



ECCLESIASTES
ITS MEANING AND ITS LESSONS

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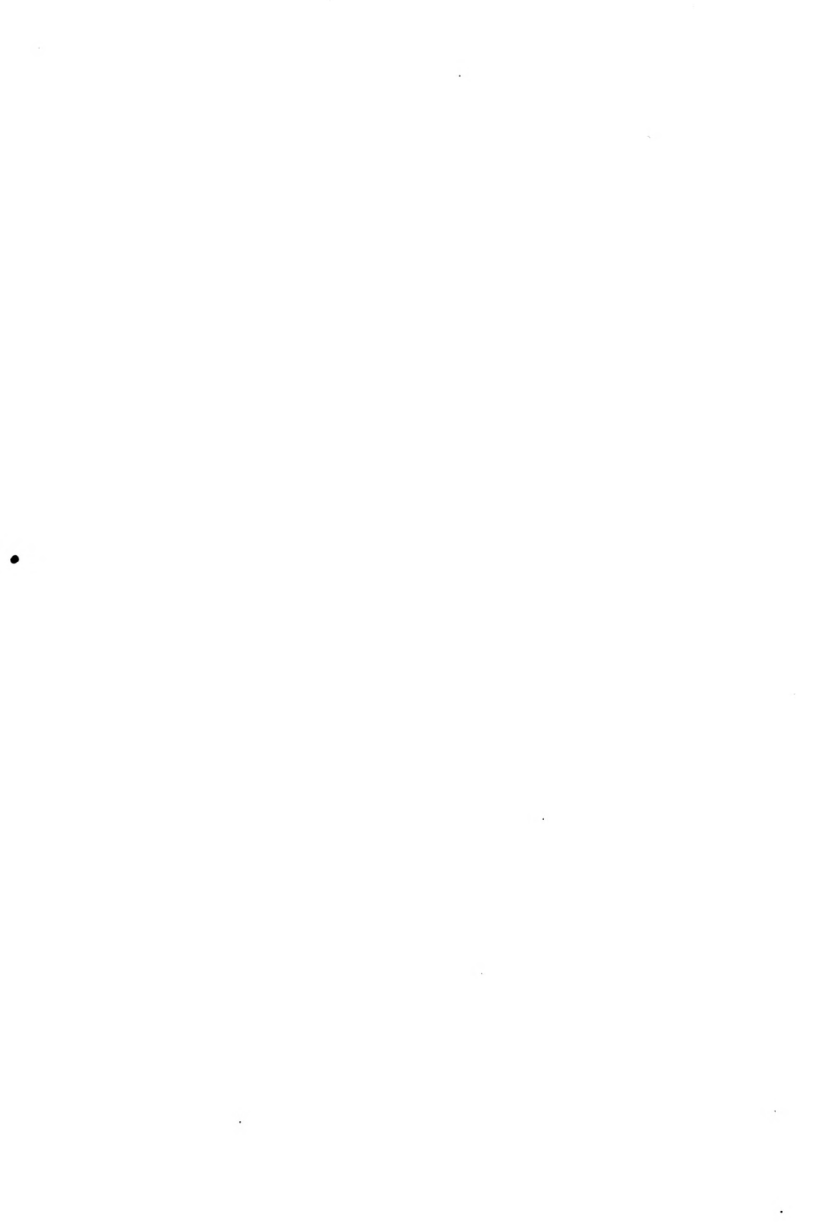
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Book

THE

BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES.



THE
BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES:

ITS MEANING AND ITS LESSONS.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "THE TEN YEARS' CONFLICT," "A CLERICAL FURLOUGH IN THE
HOLY LAND," ETC., ETC.



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PREFACE.

THE twofold object of this volume is sufficiently indicated by its title. The Author has used his best endeavours to ascertain, in every instance, the true meaning of the text; but in setting forth the grounds on which he has ventured, in any case, to differ from the generally received interpretation, he has contented himself with a reference to those considerations, which admit of being made easily intelligible to the ordinary reader.

The materials of which the volume is composed were originally prepared for, and used in, the pulpit, where minute criticism or philological discussion would have been entirely out of place. In now giving them, with very great deference, to the Press, the changes he has made, though considerable, are chiefly such as belong to the form, rather than to the substance of the Work.

Discourses addressed to a congregation are necessarily of a somewhat uniform length, and often, in consequence, interrupt injuriously, though unavoidably, the continuity

of the exposition. The Author has, accordingly, availed himself of the greater freedom which a book affords, of escaping from these trammels. By adopting the more elastic arrangement of chapters, he has sought to preserve, and to exhibit, the identity of the various branches of the great subject of which Ecclesiastes treats; and thus, perhaps, to present more clearly, the general structure and scope of this part of the sacred volume.

That, in an age of engrossing worldliness, and of multiplied earthly allurements, it may be blessed to promote the cultivation of that wisdom which cometh from above, and of that spirituality of mind which is life and peace, is the Author's chiefest wish and most earnest prayer in now sending it forth.

GLASGOW, *November 7, 1859.*

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ECCLESIASTES.

CHAPTER I.

THE BOOK AND ITS AUTHOR.

“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king of Jerusalem.”—ECCLES. I. 1.

IN such an age as the present, the study of this book would seem to be peculiarly appropriate. Never, perhaps, at any former period did this world hold out so many allurements to fascinate the minds of men, and to draw their hearts away from God. The achievements of science and the wonders of art have combined to invest material and earthly things with a thousand charms unknown in simpler and ruder times. A high civilization has so gilded over the outside of things, as to have imparted a certain brilliancy to the whole condition and arrangements of modern society. The vast increase and the great diffusion of wealth have immensely multiplied the sources of mere mundane enjoyment. The progress of geographical discovery, the conquests of military power, and the energy of commercial enterprise, have brought the entire globe under the dominion of man, and placed the endless store of its treasures at his feet. Possessed of such resources as these, there is no undertaking on which he is afraid to enter, or whose difficulties he cannot find means to overcome. The most subtle of the elements of

nature have become his obedient servants. He rushes to and fro in pursuit of his business or his pleasure with the speed of the winds; and his winged words dart through the seas and flash across the breadth of mighty continents as swiftly as the very lightnings of heaven. In the midst of all these marvels—so flattering to human pride—man is in no small danger of becoming his own god, and of making this earth his heaven. With so many terrestrial fields of contemplation in which to expatiate—with so much among the things that are seen and temporal to occupy his time, to gratify his taste, to satisfy all the desires of the carnal heart—he finds it only too easy to persuade himself that he can do without those things which are unseen and eternal. Nor can it be doubted by any thoughtful observer, that the state of things now described is exerting, at this moment, a most powerful and perilous influence among all ranks and classes of men. It takes them up, as Satan took our Lord, to the summit of an high mountain, and shows them so bright a prospect on every hand, that this world would seem to have a satisfying portion for them all, if only they will fall down and worship the creature instead of the great and glorious Creator. And, alas! with what countless multitudes the temptation prevails! That happiness which it is the instinct of their nature to seek, they think themselves sure of finding somewhere or other in so fair and inviting a scene. The men who are hasting to be rich are allured by those many dazzling schemes which promise to make their fortune in a day. The more sober and calculating votaries of mammon pursue with increased avidity those numerous avenues to wealth, opened up by the prodigious energy and the far-reaching commerce which characterize the age in which we live. The lovers of pleasure, whether in its more refined or in its grosser forms, if they miss the object of their search in one of those gay capitals which the facilities of modern travel make it so easy to reach, assure themselves of grasping it in another; while the aspirants after a higher kind of enjoyment—those who long for

fame in some distinguished professional career, or whose delight is found in cultivating an acquaintance with the discoveries of science, or the works of art, or the speculations of philosophy, or the charms of literature—appear equally certain of success, in whichever of these attractive employments their peculiar bent of mind may incline them to engage. That amazing intellectual activity, which is one of the most remarkable features of our time, has provided something suitable for them all. In a word, it would seem as if, at last, the world that now is had succeeded in securing happiness for man, and as if he might now safely dispense with those aids of religion, and with those spiritual hopes and consolations that are associated with the world to come.

It is well known, indeed, that among certain *savans*—the would-be wise men of the day—men whose towering self-complacency persuades them that they are at the head of the age—there are those who openly proclaim that the period of religious belief was simply the childhood or nonage of the world, from which it has now emerged into the manhood of philosophy, when God and His Christ, and hell and heaven are to be all set aside, as ideas unsuited to the progress of modern times. But what is more, perhaps, to our present purpose is the fact, that, far and wide, beyond the circle in which these bold blasphemies of infidelity and atheism are uttered and embraced, there is a spirit abroad, which, though in words it may confess God, does yet in deeds deny Him—a spirit of engrossing worldliness—a spirit that sees nothing, and thinks of nothing, but the things which are beneath—a spirit that, amid the cares of this life, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things, loses sight of eternity and of the interests of the undying soul. We know of nothing better fitted, under the divine blessing, to operate as an antidote to this earthly and sensual spirit, than the devout study of this particular portion of the Word of God. As its inspired author himself has said, “The thing which hath been, it is that which

shall be." No man ever drank deeper than he of the spirit now spoken of. Obedient to its impulse, he ran the whole round of worldly pursuits and pleasures; and here we have set before us the results of an experience unsurpassed in fulness and variety since the world began, as to what created things can do as a substitute to man for the favour and the fellowship of God. And if it be so, that we are living at a period of the world's history when the same desire to seek happiness among the things of sense and time is not only extensively abroad, but is fed and stimulated by all those multiplied worldly fascinations which belong to modern times, it cannot be otherwise than salutary that we should give good heed to the words on this subject "of the Preacher, the son of David, king of Jerusalem."

In entering on the exposition of this book—which we do with a very profound sense of the many difficulties its interpretation involves—it is natural to begin by making some reference to its author, to the period and the circumstances of his life in which, under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, it was written, and to the main design which it appears to have in view. It certainly does seem strange that there should ever have been a question among critics or commentators, as to the authorship of this portion of Scripture. Such, however, is the fact. There have been Rabbis and Talmudists among the Jews, and learned men in the Christian church, who contrived to persuade themselves and tried to persuade others that, not Solomon, but some one else, must have written this book. The circumstance seems only to prove that there is no point, however plain, about which the perversity of the human mind will not find means to raise a dispute. It were both tedious and unprofitable to go into a discussion which has never for a moment shaken the conviction of the Church, that "the words of the Preacher" are the words of Solomon. Although his name is not expressly inscribed upon the book, even he who runs may read that name in many allusions which most unequivocally

proclaim it. The writer himself tells us that he was "the son of David, and king over Israel in Jerusalem" (i. 1, 12); and furthermore, in various passages he describes himself in terms which, as face answereth to face in a glass, present the very picture of that remarkable man who stands out on the page of Scripture history as at once the wisest and the most splendid of Israel's kings.

As regards the period and circumstances in the life of Solomon in which this book was written, it contains within itself internal evidence of the fact that it was written near the close of its inspired author's career, and after divine grace had raised him up from his grievous fall, and restored him once more to the fear, the love, and the service of God. In his earlier years, as is well known, he was eminent for his piety. Even from his birth it is testified that "the Lord loved him," in token of which He sent the prophet Nathan to give him the significant name of Jedidiah—that is, "Beloved of the Lord." When, still young and tender, he succeeded, by divine appointment, to the throne of the kingdom, we read of him that "He loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father" (1 Kings iii. 3). Scarcely had he entered on his regal office when, along with a multitude of his people, he "went to the high place that was at Gibeon," the tabernacle of the congregation of God; and after offering burnt-offerings unto the Lord, he earnestly besought Him, saying—"Now, O Lord God, let thy promise unto David my father be established, for thou hast made me king over a people like the dust of the earth in multitude. Give me now wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people; for who can judge this thy people that is so great?" (2 Chron. i. 9, 10). The Lord had been pleased in a vision to invite him to ask whatever he would desire to have; and this was the petition of the youthful king—"I am but a little child," said he, in a spirit of beautiful humility: "I know not how to go out or come in. And thy servant is in the midst of thy people which thou hast

chosen, a great people that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. Give, therefore, thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad; for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?" It was in answer to this truly touching and memorable request that "God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honour: so that there shall not be any of the kings like unto thee all thy days" (1 Kings iii. 7-14).

It is a principle of God's moral administration that "whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance" (Matt. xiii. 12). He who values and improves the gifts with which the Lord has endowed him, is thereby putting himself in the sure way of having these gifts still further increased. The very fact that Solomon, even in early youth, had the high sense which his petition indicates of the value of wisdom, is a conclusive proof that he had been assiduously cultivating his great mental powers; and that in the view of that exalted and responsible position which he was destined to occupy, he had been studiously seeking after every kind of knowledge, human and divine, that was fitted to qualify him for it. Nor was it the least conspicuous mark of the eminent qualities by which he was already distinguished, that he felt so keenly how inadequate they were for the work that was now given him to do.

It is ignorance that is boastful and confident. True wisdom is ever modest and humble. "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." Solomon's larger capacity, and deeper knowledge,

and more reverential spirit, enabled him only the more clearly to perceive, and the more strongly to feel, the difficulties of the task that awaited him as the king of Israel. Hence the solemn earnestness of his prayer for a wise and understanding heart. Of the subsequent career of such a man we are ready at once to conclude, that expectations too sanguine could hardly be formed. Of one whom nature and grace had combined so remarkably to distinguish, we do not wonder to hear that he speedily became the admiration, not of his own country alone, but of the princes and people of many other lands. Other kings have made themselves known in even the most distant regions of the earth, by the force and the terror of their arms. The fame of Solomon was of a different and far more attractive kind. While he was yet unborn it had been foretold concerning him that he should be a man of rest, and that the Lord would give him rest from all his enemies round about, and would give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. As this state of public tranquillity was peculiarly favourable to the cultivation of those tastes, and the development of those qualities, and the execution of those great public works in which Solomon so signally excelled, so was it also highly favourable to their becoming extensively known among the nations around. War keeps nations jealously apart. Peace draws them, in a thousand ways, into friendly intercourse with one another. Never, accordingly, either before or after, did ancient Israel occupy so eminent and influential a place among the neighbouring kingdoms as during Solomon's illustrious reign. Her people multiplied—her commerce flourished—her wealth immensely increased; so that, as we read (1 Kings x. 23, 24), "King Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom. And all the earth sought to Solomon, to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart." There was scarcely any branch of knowledge with which his acquaintance was not extensive and profound. He had studied with equal assiduity the works and the Word of God. Hardly anything, either

in nature or in art, had escaped the investigation of his penetrating and comprehensive mind. The graces of poetry, the charms of music, the beautiful creations of the æsthetic arts, the severer studies of science and philosophy, the graver lessons deducible from the divine principles of morality and religion—he was at home in them all. Need we wonder that the court of this gifted monarch drew towards it all the inquiring minds of his age—that the mightiest of his contemporary sovereigns coveted his favour, and sought his friendship, and loaded him with their gifts—and that there should have gathered around him a magnificence and a glory, which, as they dazzled every eye that looked upon them, so did they at length fatally dazzle his own?

“How hardly,” said our Lord, “shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!” (Mark x. 23). Worldly pomp and prosperity lay terrible snares for the soul. Wealth and greatness corrupted his heart; and instead of continuing to leaven the worshipping world with his piety and wisdom, the world seems insensibly to have leavened him with its errors and its sins. And now a dark and mournful period of his history begins. Not that his capital is less brilliant, or his court less crowded, or his royal estate less glittering and gorgeous than before. In all these respects he shines with only increasing splendour; but the moral glory of the man and of his reign are passing away. His most honoured guests and associates are not now the wise and good, the virtuous and holy, but those who are lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God. Strange women and loose-living men are now his companions and friends, and they have corrupted his heart, and led him away from the God of his fathers. That temple which he had reared with so much care, and dedicated with so much solemnity to the service of the one Jehovah, is now forsaken for the altars of idolatry—for Ash-toreth, the goddess of the Zidonians, and Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites; for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon.

How has the gold become dim, and the most fine gold changed! Ichabod! Ichabod!—for the glory is departed!

In this new career on which the misguided king has entered, it is evident from many unequivocal tokens that he is ill at ease. His former serenity no longer sits upon his brow. Often it is throbbing with the burning fever of intemperance, and oftener still with the anguish of remorse. In the vain hope of obtaining relief from this internal disquietude, his mind is ever on the rack, in quest of new occupations or new pleasures. Now he tears himself away from those base sensual indulgences to which he has given way, and shuts himself up in his chamber among his neglected books. Anon, growing weary of this solitude and of these exhausting studies, he plunges anew into all those degrading excesses which for the time he had laid aside, until the very satiety and disgust which they speedily produce, drive him once more away to seek his lost peace of mind in some more hopeful pursuit. Sick of his luxurious palace, and of its maddening pleasures, he hurries forth from the city to breathe the freshness and to enjoy the repose of nature, and his old love of nature's works returns. He sits him down beneath the cool shade of its majestic trees, and regales him with the odours of its fragrant flowers, and persuades himself that in this Elysium his happiness will return. He will enlarge and beautify his gardens, and store them with all that is rarest and fairest in the vegetable kingdom, and in this innocent and delightful employment, health shall come back to his languid frame, and cheerfulness to his care-worn and desolate heart. In a word, he tries every means of expelling the worm that is gnawing at his conscience but one; and he tries in vain. And were it not that this book of Ecclesiastes has been handed down to us among the Scriptures of Truth, we might have seemed to be shut up to the mournful conclusion that he had gone to the grave in a state of hopeless and final estrangement from God. But this book is the cheering and decisive evidence that before his sun went down, the clouds which for a season covered it had rolled away,

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and that its setting was bright with the radiance of life and immortality. There can hardly be a doubt in the mind of any one who carefully examines the question, and who places this book side by side with that record of Solomon's personal history which the first book of Kings and the second book of Chronicles contain—that this book is the complement, so to speak, of the historical narrative—that the one comes in where the other ends—and that without it we should have lost the grandest lessons which the life of Solomon was designed to teach.

If the previous sketch of its inspired author's history has at all served its intended purpose, it can hardly have failed to throw much light on the design with which the book of Ecclesiastes was written. Read in the light of its connection with his preceding life, its design becomes clear as day. Ancient heathen moralists were wont to speculate much on what they called the *summum bonum*, or chief good of man. In their able, and in many respects instructive and remarkable treatises, they left the grand question still unresolved. But, guided by the Spirit of God, and taught by his own terrible experience, the king of Israel has expounded this mystery. He has taught us infallibly what is "that good for the sons of men which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life" (Eccles. ii. 3). The *summum bonum*, the chief good, is "to fear God and to keep his commandments." The design of the book of Ecclesiastes is to illustrate and enforce this all-important truth; and never, perhaps, did any son of Adam occupy such a vantage-ground for performing this great work as the son of David. Do the wise men of this world object to the conclusion here pronounced, that only one who could grapple with the deep things of science and philosophy is competent to instruct them on such a theme? In respect even of natural knowledge and mental endowments, Solomon was the wisest of men's sons. Do the men of cultivated taste and intellectual refinement contend that only those who are capable of appreciating the beauties of nature and the graces of art, and the productions of literary genius, are entitled

to say whether happiness may not be found in earthly and created things? In every one of these attainments Solomon was the first man of his age: a poet, a naturalist, an assiduous cultivator of the fine arts, eminent for every accomplishment in which the scholar or the man of taste can excel. Or, once more, do the men of the world—the gay, joyous, pleasure-loving, boon companions who laugh care away—or those whose wealth, and rank, and power, place all sorts of enjoyment within their reach, and at their command—do they think themselves entitled to hold that no one who is a stranger to their favoured circle can tell what elements of happiness it includes, and how much it can do to furnish man with all that his heart can desire? Of that brilliant circle Solomon was the very centre and star. If wit, or wine, or mirthful company, or song, or sensual indulgence, could give man the contentment and happiness for which his nature longs, Solomon was the man of all others that must have had the fullest share of all those blessings. He is, therefore, by their own confession, the very master at whose feet they ought to sit, in order that they may listen to his experience, and learn his decision. The Lord, in His mysterious providence, permitted His own Jedidiah to forsake Him for a season, and to go after other gods, that in His own time and way He might bring the wanderer back, to tell the men of all after-times, and to tell it as one who had authority to speak, what he had found. And this, at his return, is the sum of that truth which, in this blessed book, he has given by inspiration to the world—that without God, and away from God, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

By nature we are, every one of us, of the earth, earthy—prone to set our affections upon the things which are beneath, and to love and serve the creature more than the Creator. How necessary is it that we should be often and earnestly reminded of the folly and the sinfulness of such a choice! And with what an infinite variety of most felicitous illustrations and impressive examples is this admonition enforced by this royal Preacher,

who had himself slowly and painfully learned what he has here so strikingly taught! As we follow him through the changing scenes which he describes, and mark the all but countless sources from which his arguments are derived, we shall have abundant cause to contemplate, with admiration, the over-ruling providence of that God who is ever wonderful in counsel and excellent in working. We shall then see a purpose and a plan not only in all those high intellectual endowments and immense and multifarious acquirements by which Solomon was distinguished, but even in those dark and disastrous aberrations in which for a season he was permitted to go astray. Not by his wisdom only, but by his folly too, was God preparing him to be at once a beacon and a guide. The Holy Spirit has, in this book, made use both of all his excellences and of all his errors, for the warning and for the instruction of the world. It is this very circumstance that makes it a task so difficult fully to set forth what these words of the Preacher, the son of David, king of Jerusalem, contain. To do justice to such a work would almost require a grasp of mind as large, and a store of knowledge as vast and various as his own. For the elucidation of the great theme he has in hand he lays under tribute the whole economy of nature and the whole condition of man. With a science that had scanned the phenomena of the one and the fortunes of the other, and with a philosophy that had looked deeply and thoughtfully into the hidden laws which they obey, he makes both nature and human life bear witness with one harmonious voice to this fundamental fact, that there is no real good and no true happiness for man in a state of estrangement from God. May He whose inspiration gave this large understanding to Solomon, give us patience to study, ability to learn, and willingness to receive what this wisest of men's sons has taught. And as we strive, in humble and prayerful dependence on divine illumination, to gather up the mind of the Spirit as unfolded in this pregnant and precious portion of the Word, may we ever look through Solomon to a still mightier Preacher

and more glorious King, even to Him who is the power of God and the wisdom of God. And as the conviction which Solomon sought, by this book, to establish, grows and deepens in our minds, that to be seeking happiness in created things, is to be hewing out unto ourselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water—let us be stirred up to follow, more closely and more earnestly than ever, after Him who alone can give us living water: who will be to us an all-sufficient portion in the life that now is, and a glorious and everlasting inheritance in the life to come.

CHAPTER II.

THE PREACHER, HIS TEXT, AND THE EXORDIUM OF HIS DISCOURSE.

“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all *is* vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? *One* generation passeth away, and *another* generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north: it whirleth about continually; and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea *is* not full: unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again. All things *are* full of labour; man cannot utter *it*: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

“The thing that hath been, it *is that* which shall be; and that which is done, *is that* which shall be done: and *there is* no new thing under the sun. Is there *any* thing whereof it may be said, See, this *is* new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. *There is* no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be *any* remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.”—ECCLES. I. 2-11.

IN the previous chapter, introductory to the exposition of this book, reference was made to its inspired authorship, to the period and circumstances of Solomon’s life in which it appears to have been written, and to its main scope and design. We are now, therefore, in some measure, prepared to enter on the study of it, and to gather up, under the teaching and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the great lessons which it is so well fitted and so evidently intended to teach.

The son of David, king of Jerusalem, is the preacher whose words we are now invited to hear; and his singularly striking and significant text is this, “Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” When Massillon ascended the pulpit to pronounce the funeral oration of the greatest monarch of France—a monarch whose long and splendid reign, whose military conquests, whose brilliant court, and whose personal

magnificence had, for more than half a century, dazzled all Europe—the preacher, after looking around him on the sable draperies and solemn insignia of death, thrilled every heart in the vast assembly before him, when he broke the breathless silence which pervaded it with these expressive words—“God alone is great!” That brief sentence was felt instinctively by all to embody the very thought which the scene suggested, and, for the moment at least, the gayest courtiers and the haughtiest princes and peers of France seem, equally with the meanest of the people, to have realized the utter nothingness of man, in the presence of the power and sovereignty of God. We do not wonder that the memory of an occurrence so suggestive should still survive, after the lapse of an hundred and fifty years; and yet, arresting and impressive as it may have been, it was in both of these respects unspeakably inferior to that far older incident which the opening words of this book cannot fail to call up to every reflective mind. The preacher here is the king himself—a monarch more illustrious by far than any that the world has ever witnessed in modern times. He has laid aside his sceptre and come down from his throne, and taken his place in the pulpit, to deliver a discourse addressed to the whole world. Instead of leaving it to some one else, after the grave should have closed over him, to point the moral which his life conveys, he comes forth in the humble garb of a penitent, before quitting this earthly stage, to point it himself. He, too, looks around him ere he begins. Scenes vivid and various pass in rapid review before the eye of his soul. That eye, now touched with an unction from the Holy One, instead of being blinded as once it was by their deceitful glare, now calmly, and perhaps tearfully, regards them as little better than the pageantry of death. Gardens and palaces, chariots and horsemen, music and wine, royal banquets and merry companies, and all sensual delights—alternating, sometimes with lighter and sometimes with severer intellectual pursuits—these, and such like, follow each other in long procession, as busy memory summons them up from the

depths of the past, and causes them to flit like living realities before his mental vision; and when he has surveyed them all, and has recalled his own personal experience of them all, this is his deliberate judgment concerning them—"Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities; all is vanity."

Before entering on the wide field of beautiful and most felicitous illustration by which the royal Preacher expounds and enforces this striking text, it is necessary, in the outset, to guard from misconstruction the text itself. It were a great error to regard it as the misanthropic utterance of a jaundiced and disappointed mind, which sees everything through the medium of its own gloomy and distempered spirit, and scowls in sullen discontentment even at those things which are most innocent and good. The world has often witnessed cases of that kind: men who have been so soured by misfortune, or so sated with sensual pleasures, as to be unable to enjoy anything; and whose only delight appeared to consist in pouring out the venom of their wounded pride, or the scornfulness of their bloated passions and blunted sensibilities, upon every one and everything around them. It was under the influence of no such feelings that Solomon gave expression to the sentiment before us. He had lost none of his sympathies either with nature or with his fellowmen; but he had at length learned to know the true place that belonged to them. He had found out this, that in themselves, and apart from God, created things are no satisfying portion for the human soul, and are utterly incapable of imparting solid peace or lasting happiness to man. In this sense considered, they are no better than the shadow which we in vain attempt to grasp. We pursue it eagerly, we try to seize it a thousand times, but as often the sickening discovery is made that we have taken nothing; or, worse still, in thus setting our affections on the things that are beneath, and becoming lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God, how often are we made to feel that we have been but gathering the apples of Sodom, beautiful and inviting to the eye as they hung on the

forbidden tree, but resolved, in the very act of seizing them, into bitter dust and ashes.

Let it, then, be clearly and well understood that this sweeping sentence of Solomon is neither the splanetic language of envy, nor the contemptuous sneer of one whom long prosperity and unrestrained self-indulgence have pampered and depraved. He has no quarrel either with men or things when he solemnly and deliberately pronounces the verdict which that sentence contains. Perhaps no man of his time knew so well as the enlightened king of Israel how much there is, both in the constitution of man and in the whole economy of the external world, that, instead of being useless and unprofitable, is, on the contrary, most excellent, beneficent, and wise. It was certainly no part of his purpose in speaking so strongly as he does, to imply that God had failed in any part of his great design in calling this universe into being, and that verily he had made all things in vain and for nought. Nothing could be farther from the mind of Solomon than to bring any such charge against either the works or the ways of God. Both the philosophy and the piety of Solomon had conducted him to an entirely opposite conclusion. This very book most unequivocally shows with what a profound and comprehensive intelligence he had observed the phenomena and studied the laws of the physical creation, and how much he had seen in them of the power and wisdom and goodness of the Almighty Maker of heaven and earth. Nor had the moral world—including the whole condition and relations of man—less occupied his thoughtful mind. Not in this book only, but in that marvellous production, the book of Proverbs, we have ample and convincing proof of the closeness with which he had looked into the human spirit—how thoroughly, under the guidance of inspiration, he had searched out the principles by which its Divine Author meant it to be governed—and how clearly he saw how ruinous man's departure from these principles had been.

It is not, therefore, of created things in themselves, and in their own proper place, that Solomon means to say that they

are all vanity; but it is of these things as misused and misapplied by ungodly and unspiritual men. Substituted for the things that are above—substituted for Him whose favour is life, and whose loving-kindness is better than life—even the best of them are no better than wells without water, and clouds without rain, and trees whose fruit withereth; while as regards those of a baser sort—those which minister to the lusts of the flesh—it may be not less truly testified of the men that are given up to them, that they are like “raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame—wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever.”

Understanding, then, the general statement contained in the second verse, in the sense and under the reservations now explained, let us advance to the argument, and the evidence by which it is supported. The first proposition in proof of the statement that all is vanity, which the Preacher lays down, is the somewhat startling one that man has no profit “of all his labour which he taketh under the sun.” The proposition is put, indeed, in the form of a question, but, at the same time, in such a way as plainly implies that it is demonstrably true. Now, there is undoubtedly a sense, as Solomon himself elsewhere allows, in which it may be most confidently affirmed that “in all labour there is profit” (Prov. xiv. 23). The very effort itself, whether of mind or body, which labour involves, is good and salutary. The labour of the hands invigorates the corporeal frame, and the labour of the head develops and strengthens the faculties of the mind. Apart, therefore, from any direct fruit or reward which the labour may yield, it exerts upon the labourer himself a most useful and wholesome influence. So necessary, in fact, is work of some kind or other felt to be, that without it life would become intolerable. It is accordingly under this impatience of having nothing to do, and to escape from the misery of that *ennui* which inaction and idleness inevitably produce, that many who have no need and no inclination to labour for mere worldly gain, do yet toil harder than even those whose lot

it is to earn their daily bread in the sweat of their brow. In short, instead of asserting or assuming that man has "no profit" in all his labour, it might seem much more just and reasonable to maintain that he has no profit without labour. What is obtained without effort is commonly little valued, and generally is little worth. Labour sweetens the food which it purchases and the rest which it secures. It is the very law of progress in everything that is good and great, and without it hardly anything can be attained that is really desirable for man.

What meaning, then, is it intended that we should put upon these words? Obviously such a meaning as shall be in harmony with the Preacher's fundamental doctrine, that "all is vanity." All is vanity to the man who seeks his happiness away from God, and to *that* man there is no profit in all his labour which he taketh under the sun. His labour, however unwearied, never brings him one step nearer his aim. Like that Sisyphus of whom the fable tells, he is painfully rolling a heavy stone up the steep mountain's side, and the moment he withdraws his hand it rushes back to the bottom again. To illustrate this ceaseless and yet unprofitable toil, a series of beautiful examples are employed in the verses which follow. First, we are called to contemplate the fluctuations of the human race, which resemble the ebb and flow of the ocean's tides, continually advancing and receding, but never gaining upon the land. "One generation passeth away and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever." Our fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever? The Nile still flows in its ancient bed, but the Pharaohs who built those massive pyramids which continue to throw their evening shadows across its fertilizing stream are long since forgotten and unknown. The mount from whose flaming summit the voice of God came forth still looks down upon the depths around it and upon the dreary wilderness beyond, but the tribes and the tents of Israel have disappeared. The sea of Tiberias still lies embedded, bright and blue, amid the hills of Galilee and Golan, but the men who

crowded its shores to listen to the voice of One who spake as never man spake are nowhere to be found. The earth abideth ; its mountains and plains—its rivers and seas, are substantially as they were, and where they were, thousands of years ago, but earth's inhabitants have found upon it no continuing city, nor any sure place of abode. It has been alternately their cradle and their grave. There has been a ceaseless coming and going—continual movement, and yet no progress ; no advance made in the way of gaining a surer footing, a more lasting place, a firmer hold upon their earthly inheritance. The generation that now exists, and has the earth at this moment in actual possession, holds it by a tenure as fleeting and insecure as that which belonged to the men of Babylon or Nineveh, whose cities and palaces, like themselves, have lain for ages buried in the dust. But a few short years have to run their course, and of all those thousand millions of living men who now people this world, not one solitary survivor will remain. "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh ; but the earth," as if in mockery of man's transient career, "abideth for ever !"

From the earth the royal Preacher next turns his eye upward to the heavens, and there he finds a new example to illustrate the truth he has just proclaimed—"The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose." From the windows of his palace, upon Mount Zion, Solomon could catch the first flush of the early dawn, as it reddened the eastern sky, and mark the very spot on the far-off horizon where the bright orb of day rose majestically from behind the mountains of Moab, coming forth as a strong man out of his chamber to run a race. What distance, howsoever remote, might not such a traveller hope to reach ! As he swept along, he saw the smoke of the morning-sacrifice ascending from the courts of the temple at Jerusalem ; and already he had traversed the broad Atlantic, and looked down on the vast primeval forests of the New World, and lighted up the wide expanse of the Pacific Ocean with his beaming countenance, before the

fires of the evening-sacrifice had been yet kindled on the hill of Zion. But where is he, after all, when the hour at which he rose once more arrives? He is coming up from behind the mountains of Moab again—he has “returned to his place where he arose,” and is only preparing to run the same race anew. And so is it with all the labour that the man who is living without God taketh under the sun. He is travelling in a circle, incessantly toiling on, but never getting beyond the point from which he first set out. “As he came forth of his mother’s womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour which he may carry away in his hand” (v. 15). By all the acquisitions of all his labour he cannot “by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him: . . . that he should still live for ever, and not see corruption. For he seeth that wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others. Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling-places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names. Nevertheless man being in honour abideth not: he is like the beasts that perish. This their way is their folly” (Psalm xlix. 7–13).

From the ceaseless and yet unprogressive revolutions of the sun, the Preacher points next to the motions of the changeful wind—“The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.” We cannot tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth. It shifts often suddenly and without warning, and in obedience to influences which we can neither foresee nor control. There is no quarter of the heavens from which at one time or another it does not blow. And yet, variable and capricious as its movements may appear, they are governed by laws as fixed and certain as those which regulate the tides of the ocean or the orbits of the stars. The same All-wise and Almighty Ruler who hath set bounds to the waters of the deep, and said to them, “Hitherto shalt

thou come, and no further," hath assigned "their circuits" to the winds of heaven, from which they cannot deviate, and within which they are perpetually confined. From the stillness of the calm they may advance to the terrific sweep of the hurricane; but only to return to the stillness of the calm again. Boreas, and Eurus, and Notus, and Hesperus may succeed each other, as the tempest flies round the heaven; and each in his turn may shake the forest and mingle the sea and sky; but they can do no more. They can only return to their appointed circuits again.

And as it is with the sun and with the wind, so is it with the rivers that run into the sea. Look at that tiny rill trickling down from the face of some glacier in the Alps, or Andes, or Himalaya, how soon it swells in its descending course from a gentle rivulet into a fierce, impetuous stream; and finally escaping from the mountains where it rose, rushes forth into the plain, a broad majestic river, carrying verdure and fruitfulness all along its rejoicing course—sweeping through vine-clad vales, and shady forests, and waving corn-fields—gliding past quiet hamlets and busy towns—and bearing on its ample bosom many a richly laden bark, as it hastens onward to pour its accumulated and now mighty flood into the boundless sea. Into that same all-encircling sea, not this one river only, but countless others, like-copious and far-descended tributaries, are continually discharging their rolling waters. Surely a sea so fed must at length rise and overflow its bounds. But not so. "All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again." The Preacher had "great experience of wisdom and knowledge." He had searched out that wonderful and beautiful economy of nature, according to which the thirsty air is continually drinking up the sea—sucking up the waters of the deep in spongy clouds, and bearing them away upon the wings of the wind, and dashing them against the lofty ridges of the land, and thus filling the far-off lakes and far-up fountain-heads from

whence the rivers come ; and thereby maintaining, undisturbed and unaltered from age to age, that ceaseless circulation of the watery element, by virtue of which the rivers continually flow, while yet no increase is ever made to the volume of the deep—a perfect balance being thus preserved between them. It is this goodly order, and this beneficent arrangement, which the father of Solomon so fitly celebrates in the 65th Psalm—“Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it: thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God, which is full of water : . . . thou blessest the springing thereof: thou crownest the year with thy goodness ; and thy paths drop fatness. They drop upon the pastures of the wilderness ; and the little hills rejoice on every side. The pastures are clothed with flocks ; the valleys also are covered over with corn ; they shout for joy, they also sing” (9-13). David had referred to that subject for one purpose: Solomon points to it for another. The one employed it to magnify the wisdom and goodness of God: the other adduces it to illustrate the folly and the sinfulness of man. Bent on finding happiness among the things of sense and time, he labours on in the vain hope that at length he must succeed. But just as the incessant running of all the rivers into the sea never makes it full—never raises its level one hair-breadth higher than it was—so is it with all the labour which man taketh under the sun. The expected profit never comes. The aching void in his heart is never filled ; and having lived and laboured without God, he dies without hope.

Leaving these illustrations, borrowed from the facts of physical nature, he goes on to enforce the great lesson which it is his leading object in this passage to teach, by appealing to the still sterner facts of ordinary human life. “All things,” says the Preacher, “are full of labour ; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.” Every grade of society has its own burden to bear in this toil-worn world. We speak of the working-classes, as if the only labourers were those who wrought with their hands. But Solomon knew in his day, and thousands know it in ours, that

“much study is a weariness of the flesh:” that intellectual efforts and mental cares are more exhausting by far than mere bodily toil. Labour is the common lot of man. Look at these pale faces and busy hands in the crowded factory; at these brawny forms sweating around the furnace or the forge; at these thronging multitudes, each intent upon his own errand, hurrying through the streets; at the trader engrossed with his customers and his wares; at the anxious merchant absorbed in the calculations and pondering the risks of his commerce; at the student buried in his books; at the mother watching, correcting, and fondling, by turns, her wayward children—and say, if it be not emphatically true, that “all things are full of labour;” that “man cannot utter it.” And if this survey could be extended so as to include the entire world, should we not find the whole earth like one huge hive, from which the hum of incessant toil is heard continually to ascend? “The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Rom. viii. 22). And yet, after all, the “eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing;” the one cannot rest complacently on the sight, nor the other listen with comfort to the ceaseless sound. The sameness of it wearies both senses alike. To-day is just like yesterday; and to-morrow will be just like to-day. For, continues the Preacher, “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be: and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.” We search the most ancient records of history, and what do they tell us of the condition and pursuits of men in those bygone times? They tell us that they bought and sold—that they planted and builded—that they wronged and oppressed each other—that nation rose up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom—very much as they do at the present hour. We dig into the shapeless mounds which cover the once regal abodes of a Nebuchadnezzar or a Nimrod, or we explore the venerable monuments of a still remoter antiquity on the banks of the Nile, and what do we find but fresh confirmations of this saying of Solomon, that there is “no new thing under

the sun?" The very achievements in which our modern world would make her chief boast, seem, with few exceptions, to have been all achieved before. Both science and the arts had been so assiduously and successfully cultivated by men whose very names are utterly unknown, and by generations whose memory has altogether perished, that while, on the one hand, we are forced to exclaim, "Is there anything whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us"—so, on the other, we are compelled to acknowledge the vanity of those labours of the men of other times, seeing that, in the very act of discovering them, we are reminded of the humbling fact that "There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come, with those that shall come after."

What a poor thing, then, it is to labour for a mere worldly end! We toil, and toil, and never make one inch of progress towards the happiness we are expending all this effort to reach. We have no real profit—no profit that can pacify an accusing conscience, or purify a sinful heart, or secure the acceptance of a guilty soul with God—in all the labour of that kind that we take under the sun. Such labour resembles the ceaseless coming and going of the successive generations of men; or the apparent course of the sun round the earth, ever returning to the place whence it rose; or the movement of the winds in their appointed circuits, or of the rivers from the mountains to the sea, and from the sea back to the mountains again. All things—all departments of life—are full of this labour, that exhausts itself upon earthly objects and aims, and that ever ends in vanity and vexation of spirit. It may be exciting and satisfying for a time, but it soon grows into a weariness—a dull and joyless round of the same things over and over again. The eye is tired of seeing the unvarying sight, and the ear of hearing the unvarying sound. The poor drudge may try at times to persuade himself that he is, at least, surpassing, in his own department, all who have gone before him; and his pride and perseverance may be stimulated by the

thought that his industry, or his science, or his artistic genius, or his literary lore, are giving birth to some new thing under the sun—to something that will serve, even among latest generations, to perpetuate his fame. After all, it proves but a repetition of that which has been before, and in no long time both the work and its author are alike forgotten. For, as in looking back upon the past, we find “there is no remembrance of former things;” so, in looking forward to the future, we may be well assured that “neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come, with those that shall come after.” Men and deeds mightier and more memorable by far, in their day, than we or our works can pretend to be in our own, have passed away and left no trace of their existence behind. Have we not, then, abundant cause to return to the royal Preacher’s text, and to say of all such labour, “Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities; all is vanity?”

Yes, all labour is, and must be unprofitable and vain, that is not directed towards the great end of our being, which is to glorify and enjoy God. “This,” said another royal preacher, and one greater than Solomon, “this is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom God hath sent” (John vi. 29). When once, through grace, we have done this, then everything else we do will possess a new character—our worldly business will be prosecuted in a different spirit—the commonest actions of life will take another and a higher aim;—every service will be dignified, and every labour will be lightened by the elevating thought, that it is “done unto the Lord.” Let us give heed then to the exhortation, “Labour not for the meat that perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed” (John vi. 27). Say not, “What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?—for after all these things do the nations seek—for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his

righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. vi. 31-33). Unhappily, the too common course is to reverse this divine order—to seek the world first, and to trust that, somehow or other, the kingdom and the righteousness of God will be gained at a future and more convenient time. To the world, accordingly, men devote the prime and vigour of their days. The world's riches and honours, its gaieties and pleasures, its follies and lusts—after these they run with eager steps; and, meanwhile, the things that belong to their eternal peace are pushed aside and forgotten. They begin, indeed, ere long, to find that they have no profit in all this labour—that it is ever and anon disappointing their fondest hopes—that its very acquisitions prove to be a burden, and its enjoyments a weariness; and that its sweetest draughts leave a bitterness behind. The feeling that in such a life "all is vanity," forces itself with increasing frequency on their minds. In their inmost heart they have a growing sense of emptiness and weariness, from which, nevertheless, they try no other mode of getting relief than by returning anew to the customary round of their former ways. And, alas! how many thousands, and tens of thousands, go on thus to the end, knowing all the while that there is a more excellent way and a better choice, which, nevertheless, their increasing worldliness will not suffer them to take! They may have become rich—they may have grown great—they may have gathered around them a wide circle of friends—but a secret whisper tells them that they have been sowing to the flesh, of the flesh to reap corruption. At last, the death-hour arrives—the day of grace is over—the acceptable year of the Lord is at an end; and now, when it is too late, they realize the awful truth that they have no profit of all the labour which they have taken under the sun!—that, in striving to gain the world, they have lost their souls!

CHAPTER III.

THE STORY OF THE PREACHER'S LIFE.

“I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all *things* that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man, to be exercised therewith.

“I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all *is* vanity and vexation of spirit. *That which is crooked cannot be made straight; and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.*

“I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all *they* that have been before me in Jerusalem; yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom *is* much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

“I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also *is* vanity. I said of laughter, *It is* mad; and of mirth, What doeth it?

“I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine (yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom), and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what *was* that good for the sons of men which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all *kind of* fruits; I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees; I got *me* servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces; I gat me men-singers and women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men, *as* musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour; and this was my portion of all my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do; and, behold, all *was* vanity and vexation of spirit, and *there was* no profit under the sun.”—ECCLES. I. 12-18; II. 1-11.

IN the preceding context the Preacher has told us who he is, and what is to be the leading subject of his discourse, and has thrown out some general reflections of a nature to prepare us for what is to follow. Hitherto, however, he has made no reference to his own individual connection with the matter in hand. So far

as we have gone he might have been, for anything he has yet said, a simple looker-on, about to give us the results of his own reflections, or a description of what he had observed in others. It is now, for the first time, we learn that the case is altogether different. From the passage before us we begin to discover that it is not an abstract discussion, but a personal history with which we have here to do. The school in which this instructor has been taught, is that of his own painfully acquired experience. A deeper and fresher interest gathers in consequence upon his words. There is always a peculiar charm and a peculiar force in the lessons of an actual life. They have a felt reality about them which at once awakens our sympathy and commands our confidence. This, we are ready to say, is no imaginary picture, no empty speculation, but a series of facts; for he who tells us of them, has himself proved them all.

There is a difference, not undeserving of notice, in the announcement which the Preacher makes of himself in the 12th verse, as compared with that which he had previously made in the opening verse of the book. That opening verse informed us that the words about to be spoken were those of the son of David, king of Jerusalem. From the outset, therefore, we knew that we were listening to a royal preacher; but whether the truths to be embodied in his inspired discourse had been learned before or after he ascended the throne, the opening verse did not explain. In the 12th verse, however, this information is distinctly communicated. "I the Preacher," it is here expressly stated, "*was* king over Israel in Jerusalem." Not only am I king now, when this discourse is pronounced, but I was king at the period when these proceedings took place, which my discourse will be found to describe. It was not in my early youth the career was run, and the observations and reflections were made, which this book of Ecclesiastes records. Had it been so, the objection might perhaps have been urged that at so immature an age, and with necessarily but limited means and opportunities at my command, I could not then be in a position either fully to work out the

problem of what this world can do to furnish a satisfying portion for man, or to form a right opinion regarding it. As the case actually stands, however, there is no room to raise any such question. It was in the prime and vigour of my days, and with the unfettered freedom and the exhaustless resources of a sovereign prince, that I made this great experiment. If ever, therefore, there was a man on earth entitled to speak with authority upon the subject, I am he! Such would seem to be something like the design and import of the statement which this 12th verse contains. It is not to be regarded as a mere gratuitous repetition of what he had said *before*. In virtue of what he had said *before*, we knew that these were the *words* of a king. In virtue of what he says *now*, we know that these words embody the *personal experiences* of a king. By this 12th verse, accordingly, we are brought to the proper point of view for studying these experiences. The scene we are to survey is Jerusalem in the height of its magnificence. The actor on that scene is the most illustrious monarch that ever occupied the throne of Israel. The time is the very noonday of his life, when all his powers, mental and bodily, are in their fullest strength, and when his great dominion, his prodigious wealth, his unrivalled fame, and his immense popularity, have placed, so to speak, the world at his feet. Well may we look and listen when such an one comes forth to tell us what the world is worth, as a substitute for the love and the enjoyment of God.

In his earlier days Solomon, as has been already noticed, had been eminent for his piety. Under the care of his godly father, he had been brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. "I was my father's son," he says, referring elsewhere to this interesting subject, "tenderly and only beloved in the sight of my mother. He taught me also, and said unto me, Let thine heart retain my words, keep my commandments, and live. Get wisdom, get understanding, forget it not: neither decline from the words of my mouth. . . . I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right

paths" (Prov. iv. 3, 4, 5, 11). These salutary counsels which the good old king had so often addressed to his son as he grew up before him, were most solemnly and impressively enforced with his latest breath. For when the days approached that David should die, he charged Solomon his son, saying, "I go the way of all the earth: be thou strong, therefore, and show thyself a man; and keep the charge of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest, and whithersoever thou turnest thyself: that the Lord may continue his word which he spake concerning me, saying, If thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail thee—said he—a man on the throne of Israel" (1 Kings ii. 2-4). We do not wonder, therefore, to be told, that when he came to the throne of the kingdom, his first concern was to build the temple of God; and never surely did earthly sovereign set a nobler example to his people than did Solomon the king, when he himself led their devotions in dedicating that glorious temple to the Lord.

At what precise period his piety began to fade, the Scripture history does not distinctly indicate. There seems no reason to doubt, however, that its decay was gradual and progressive. It is seldom, indeed, that religious convictions and habits, where they are at all deep and strong, are thrown off suddenly. Satan would not succeed so often as he does, if it were his very first demand that his victim should entirely and all at once cast the fear of God away. He knows that the process of sap and mine will, in the end, subdue many a citadel, which it would be hopeless to attempt to carry by immediate and open assault. By such a seductive process, no doubt, it was that the devout and spiritually-minded Solomon was brought at length so far in his mournful course of defection that he went after other gods, and "did evil in the sight of the Lord," so that "the Lord was angry with Solo-

mon, because his heart was turned from the Lord God of Israel" (1 Kings xi. 5, 6, 9). We may rest assured that long before he had sunk so low as to become a worshipper of idols, he had lost his former love and reverence for the God of his fathers. And if we might venture to trace, with such imperfect materials as the Scriptures supply, the steps of his downward career, perhaps we should not greatly err in specifying as the first of these steps, his giving way to the pride of superior knowledge. Gifted with a penetrating and comprehensive intellect, and evidently addicted to study from his earliest years, he surpassed in the extent and variety of his mental acquirements all the men of his time. His wisdom, we are told, "excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men: than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all nations round about. And he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five. And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes" (1 Kings iv. 30-33). Into his proverbs he had condensed the choicest maxims of moral and political science—in his songs he had given expression at once to his piety and to his poetic genius—in his discourses or treatises on natural history he had ranged over the whole length and breadth of both the animal and vegetable kingdoms; and we can therefore well conceive what an ascendancy these high qualities must have given him over the minds of others, and what a crowding there must have been to the privileged assemblies where those treasures of knowledge were wont to be displayed. It does not surprise us to read that "there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth which had heard of his wisdom" (1 Kings iv. 34). For a time, indeed, he doubtless remembered, and gratefully acknowledged, that for all these great endowments he was indebted to the only wise God; for it was God who "gave Solomon

wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore" (1 Kings iv 29). But, alas! how few can long inhale the incense of such adulation as must have surrounded the throne of Solomon, without becoming intoxicated with vain thoughts. Even Moses, the meekest of men, forgot himself at the rock in Horeb, and arrogated to himself the glory that was due unto the Lord. It need not, therefore, seem to us a strange thing, if amid the flattery of courtiers and the applauses of the multitude, Solomon began to worship himself; and, looking around him on his high place and power, began to say in his heart, "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent" (Isaiah x. 13).

His wisdom having thus become his idol, he persuades himself that it will enable him to solve all mysteries and to rectify all disorders, and thus to render him the master both of his own destiny and of the destinies of his people, nay, of the whole world. We can imagine how such a notion would captivate a generous, great, and aspiring mind. He sees in the state of society, and in the condition of individual men, evils which he would fain remove, and wrongs which he would fain redress. Many are suffering from disease, many are pining in poverty, many are groaning beneath the iron yoke of injustice and oppression. Good men are often treated with neglect, or covered with obloquy, while wicked men are as often high in place and power. Why is all this? What is the source and explanation of these painful anomalies? Cannot I, who have searched out so many deep things, fathom this secret too? Shall it not be the privilege and the prerogative of Solomon the wise, to inaugurate a new and better condition of things? Is not this a natural and probable account of the circumstances and state of mind to which these words apply: "And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven!"

Some commentators on this book have, it is true, understood

this language and the whole passage to which it belongs, as if it were intended simply to intimate that the first of the ways in which Solomon sought to find happiness away from God, was by giving himself up to intellectual pursuits. They have been at much pains, accordingly, in handling this passage, to prove that, however pure and elevating such pursuits in their own nature and in their own place may be, they have no power to supply that satisfying portion, that highest good, after which our nature instinctively longs. And all this is undeniably true. But still, it may be reasonably doubted whether this be really the truth which this part of the royal Preacher's history was meant to teach. It is not, we apprehend, either the mere efforts of intellectual study, or the intellectual knowledge resulting from these efforts, of which Solomon intends here to say, that he found them to be vanity and vexation of spirit. It is not the labours of a mere student, of a mere devourer of books, which are here described. The admirable and instructive, though not always critically accurate, Matthew Henry had evidently adopted that view, when after leaving this passage, and when entering on the new phase of Solomon's career, which opens at the commencement of the 2d chapter, he quaintly and graphically says:—"Solomon here, in pursuit of the *summum bonum*, the felicity of man, adjourns out of his study, his library, his laboratory, his council-chamber, where he had in vain sought for it, into the park and the playhouse, his garden and his summer-house, exchanging the company of philosophers and grave senators for that of the wits and gallants, and the *beaux esprits* of his court, to try if he could find true satisfaction and happiness among them. Here he takes a great step downward from the noble pleasures of intellect to the brutal ones of sense: yet, if he resolve to make a thorough trial, he must knock at this door, because here a great part of mankind imagine they have found that which he was in quest of." He sought happiness first, that is to say, in the researches of learning and science, and not succeeding in that direction, he sought it next in the baser grati-

fications of sensual pleasure. In the view thus expressed we do not concur. It is not only, we think, erroneous in itself, but is pervaded by a very common fallacy as to the entire theory of this book. A frequent assumption regarding this book is, that Solomon having come to a formal resolution to try, by actual experiment, whether, and how far, worldly pursuits, possessions, and pleasures were capable of making man truly happy, had set himself deliberately to the task of going the round of them all. This is not a very likely supposition, and there is nothing whatever to support it either in this book itself, or in the Scripture record of Solomon's life. It is much more natural and reasonable to conclude that in following the course which this book describes, he had no preconcerted plan or purpose at all: but was simply giving way to the varying impulses of his own carnal tastes and wayward will. Having suffered himself to be drawn away and enticed by the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, from the paths of piety and holiness, he did, in point of fact, make trial of what earthly things could do to confer happiness, but not by any means in the way of systematically following out any scheme previously arranged for that end. He was not seeking to solve any great general question. He was simply following the bent of his own mind, impelling him, in a season of backsliding and forgetfulness of God, now in one direction, now in another. But God had a purpose in all this, though Solomon had none. He suffered his erring servant thus "to labour in the very fire," and to "weary himself for very vanity," in order to bring him back from these broken cisterns that could hold no water, to the true and only fountain of living waters—that is to Himself. And when, through the abundant mercy of God, this divine and gracious purpose had been at length accomplished, Solomon was moved by the Holy Spirit to turn his own experience to account for the spiritual good of others. It was not, in other words, before the devious course described in this book began, but after that course had come to an end, that Solomon was led to per-

ceive the importance of the lesson it was fitted to teach, and proceeded, under the guidance of inspiration, to set that lesson down in this truly precious portion of the Word of God.

There is an obvious and inherent probability in this view of the subject, which can hardly fail to commend it to the thoughtful and dispassionate mind. According to this view, the book of Ecclesiastes is rightly regarded as a discourse upon the chief good; as aiming to show that there is no happiness for man in a state of estrangement from God. But, on the other hand, according to this view, it is altogether a mistake to suppose that the career of worldliness which the book records was the result of any preconcerted plan, as if Solomon had said;—‘I shall give the world a full and fair trial; I shall put all its resources to the test, and see what they are worth:’—and had then, with a sort of philosophic calmness and impartiality, tried first one thing and then another. Although this supposition seems to lie at the bottom of many commentaries on the book of Ecclesiastes, it needs only to be distinctly stated, in order to be rejected as utterly at variance with reason and the very nature of things. In writing this book, Solomon was looking back on the various incidents in his own history to which it refers, from a totally different point of view from that in which he regarded them at the time they actually occurred. Now he sees them in the light which is thrown back upon them from his new position as an humble penitent who has been awakened to his folly and his sin, and has returned from his backsliding to the God from whom he had gone astray. They have now a meaning to his mind which they had not before, because God’s design in permitting him to run that wild career has now disclosed itself to his spiritually enlightened eye. Now, accordingly, he can see an order and a plan, where, in so far as he was himself concerned, there was no order or plan at all. And while it is most important, and indeed indispensable, to have this fact distinctly in view, in order to understand the main scope of the book, and the great lessons it is intended to teach, we must

never lose sight of the other fact already noticed—that in betaking himself to one pursuit or pleasure after another as the book describes, Solomon had, at the time, no other object in view than simply to gratify the wish which at the moment was uppermost in his mind. If we forget this, we shall inevitably fail in the true interpretation of the particular incidents that will come before us. In a word, we shall not succeed in accurately tracing and explaining this most instructive portion of Solomon's history, unless we realize his position and state of mind at the time he was actually passing through it. Seen from this, the direct and natural point of view, things will come out in their own proper form and colour; and with the facts of the history thus placed distinctly and correctly before us, there will be less difficulty in arriving at the great truths they embody, and at the vitally important lessons they are fitted to teach.

It is, then, as following this method of studying the passage at present before us, that we have arrived at that particular view of it which has been already briefly indicated. In other words, we regard what is here described as the natural result, in the case of a mind like Solomon's, of that pride of knowledge to which he had been tempted to give way. "Knowledge puffeth up," an inspired apostle tells us (1 Cor. viii. 1), and Solomon was not proof against this vain-glorious spirit, fed and fostered as it was by the thousand tongues that were continually sounding his praise. Gifted with such lofty intelligence, what may he not hope to achieve in the way of putting right whatever is wrong in this disordered world? We know how the pride of knowledge works in our own day—how it persuades our sceptics to think that their science and philosophy are about to put an end to all the evils which afflict humanity, and to bring on the true millennium. Ignorance they assume to be the real and only cause of either suffering or crime. Let juster views of the laws of nature, of political science, of personal and social well-being, become prevalent, and all will be well. Let

men only eat of this tree of knowledge and they shall be as gods. Solomon had eaten of it more largely than any of his fellows, and his flatterers told him every day that he had become as a god. Proud of his acknowledged pre-eminence, he will now show what his wisdom can achieve. He will be the enlightener and the benefactor of his age. He will correct the errors, and reform the abuses, and remove or ameliorate the miseries of his day. With this end in view, "I gave," says he, "my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven." This evidently did not mean that he retired into his study, and shut himself up among his books. No; but rather that carrying along with him the knowledge or wisdom which his previous studies had supplied, he went forth, armed with it, to observe the actual condition of men in the world around him. In the light of this wisdom he applied himself, with his utmost energy, to seek and search out the whole workings of private and public life—to see how it fared with men in their various places and pursuits—to observe how they were employed, and what profit they had of their labour. On all sides he found men toiling after one thing or another. The fact was obvious and irresistible that "this sore travail hath God given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith." And what had Solomon accomplished by surveying it all? "I have seen" said he, describing the result of it, "all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit." I have seen much that is humiliating—much that is painful—much that is altogether out of joint—but I have found myself impotent to amend it. "That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered." I have been compelled to acknowledge my impotence, and to leave things just as they were. The ordinations of Providence and the perversity of human nature have proved too strong for me. All my wisdom and all my knowledge have been of no avail to regenerate the world.

Smarting under this feeling of disappointment, and thus

thrown back upon himself, he retires within the deep recesses of his own bosom, and thus describes the thoughts that passed through his oppressed and troubled mind—"I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly." As if he had said—"I have employed all my laboriously gathered knowledge, and all my superior acquirements and powers; and, searching into the state of things in the world around me, I have seen both wisdom and folly extensively at work—prudent men labouring in one way, and madmen indulging their extravagances in another: but I have not been able either to correct the mischief done by the one class, or to insure the success merited by the other. My larger knowledge and deeper study of these things have ended in nothing but in the blasting of my hopes and in the grieving of my heart." "I perceived that this also," this superior wisdom and knowledge of mine, when thus employed, "is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." If he knew more of institutions and of men than any of his contemporaries—if he had looked deeper into the whole condition of humanity than they—it had only served to leave him under a more distressing and humiliating sense of man's pitiable state. It had but shown him this—that all his boasted wisdom and all his boasted greatness were no match for the countless errors and evils that prevail in this fallen world. In itself considered it was a great and noble enterprise which Solomon, in the pride of his power and wisdom, had taken in hand; but prosecuted as it had been, in reliance on his own might and his own prudence alone, and without any regard to the grace and power of God, it necessarily terminated in a total failure. Not thus could the face of this guilty world be renewed: not thus could the sorrows that afflict the human heart be driven away: not thus could the wrongs and evils

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which abound in society be brought to an end. Satan is not to be charmed out of his fatal dominion over our fallen race by the wise men of this world, charm they never so wisely. Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts!

Such is our view of this passage. The construction usually put upon it—and which supposes it to refer to a period in which Solomon had given himself up to severe and laborious study as a means of gaining happiness—is altogether forced and unnatural: as little in keeping with the probabilities of the case as with the statements of the passage itself. Study was no new thing with Solomon. Intellectual pursuits had been his familiar occupation for years. He did not need to have recourse to them now in order to find out what they could do for the happiness of man. Nor is the language employed that which is fitted to describe any such line of things. Its whole tone and bearing savour, not of the closet but of the busy world. It was not books, but men, wherewith the mind of Solomon was evidently at this period engaged. “The things”—that is, the works—*done* under the sun were what he had given his heart to seek and to search out; and the practical inefficiency of mere human wisdom, as a means of rectifying the disorders of humanity, of making straight that which was crooked, or of supplying that which was wanting, seems to have been the disappointing fact, the discovery of which made all his great acquirements appear to be nothing better than vanity, and their exercise to be only “vexation of spirit.”

Solomon's heart had begun to be turned away from God. His great estate, and the wisdom which he had gotten, more than all they that had been before him, had been lifting him up in his own eyes, and tempting him to forget his dependence on the Author of all good. In that course of defection on which he had now unhappily entered, he did not all at once rush into the excesses of sin. Its first movements bore about them something of the character and complexion of his former and better

days. It is still his desire and purpose to promote the welfare of his people, but it is no longer in God's own way that he is seeking to do it. In other times it was to God he looked to give him an understanding heart to judge his people, and to discern between good and bad. But now, in the pride of his high attainments, he has come to think that he needs no other help than his own, and is accordingly making flesh his arm, and suffering his heart to depart from the Lord. He will be, as before, the patriotic prince, the wise and righteous ruler, the friend and father of his people; but it is now not in God's strength, but in his own that he is to execute his high trust, and it is not God, but himself that is to have the glory. He makes the trial honestly and laboriously, to grapple with the evils he knows to exist, and which he has been at pains to study; but his efforts are expended in vain. Human selfishness, and human folly, and human depravity are too stubborn to bend before any influence he can bring to bear upon them; and he retires baffled and sickened, and sad at heart from the field. He has found his much worldly wisdom to be only a source of much grief, and that in increasing unsanctified knowledge, he had been but increasing sorrow.

Let us rejoice that One has arisen who is greater than Solomon, and who also has given His heart to seek and search out by wisdom—by a divine and infinite wisdom—all things that are done under heaven. He, too, has seen the sore travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith—how the earth has been cursed for sinful man's sake, and how laboriously he eats of it in the sweat of his brow—how man wearies himself amid toils and cares which, after all, leave him as unsatisfied as ever. But, unlike the literal Solomon, this mightier son of David, this more glorious King over Israel, has found out a way whereby that which is crooked can be made straight, and that which is wanting can be numbered. The Lord Jesus Christ has come down from heaven to look upon this fallen world. He has come, not to condemn it but to save it, and

this great work He has accomplished by the blood of His cross. He has redeemed us from the curse under which we groaned, by himself bearing that curse for us; and there is, therefore, now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus. A sinful nature was that crooked thing which no device of human wisdom could make straight. Human science and philosophy, neither in Solomon's days nor in ours, have ever been able to erect the bent form of fallen and degraded humanity, or to supply the felt wants of a consciously guilty soul. But He who is the power of God, and the wisdom of God, has achieved this blessed triumph for man. By His atoning sacrifice He makes reconciliation for iniquity; by His infinite merits, He secures for us a title to heaven; and by the regenerating and sanctifying grace of his Holy Spirit, He rescues our moral and spiritual nature from the dominion of Satan and sin, and restores us to the lost image of God.

In going on from the first to the second chapter of this book, we perceive at once that we have entered on an entirely new stage of Solomon's career. If, in the first act of this most instructive drama, we found him involving himself to no purpose in the cares of this life, we now find him, in the second, still more hopelessly and injuriously entangled in the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other things. In his former movement he came out in the character of a philosophical philanthropist, bent on rectifying, by the devices of mere human wisdom, the disorders which afflict society, and on putting an end to the wrongs and sufferings so prevalent among mankind. In that attempt, by his own confession, he had utterly failed. All his boasted statesmanship and science, and all the resources of his regal authority and power combined, had proved unequal to the task. In spite of all the pains and labour he had bestowed upon it, little or nothing had been accomplished. Things remained very much as they were. That which was crooked could not be made straight, and that which was wanting could not be numbered. The "sore travail" given to the sons of men to be

exercised therewith—life's manifold difficulties, and distresses, and evils—were not to be charmed away by any contrivances which the wisdom of this world could supply. The discovery was a very humbling and painful one for Solomon to make. It mortified his pride, and it wounded his benevolent feelings. What was the worth of his superior knowledge, if it served only to acquaint him with acts of injustice which it could not enable him to redress, and with miseries which it could not teach him how to cure? We do not wonder, therefore, to find him retiring from this fruitless contest, sickened and sad at heart. But we are curious to learn what he will do next. Will this rebuke, which his vain confidence in the arm of flesh has received, suffice to show him the error of his way in suffering, as he is now doing, his heart to depart from the Lord? Will this palpable defeat and bitter disappointment bring him to a better mind? We might have wished and hoped that it would; but so speedy a return from his backsliding career would not have furnished the materials for so large and lasting a lesson as Solomon's eventful history was destined to convey. He must go farther, and fare still worse in his devious course, before he can be brought to abandon it. That perilous influence which, in the midst of his unrivalled prosperity, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, had gradually acquired over his whole heart and mind, is not to be so easily shaken off. He has failed to gain the satisfaction which he seeks in one direction; but he will try another, in which he is fain to persuade himself that success will be much easier and more secure. "I said in my heart," he tells us, describing his next experiment, "Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure." Why should I burden myself with cares which it is so utterly useless to bear? Why should I vex myself about misfortunes and mischiefs which I have not the means to remedy? Let me fling care away; let me escape from these sad scenes and serious thoughts, and let me enjoy myself amid the gaities and convivialities of social life.

We cannot doubt that a court so numerous and so brilliant as that of Solomon must have contained ample materials for this sort of indulgence. Men of influence far inferior to his, find it easy to surround themselves with associates in keeping with their own wishes and tastes. Princes especially who—like our own Charles II.—are bent on giving the rein to their pleasures, and on laughing care away, soon succeed in crowding their splendid saloons and gathering to their luxurious banquets the proper kind of guests. The wits and buffoons of the day—the men whose peculiar faculty it is “to set the table in a roar”—would gladly come when a king called. It is not uninteresting to notice, however, that this particular form of pleasure seems very soon to have palled on Solomon’s taste. Mere jesting and foolish talking could not long satisfy a mind like his. Such giddy and senseless mirth speedily revolted him. “I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?” Referring to the same subject farther on in this book (vii. 6), he compares the laughter of the fool to the crackling of thorns under a pot—emitting a bright blaze for the moment, and suddenly going out in darkness. There must be great shallowness, or hopeless levity, about the mind that can be contented with so contemptible a species of enjoyment. A mind of any depth or strength cannot avoid being both ashamed and angry with itself at having given way, for however brief a period, to so unworthy a method of consuming time. Not, indeed, that innocent mirth, in its own place and measure, is to be repudiated and condemned. As Solomon himself elsewhere testifies (iii. 4), there is a time to laugh as well as a time to weep. That heart must want some of the best chords of feeling that cannot sympathize in the spontaneous hilarity of youth—that cannot delight in its spontaneous and exuberant joy. Our nature, indeed, has been so constituted by its infinitely wise and beneficent Maker, that occasionally to unbrace the mind from severer labours and sterner thoughts is in some sense necessary, in order to preserve it in a sound and healthful condition. It is not, how-

ever, of such regulated mirth that Solomon intends here to speak. It is not mirth as the accident, or the occasional accompaniment of life, but mirth as the end and object of life, which his words condemn. And especially, it is that unmeaning and extravagant mirth which seems to involve an utter forgetfulness of our rational nature, and of our condition as moral and responsible beings. Of such laughter it is emphatically true to say, that "it is mad;" and of such mirth to ask, "What doeth it?"

But, though soon weary of such empty and boisterous merriment, he had, as yet, no idea of giving up this chase after pleasure. "I sought in mine heart," he goes on to say, continuing this remarkable history, "to give myself unto wine—yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom,—and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life." This is a very remarkable statement. Solomon did not mean to be a mere vulgar, commonplace sensualist. He would freely indulge his grosser appetites, but he would not be their slave. He would not allow them to carry him too far. His was to be a refined and regulated licentiousness. His passions were to be kept under the control of his reason. He would "give himself unto wine," which here, evidently, is put for what are called the pleasures of the table—"banquetings, revellings, and such like"—and, perhaps, for sensual delights in general. He will indulge in these. He will frequent the society of those boon companions who find their so-called happiness in these jovial feasts. But, at the same time, he will keep up his acquaintance with books and scientific men. If his evenings are to be devoted to the wine-cup, the song, the dance, the grovelling debauch, and to such loose company as these pursuits never fail to bring together, his mornings shall still find him in the closet, or the library, or the council-chamber, occupied with his studies and his senators, and his public and political affairs—with everything, in short, that belongs to a higher and more intellectual walk of

life. By this singular combination of wisdom and folly—this strange compromise between his animal and his rational nature —he thinks, at length, to discover the true middle course in which the greatest amount of absolute enjoyment can be realized. In other words, and as he himself expresses it, he thinks, in this way, to learn “what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life.”

Thousands and tens of thousands, since Solomon's time, have done the same thing. Examples of it, only too numerous, it is to be feared, might easily be found among the cultivated men of the present day. To such men, when not under the influence of real godliness, there is something very enticing in such a way of life. To become mere drunkards or profligates would be to forfeit their position in society, and to be utterly degraded even in their own eyes. But to be men of pleasure and men of science at the same time—to give themselves unto wine, and still to be acquainting their hearts with wisdom, prosecuting their scientific researches or literary studies,—enables them to keep up a certain kind of self-respect, which blinds them to the disgracefulness of their immoral habits, and which imparts a certain air of usefulness and honour to a life that is at bottom utterly corrupt and depraved. We hear it often argued that mere intellectual cultivation would suffice to banish both vice and crime; and that if only our working-men had access to that kind of knowledge which refines the taste and invigorates the mental powers, they would inevitably become virtuous and good. The case of Solomon might surely suffice to show that this is a very rash and foolish conclusion; and his case, as has been already noticed, is only one out of thousands in every age of the world. It is a fact, notorious to every one at all acquainted with the subject, that oftentimes the very men who have been foremost in the ranks of literary and scientific fame, or in their attainments in the æsthetic arts, have also been the most remarkable for the profligacy of their private lives. Not out of

the head, but out of the heart, are the issues of life ; and only when the heart has been renewed by the grace of God, will the life be pure and holy.

In following out this new course on which he had entered, Solomon was at pains to surround himself with all the choicest beauties of nature and the most magnificent productions of art. "I made me great works," he goes on to say ; "I builded me houses ; I planted me vineyards ; I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits : I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees ;" or, as it might be rendered, "the grove flourishing with trees."

Of the great works here spoken of, it seems probable that a considerable part may have been connected with the general improvement of his kingdom, rather than with his own mere personal convenience or royal state. In the first book of Kings and the second of Chronicles, which contain the records of Solomon's reign, we read that "he built Tadmor in the wilderness, and all the store cities which he built in Hamath. Also he built Beth-horon the upper, and Beth-horon the nether, fenced cities, with walls, gates, and bars ; and Baalath, and all the store cities that Solomon had, and all the chariot cities, and the cities of the horsemen, and all that Solomon desired to build in Jerusalem, and in Lebanon, and throughout all the land of his dominions" (2 Chron. viii. 4-6). These were great works, and the execution of many of them was, no doubt, dictated by an enlightened policy, as being fitted to promote the security and the general good of the realm. It was, we may presume, with a special reference to such statesman-like achievements as these that he spoke of himself as still, in the midst of all the jovialties and follies connected with his pursuit of pleasure, acquainting "his heart with wisdom." To aggrandize his kingdom was, indeed, only another way of aggrandizing himself. It was another way of gratifying that self-idolatry, which the consciousness of his great attainments and the flattery of his cour-

tiers had nursed into a passion, and in giving way to which apparently, his departure from God began. He was ambitious of the world's applause. His aim was to outshine in riches and worldly renown all his contemporary kings. The wisdom, accordingly, which he continued to cultivate, was not the wisdom that is from above—that heavenly wisdom, the beginning and essence of which is the fear of God. It was the wisdom of this world which alone, at this period of his career, seemed to be of any value in his eyes—the wisdom which looks closely to those things that are seen and temporal, but is utterly blind to the things that are unseen and eternal. In the exercise of this mundane wisdom he reared store cities and fitted out fleets, and immensely increased the material wealth and prosperity of his kingdom. A great part of the commerce of the world was made to flow through it. By means of his friendly alliance with Tyre, the great merchant-city of the West—by his own out-port of Eloth or Ezion-geber, on the Red Sea—and by the caravans which communicated, through his skilfully placed city of Tadmor in the wilderness, with Babylon and Nineveh, and the great cities and kingdoms of the East, the land of Israel became, under Solomon, the very highway of the nations, the very heart and centre of the world's trade; a trade which, after the lapse of 3000 years, is again, in our own day, rapidly returning to those ancient channels which Solomon opened; and by the opening of which “the weight of gold that came to Solomon, in one year, was six hundred threescore and six talents of gold. Beside that he had of the merchantmen, and of the traffic of the spice-merchants, and of all the kings of Arabia, and of the governors of the country” (1 Kings x. 14, 15).

But while Solomon was thus playing the part of the statesman and political economist, he was not less assiduously playing the part of the luxurious man of pleasure. His houses and vineyards, and orchards and gardens, and pools of water, were all designed to display his own magnificence and to minister to his own gratification. Nothing could exceed the splendour of these

royal retreats to which, we may suppose, he was wont to resort when he desired to "lay hold on folly," and, at a distance from the cares and distractions of his capital, to give himself up to jollity and mirth, with the gay and dissolute companions of these festive hours. "All king Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the house of the forest of Lebanon were of pure gold; none were of silver: it was nothing accounted of in the days of Solomon" (1 Kings x. 21). Nothing was wanting that could either flatter his vanity or gratify his taste, or give zest and variety to his sensual enjoyments. "I got me," he says, "servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me; I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces; I gat me men-singers and women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts." In a word, he made for himself a kind of sensual paradise. His palaces shone with pearl, and ivory, and gold; their stately halls were lined with guards and liveried menials; their tables groaned with every luxury which sea or land could yield; the eye was dazzled with the costly attire of the noble and princely guests; the ear ravished with the strains of choicest music that ever and anon resounded through the long corridors, or floated up from beneath the open windows, as the royal banquet went on. The harp and the viol, the tabret and pipe, and wine, were in their feasts; but they regarded not the work of the Lord, neither considered the operation of his hands. Had man been the mere creature of a day, made for no higher a destiny than to eat, and drink, and die, such a way of life might well, perhaps, have been regarded as the very consummation of human happiness. It is a way of life which many continue to pursue, and which many more who have not the means of doing so, regard with envy. When those in humbler life look on from a distance at such a scene, they are apt to sigh over the hard fortune that excludes them from it. They can hardly conceive of care or

sorrow, or sense of want, as ever by possibility finding entrance into it. Let those who may be disposed to cherish such a feeling, listen to the testimony of one who had quaffed this cup even when it was filled to the brim—who was not simply a sharer in the delights of that envied condition of things, but who was himself the lord and master of it all—the very centre around which all this gaiety and grandeur revolved. He had been at pains to gather all this magnificence and all these scenes of enjoyment around him. It was for him especially they had all been prepared. And, now that the preparation was complete—now that the fairy scene to which he had long been looking forward was at length realized—now that the scaffolding had been taken down, and that the palace of pleasure stood out, in all its sensuous splendour, before his eyes—now that he had taken his seat on its lofty throne of “ivory, overlaid with the best gold,” and could say, without fear of contradiction or challenge, “So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me: And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy”—now, in a word, that Solomon had fully tested and seen what all this array of worldly wealth, and all these means of luxurious self-indulgence could do for his happiness, this is the conclusion to which he comes—“Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do; and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.”

Let it be observed that this feeling of disappointment—this painful sense of emptiness and unprofitableness which oppressed the mind of Solomon,—is not to be imputed either to any want of success in obtaining the means of enjoyment which he sought, or to any incapacity or indisposition on his part to take the fullest use of them for that end. He tells us expressly that whatsoever his eyes desired he kept not from them. His riches and popularity and power placed everything he could wish to

have within his reach, and he grudged no pains or cost to secure it. One whose wealth was less abundant might have seen and coveted many things which he could not afford to procure; and one whose spirit was less munificent might have longed to possess what he was too parsimonious to give the necessary price to obtain. There were no such obstacles in the way of the king of Israel when he resolved to prove his heart with mirth and to enjoy pleasure. Nor, on the other hand, was his purpose marred by anything of that cold, cynical, unsocial misanthropy which positively disqualifies some men from enjoying anything whatever. Solomon threw his whole heart and soul into the pursuits and pleasures to which he had thus, for the time, devoted himself. "His heart rejoiced in all his labour." While it was yet in progress, while it was still fresh and new, it seemed to be the very thing he sought—even "that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life." His glowing fancy kindled in the prospect of realizing its own brilliant schemes; his fine taste luxuriated among those works of art and those beauties of nature which the architect, and the painter, and the sculptor, and the horticulturist, and the landscape-gardener, were accumulating around him. His self-importance, his love of show, his desire to astonish and dazzle the multitude, were fed and flattered by all this gathering magnificence of his royal state; while, at the same time, his vast stores of knowledge, his strong social sympathies, his ability to shine in every kind of society in which he chose to mingle, all combined to carry him eagerly along in this pleasure-seeking course, and to give it a zest and a relish entirely to his mind. Never, therefore, could the same experiment be made in circumstances more favourable to its complete success. And yet it entirely failed. As the novelty of such scenes and entertainments wore away,—when familiarity had begun to make them tame and dull,—they lost their power to please. Instead of exciting and exhilarating his mind, they now only wearied and oppressed it. There was nothing in them to impart real or permanent

satisfaction. When the gay company had dispersed; when the splendid pageant had passed away; and when, amid the silence and the solitude of his own chamber, worn out and exhausted with the very efforts he had been making to be merry—his head throbbing with the fever of his sensual feast, and his heart aching with the reproaches of an accusing conscience—when, in these circumstances, he set himself to reflect on all the works that his hands had wrought, and on all the labour that he had laboured to do, we do not wonder to hear him confessing, with a sigh, that all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and that it left no profit behind.

If only they would tell the truth, there can be no question that the very same acknowledgment would be heard issuing from the lips of every individual of that immense and multifarious crowd who are lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God. Little do mere on-lookers know what an amount of real wretchedness often lurks unseen and out of sight beneath the gaieties of the world. The first lesson, indeed, which this instructive record of the experience of Solomon should teach, is that of contentment with our outward estate. When men's worldly means are limited and their lot obscure, they are sometimes tempted to conclude that, by a harsh and adverse decree of Providence, happiness has been placed beyond their reach. The case of Solomon may surely suffice to correct this error. If it proves anything at all, it proves this, that happiness is no necessary adjunct of wealth and worldly greatness. Never, perhaps, at any period of his life was Solomon so truly miserable as when he had gathered silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings, in such store as to have increased more than all that were before him in Jerusalem. Happiness is not the peculiar prerogative of any one grade of society, or of any one condition of life. It is not the station or the outward circumstances of the man that determines the amount of his happiness: it is the state of his soul. We have often thought of a beautiful evidence and example of this truth with which we became

acquainted in the very outset of our ministry, in a quiet country parish then under our pastoral care. The person to whom we allude was a feeble old woman, one of the paupers of the parish. Her single room was small and dark: she was bent nearly double with the infirmities of age: she was a solitary creature who could claim kindred with no human being around her: she dwelt alone. To see her cowering over her scanty fire in a cold winter day, or tottering across the crazy floor of her dingy dwelling, or creeping laboriously up the stairs that led to it, with her little bag of meal or her pitcher of water from the well—a more apparently pitiable object could hardly be found. What a contrast to Solomon, blazing in scarlet and gold upon his ivory throne, or carousing with his gay companions amid the oriental magnificence of the house of the forest of Lebanon! But, if the outward contrast was great, the inward contrast was greater still. The peace of God, that passeth all understanding, kept her heart and mind through Christ Jesus; and no language but that of cheerful contentment and tranquil happiness was ever heard issuing from her lips. How often have we found her, in a gloomy winter day, waiting eagerly for the height of noon, when the sun was wont to look down for a brief interval through an opening in the hill above, with her large open Bible laid out in the little window-sill, ready to receive the augmented stream of light that would enable her dim eye to read some cherished portion of that blessed Word upon which the Lord had caused her, like the father of Solomon, to hope. In poverty, in weakness, in solitude, with nothing but her Bible and her God, she was truly and habitually happy. If she ever thought of the difference between her worldly lot and that of the rich and the great, it was only to give utterance to the beautiful sentiment of the Psalmist: Lord, “thou hast put gladness in my heart more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased” (Psalm iv. 7). Blessed, truly, is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is!

If these things be so, what folly are those men guilty of who

spend their days in laboriously laying up treasure for themselves, and are not rich towards God—who are so busy about gaining the world, that they have no time and no thought to give to the saving of their souls? Solomon was far more successful in making that kind of acquisition than they can ever hope to be; nor can their wealth ever purchase a title of the worldly grandeur or worldly pleasure for them which Solomon's wealth procured for him; and yet, so long as he made the gold his hope, and the most fine gold his confidence, it yielded him no profit—it was productive of nothing but vanity and vexation of spirit. “Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl 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. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days” (James v. 1–3). “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life!” (1 Tim. vi. 6–12).

It is no unusual thing, indeed, for men to be disappointed and sickened with the world. It fails to yield them the satisfaction they counted on: they feel the heavy burden of its cares: their pride is wounded by its neglect: their kindlier feelings are hurt by its coldness and ingratitude: their sense of honour is outraged by its want of truth; and, in looking forward to the future, their fears are alarmed by the painful evidences that are daily multiplying around them of its utter instability. But, alas! though

the conviction thus often forces itself upon them that all is vanity, and that there is no real, abiding, satisfying profit in all the labour they have been taking under the sun, how few, comparatively, lay this salutary lesson to heart! Like Solomon, in the days of his backsliding, they may turn from one earthly object or worldly pursuit to another, but it is still to the things which are beneath they continue obstinately to cleave. They have been long and laboriously hewing out one cistern; and just when they hoped to see it filled with the water that was to quench that thirst for happiness which is the instinct of our nature, it is broken by some unexpected stroke, and falls to pieces in their hands; or they find some flaw in it through which all the expected enjoyment escapes: in a word, they find it can hold no water. And yet, no sooner is the discovery made, than they address themselves, like Solomon of old, to the hewing out of another cistern, destined, as in his case, to prove equally valueless as all the others they have already tried. Thus do multitudes go on from year to year, until at length that sense of want, that feeling of vanity and unprofitableness which impelled them for a time to long for something different and something better, itself gradually dies away. They become reconciled to these disappointments, and are willing to take the world on its own terms. It has often deceived them, and it has never afforded them the happiness they looked for; but, like the bullock accustomed to the yoke, they grow callous and insensible to the vexations that once galled and fretted them. And thus they go on in the dull round of the world's ways until they are taken away from it for ever, to sink into the abyss of a lost eternity. "If any man thirst," said the Lord Jesus, "let him come unto me and drink" (John vii. 37). "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even

the sure mercies of David" (Isaiah lv. 2, 3). "Seek not what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind. For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: and your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things. But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Luke xii. 29-31).

CHAPTER IV.

THE PREACHER REVIEWS HIS ERRING CAREER, AND
POINTS OUT THE LESSONS IT SHOULD TEACH.

“And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what *can* the man *do* that cometh after the king? *even* that which hath been already done. Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. The wise man’s eyes *are* in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all.

“Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also *is* vanity. For *there is* no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now *is*, in the days to come shall all be forgotten: and how dieth the wise *man?* as the fool. Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun *is* grievous unto me: for all *is* vanity and vexation of spirit. Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun; because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise *man* or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This *is* also vanity.

“Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun. For there is a man whose labour *is* in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it *for* his portion. This also *is* vanity, and a great evil. For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days *are* sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.

“*There is* nothing better for a man, *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that* he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it *was* from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who else can hasten *hervunto*, more than I? For *God* giveth to a man that *is* good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather, and to heap up, that he may give to *him* that *is* good before God. This also *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.”—ECCLES. II. 12-26.

SOLOMON is here reviewing that devious and downward course already described, and which for many years he had pursued when seeking his happiness away from God. Two distinct stages of that course have come under our notice. Setting out as a sort of philosophical philanthropist, he seems to have thought to reform all the abuses of society, and to remedy all the ills that

afflict human life, by bringing to bear upon them the resources of his own idolized wisdom. This boastful enterprise, after much pains and labour had been bestowed upon it, led, as we have seen, to nothing but bitter disappointment. That which was crooked could not, by all his efforts and ingenuity, be made straight; and that which was wanting could not be numbered. Things went on very much as they had done before. Human selfishness and human depravity were not to be charmed into submission by the wisdom of this world. His deeper search into the actual condition of humanity served only to reveal to him disorders he could not rectify, and evils which all his skill and science were impotent to cure. He found, in short, that in much wisdom is much grief, and that he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. Sick of this fruitless toil, he determined to abandon it altogether as equally hopeless and vexatious, and to consult for the future only his own personal gratification. His next movement, accordingly, was a chase after mere enjoyment. He gave the rein to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, and at the same time by way of imparting a certain refinement and dignity to this ignoble career, he still acquainted himself with wisdom. He continued, that is to say, to cultivate intellectual pursuits, so as to be at once the student and the sensualist, the philosopher and the man of pleasure in one. This new experiment succeeded no better than the other. After trying it in every conceivable form, and with all the means at his disposal which his boundless wealth, his high rank, and his immense acquisitions supplied, it yielded nothing but vanity and vexation of spirit. It left nothing behind but a painful sense of weariness and self-dissatisfaction. Precisely at this point the passage at present before us comes in. Solomon is here looking back upon these past proceedings, and telling us in what light they subsequently appeared to his own mind. There is, perhaps, some reason to doubt whether this retrospect includes both of the stages of his history, which have just been briefly alluded

to, or only the second. "I turned myself," he tells us, in entering upon that train of sad and humbling reflections which the verses now under consideration record, "to behold wisdom and to behold madness and folly." Understanding wisdom in the sense which evidently is here intended—understanding it not as the wisdom that cometh from above, but as the wisdom of this world, the wisdom that consists in mere human sagacity and secular science—it may truly enough be said that while this wisdom was the leading characteristic of his first experiment, madness and folly were the chief attributes of the second. At the same time, it is to be borne in mind that both of these features—not the madness and folly only, but the wisdom too—were designedly embraced in the second stage of his course, as a wanderer from the ways of God; and therefore that, even by itself alone, that second and strange chapter of this eventful history might suffice to furnish materials for the twofold theme on which Solomon is now preparing to discourse. Upon the whole, however, it seems the more natural conclusion that the course on which he now turned back this searching look, included all which the foregoing context describes. He had now made trial of what the cultivation and the exercise of his intellectual nature could accomplish in the way of securing true happiness; and he had also made trial of what could be achieved by proving his heart with mirth, and giving himself up to animal pleasures. He had made the experiment in both ways, under advantages which, in the same degree, few, if any, could ever hope to enjoy. "For what can the man do that cometh after the king?" Who can pretend to surpass, or even to rival Solomon in mental capacity or acquired knowledge, or in facilities for bringing all his high intellectual endowments to bear upon any scheme of either social improvement or personal aggrandizement in which he might think fit to engage? Or, on the other hand, if it be the delights of sense that are in question, who is it who can expect to surround himself with such a paradise of pleasure as the gay and splendid monarch who builded him houses and planted

him vineyards, and made him gardens and orchards, and pools of water: who gathered him also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings: who gat him men-singers and women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men: who withheld not his heart from any joy? If, therefore, human wisdom on the one hand, or madness and folly on the other, be competent to provide a satisfying portion for man, it is impossible but that Solomon must have obtained it. He tried both, and he did so on very purpose to find that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. He made the trial, moreover, in circumstances immensely more favourable than those in which almost any other of the sons of men can ever hope to be placed. What, then, was the issue? what was the conclusion to which all his elaborate experience conducted him? This is what we are now to hear, and what it deeply concerns us thoroughly to learn and to lay to heart.

“Then I saw,” he says, “that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.” Although both had disappointed him, he does not confound the one with the other. He is by no means disposed to treat them as equally worthless. Wisdom, earthly wisdom, had indeed utterly failed to win for him the happiness he sought; but still it was undeniably a far nobler thing than folly. When, for the purpose of instituting a comparison between the two, he recalled the hours he had spent in intellectual pursuits, and then remembered those other and far different hours that had been devoted to “banquetings, revellings, and such like,” the conclusion was too obvious to be resisted. By the one, his rational nature had been cultivated and improved; by the other his moral nature had been deadened and depraved. In following the dictates of wisdom—earthly wisdom though it was—his mental powers had been strengthened, his knowledge had been increased, his means of usefulness had been enlarged, and much real and elevating enjoyment had been imparted to

his own mind. In giving way, on the other hand, to the impulses of folly—in consuming days and nights in frivolous mirth, or sensual indulgence—he had only impaired his health, and wasted his time, and degraded his character, and lowered himself even in his own eyes. Reflecting on all this, he now accordingly states the conclusion to which this comparison had brought him. “Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.”

As light makes all external things manifest, it is the appropriate emblem of intelligence. “Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun” (Eccles. xi. 7). It is not only grateful to the sense, but pleasing to the mind, by the feeling of confidence and security which its presence inspires. Darkness, on the other hand, is correspondingly distasteful. It suggests painful ideas of uncertainty, danger, and helplessness. “If any man walk in the day he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world. But if a man walk in the night he stumbleth, because there is no light in him” (John xi. 9, 10). Wisdom resembles the light of day; folly resembles the darkness of night. The difference between the two, and the superiority of the one to the other, Solomon still further illustrates by this pointed remark—“The wise man’s eyes are in his head, but the fool walketh in darkness.” The mind is the eye of the soul, and when it is informed with wisdom, it is in its true position. It is then like the bodily eye, which, by a beautiful and beneficent arrangement of the Divine Author of our frame, is placed in the head, that from this elevation it may be able to look around, and to embrace an extended view,—like a sentinel upon a watch-tower,—ready to descry danger while it is yet afar off. The mind of the wise man—of the man who has been at pains to cultivate and exercise his intellectual powers—whose memory has been stored with knowledge, and whose judgment has been enlarged by study, and sharpened by exercise, and matured by reflection—the mind of such a man is in circumstances to guide him with some measure of

safety through the perils and perplexities of life. His eyes are in his head. He sees where he is going. He can look before him and forecast the future. His acquaintance with men and things enables him to make the best use of his talents and opportunities. His sagacity anticipates and discovers dangers before which others fall. His mental culture and capacity make easy to him tasks by which others are overborne, and insure his triumphant success in circumstances that involve his competitors in shameful defeat. Whatever may be the career in which he has embarked, wisdom gives him prodigious advantages in pursuing it. The very opposite is the inevitable consequence of giving way to folly. "The fool walketh in darkness." He is like a man pursuing his journey under the cloud of night. He is continually losing his way, and falling into the ditch. By the fool Solomon evidently means the gay, idle, thoughtless sensualist, intent on his worthless pleasures, and caring about nothing besides. Such a man speedily becomes besotted by his own base habits. Relaxed and enervated by idleness and dissipation, his mind loses equally the power and the disposition to apply itself to anything that requires an intellectual effort, or that involves serious thought. The longer he persists in such a course, the more useless and contemptible does he become, until he ends in being nothing else than a nuisance to society and a burden to himself.

Such, in substance, is Solomon's estimate of the difference between wisdom and folly; and this estimate is founded not merely on his observation of their effects upon others, but on his personal knowledge and experience of their influence and tendency in his own particular case. And let it be remembered that all the while he is describing, in both instances, a life spent without God. Even in such a life, therefore—a life in which the fear of God has no place—Solomon recognizes great and important diversities. One style of such a life may be, in many respects and for many ends, greatly preferable to another. It is important to remember this, and to keep it distinctly in view,

in dealing with the great subject which Solomon has here in hand. Religious men are often accused of overlooking it, and of placing the life of the most intelligent, upright, and amiable of the men of the world, on the same level with the life of the most profligate and depraved. There is undoubtedly a difference, broad and palpable, between two such lives and two such classes of men; and it is precisely to this difference Solomon means to refer, when he says—"I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness." But if we wish to know of how little avail that difference is after all, when it comes to be viewed in the light of God and of eternity, we must not pause here, but rather prepare to follow our inspired instructor till he has reached the conclusion of the whole matter.

We have heard him describing wherein wisdom and folly *differ*—let us now hear him describing wherein they are *at one*. In observing the two, this was not his *only* inference, that "the wise man's eyes are in his head," whereas "the fool walketh in darkness." "I myself," he adds, "perceived this also, that one event happeneth to them all." Their earthly wisdom, however valuable in its own place, is not an infallible guide, for even he who follows it is nevertheless often found to err. It is not an infallible protection, for he who enjoys it is not safe from adversity and sorrow. His flesh is heir to the same ills as that of the fool. Fortune fails him, friends deceive him, the world ill-uses him, disease assails him, age overtakes and enfeebles him, death drags him down to the grave. Solomon himself was pre-eminently wise. His eyes were in his head, if the eyes of any man ever were. Few men had ever looked so widely or so intelligently abroad upon the face of nature, or had searched so deeply into the philosophy of human life; and yet he had found himself as impotent as the senseless and improvident fool to control the course of Providence, or even to determine with any certainty what should be on the morrow. "Then said I in my heart"—then, when this humbling conviction forced itself upon his mind—"as it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to

me: and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity."

We do not understand this statement to mean, that the wise man has no advantage over the fool. This were plainly inconsistent with what Solomon had said immediately before. In many ways, as has been already shown in dealing with the preceding verses, the wise man benefits by his wisdom. His prudence, and forethought, and general ability secure for him a respect and consideration which are commonly denied to those who live merely for their own selfish and sensual pleasures. He will usually be found to rise in society while they sink, and to succeed in his undertakings while they fail; to come, in a worldly sense, to advancement and honour, while they come, in every sense, to shame and ruin. Solomon knew all this: he had seen it exemplified a thousand times in the world around him. But still the great fact remained, that the wise man equally as the fool, is liable to numberless adversities, crosses, and disappointments, of a kind which, though he can sometimes foresee, he is often powerless to prevent. Providence moves on in its stately march, and ever and anon tramples his best-laid schemes in the dust. To the eye of mere earthly wisdom it seems as if that providence were blind—as if it made no distinctions. Even good men, godly men, are sometimes perplexed by considerations like these. So much at one period did they disturb the mind of David, as almost to have subverted his faith. He was envious of the foolish when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. It seemed as if in vain he had cleansed his heart, and washed his hands in innocency. Profligacy appeared to fare better than piety. His feet were almost gone: his steps had well-nigh slipped. A dark and dreadful scepticism had begun to cast its deadly shadow upon his soul. But a closer study and a larger view of the Lord's works and ways dispelled this gloomy feeling. "When he went into the sanctuary of God, then understood he their end" (Ps. lxxiii.) Eternity will amply justify the ways of God to man. It is when we limit our view of these ways to time,

that we mistake their true import; because we are then looking on what is altogether imperfect and incomplete. Solomon was under this misleading influence when, in his haste and impatience, he said—Why then was I more wise than the fool? In so speaking he was causelessly disparaging a valuable gift. In making him wiser than the fool, God had conferred upon Solomon a most precious blessing. His larger knowledge and higher intelligence, and his clearer discernment of the true nature and real worth of things, had placed at his disposal means both of gaining and of doing good, which made his position, even in a temporal point of view, unspeakably preferable to that of the fool. It was no reason for underrating his wisdom that it did not raise him above the reach of misfortune—that it could not save him from disappointment, disease, and death. Had his wisdom been rightly improved—had he continued to exercise it on things spiritual and divine,—had his great mind been still illumined, as of old, by a light from above, no such petulant complaint, as we are now considering, would ever have proceeded from his lips. It was because his wisdom had become his idol—because it had so inflated his pride that in his own eyes he seemed to be as God—because he had been leaning on it, and looking to it, for everything he could need or desire—therefore it was that he now felt so dissatisfied with it. Because a sad and humiliating experience taught him that he was no god after all, but a poor, frail, mortal creature, subject to the same infirmities, and exposed to the same evils which assail the foolishness of men, he was ready to run from one extreme to another, and to treat almost with scorn those very attainments in which he had so lately gloried.

And so it will, and must always, be with every one who expects from mere human wisdom what it can never yield—who dreams that it can make him the author of his own happiness, and render him independent of the grace and mercy of God. So perverted, instead of securing happiness, it will rather contribute to take it away. This evidently was the experience of

Solomon, and hence the bitter exclamation—Why was I then more wise? That very wisdom, that superior science and sagacity by which he was so eminently distinguished, only enabled him the better to perceive how insecure were the possessions, and how hollow were the friendships, and how empty and evanescent were the enjoyments of the world. Shallower or more unreflecting minds might see only the glittering surface of things, and grosser and baser natures might find it possible to grovel among sensual pleasures. It was otherwise with him. His keener eye detected the cheat, and his finer sensibilities speedily recoiled with disgust from scenes and pursuits the very remembrance of which covered him with shame. He saw—and almost envied the fool for not seeing it—that, verily every man at his best estate is altogether vanity—that surely every man walketh in a vain show—that surely they are disquieted in vain—that he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them (Psalm xxxix. 5-6). We do not wonder, therefore, to hear Solomon saying with a sigh, as he thought of these things, that this also is vanity. He had been reviewing the past, when he felt himself driven to this painful conclusion; but the conclusion was only strengthened and confirmed when he cast his eye forward upon the future. “For,” added he, as this additional view of the matter rose up before his mind, “there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is, in the days to come shall all be forgotten.”

Nothing is more humbling to human pride than the stern fact which these words proclaim. It is not meant, indeed, that such a man as Solomon, considered even simply as a man of the world, was likely to disappear as soon from the memory of after-generations, as any of the gay and giddy crowd who were the companions of his folly. Though no place had belonged to him on the pages of inspiration, or among the people of God, his name nevertheless would, in all probability, have been handed down to a remote posterity. A great mind, even though it be a stranger to the wisdom that cometh from above, cannot live and move

and have its being in this world, without leaving some memorials of its presence and power behind. And yet, had Solomon possessed no other wisdom than that of which he is discoursing in the words before us—the wisdom of intellectual culture, and human science, and statesman-like policy—how little should we have known of him at this hour! It is to his divine wisdom, and to his place among the prophets and people of God, he is indebted for his enduring and immortal name. What do we know of the wise men of Egypt or Assyria? Little or nothing, save what we gather incidentally from the Holy Scriptures. It is chiefly their relation to the indestructible church and Word of the living God, that has saved them from that oblivion which is the lot of all human works and human things.

But when Solomon observes that there is “no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever,” it is evidently not of the wise man’s mere name he designs to speak. The name may be remembered while the man and his works are, to all practical purposes, forgotten. The world goes on just as if he had never been. The space he filled, when alive, was so large—his influence made itself felt in so many ways—his skilful and weighty hand touched and regulated so many of the springs that animate and govern human affairs, that it seemed as if his death must bring society to a stand. And yet, the grave has scarcely closed over his mortal remains, when the place that knew him knows him no more. As the setting of the midnight moon brings stars into view, whose feebler rays were quenched before, even so does it come to pass that names which the wise man’s, while it shone, threw into the shade, now take their place in the social firmament; and, though the light be less, the world moves on under it, as if none better or brighter had been ever known. “Let not, therefore, the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the

earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord" (Jer. ix. 23, 24). He who does not know and understand this—he, in other words, who is ignorant of God, and has no purpose nor desire to be enabled to do those things that please Him,—is destitute of true wisdom, even though, as regards intellectual endowments and secular science, he may be the wisest of men's sons. Neither by his wisdom, nor by his wealth, could Solomon by "any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him that he should still live for ever, and not see corruption." Solomon, as well as the Psalmist, saw this, "that wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others. Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling-places to all generations: they call their lands after their own names. This their way is their folly" (Psalm xlix. 6-13). It was, in truth, this very sentiment that was filling the dark and despairing mind of Solomon when he gave expression to this bitter thought—"And how dieth the wise man? as the fool." Yes; he may surround himself with all the appliances of health; he may breathe the most salubrious air; he may have his winter palace in the sheltered city, and his summers may be spent amid the cool and shady retreats of Lebanon; he may have the most skilful physicians at his call, and venal courtiers may be every day saluting him with the grateful cry—O king, live for ever! But the hour incessantly draws on that must consign him to the tomb; and when he too, even Solomon the mighty and the wise, must say to corruption, Thou art my father, and to the worm, Thou art my sister and my mother!

Nor is this the last or worst of this humbling story; for, as all his wisdom cannot avail to save him from the same death that overtakes the fool, so neither can it save him from the same judgment that is to follow. Alas! his wisdom, instead of then coming to his aid, shall only rise up to condemn him. It was a talent of great worth which the Lord of all had committed to his charge; but, instead of laying it out for God's glory, he had oftentimes

prostituted it to the service of folly and sin, and more frequently still had employed it to deify himself. If the fool for abusing his one talent must be brought in guilty, how much more the wise man who had abused his ten! "For unto whom much is given, of him shall be much required" (Luke xii. 48).

Blessed be God, there is a better wisdom than earthly science can ever teach. "But continue thou," said the apostle Paul to Timothy, "in the things which thou hast learned, and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them: and that from a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. iii. 14, 15). Let us rejoice that this highest wisdom is not the rare gift or attainment of the few, but may be the possession of all, even of those who, as regards the wisdom of this world, are no better than fools. So plainly is it taught in the Word of God, that even the wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein. The one qualification needful for any man who would acquire it is, that he become as a little child. It is the way of a righteous God to hide these things from the wise and prudent, and to reveal them unto babes. Therefore is it written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that, in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. i. 19-24.)

Solomon had thus been making a deliberate survey of human life, and more especially had been reviewing the course which in the days of his folly he had himself pursued. That course

had been of a very diversified description. It had carried him now in one direction, now in another. At one time he had been the assiduous and successful cultivator of learning and science; at another, the thoughtful statesman and political economist, providing for the security, developing the resources, and augmenting the wealth of his kingdom; at a third, the man of taste, beautifying his capital and his country seats with magnificent works of art; at a fourth, the man of pleasure, carousing with his boon companions, and running the wild race of madness and folly with the gayest, the most reckless, the most profligate of them all. Having at length turned himself, in some hour of calm reflection, to look back on this strange career, there was, as we have seen, one conviction which deeply impressed itself on his mind—that though neither the wisdom which had characterized some departments of that career, nor the folly which had been so painfully manifest in others, had won for him the happiness he sought—yet that wisdom was a far nobler thing than folly—that the one excelleth the other as far as light excelleth darkness. The wisdom, it is true, of which alone Solomon had it then in view to speak, was mere earthly wisdom—the wisdom of human science and worldly prudence. But to be guided even by this wisdom was to be in a greatly better position, for many of the purposes of life, than that which belongs to the senseless and improvident fool, whose ignorance or incapacity, or whose debasing habits and grovelling pursuits, make him worse than useless to others, and little better than a burden to himself. This, however, was not the only conclusion to which the contemplation of his past career had conducted him. Solomon saw well enough the superiority which his wisdom gave him in managing his affairs, and in prosecuting his various worldly schemes. But he also saw that there were other things, and these of far deeper moment, in regard to which his wisdom was of no avail. It could not control the course of events. There was a higher Power at work on this earthly scene, which ever and anon, by some unexpected and resistless movement,

was overturning the best-laid plans, and trampling the devices of human wisdom in the dust, and in whose giant grasp the wise man was oftentimes made to feel himself to be as impotent as the fool. He saw, above all, that the end of the wise man, like that of the fool, is to sicken and die; and that when he is gone, "there is no remembrance of the wise man more than of the fool for ever!"

The humbling and depressing thought, as to a mind like his it must have been, to which Solomon had thus given utterance in the 16th verse, settled down like a dark cloud upon his soul. Is this all that the wisdom I have been at so much pains to acquire, and in which I have been so accustomed to glory, can do? To enable me to outshine my contemporaries for a few fleeting years! To make me more skilful and successful than others in building me houses and planting me vineyards, and in surrounding myself with the delights of the sons of men! And then, perhaps, without a moment's notice, to let me sink into the tomb, and rot in the dust, side by side with the gaping fool who may now be admiring my greatness and envying my renown! As this repulsive prospect rose up before his mind's eye, its influence fell, like a withering blight, upon his heart. Not only did it deprive him of all relish for those pursuits and pleasures to which he had previously been so devoted, but it made him regard them with feelings of positive disgust. A sullen spirit of misanthropy took hold of him. Existence itself lay on him like a burden, and galled him like an oppressive and intolerable yoke. A little before, he had been disposed petulantly to demand, "And why was I then more wise?" Now he is ready, half impiously, to ask, "And why was I born?" In a word, he "hated life." Instead of a blessing, it seemed to him, in this distempered mood, to be a positive curse. It was like a landscape from which every ray of sunshine, and every remnant of verdure and beauty, had utterly disappeared—which had been suddenly transformed, by some malignant power, into a dull, and cheerless, and desolate waste. As he looked around him on his royal state—on "the

meat of his table, and the sitting of his servants, and the attendance of his ministers, and their apparel, and his cup-bearers" (1 Kings x. 4)—on all that grandeur, in a word, which had so dazzled the Queen of the South that when she beheld it "there was no more spirit in her"—it had lost all its power to please him. He felt that in the midst of it he was but walking in a vain show. It seemed to him now to be nothing better than a mockery; for behind it all, and through it all, he could see too plainly the dark and lonesome grave to which he must ere long be consigned, where his regal robe must be exchanged for a shroud, and his large and glorious kingdom must shrink into six feet of common earth.

Nor was this all. It was, indeed, a mortifying thought that Solomon the wise must die as the fool; but it was more mortifying still to reflect that, in the hands of his successor, the works on which he had lavished such wealth and skill might all, in a few years, come to nought, and be as if they had never been. It is to this additional and aggravating consideration he turns at the 18th verse, where he goes on to say:—"Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me." The work which others wrought under the sun, even though wrought expressly in his own behalf, had ceased to afford him pleasure, nay, had become grievous unto him, and was felt to be all vanity and vexation of spirit, because he had no more ability than the veriest fool to retain possession of its fruits, but, like the fool, must die and leave them all behind. But that the fruits of his own labour, too, must pass away entirely out of his hands and beyond his control, and be, by and bye, at the absolute disposal of some one who, perchance, could neither appreciate nor preserve them, was like gall and wormwood to a mind which, like that of Solomon, had been all but deifying its own powers. With the resources of a kingdom at his command, he had been rearing what he meant to be the monuments of his fame. He had been fitting out fleets, and framing commercial treaties, and erecting store cities and fenced

cities, in order to increase the wealth, and promote the material prosperity, and to enhance the dignity and influence of his country and crown. He had been filling Jerusalem with the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces, with the rarest products of nature and the costliest works of art, in order to convey to latest posterity some adequate conception of the splendour which had distinguished his illustrious reign. But the stern fact which had now risen up before him,—like the mysterious handwriting that suddenly flashed upon Belshazzar from his palace wall, in characters of fire,—broke the proud monarch's dream, and prostrated his boastful anticipations in the dust. Another must ere long wield his sceptre and occupy his throne, and "who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?"

We can hardly doubt that Solomon had seen, in the tastes and habits of the heir-apparent to the crown, something that gave painful force and significancy to these pregnant words. Rehoboam was forty and one years old when his father died; and if, as many things seem conclusively to prove, this book of Ecclesiastes was written towards the close of Solomon's life, his successor had in all probability reached the stage of manhood at the period to which this passage refers. His general disposition and turn of mind must by this time, therefore, have been sufficiently manifest to so close an observer as Solomon; and can hardly fail to have betrayed those features of levity and recklessness from which, after his father's decease, there flowed such disastrous consequences to himself and to his kingdom. We may well, indeed, suppose that a father's eye took as indulgent a view of Rehoboam's character as the nature of the case allowed; but, bearing in mind what manner of man Rehoboam was, we can the better understand the gloomy feeling with which, in the prospect of leaving all his labour to the man that should be after him, he said, "Yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have showed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity." There was bitterness in the thought; but how much deeper and more poignant would the

bitterness have been, had some prophetic hand at that moment unveiled the future and revealed to him the disgrace and dismemberment in which Rehoboam's accession was destined to involve his noble and prosperous realm! Scarcely had Solomon been gathered to his fathers when the folly of his son fanned the little fire of a local and temporary discontent into the flames of a wide-spread rebellion, which terminated in the permanent alienation of ten out of the twelve tribes from the family of David, and in the establishment of that fatal breach in the house of Israel, that so ruinously weakened its power, and impaired its influence for good in the Gentile world. Furthermore, and to make the degradation of the kingdom more manifest and more complete, within five years after Rehoboam began to reign, "Shishak, king of Egypt, came up against Jerusalem, and took away the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king's house; he took all: he carried away also the shields of gold which Solomon had made" (2 Chron. xii. 9). In a word, the darkest thoughts that were now filling the moody mind of the king, were realized to the full—all that he had been at so much pains to build up was utterly broken down—all that he had laboured to accumulate was scattered to the winds!

What a lesson is written here for those who are spending their time and strength in laying up treasure for themselves, but are not rich towards God! Let them ponder the words of Solomon and the history of his house. The instruction which these convey is pre-eminently needful at the present hour, when men are actually treading one another down, in their eager and engrossing pursuit of the things of this world. Did the multitudes who, in this bustling and ambitious, but somewhat sordid age, are toiling after wealth—and who, in their eagerness to reach it, are many of them ready to sacrifice, not only their health and ease, but their conscience too—reflect a little on the considerations which this striking passage suggests, they would surely be led to pause. What happened to Solomon is no rare

and unwonted occurrence. The same thing, for substance, is taking place every day. It is as true now as it was in the times of the Psalmist, that men heap up riches and know not who shall gather them. Could those who at this present moment are thus employed, get a glimpse of the future—could they realize the state of things in which all their painful anxieties and toils may be destined to issue, perhaps within half a generation after they are laid in the dust,—could they see the splendid fortune which their laborious industry had accumulated dissipated by extravagance, or broken up and lost by mismanagement and folly—could they behold the noble mansion they had reared passing into the hands of strangers, or falling into decay—could they witness the hammer of the auctioneer rudely dispersing in a day those choice treasures of literature and art, upon the collection of which taste and wealth had been occupied for years—could they get a sight of all this, they would cease, perhaps, to wonder that the bare thought of such things should have wrung from Solomon these bitter words :—“Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun.”

It has been already hinted, as at least highly probable, that in giving way to these dark and desponding imaginations, he was not influenced exclusively by the mere abstract possibilities of the case. These, no doubt, are always such as may involve the very worst of what is here contemplated. Although, at the moment, all may promise well, the vicissitudes of an unknown future may speedily change the whole aspect and condition of things. The wise son who made the father glad, and in the prospect of whose succession his heart rejoiced, may go before him to the grave, and the real heir may turn out to be one whom he can neither trust nor love. These, and such like uncertainties, must always hang over even the brightest prospects that relate to this present world. But the discomfort which that uncertainty is of itself amply sufficient to create in the worldly mind, was, we cannot doubt, greatly aggravated in the case of Solomon,

by what he knew of the actual character, and dreaded might be the subsequent career, of his son Rehoboam. The two kinds of men, so pointedly contrasted in the 21st verse, were, most likely, no mere sketch of fancy, but a picture, the living originals of which were at that moment vividly present to Solomon's mind. "For," said he, "there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity: yet to a man who hath not laboured therein"—who hath not exercised himself in the putting forth of any such qualities—"shall he leave it for his portion." Though Solomon had given way to many personal follies, it was still true that in ruling his kingdom, and in administering public affairs, his policy and his proceedings had been largely regulated by wisdom, and knowledge, and equity. Of this fact we have abundant proof in the sacred history of his memorable reign. Nor does the history of his successor less clearly show that these virtues were no part of the inheritance of Rehoboam. It is easy to conceive how painfully the thought of all this must have weighed upon Solomon's heart. If, indeed, that heart had been right with God—if it had been to God he was looking, to uphold himself and his kingdom—if it had been in God's power he was seeking his chief joy, he would never have known the anguish by which he was now oppressed. It was because he had been living without God, and seeking his happiness away from God, that the iron of these bitter reflections now entered so deeply into his soul. In the haughty confidence of the arm of flesh he had been saying, as he surveyed his prosperous realm, and his splendid capital, and all the great works by which his kingdom was at once fortified and adorned, "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent." But that very mind on whose immense resources he so proudly relied, itself broke his peace. Its penetrating glance looked through the glittering surface of things, and showed him how hollow and insecure was the foundation on which his grandeur stood. Anticipating the altered position which things must assume when the infirmity of age should have enfeebled his capacities, or the strong arm of

death should have wrenched the sceptre from his grasp, and when all that wealth, and fame, and power, with which he had laboured to identify himself, must pass into weak and incompetent hands—must be left “to the man that should come after him”—he was too far-sighted not to know what the end must be. He had been sowing to the flesh, and the terrible conviction had already seized him, that of the flesh he was destined to reap corruption. Well, therefore, and truly might he say that, “This also is vanity and a great evil.”

To explain and vindicate this statement, he proceeds, in the succeeding verses, the 22d and 23d, to point out the practical bearing of the humbling facts previously specified, and to which this statement referred. If it was indeed so, that the wisest and most sagacious must die as certainly as the fool—that they must leave all their worldly acquisitions behind them—leave them, it may be, to some silly dupe who will soon be cheated out of them, or to some reckless speculator who will throw them away, or to some wasteful spendthrift who will consume them in riotous living—if this were so, then might Solomon with reason inquire, “What hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night.” If this is to be the end of it all, that the produce of his toils must pass away from him, to perish, it may be, in the hands of a successor, of whom he cannot possibly tell whether he is to be a wise man or a fool—what has he gained? What reward has he received to compensate him for those laborious days and restless nights that were occupied in heaping up what may be so speedily and so utterly thrown away? Does not the very putting of such questions—questions to which no answer but one can be given—amply justify Solomon in affirming, of a life so spent, and leading to such an issue, that “it is vanity and a great evil?”

It cannot be denied that the account Solomon gives of the pains and cost at which men usually gain worldly wealth and

greatness is strictly true. They pay a high price for it. Its attainment costs them many a busy hour and many an anxious thought. Our merchants and millionaires, even the most successful of them, could tell whether it be any exaggeration to say that their days have oftentimes been sorrows, and their travail grief. And if they have never sought or secured any other or better portion than that which this world gives, they could also tell of how little worth it is, and how poorly it repays the heavy sacrifice of time, and toil, and care at which it has been obtained. Were they to speak plainly out—to utter the secret feeling of their heart—there is little doubt it would be in some such confession as that of Solomon, that “This is also vanity.”

It must never be forgotten, in dealing with this passage, that Solomon is here recording his experience as a man of the world. He is not speaking of the feelings with which a man of God would contemplate the same things. Such a man can look forward to death, and to all the changes, possible or probable, which it may be destined to make upon his fortune, or his family, or his worldly fame, without any undue disquietude—without either the disgust or the despair which the language of Solomon breathes. Whatever calamity may betide his name and lineage, the believer can still say with David, “Although my house be not so with God; yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire, although he make it not to grow” (2 Sam. xxiii. 5). Having set his affections, not on the things which are beneath, but on those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God, earthly vicissitudes cannot shake the foundations of his peace. He knows the blessedness of the man who trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is.

But though up to the 24th verse it is as the man of the world that Solomon speaks, the thoughtful and observant reader can hardly fail to perceive that at this point the spiritual man comes in to teach us what he had subsequently learned in another and

better school. As respects worldly possessions, he had been striving to make them the foundations of his happiness and the pillars of his fame ; but both the palpable experiences of the past and the dark shadows already falling from the coming events of the future, had painfully dissolved the dream. Were these earthly things to be therefore despised? Was it right and wise to regard them with that sullen and scornful feeling which made Solomon, in that gloomy period of his career, “go about, and cause his heart to despair of all the labour which he had taken under the sun?” No. He came at length to see that the blame of that bitter disappointment to which his earthly acquisitions had given rise, was not their fault but his own ; it was the fault of his seeking and expecting from them a measure and kind of happiness they were never meant to yield. It was the fault, in a word, of making them his chief good, and, in them, loving and serving the creature more than the Creator. When, taught and guided by the Spirit of God, he came afterwards to view them in a truer and juster light, and to put them, in consequence, in their own proper and subordinate place, this is the conclusion at which he arrived—that “There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour.” He learned to see, in short, that to be rightly and profitably used, these worldly things must be treated, not as an end, but simply as a means. “Every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving : for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. iv. 4, 5). Let him to whom these worldly things are given, whether by inheritance or as the fruit of his own industry, take from them, with a cheerful and grateful heart, such comfort as it belongs to them to impart. Let his soul in this way enjoy good in his labour ; and let him not be unduly careful for the morrow. Enough for the day is the evil thereof ; let the morrow take thought for the things of itself. Let him neither play the miser nor the monk ; but let him use this world as not abusing it, so that it

may supply his wants and minister to his convenience, and sustain him in his work, and put it in his power to give to him that needeth; and all the while may continually remind him of his dependence on the great Author of his being, from whom every good gift and every perfect gift cometh down. In so far as this world's possessions are concerned, there is nothing better for a man than that he should employ them thus. So dealing with them, he will be their master and not their slave. He will neither be unreasonably elated by abundance, nor weakly depressed by the scantiness of a more stinted store. Having food and raiment, he will be therewith content. Like the apostle, he will be instructed both "to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need" (Phil. iv. 12).

Solomon at length discovered that this was the right course—the golden mean between an excessive carefulness, that virtually distrusts God, and a wasteful prodigality or luxurious self-indulgence, by which God's gifts are abused. But he also discovered that to follow this course was not the dictate of the natural mind. "This also I saw," he says, "that it was from the hand of God." He alone could dispose and enable carnal and selfish man so to regulate his desires, and to control his appetites, and to consider the wants and the welfare of others, and, above all, so to commit his way unto the Lord, as to realize that state of things which Solomon meant to describe. In a word, it is from the hand of God that a man learns to be without carefulness, and to eat his meat with gladness and singleness of heart; and, by the regulated use and right improvement of that portion of worldly substance he has received, "to enjoy good in his labour." Had it been otherwise—had it been an attainment of man's own, thus to extract from worldly things the good which they are really capable of communicating—surely Solomon must have succeeded in it. "For who," he continues, "can eat, or who else can hasten hereunto, more than I?" It is the very thing I was set upon. I was bent on finding happiness in the things of sense, in the pleasures of the table, and in the luxury

and splendour with which wealth had surrounded me. But I utterly failed, notwithstanding. I was soon satiated with my gorgeous feasts. They palled upon my taste. I thought of death, and sickened at the very sight of banquets that were only feeding me for the worms, and of a magnificence that must so speedily be exchanged for the ghastliness of the tomb!

But though Solomon, in the days of his folly, failed, as all men of carnal and earthly minds fail, to get out of worldly things the actual good and enjoyment which the beneficent Author of our frame meant them to convey, there is a way of getting it—as has been already explained—but a way that must be learned “at the hand of God.” “For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight,—wisdom, and knowledge, and joy:—but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather, and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.” No man, therefore, may hope to learn this secret—the secret of making his soul enjoy good in his labour—but the man who is himself good in the sight of God. Many men, let it be heedfully noted, are good in their own eyes, or good in the eyes of the world, who are not good in God’s eyes—not good, as He sees them, and according to the standard by which He measures them. The carnal mind, which is the mind of every unregenerate man, “is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom. viii. 7). And therefore, in His sight, no man is or can be good but he who has become through grace a new creature; who has put off the old man, which is corrupt, with the deceitful lusts; and who has put on the new man, which, after God, is renewed in righteousness and true holiness. Such a man is good; because the love of God, who is the centre and source of all goodness, has been shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him.

To such a man—the child of God, the genuine believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, he whose rejoicing is this, even the testimony of his conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not by fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, he has his conversation in

the world—to such a man, God giveth “wisdom, and knowledge, and joy.” He giveth to such a man wisdom and knowledge to estimate earthly things at their proper worth, to discern the true place that belongs to them, and to apply them to their fitting and lawful ends. He giveth, moreover, to such a man that cheerful contentment with his lot, that grateful sense of the divine goodness, that delight in promoting the happiness of others, which makes even his earthly things a source of continual joy. He sees God in them all, and by them, as instruments or means, it is his meat and his drink to do God’s will.

It is altogether otherwise with the sinner—with the man, that is, who has no part nor lot in Christ, and who, therefore, whatever the world may think of him, or whatever he may think of himself, is living without God. To such a man, “God giveth travail to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God.” He spends his money for that which is not bread, and his labour for that which satisfieth not. The avarice which prompts him to toil so incessantly after worldly gain, will not suffer him to take the good of it. All his life long it proves little else to him than a load of anxiety and care; and when death at length compels him to relax his hold of the coveted treasure, it finds its way into other hands. The poor miser becomes, perhaps, a public benefactor at the last. One way or other, and often in ways the most unlikely and unexpected, the laborious accumulations of the sinner become ultimately the heritage of the man or of the cause that is good before God. The sinner sows but the good man reaps. “The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand. I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread. . . . For the Lord loveth judgment, and forsaketh not his saints; they are preserved for ever: but the seed of the wicked shall be cut

off. . . . The salvation of the righteous is of the Lord, he is their strength in time of trouble, and the Lord shall help them and deliver them; he shall deliver them from the wicked, and save them because they trust in him." "Trust therefore in the Lord and do good: so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the Lord, and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart" (Ps. xxxvii).

CHAPTER V.

OUR TIMES ARE IN THE HAND OF GOD.

“To every *thing there is* a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven :
 A time to be born, and a time to die :
 A time to plant, and a time to pluck up *that which is* planted :
 A time to kill, and a time to heal :
 A time to break down, and a time to build up :
 A time to weep, and a time to laugh :
 A time to mourn, and a time to dance :
 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together :
 A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing :
 A time to get, and a time to lose :
 A time to keep, and a time to cast away :
 A time to rend, and a time to sew :
 A time to keep silence, and a time to speak :
 A time to love, and a time to hate :
 A time of war, and a time of peace.”—ECCLES. III. 1-8.

UP to the 24th verse of chapter ii., Solomon speaks simply as the man of the world; describing the course which, in that character, he had pursued, and the unsatisfied and wretched state of mind in which it had left him. At that point, as has been already noticed, there is an evident change. A better wisdom than his own begins to be apparent in the train of reflections that follows. The hand of God is now recognized as the all-controlling power in human affairs, and His blessing is seen to be the source of all that is gracious and good in the heart and life of man. In a word, the fact, at every step of our progress, becomes henceforth increasingly manifest, that Solomon survived the mournful and humbling season of his defection from God, and that this book is the precious and lasting fruit of his happy restoration to the faith and the piety of his earlier days. So long as he

surveyed it through the medium of the wisdom of this world, human life seemed to be a mere chaos of confusion, governed by no plan, and leading to no result, and in which all was vanity and vexation of spirit. At length, however, a light from above breaks in on this dark and disordered scene, and all things in consequence assume to his eye an entirely altered form. That which was meaningless before, is full of meaning now. It is no longer a blind chance, but a fixed, and wise, and righteous law, under which all events are seen to be taking place. From this point, accordingly, we find his observations on men and things assuming a different tone. Their worth is tried by another standard, and judged by another rule; and the devout student of this remarkable portion of Holy Scripture is gradually led on to that "conclusion of the whole matter" at which Solomon himself, through grace, had finally arrived—the conclusion that the wisdom and the happiness of man are summed up in this, that "he should fear God, and keep his commandments."

The passage at present before us signally illustrates the correctness of these remarks. Instead of continuing to indulge the rash and atheistic notion to which at one time he had been tempted to give way,—that there is no principle, and no system in the universe—that good and evil, wisdom and folly, share the same indiscriminate fate,—this passage expressly and pointedly announces the great contrary fact, that "to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." All things, that is to say, are of God, and there is a season fixed for the accomplishment of everything which God has decreed—a time unalterably determined for the execution of every purpose which He has formed. Man's decrees and purposes often fail from the fickleness of his own mind, from his want of foresight, and from his want of power. When the period contemplated for carrying them into effect arrives, he has already, perhaps, laid them altogether aside; or if they are still entertained, he finds, it may be, the circumstances unfavourable to the carrying out

of his design. It is altogether otherwise with the designs of the Almighty. When His set time for working comes, not all the power in the universe can stay His hand. When we first look abroad, indeed, upon the busy field of human affairs, and observe the numerous actors upon the scene, all moving energetically to and fro, planning, arranging, adjusting the course of things, we may be tempted for the moment to imagine that destiny itself is in their hands. But when we have looked a little longer, and have seen all their schemes deranged, and all their contrivances thwarted, and all their devices turned to foolishness, and a result emerging the very opposite, it may be, of what they had been labouring to produce, we begin to discover that there is a Power out of sight mightier than they all—One whose purposes are from everlasting to everlasting—whose counsel shall stand, and who will do all His pleasure. This is the pregnant and momentous truth which Solomon here proclaims. He tells us, with the voice of inspiration, that there is nothing accidental in all the complicated movements and occurrences, whether of the moral or of the material world. He in substance declares, what a greater than Solomon expressly affirms, that the very hairs of our head are all numbered, and that without God not even a sparrow falleth to the ground.

Is a man to be born?—not only the event itself, but the precise moment at which it is to happen, has been irrevocably decreed in the counsels of eternity. When that moment comes, the deadness of Sarah's womb proves no bar to the birth of Isaac!—the exterminating decree of Pharaoh is powerless to arrest the birth of Moses!—the unbelief of the Jews cannot hinder or delay the birth of Messiah! And no more, on the other hand, when the appointed season arrives, can the impending slaughter of the innocents avail to prevent the birth of a Herod, or the impending persecution of the saints of God, to prevent that of a Nero or of a Philip of Spain. When God has a purpose of mercy towards his church and people, the deliverer is born, though the great red dragon should be standing ready to

devour him. And when he has a purpose of judgment to fulfil, not even the pleadings of a David or a Hezekiah can stay the forthcoming of the destined instrument—the Jeroboam or the Nebuchadnezzar—who is to be the rod of the Lord's anger, and the staff of his indignation.

On the other hand, is a man to die? There is a time for that, too, as unalterably fixed as the setting of the sun. Ahab may disguise himself in the battle, but an arrow shot at a venture finds out unerringly the fatal joint in the king's harness, and inflicts the mortal wound. Our own William, the hero of our glorious Revolution, faces death again and again in the bloodiest of battle-fields, and never meets it; but at length, when no danger threatens—when he is surrounded with the quiet and security of home—his horse stumbles, and he is consigned to the tomb! In a word, the times of all men, high and low, rich and poor, young and old together, are in the hand of God. When he sendeth forth his spirit, we are created; and when he taketh our breath away, we die. Not one solitary individual of the human race is either born or dies an instant sooner, or later, than God has ordained; and every separate human existence has its own definite place and use in that wonderful and all-comprehensive economy under which He is incessantly carrying on the great ends for which He summoned the universe into being. Judging according to our limited and imperfect views, we may be ready to think of one man, that he has been born too soon; and of another, that he has been born too late, for the age in which he lives; or to think of this individual, that the days assigned him are too few, and of that individual, that the days assigned him are too many. But the very fact that there is “a time to be born, and a time to die”—a time fixed for all, and fixed by the only-wise God—should both silence and satisfy every pious and thoughtful mind. What especially concerns us, in connection with that solemn and significant fact is this, that the all-important interval between our birth and our death, is rapidly drawing to an end, and that we can no more add one hour to the appointed sum of

our days, than we can add one cubit to our stature. At the longest, it will be all too brief for the work which God has given us to do; and to-morrow it may have come to a close. This is the work of God, that we believe in Him whom God hath sent. It is only in so far as the life we live in the flesh is a life of faith upon the Son of God, that we are prepared to face the hour that awaits us all—our time to die!

Having thus signalized, in the outset, the fundamental truth that “there is a time to be born, and a time to die,” Solomon proceeds to testify that there is also a pre-determined time for every work which, in this present life, man can have to do. “There is a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.” There is not improbably an allusion here to his own achievements in this line of things. Solomon had planted much; and his eye had no doubt rested often with delight on the blooming gardens, and fruitful vineyards, and waving woods, that had sprung up around his favourite residences, under his graceful and skilful hand. And not a little, perhaps, of the bitterness which had been bound up with the thought of leaving all his labour to the man that should come after him, had arisen from the painful apprehension that his fair flowers and goodly trees might have no value in the eyes of his successor, and might ere long be all rooted up or trampled down. But that result he could now contemplate with a calmer mind. These things were not designed to endure. Their own natural decay, or some newer style of horticulture, or the altered taste, or pecuniary necessities of their owner, or the ravages of war—any one, in short, of an endless variety of causes would suffice to bring about, within no distant period, “a time to pluck up,” a time to undo all which in this department of his labour Solomon had done.

Nor is it true in a literal sense only, that there is a time “to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.” It is as true in a figurative or metaphorical sense. There is a time to plant thrones and dynasties, peoples and nations, and even

Christian missions and churches; and a time to pluck them up again by the roots. The thrones of the house of David have long since disappeared. The Pharaohs, the Nebuchadnezzars, and the Cæsars have perished. Empires that once ruled the world are now only names in history. Churches that had apostles for their founders, and martyrs for their leaders, and that in primitive times subdued kingdoms, and wrought righteousness, and turned to flight the armies of the aliens, have themselves been subdued by their own errors and sins. "Now will I sing to my well-beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill, and he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine. . . . For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry. . . . Therefore, as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust; because they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel" (Is. v. 1, 2, 7, 24). Such words as these, while they emphatically confirm the saying of Solomon, that there "is a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted"—and while they serve to show how wide the range and scope of that saying is—they also teach us that the time in question is not determined by an arbitrary decree, but is adjusted with unerring wisdom and righteousness to the great desigus of the government of God. "At what instant, saith the Lord, I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; if it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good wherewith I said

I would benefit them" (Jer. xviii. 7-10). Of this, especially, we may be well assured, that every plant which our heavenly Father hath not planted—every opinion, every institution, every power which is at variance with His mind and will—shall be rooted up. Fashion and custom may be all on its side—centuries may have been occupied in extending its influence—nations may be banded together to defend and uphold it—but the time will come when it must inevitably fall. "Every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit, is hewn down and cast into the fire" (Matt. iii. 10).

There is "a time to kill, and a time to heal." There is a time when the king who would be "the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil" (Rom. x. 4), must smite with the sword of justice, and take life away; and there is a time also, when it will be his duty and his privilege to interpose as a protector and benefactor, and to bring help to those who were ready to perish. There was a time for Moses to imprecate the Lord's anger upon the rebellious company of Korah: it was "a time to kill." And there was also a time for him to run into the midst of the congregation, and to stand with Aaron between the dead and the living, and to stay the plague: it was "a time to heal." In a word, whoever or whatever may be the instrument of death on the one hand, or of deliverance on the other, there is an appointed season for the agency to work. The destroying angel—whether he appear in the form of famine, or pestilence, or war—comes only when he has received his terrible commission. These appalling visitations, however unexpected may be their rise, or inscrutable their origin, are all obedient to the will of the Supreme Ruler. They come and go at his command; and their times are as fixed as those of the ebbing and flowing of the tides, or of the rising and setting of the sun. And the same thing is true also of those beneficent influences,—of those plenteous harvests, and salubrious seasons, and peaceful and prosperous times,—when the desolations of famine, and pestilence,

and war, are happily repaired, and when a suffering people are again revived and restored.

There is "a time to break down and a time to build up." Solomon himself had been one of the greatest builders of the age. He built the house of the Lord, and his own house, and Millo, and the wall of Jerusalem, and Hazor, and Megiddo, and Gezer, and Beth-horon the nether, and Baalath, and Tadmor in the wilderness, and cities of store, and cities for his chariots, and cities for his horsemen, in all the land of his dominion (1 Kings ix. 15, &c). But these architectural monuments of his taste and magnificence, as well as of his kingly policy, would not be everlasting. Humbling to human pride as the prospect might be, the fact was certain that even the grandest and strongest of them all was destined to become a shapeless ruin. Long centuries ago Zion was ploughed as a field, Jerusalem became heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of the forest; nor have the works of other builders fared better than those of Solomon. Time, and tempest, and war, have sufficed to overthrow the noblest fabrics of antiquity. The stately palaces of Assyria have crumbled into dust—the ponderous temples of Egypt have fallen beneath their own weight, and lie half buried in the desert sand—the splendid structures of Greece and Rome present nothing but the shattered fragments of what once they were. A "time to break down" has overtaken them all; and that time shall inevitably overtake every work of man. It was good for Solomon to know this; and it is good for us to know it; that so we may realize the fact that we have, in this world, no continuing city, nor any sure place of abode. Even the earthly house of this tabernacle—the material habitation of the immortal spirit itself—must be dissolved. We may build it up with all kinds of nourishment—we may shade it from the summer's heat, and shelter it from the winter's cold—we may defend it from the hand of violence, and guard it against the insidious assaults of disease or decay; but the time will come when it shall be taken down—when the melancholy words, "dust to dust, and

ashes to ashes," must be pronounced at the grave's mouth, over the goodliest human form that now lives and breathes. How vain, then, to seek, as our chief good, "what we shall eat, or what we shall drink, or wherewithal we shall be clothed!" After all these things do the nations of the earth seek; but let it be our higher wisdom to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Let it be our supreme desire to have, through faith in Him who is the resurrection and the life, "a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (1 Cor. v. 1).

There is "a time to weep, and a time to laugh: a time to mourn, and a time to dance." In our present probationary state of being, both sorrows and joys have an important use. We are so constituted as to be equally susceptible of the one as of the other; nor can our moral and spiritual nature be rightly and fully developed without that peculiar influence which these emotions exert upon the human soul. God has accordingly, in his wisdom and goodness, so ordered His providence as to call into exercise, now the one and now the other. If life were all sunshine, many of our best and most needed lessons would never be learned. If it were all darkness and gloom, the mind would lose its capacity for action, and the heart would be soured or broken. Recognizing this truth, Solomon now sees that those disappointments and griefs, under the bitterness of which he had once gone about to cause his heart to despair of all his labour which he had taken under the sun, were really salutary. He is beginning to experience himself, what in this book he teaches to others, "that sorrow is better than laughter, for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better." But if we would enter into this experience, we must, like him, acknowledge the hand of God in the afflictions that befall us. We must understand this, that "affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth sorrow spring out of the ground" (Job v. 6)—that the "time to weep and mourn" is from the Lord. Too many forget this, and fail in consequence to humble them-

selves under God's mighty hand. Their aim rather is to disown the time, or to reduce it within the briefest possible limits. For this purpose, they hurry away from it into the distractions of business, or into the gaieties of amusement—and thus refusing to be exercised by the affliction, it yieldeth none of the peaceable fruits of righteousness, but only hardens the heart in worldliness and sin. To such persons, a time of joy is as unprofitable, in a spiritual sense, as a time of sorrow. It awakens no grateful sense of the divine goodness, and prompts to no generous deeds. It serves only to nurse the pride and self-confidence of the human heart. How different is the result when God's hand is seen, and His purpose diligently sought out, in these providential dealings! It is then that in the "time of weeping and mourning" the child of God learns, like the prophet Isaiah, to say, "O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit" (xxxviii. 16). And it is then, also, that in the time of joy—when the Lord has been turning his mourning into dancing—putting off his sackcloth and girding him with gladness—he is ready to take up the language of the Psalmist, and to say—"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies; who satisfieth thy mouth with good things, so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Ps. ciii. 1-5).

There is "a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together." This cannot be the same thing as the breaking down and building up spoken of in a preceding verse. It can hardly be doubted that the reference here is rather to the well-known custom of antiquity, and of which mention is often made in Old Testament Scripture, of piling up stones in commemoration of important public events. When Jacob and Laban made a covenant one with another, "Jacob took a stone, and set it up for a pillar. And Jacob said unto his brethren, Gather stones; and they took stones, and made an heap: and they did eat there

upon the heap. . . . And Laban said to Jacob, This heap is witness, and this pillar is witness, that I will not pass over this heap to thee, and that thou shalt not pass over this heap and this pillar unto me, for harm. The God of Abraham, and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge betwixt us" (Gen. xxxi. 45, &c.) As another example of the same thing, we read of Joshua, in obedience to a divine command, setting up twelve stones to commemorate the passage of the Jordan—to be a sign among their posterity, that when their children should ask in after-times, "What meaneth these stones?" the answer should be given, "That the waters of Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it passed over Jordan, the waters were cut off: and these stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel for ever" (Jos. iv. 6, 7). In like manner, when Joshua vanquished the hostile king of Ai, and hanged him upon a tree, he gave commandment that the dead body should be thrown down at the entering of the gate of the city, and that a great heap of stones, in memory of the fact, should be raised thereon (Jos. viii. 29). The same thing was done at a later period at the death of the rebellious Absalom; for we are told that Joab and his men took his body and cast it into a great pit in the wood, and laid a very great heap of stones upon him (2 Sam. xviii. 17, 18). The cairn of our own country, which still marks, upon the lonely moor or in the solitary mountain glen, the spot where some martyr for Christ's crown and covenant fell, may be also noticed, to show how wide-spread and how lasting the custom now under consideration has proved. But, distant as it may be, there is a time for casting away these stones, as well as for gathering them together—a time, in other words, when the firmest of earthly covenants is dissolved, and when the memory of the most notable events comes to be forgotten. There is a time for erecting such memorials and forming such treaties. They have their temporary place and use in the economy of providence; and when their end is served, they cease. Though saddening, it is salutary to remember that

all mere earthly bonds are destined to be broken, and all earthly memorials to perish. The alliances of nations, equally with the ties of social and domestic life, will soon fall asunder. The stateliest monuments that were ever reared to departed worth or greatness will disappear. But there is one bond that shall never be broken—the bond that unites the believing soul to Christ; and one memorial that shall never perish—the memorial treasured up in heaven, of a life that has been devoted to God our Saviour!

There is “a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.” The social and domestic affections which are so deeply implanted in our nature crave for objects on which to expend themselves. The companion clings to his friend—the husband to the chosen partner of his lot—the parent to his child. But life has too many duties and too many difficulties to be consumed in the caresses of friendship, or in the soft dalliance of love. The time comes when David must tear himself from the arms of Jonathan, and confront the stern destiny that awaited him; when Jacob must leave his beloved Rachel, and go forth with the flocks of Laban to endure the drought by day and the frost by night; when David must cease to indulge his paternal fondness for his beautiful but unnatural son, and finds it needful to refuse even to admit him into his presence. The indulgence of even the purest human affections must not be allowed to interfere with the practical business of life. Solomon himself had too long forgotten this; and had lost in consequence, among his numerous wives and his jovial friends, in idle and enervating pleasures, many a precious hour that ought to have been devoted to the care of his kingdom, and to the service of his God.

There is “a time to get, and a time to lose: a time to keep, and a time to cast away.” There is a time to get—a time when fortune smiles upon our outward estate; when propitious seasons fill to overflowing the barns of the husbandman; when prosperous trade augments the stores of the merchant; when every

venture of the capitalist brings in an ample return. But there is also a time to lose—a time when the fig-tree fails to blossom, and there is no fruit in the vine; when the labour of the olive fails, and the fields yield no meat; when the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls. Shall we murmur at this? Shall we complain that the tide has its ebb as well as its flow? “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job ii. 10). Our losses, if rightly understood and used, will be as profitable to us as our gains. They will serve to remind us of our dependence on Him who giveth their meat in due season to all His creatures; and they will teach us not to trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God. And as there is thus a time to get, and a time to lose—so there is also a time “to keep, and a time to cast away.” The selfish and the worldly-minded recognize only one of these seasons, and obstinately shut their eyes to the other. And because they do so—because with them it is always a time to keep—because they see their brother have need, and shut up their bowels of compassion from him—because they turn a deaf ear to some high call of conscience, some imperative command of Christian principle, bidding them to go and sell all that they have, and to give to the poor—or to forsake lands and houses for Christ’s sake, and to follow Him; because they do this, they are inevitably preparing for themselves that righteous and terrible retribution spoken of in these words by the apostle James—“Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl 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” (v. 1-3).

There is “a time to rend, and a time to sew.” If these words be literally understood, they remind us that the garments we wear, like the bodies they clothe, are liable to decay;—that there is not only a time to piece them together, and fit them for use—but a time to tear them up and fling them away. If,

on the other hand, as is not improbable, the words are to be taken in a figurative sense, they may be meant to refer to those seasons of sudden calamity and distress, when, in ancient times, men rent their clothes; or to those breaches in families, and kingdoms, and churches, when lasting and fatal divisions are made among those who were formerly united. There is a time for such disastrous occurrences, and there is a time for the opposite—a time when old breaches are repaired, and old divisions healed. And as it becomes us to fast and mourn under the one, it equally becomes us to rejoice and give thanks under the other.

There is “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” It is a time to be silent when the hand of the Lord has been laid heavily upon us, and when He is commanding us to be still, and to know that he is God. It is a time to be silent when passion is overbearing our judgment, and when the tongue is in danger of being set on fire of hell. It is a time to be silent when days speak, and the multitude of years is teaching wisdom. It is a time to be silent when our words would be thrown away. But there is a time to speak; a time of deliverance and blessing, when out of the fulness of the heart the mouth must needs publish the goodness and grace of God; a time of witness-bearing, when the truth must be declared, whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear; a time of doing good, when a word spoken in season may be as the balm of Gilead to some sin-sick soul.

There is “a time to love, and a time to hate.” There is a sense, indeed, in which the time to love can never have an end. It is always a time for loving God and His Christ—for loving the brotherhood—for loving our neighbour as we love ourselves. God appoints us no time for hating anything but sin. It is probable, indeed, that both here and in other parts of this passage, Solomon is speaking, not of what men ought to do, but of what they actually do. Times occur that are fitted to awaken in our carnal nature the sentiment of hatred, and to change even the fondest love into the bitterest enmity. When confi-

dence is betrayed, and when benefits are rewarded with insult and injury, the revulsion of feeling thereby produced in an ardent and sensitive mind too easily carries it to the opposite extreme, and turns to gall and wormwood all its former love. But the fact that there is a time calculated to produce this change, does by no means imply that we are at liberty to yield to its influence. The part of the Christian is to distinguish between the offence and the offender, and while he hates the one, to pity and to pray for the other. "Ye have heard," said the Lord Jesus, "that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. v. 43-45).

Finally, says Solomon, in completing this long catalogue of earthly vicissitudes, there is "a time of war, and a time of peace." Alas! that in the history of this fallen world, the time of peace should be but the exception, and the time of war the rule. In the view of the horror and misery which it works, we may cry, like the prophet of old—"O thou sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet? Put up thyself into thy scabbard, rest, and be still." But the answer is again and again returned—"How can it be quiet, seeing the Lord hath given it a charge against Ashkelon, and against the sea-shore? there hath he appointed it" (Jer. xlvi. 6, 7). The wickedness of men—avarice, ambition, intolerance, cruelty, and fraud—will not suffer the sword to be quiet. Nor will this sore controversy of the Lord cease, till the kingdoms of this world shall have become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ. Then there will be nothing to hurt nor to destroy: then shall men beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; neither shall they learn war any more.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BANE AND THE ANTIDOTE.

“What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth ?

“I have seen the travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it. He hath made every *thing* beautiful in his time : also he hath set the world in their heart ; so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end. I know that *there is* no good in them, but for a *man* to rejoice, and to do good in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it *is* the gift of God. I know that whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever : nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it ; and God doeth *it*, that *men* should fear before him. That which hath been is now ; and that which is to be hath already been ; and God requireth that which is past.

“And, moreover, I saw under the sun the place of judgment, *that* wickedness *was* there ; and the place of righteousness, *that* iniquity *was* there. I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked : for *there is* a time there for every purpose, and for every work. I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts ; even one thing befalleth them : as the one dieth, so dieth the other ; yea, they have all one breath : so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast : for all *is* vanity. All go unto one place : all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth ? Wherefore I perceive that *there is* nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works ; for that *is* his portion : for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him ?”—ECCLES. III. 9-22.

IN the verses immediately preceding the passage which stands at the head of this chapter, Solomon had spoken in very striking terms of the many and great vicissitudes to which human life and all earthly things are liable. Here we see the cradle, and a few steps farther on the grave. To-day we find the busy hand of tasteful industry laboriously planting what some other hand is destined ere long to pluck up. Now destructive agencies are let loose, and men fall like grass before the mower's scythe ; anon, the plague is stayed, and it is a time to heal. At one period houses, temples, cities spring up in

strength and beauty; at another, decay or violence overtakes them, and they sink into ruin. To-night is all tears, to-morrow is all joy. This year, or this generation, alliances are formed, and treaties are ratified, and monuments are reared; the next, they are dissolved and disappear. At one moment friends, kindred, lovers, are locked in each other's embrace; at another they are separated by some cold estrangement, or by some stern call of duty. Now riches increase, and by and bye, scared by some adverse turn of fortune, they make for themselves wings and fly away. Now it is a fitting season to keep fast hold of our possessions; by and bye the occasion arises when we are imperatively called upon to give them up. To-day division is rending things asunder; to-morrow the spirit of concord is binding them into one. To-day it is a time to be silent; to-morrow to speak. To-day worth and kindness are calling forth love; to-morrow iniquities and injuries are filling the heart with the bitterest enmity. To-day war is deluging the earth with blood; to-morrow is proclaiming the blissful return of peace. In a world so full of change, amid scenes so shifting and transitory, how vain is it to imagine that there can be any solid or satisfying portion for man! It is evidently some such reflection as this that suggested to the mind of Solomon the inquiry with which the passage before us opens—"What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?" What can he gain to compensate him for his care and toil? However successful he may be in the worldly pursuit to which he has devoted his efforts, he cannot protect either his acquisitions or himself from one or other of those numerous casualties to which reference has just been made. At the very moment when his prospects are brightest and his triumph most complete, his time to die may come, and the last enemy, from the warfare with whom there is no discharge, may ring in his ear the startling and terrible words, "Thou fool, this night shall thy soul be required of thee: then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?"

It was no fanciful picture of human life which, in the fore-

going context, Solomon had thus drawn. There was not one of the transitions he had enumerated, of which many examples had not passed under his own eye. He had seen one generation going and another coming at every step of his own career. He had himself often plucked up what others had planted, and broken down what others had built. He had experienced in his own history the alternations of grief and joy—of attachment and alienation—of success and failure—of hatred and love. Nor was his case singular. He had but shared in the common lot of man. When he looked around him, whether upon higher or upon humbler life, he beheld everywhere the same ups and downs, the same uncertainties, the same revolutions; and, as the necessary consequence, the same baffled schemes and disappointed hopes. He had seen, in short, as he himself expresses it, “the travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith.” Solomon had seen that there is a crook in every man’s lot; that there is a burden of some sort or other which every man has to bear. He had also found out that this is not the result of chance; that God has a purpose in it all; that it is part of His divine method of convincing men that this is not their rest. Contemplated from man’s point of view, the course of events might appear to be without a plan and without an aim. It is altogether otherwise when surveyed from that higher and more commanding eminence on which we are placed by a recognition of the hand and power of God. It is from this vantage ground Solomon is now casting his thoughtful eye over the whole field of human affairs, and accordingly he is enabled to form a far juster estimate of things. What seemed to him before to be all darkness and perplexity, is now full of light and meaning. In a word, the conviction at which he has arrived is this: “He hath made everything beautiful in his time.” Events may be out of keeping with the purposes of man, but they are never out of keeping with the purposes of God. If our finite minds were capable of taking in His vast and glorious designs, every phenomenon of nature, every occurrence of history, every incident of

human life, would be found to be in its own fitting and proper place. Darkness would become light before us, and crooked things straight. It is, indeed, the duty and the privilege of the child of God to believe and be assured that the statement of Solomon is, and must be, true, even when in some particular instance he cannot see, as yet, all the grounds on which it rests. Though, to his eye, the way of God be in the sea, and His path in the great waters, so that His footsteps are not known, he can still rest with unwavering confidence on the infinite perfections of the Almighty. What he knows not now he shall know hereafter, and meanwhile he can take his stand upon this—that the Lord reigneth, and that justice and judgment are the habitation of His throne. In point of fact, as Solomon goes on to explain, we cannot often get much beyond this in our present state of being; for while he affirms it to be unquestionably true that “God hath made everything beautiful in his time,” he makes this further declaration, “Also, he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.”

These words, no doubt, are of somewhat difficult interpretation. Most thoughtful readers of the passage have probably found themselves at a loss as to the precise import of the expression, “He hath set the world in their heart;” and yet these words evidently contain the key to the whole sentence to which they belong. They plainly embody the reason or explanation, whatever that may be, of the circumstance subsequently noticed, that “no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.” Some commentators have adopted the opinion that the expression in question is not a correct rendering of the original, which they think should rather have been translated thus:—“He hath also put obscurity in their heart”—that is, in the heart or midst of His works. According to this way of getting over the difficulty, Solomon means to say that God has designedly so veiled His own plans, so shrouded them in mystery and darkness, that we cannot

trace the links of the chain so as to be able to fathom, or follow out His great designs: that, in general, we can only, so to speak, feel after them if haply we may find them. Now, in itself considered, and apart from any question of interpretation as to the particular passage before us, this is undeniably true. It was not without reason the prophet Isaiah said—"Verily, thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour" (xlv. 15). It would scarcely be consistent with the ends of that moral government under which man is placed, or with the right working of that system of training and discipline to which it is needful that he should be subjected in his present state of being, that he should be able to see the end from the beginning—to see, that is, the ultimate issue of all actions and of all events. His faith in God, and his submission to the divine will, could hardly, in such a state of things, be rightly or adequately exercised.

We are not satisfied, however, that there is any sufficient warrant for so departing from that sense of the passage which our authorized version has given. It is the same with that which we find in the Septuagint—a translation made by Jews from their own Hebrew tongue—and is substantially at one with the best modern versions made about the same period as our own. The question therefore is—What are we to understand by the assertion that "God hath set the world"—or, as the French version, by a slight variation, and perhaps more accurately, has it—"the age"—the things of this present time—"in their hearts." It obviously cannot be intended that He hath done this in any bad sense, in any sense that would imply that men are compelled, by the very nature and necessity of things, to take low, and carnal, and earthly views of the events of this present life. The words cannot possibly have any meaning that is inconsistent with the divine wisdom, and goodness, and rectitude, on the one hand, and with men's responsibility on the other. Is there, then, any sense, compatible with these conditions, in which it can be said that God hath set the world in men's hearts? We

apprehend that there is. It is, in truth, a profound thought with which we have here to deal, and one which betrays, like many of the other inspired sayings of Solomon, a deep knowledge of human nature, and of what may be called the philosophy of human life. God hath set the world in men's hearts in this respect, that He has connected them with it by many close and powerful ties. He has endowed them with affections and desires which draw them forcibly towards it; and has so bound it up with their very being, that they cannot in this life detach themselves from it, even if they would. It will of course be understood that in using this language, we are speaking, not of the evil world, but of the world simply as synonymous with what is seen and temporal—the relations, interests, and affairs which make up the existing condition of things. God has set a man's wife, and children, and friends in his heart, by making them the natural and legitimate objects of his love. He has set a man's ordinary business in his heart, by making him largely dependent on the ability and assiduity with which it is prosecuted. He has set a man's temporal goods in his heart—his money, or houses, or lands, by making them necessary to his convenience and comfort. He has set the very food which man eats in his heart, by not only making it indispensable to his bodily health and life, but by connecting it with the removal of painful sensations, and with the production of others of an entirely opposite kind. He has set the scenery of nature and the creations of art in man's heart, by adapting them to that sense of the beautiful which is a part of his mental constitution. In all these, and many other ways, has God set the world in man's heart—given it, that is to say, a strong place in his affections and sympathies—a place, moreover, which, while it does not necessarily involve man in sin or evil, does unquestionably tend to hinder him from “finding out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.”

To illustrate the connection between these two things—be-

tween this necessary and intimate relation in which man is placed to the things of the present world, and his being disabled from apprehending the intentions of the Almighty—let us select a particular case. Is a mother, for example, deprived by death of a beloved child,—the very place which that child had in her heart blinds her to everything but her own irreparable loss. Engrossed by the desolation of her heart and home, she can think of nothing else. Even when Christian principle constrains her to humble herself under God's mighty hand, and to say, with some measure of resignation, "His will be done!"—her love to the child still renders her slow to discover the divine purpose for which he was taken away. That love makes her quick, indeed, in discerning the reasons that made it desirable that he should live, but rather shuts her eyes against all the reasons that made it needful that he should die. And what is true of the mother and her child is equally true as regards all the other relations and connections, and interests of this present world. If a man's prospects of advancement are blighted—if his health or outward estate is injured—if any earthly calamity overtakes him—the loss of comfort, of influence, of position, which is thereby sustained, and the consequent grief and humiliation by which he feels himself oppressed, have all a tendency to shut out from his view those far-reaching purposes on which his afflictions may be designed to bear. Present things are too near him, and press too strongly upon him, to let him take a calm and comprehensive survey of what is so seemingly remote as the final result towards which his trials tend. It is not in the heart of the city, and in the midst of the crowded street—where the near excludes the distant—where the objects at hand, and the exigences of the moment engross the mind—that we can see any great way around us. We must escape from the bustle, and get away up to some lonely eminence—some Pisgah height—before we can comprehend, in the same wide sweeping glance, the present and the future—the wilderness and the promised land.

Nor let us complain, that in this present life our ordinary

position is not on the Pisgah height, but low down amid the bustle and business of the world's cares, distractions, and toils. It is true that this very position may so far hinder us from "finding out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end"—may obstruct, that is to say, in many respects, our view of the issue of things. It is due to this position, as much as to our limited faculties, that now we know only in part. But nevertheless it is the position best suited to our present probationary state of being. God does not mean that in this life we should walk by sight—that the whole future should be laid bare before us—so that we could not take a single step without knowing, with infallible certainty, whither it must lead, and what must be the consequences of our taking it. He means that we should walk by faith. He means that we should commit our way unto the Lord, and trust also in Him, and go forward even when, like Abraham, we know not whither we are going; or when, like Moses and the Israelites at Migdol, we may see nothing but the Red Sea before us and the hosts of Pharaoh behind.

It can hardly fail to be seen how clear and self-consistent a meaning the construction now given to this confessedly difficult sentence imparts to the whole passage to which it belongs. It is as if Solomon had said, Since our condition in this world is subject to such continual uncertainty, and to such incessant change, we might be tempted to ask whether it be worth any man's while to occupy himself about worldly things at all? And yet, though the fact is certain that these changes and uncertainties do make life a scene of constant labour and care, they are not without their use. They have every one of them a place and purpose in the moral government of God. "He hath made everything beautiful in its season." As, in the economy of material nature, the winter's cold is as needful and salutary as the summer's heat; so in the economy of the moral and spiritual world, sorrows are as indispensable as joys. But though this admirable wisdom pervades the whole order of providence, and the

whole arrangement of events, men fail to discover it. They are too much taken up with their own purposes to get a right view of the purposes of God. Things visible and temporal are so near them, and fill so large a space in their eye, as in great measure to shut out the things which are unseen and eternal. And what is the conclusion to which this consideration should lead us? Because earthly objects, affairs, and interests have a tendency to exert this blinding influence as regards the final purposes of God, ought we to separate ourselves altogether from them? Ought we to refuse to have anything more to do with them? Ought we to withdraw in disgust from our worldly calling, and to cast away our worldly substance, and in the spirit of monkish asceticism to retire into some solitude where we might occupy ourselves exclusively with the world to come? Such a course is as impossible as it would be injurious. We cannot, in this life, separate ourselves from earthly things. God hath ordained it otherwise. He hath so set the world in our hearts—so bound us up with its objects and interests, its cares and labours—that go where we may, we cannot help carrying them with us;—and with them we must live and die. And what is more—while the separation is thus impossible—no attempt can be made to effect it without injury to the soul. It is in the world, and in the midst of the things of time, that God means to train us for eternity. Our true wisdom, therefore, consists in this, in neither despising and deserting earthly things, on the one hand, nor in unduly loving them and cleaving to them, on the other; but in estimating them at their proper worth, and in putting them to their proper use. And if any one desires to learn what is their real use and worth, the answer of the royal Preacher is at hand—“For I know,” he continues, “that there is no good in them, but for a man to do good and to rejoice in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God.”

Substantially the same statement as this, Solomon had made

before, in the 24th verse of the preceding chapter. Here, however, the truth which it embodies is proclaimed with greater emphasis and precision. There it had the character simply of an inference that may be fairly and reasonably deduced from the facts previously spoken of—facts which impressively illustrated the folly and vanity of amassing worldly possessions, and of expecting to find in them any satisfying portion. Looking to these facts—facts which prove by what an amount of care and toil it is that worldly possessions are acquired, and how insecure, after all, is the hold we have of them, and how certain it is that we must soon leave them to a successor, whose folly, it may be, is destined to squander in a year what it has cost us a lifetime of anxiety and labour to accumulate—looking to these facts, Solomon at that point merely gave utterance to the very natural conclusion, “that there is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour.” Now, however, when his argument on this great subject is considerably farther advanced, he assumes a tone of greater authority, and the inference takes the form of an established fact—established by his own personal experience. “I know,” he says concerning these earthly things, “that there is no good in them but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life.” He had once thought otherwise. He had once loved wealth and worldly greatness for their own sakes, and supposed it possible to find his happiness in them; but time and trial, and the grace of God, had changed his mind. He now saw the sin and the folly of having ever made them his chief good. Their true place, as he now perceived, was altogether subordinate. They were but means to certain ends; but not themselves the end for which any man ought to live. Their use might be summed up in these two things—to supply our temporal wants, and to put it in our power to relieve the necessities and promote the welfare of others. Beyond this, there really was no good in them. This was the limit of their power in the way of benefiting man. Thus far they could go and no farther. And,

therefore, the true wisdom, in so far as these earthly things were concerned, was cheerfully and gratefully to enjoy the good of them, so far as we needed it ourselves; and freely and ungrudgingly to employ them in doing good to others.

By this authoritative decision, Solomon, in the first place, condemns that excessive carefulness and solicitude about our worldly interests that unfits many men for enjoying the good of to-day, on account of the possible evil that may arrive to-morrow. Such a spirit is dishonouring to God. It betrays a want of confidence in Him. "If," said the Lord Jesus, reproving that distrustful spirit, "God so clothe the grass of the field, which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" (Matt. vi. 30). "Let a man, therefore, eat and drink, and enjoy the good of his labour, it is the gift of God." It was bestowed upon him by the Great Provider, not that it might prove to him a source of anxiety and care, but that it might minister to his temporal comfort, and sustain him in his work. Let him, therefore, use this world as not abusing it—"for every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. iv. 4, 5). But in the next place, by the decision here pronounced, Solomon equally condemns the covetous hoarding of our worldly means, and the selfish spending of all upon ourselves. Solomon, or rather the Spirit of God, by whose inspiration he wrote, has no toleration either for the narrow-souled miser, who has not the heart to spend his money at all; or for the luxurious Dives, who clothes himself in purple and fine linen, and fares sumptuously every day, and leaves all the while the poor neglected Lazarus to pine and perish at his door. The one of these two is like the slothful servant, burying an important talent in the earth; and one day the rust of this unused talent shall be a witness against him, and shall eat his flesh as it were fire. The other of these two is preparing for himself the terrible taunt, "Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your heart as in a

day of slaughter" (James v. 5). When that day of slaughter—that day of final retribution comes, the selfish and luxurious liver shall then be reminded that he is only reaping as he sowed. "Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented" (Luke xvi. 25). In the view of that dread eternity, when God shall render to every man according to his deeds, how seasonable, in connection with this part of our subject, are the words of Paul to Timothy—"Charge them that are rich in this world that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life" (1 Tim. vi. 17-19).

Solomon had spoken, as we have seen, in the beginning of the chapter, of the many changes to which human life, in this world, is liable; and from these changes he had derived an argument as to the utter vanity of seeking, or expecting to find, a satisfying portion among the things of time. And now he founds upon these changes a further argument of the same kind, drawn from the fact that these changes, all of them, proceed from the hand of God, and that they are connected with the accomplishment of His immutable purposes, which no human power can arrest or alter. "I know," he says, at the 14th verse, giving utterance to this solemn thought, "that whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it." Let men say or do what they please, "His counsel shall stand, and He will do all his pleasure" (Isaiah xli. 10). The brethren of Joseph may sell the helpless youth for a slave, but the day will come when they must bow before him, and feel and acknowledge his pre-eminence above them all. Pharaoh, in the haughty consciousness of power, may set himself against the divine command, and arrogantly exclaim, "Who is the

Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go" (Exod. v. 2). Nevertheless, the hour arrives when the deliverance is achieved, and when the proud boaster, who thought to hinder it, perishes, with all his hostile armament, in the depths of the sea. The heathen raged, and the people imagined vain things. The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord, and against His Christ. But it was only to do, in their madness and impiety, whatsoever God's hand and counsel had determined before to be done. "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall He speak unto them in His wrath, and vex them in His sore displeasure. Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion" (Psalm ii. 4-6). "Whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it: and God doeth it that men should fear before Him." He baffles all our efforts to set His purposes aside, and asserts His own rightful and glorious supremacy, that we may be still and know that He is God. "Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the loving-kindness of the Lord" (Psalm cvii. 43). The more we mark the operations of His hand in the things that befall us, the greater cause shall we find to confess that His tender mercies are over all His other works. "He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men" (Lam. iii. 33). When He chastens, it is not for His pleasure, but for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Let us beware, then, of fighting against God. "He is wise in heart and mighty in strength. Who hath hardened himself against Him and prospered?" (Job ix. 4). It is as vain as it is impious to contend with the Almighty. "Saul, Saul, it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks!" Instead of resisting His will to our own hurt, let us humbly and heartily accept it as, in all things, holy, and just, and good. In a word, let us learn the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb — "Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God

Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name, for thou only art holy!" (Rev. xv. 3-4).

To illustrate the immutability of which Solomon had thus spoken as characterizing the purposes of God, he adds this further statement—"That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past." He had noticed this fact before, at chap. i. 9, for the purpose of exposing the folly of the men of this world in trying to find happiness in created things. The path they were pursuing had been trodden ten thousand times before, and always with the same unvarying and disappointing result. Here his design, in again referring to it, is rather to confirm the great practical lessons taught in the 12th and 13th verses of the passage now under consideration—that there is no good in earthly things, "but for a man to rejoice and to do good in his life;" to take, while he has them, the comfort they are fitted and designed to yield, and to turn them to account in rendering some needed service to others. That there is no other or higher good in them than this is manifest from the fact, that those vicissitudes which affect all earthly things, and which make our possession of them so fleeting and insecure, are a fixed and fundamental part of that economy under which we live. They may seem to be the result of chance, but in reality they belong to a pre-arranged and settled order of things. They are as much, therefore, to be counted on as the recurrence of the seasons, or the revolution of the stars. The laws to which they are subject may elude our observation—the times and the seasons when they are to fall out, God may have kept in his own power; but the fact is certain that happen they will. They have done so from the beginning of time, and will to the end. Not one of those vicissitudes which, in the beginning of this chapter, Solomon enumerates, is new or strange. Every age of the world has witnessed their occurrence. Not one solitary generation has been exempted from them. "That which hath been is now,

and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth [or recalleth] that which is past." He seeketh it out, so to speak, that He may again assign to it its place and work, and cause it to accomplish in this age, or in this man's history, what it has accomplished before. When some unlooked-for trial overtakes us, we may be ready to think that our case is exceptional—that it is a new thing under the sun. There were Christians in Paul's time who were disposed to indulge this thought, and who were greatly cast down under it; and there are many who do the same thing, and with the same discouraging consequences, still. To all such, the language of Paul is as appropriate now as in apostolic times, or as in the still remoter times of Solomon: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to men; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will, with the temptation, also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. x. 13).

Let God's people, then, take comfort amid all the uncertainties of life, and under all the trials that may be awaiting them. "Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world" (Acts xv. 18). Nothing whatever can occur without His permission; and all things shall work together for good to them that love God, and who are the called according to His purpose. But, on the other hand, let sinners beware. For to them it is an awful thought, that "whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever!" They would fain persuade themselves that His *yea*, like their own, will sometimes be exchanged for *no*; that He will not rigidly execute His threatenings; and that even the impenitent and unbelieving, who will not have Christ to reign over them, may, nevertheless, somehow escape the wrath to come. But God is not a man that He should lie, nor the son of man that He should repent. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but not one syllable of His word shall pass away till all be fulfilled. "He that believeth in Christ is not condemned, but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God"

(John iii. 18). This is the eternal and immutable counsel of God. "Nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it." If sinners will not have salvation in this way, they can have it in no other; and, therefore, to be without Christ is to be without God, and without hope in the world!

Solomon, let it be remembered, is now looking abroad upon the world with an eye that has been touched with the eye-salve of the Spirit, and the world wears, in consequence, a widely different aspect from that which it had presented to his mind in the days of his folly and sin. The dazzling and deceitful glare with which once it shone has disappeared. The many deforming marks, broad and deep, which the fall has left upon it, have come out fully into his view, and instead of regarding it as a satisfying portion, he finds in it little else than vanity and vexation of spirit. Among the numerous dark and disappointing features which the picture exhibits, there is one that most painfully affects him, and all the more, perhaps, that he had probably made earnest though ineffectual efforts to remove it. In our exposition of the 13th and immediately following verses of chap. i., we endeavoured to show that in the first stage of his career as a man of the world, Solomon aimed at being a social and political reformer. For this end it would seem to have been, that he gave his heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that were done under heaven. It was evidently a great shock to that haughty self-confidence which his kingly power and his far-famed wisdom had tempted him to indulge, to find, as he did, that he could accomplish so little in the way of rectifying the disorders of human society—that what was crooked could not be made straight, and that what was wanting could not be numbered. The irritation and annoyance thereby produced were suggested, when dealing with that passage, as the not improbable cause of the headlong impetuosity with which immediately afterwards he threw himself into the vortex of gaiety and sensual pleasure; as if the failure of his schemes as a philosophical philanthropist, had led him to

resolve to give himself no further concern about matters of that kind, and to seek simply his own enjoyment, without troubling himself as to what might become of others. But now that divine grace has brought him into a better frame, and that he has come to contemplate all these things from a totally different point of view, he can no longer regard, with the same selfish indifference, the evils which afflict mankind. Among these evils none is more distressing to an upright and benevolent mind than the wrongs and injuries which power often inflicts upon the weak, the helpless, and the poor. When places of influence and authority are occupied by cruel and unjust men, humanity has cause to mourn. It was this state of things that was now grieving the heart of Solomon, and deepening his sense of the vanity of this world. "And, moreover," he says, "I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there."

No wonder, indeed, that he saw what has been, alas! so common in every age, and what is so widely prevalent, in many lands, even at this present hour. This state of things had apparently, as has been already hinted, attracted his notice, and awakened his displeasure, even in the time of his forgetfulness of God. His sense of justice, and all the more generous feelings of his nature, had been outraged by the flagrant dishonesty with which, in too many quarters, law was administered, and by the tyranny with which power was exercised. In seeking and searching out by wisdom all things that were done under heaven, and especially things that were done amiss, and that demanded the application of some remedy, he had not far to go in order to make many painful discoveries. Not merely in neighbouring nations, but in his own kingdom, his inquiries soon brought him to the knowledge of facts well fitted to arouse his moral indignation, and to call for instant redress. But to find out the iniquity was one thing; to put an end to it was quite a different thing. He succeeded easily enough in the one, but totally failed in the other; as every social reformer must fail who overlooks the deep depra-

vity of human nature as the grand source of our social evils, and the gracious influences of the Word and Spirit of God as their only effectual cure. The gay career of mirth and revelry to which he subsequently abandoned himself, was the not unnatural reaction of a mind disgusted by the disappointment of its benevolent purposes, and eager to escape from the contemplation of evils which it had found itself impotent to remove. Examples of the same thing may be seen in abundance wherever injustice and oppression prevail. Men of more liberal and enlightened sentiments, who would fain see society delivered from the galling yoke, when they find any such attempts as common benevolence or political philosophy would prompt them to make, completely baffled, and that as much by the apathy, and ignorance, and corruption of the people themselves, as by the strong hand of despotism on the part of those in power, they are very often tempted to do what Solomon formerly did—to cease to concern themselves more about it, and to adopt the selfish and heart-hardening conclusion, that the part of wise men is to accommodate themselves to things as they are, and to extract from society, such as it is, as much personal enjoyment as they can.

It is true that Solomon was himself the head of the state, and, in his own kingdom at least, might be supposed to have had the means of removing from the place of judgment the wickedness which he saw polluting it, and from the place of righteousness the iniquity which he saw turning it into a place of wrong. It is, however, to be borne in mind that, not only is the reforming spirit of a mere man of the world easily wearied and worn out with its task, but that in so wide a sphere as his kingdom, through the conquests of his father, had become, and in so many parts of which there were doubtless multitudes of rude and lawless men, even the authority of a king would frequently find itself altogether unable to cope with the resistance, secret and open, which turbulent and powerful chiefs and selfish and interested magistrates would be ready to oppose to his juster

and humaner views. Had Solomon, at the period of his history in question, been a reformer of that school to which, in a subsequent age, such men as Hezekiah and Ezra belonged—had he been prepared, in other words, to address himself to the work of national and social reformation, by proclaiming a fast for his own and his people's sins, and by seeking a revival of the Lord's work throughout the land—he would doubtless have been privileged to see many evils arrested and many abuses done away. But while it is unquestionably the sacred duty of every God-fearing ruler, in the use of all competent means, thus to labour to purify the fountains of public justice, and to promote to the utmost of his power the righteous administration of his government, it will still remain, in this fallen world, that good men must grieve over the sufferings of oppressed humanity, and must find their chief consolation, where Solomon ultimately found it, in the solemn and yet sustaining thought, that there is a time coming when "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked." If it were not, indeed, for the peculiar considerations which this thought suggests, the mind, in surveying the painful spectacle which the words of Solomon so graphically describe, might be tempted to lapse into a state of utter scepticism as regards the very existence of a moral government in the universe at all. When we see, even in this nineteenth century of the Christian era, so many kingdoms where power is but another name for oppression—where law is invoked only to perpetrate the grossest crimes against personal and public liberty—where a remorseless despotism tramples under foot the dearest rights of humanity—where every voice that is lifted up on the side of justice and freedom is stifled in a dungeon or silenced on the scaffold;—when we see all this going on from year to year, and from generation to generation, and hardly one ray of light or hope breaking through the intolerable gloom, it is only by looking up from earth to heaven, and forward from time to eternity, that we escape from despair, and are enabled to do battle with, and to drive away the horrible doubt as to

whether it be really true that verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth. David tells us that he had once found himself on the very verge of the contrary conclusion. "But as for me," he says, "my feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped. For I was envious of the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. . . Their eyes stand out with fatness; they have more than heart could wish. They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. . . And they say, How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the Most High?" It almost seemed to David as if this their impious saying were true: as if there were no God, or none who cared about what was doing upon earth: and that as for himself he had in vain cleansed his heart and washed his hands in innocency. But faith rescued him from this abyss. When he went into the sanctuary of God, *then* understood he their end (Ps. lxxiii.) As Solomon observes in a succeeding chapter of this book: "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (viii. 11). But though the Lord be slow to anger, He is also of great power, and will not at all acquit the wicked (Nahum i. 3).

In our impatience to see the right vindicated and the wrong punished, we are ever ready, with the Psalmist, to exclaim, "It is time for thee, Lord, to work: for they have made void thy law" (Ps. cxix. 126). But in that endless future over which His rule extends, there is "a time for every purpose and for every work." Slowly, it may be, but surely, He renders to every man and to every people according to their deeds. Their own sins are made to find them out, and their iniquities to correct them; and the violent dealing of the haughty and cruel oppressor comes down at length upon his own head. While God's providence is so ordered as that in the long run righteousness never fails to exalt a nation, He, on the other hand, turns fat lands to barrenness for the wickedness of them that dwell therein. By such means God,

even in this present life, proclaims the existence and asserts the supremacy of his moral government, and makes it conclusively manifest that He loveth righteousness and hateth iniquity. But this is not all. Beyond this life altogether there is a further reckoning in store, when God shall bring every work into judgment, and every secret thing, whether it be good or bad. Then shall He finally judge the righteous and the wicked. In the view of that great and notable day of the Lord, the humble and patient believer learns, like Solomon, to contemplate with a more resigned and submissive spirit, the brief reign of the ungodly. "For yet a little while and the wicked shall not be: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be. But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming. The wicked have drawn out the sword, and have bent their bow, to cast down the poor and needy, and to slay such as be of upright conversation. Their swords shall enter into their own heart, and their bows shall be broken, . . . but the Lord knoweth the days of the upright: and their inheritance shall be for ever" (Psalm xxxvii).

In one of the many Scripture prophecies of Messiah's advent and reign, it is said, "He shall judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with judgment. The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by righteousness. He shall judge the poor of the people, He shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor. . . . In His days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth" (Psalm lxxii.) This is the very opposite of the state of things which the words of Solomon describe. It corresponds to that gracious and beautiful promise to the suffering church and people of God, contained in the 60th chapter of the prophecies of Isaiah—"I will also make thy officers peace, and thy exactors righteousness. Violence

shall no more be heard in thee, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise" (17, 18). Far, indeed, is anything the world has yet seen from the realization of this attractive and glowing picture; though enough has undoubtedly appeared to show, that it is in the progress of the gospel and in the triumph of Christ's cause, that alone there is any hope for the reign of righteousness in this fallen world. It is just in proportion as the religion of Christ has gained a footing in any land, and as its pure principles and beneficent spirit have leavened the minds and moulded the institutions of the people, that we have ceased to see wickedness in the place of judgment, and iniquity in the place of righteousness. If, in our own favoured country, the sight that so afflicted the heart of Solomon be comparatively seldom seen—if the laws are framed with a view to the welfare of the people—if they are administered with equity—if the arm of power be ever ready to defend the weak against the strong, and to secure the rights and liberty of all, it is the gospel of Christ that has gained for us these inestimable blessings; and only when the kingdoms of this world shall have become, every one of them, the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, shall there be nothing to hurt nor to destroy. It is by the fulfilment of this one prayer—"Thy kingdom come"—that the accomplishment of that other prayer shall be realized—"Thy will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven."

"I said in mine heart," continues Solomon, "concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts." To remove the obscurity that hangs over this verse, it is only necessary to understand what he thus said in his heart as a prayer. The sons of men to whose estate he refers are evidently the worldly, the unspiritual, the carnal, as contradistinguished from those who are the sons or children of God. In meditating on their condition, and observing how completely they were engrossed with earthly things, the earnest desire arose within

him that God would show them to themselves, and make them to see that, living as they did, they were lowering themselves to a level with the beasts that perish. They were forgetting altogether their spiritual nature and their immortal destiny. They were sowing to the flesh, of the flesh to reap corruption. "For that which befalleth the sons of men," he goes on to say, "befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast: for all is vanity." Such a man—a man whose thoughts and desires, whose plans and purposes, whose pursuits and aims, are all bounded by time, and are all of the earth, earthy—has little to distinguish him from the beasts that perish. They, too, have their measure of intelligence and their measure of enjoyment; and if death terminates their career, it terminates his too. He may have his dwelling in a palace, and they may have theirs in their forest lair, or in the dens and caves of the earth. But they both come to one home at the last. "All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again." What a humiliating view is this of the condition of worldly men; and yet how awfully and literally true! They have no sympathy with the things that are above. They have no tie to link them to the spiritual and eternal world. They have no realizing sense of their relation to the Author of their being. However amiable and estimable as neighbours and friends and members of society many of them may be, it is still this present life—this fleeting, empty, unsatisfying world—to which their views and desires are confined. If, indeed, it were really so, that this life were all, and that death were an eternal sleep, there might be something to say for the course they pursue. Let us eat and drink—let us catch the passing enjoyment of the hour, for to-morrow we die—might be a high enough aspiration for so ephemeral an existence. But the parallel which Solomon is here tracing between the carnal and earthly-minded sons of men, and the beasts that perish, holds only so far as to the grave. Alas!

good were it for such men if the parallel were maintained beyond the grave too. But at this point the similarity ends, and the contrast begins; and who can adequately comprehend or appreciate the mighty and momentous difference which that contrast involves! "Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?"

In giving utterance to this solemn inquiry, it is abundantly plain, from the whole tenor of the passage to which it belongs, that it was the difference in the nature and destiny of these spirits respectively to which Solomon meant to refer. The spirit of the beast which goeth downward is mortal—it perishes with the body, which mingles with its kindred dust. The spirit of man is immortal—it "goeth upward;" or, as he otherwise expresses the same truth in the closing chapter of this book, it "returns to God who gave it." Elaborate attempts have sometimes been made to prove that the Old Testament church was ignorant of a future state, and that all their notions of rewards and punishments were limited to temporal things, and to this present world. To confute so mischievous and extravagant a theory, even the single passage before us were more than sufficient. How could Solomon, when contemplating the iniquities and oppressions that are done under the sun, have consoled himself with the thought that God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, if he had known nothing of the life that lies beyond the grave? How could he have spoken with such emphatic precision and force, of the contrast between the spirit of the beast that goeth downwards, and of the spirit of man that goeth upward—that returns, at the death of the body, to God who gave it? It is sufficient to notice, in passing, this subject here; occasion will arise, before we are done with this book, to return to it, and to go more fully into it. When that occasion arrives, it will not be difficult to show that, while it is undoubtedly true that it was reserved for our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by way of eminence, to bring "life and immor-

tality to light through the gospel," it is not less true that as far back as the times of the antediluvian world, "Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold the Lord cometh with ten thousand of his saints, to execute judgment upon all;" that even before the Mosaic dispensation was given, Abraham sought another country, that is, an heavenly; and that Moses, in Egypt, chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, because he had respect to the recompense of the reward—a reward that would reach infinitely beyond the fleeting season during which alone the pleasures of sin could be enjoyed.

But without enlarging on these views at present, let us rather return to the profound and suggestive inquiry with which we have now more immediately to do—"Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward?" There are mysteries no doubt connected even with the spirit of the beast. That the beast has a spirit of some kind is manifest, unless we mean to maintain that feeling, perception, memory, intelligence, are properties of matter, and thus to lay the foundation for a system subversive of all belief in the existence of the spiritual world. But whereas the spirit of the beast perishes when its body dies, the spirit of man is invested with the awful attributes of responsibility and immortality. The human soul shall survive the stroke that consigns its material tenement to the tomb, and pass into the presence of that Divine Spirit to whom it must give account of the deeds done in the body, and from whom it shall receive its final and eternal award. Who knoweth so as rightly to conceive of and estimate what this one all-important difference between the spirit of man and the spirit of the beast involves? Knowing that such a difference exists, what self-degradation, what madness is it for man to live on a level with the beasts—to live, that is, for sense and time—busied about what he shall eat, and what he shall drink, and wherewith he shall be clothed, and having no abiding or serious concern about the condition in

time or the prospects in eternity of his never-dying soul! What shall it profit a man if he should gain the whole world and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Surely these solemn and searching questions of our Saviour would awaken louder and deeper echoes in our breasts if we were more occupied than we are with the thought of that eternal world which the words of Solomon are fitted to bring so vividly and so impressively before us. We may refuse to have anything to do with God now; but we cannot refuse to have to do with Him in the world to come. When the body returns to the dust as it was, the soul shall return to God who gave it—to Him who made man a living soul—to Him whose inspiration gave us understanding—who endowed us with reason and conscience, and all those other high capacities by which the human spirit is distinguished, and who, in regard to our use of them all, and of every other talent we have received, hath given this significant charge—"Occupy till I come."

Is our meeting with that holy and righteous and omniscient God, a matter of such inferior moment that we can afford to let it slip out of our minds, and to live without any habitual or practical regard to the account we have to give to the Arbiter of our eternal destiny—to Him who can cast us, soul and body, into hell, or assign to us a place among the just made perfect in heaven? Who knoweth what capacities, both of blessedness and woe, are lodged in that immortal spirit with whose everlasting destinies we are thus trifling? Who knoweth either the depths of that endless anguish which these pregnant words describe, "the worm that dieth not, and the fire that is not quenched!" or the heights of that felicity and glory that shall be realized in the presence of God and of the Lamb! And yet one or other of these must be the final state of every son of Adam. And if we would escape the one and attain to the other,—if we would flee from the wrath that cometh on the children of disobedience, and lay hold on eternal life,—there is but one course to follow, and that is, to betake ourselves to Christ, and

to live a life of faith upon the Son of God. "For there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" (Acts iv. 12).

From these solemn reflections on the ultimate and eternal issues of human life, Solomon derives a new ground for the conclusion at which he had arrived before, namely, that the part of true wisdom is, not to be unduly solicitous about worldly things, but to make a cheerful use of them while they continue in our possession, and to leave the morrow to take "thought for the things of itself." Speaking of our outward estate, at the 24th verse of the preceding chapter, he had said—"There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour." And again, he had repeated that sentiment at the 12th verse of this third chapter, when in reference to temporal things he gave utterance to these words—"I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life." It is obviously, in substance, the same statement which is contained in the verse at present before us. It is a landing-place to which he is conducted by each of the several lines of thought he has been pursuing in the foregoing context. Wherefore should a man vex and harass himself about things which must ever remain to him the merest uncertainties? He knows not, and cannot know, what even a day shall bring forth—what shall be on the morrow! How much less can he penetrate into the distant future, and guard himself against all the possible contingencies of coming years? Enough for the day is the evil thereof. Not, indeed, that we are to run from one extreme to another. Because Solomon, speaking by inspiration of God, would have us to be "without carefulness," we are not therefore to give way to the indolence and improvidence which he elsewhere so emphatically condemns. "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest" (Prov. vi. 6). To have no regard to

those necessities, personal and domestic, which sickness, old age, or death, may involve, is not reverently to trust, but recklessly to tempt the providence of God. The part of Christian wisdom is to find out and follow the just mean that lies midway between these opposite errors; and it is this true course which, in the several passages we have specified, Solomon is exhorting us to pursue. In the last of these passages—the one with which this chapter concludes—the idea which seems to be most prominently presented is this, that the *present* is all that in any sense we can venture to call ours. “For who shall bring a man to see what shall be after him?” Who can tell him whether his successor is to be a wise man or a fool? Who can raise for him the impenetrable curtain that hangs over the future, and unfold to his eye the secrets which it conceals? Why, then, should he allow the fleeting concerns of this life to absorb so large a proportion of his time and thoughts? Why, in his engrossing eagerness to lay up treasure for himself or for his heirs, should he condemn himself to a career by which “all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief;” and so that “his heart taketh not rest in the night.”

Let him “rejoice in his own works”—in the fruits, that is to say, of his own labour—“for that is his portion;” that is, what God has placed at his disposal, and of which an account shall be required at his hand. Whether it be less or more, let him learn “therewith to be content.” Let it be sanctified by prayer, and used with thankfulness. Let him take with a grateful heart the good which it is fitted and designed to yield, and make it as serviceable as he can to the furtherance of God’s glory. In a word, let him use this world as not abusing it—never for a moment forgetting that the fashion of this world passeth away.

If men were more concerned about those interests that lie beyond this world, they would be far less careful and troubled about temporal things. When we have been taught by divine grace in some measure to appreciate and realize the infinite

worth of that immortal spirit that goeth upward—when, in the faith of those great and precious promises which are all yea and amen in Christ Jesus, we have committed that priceless soul unto Him in well-doing as unto a faithful Creator, we shall find it a comparatively easy task to leave whatever else concerns us in His hands. He that spared not His own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall He not, with him also, freely give us all things? “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven, shall He not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?” (Matt. vi. 28-30.)

CHAPTER VII.

EVILS AND FOLLIES.

“So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of *such as were* oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors *there was* power; but they had no comforter. Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead, more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better *is he* than both they which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

“Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This *is* also vanity and vexation of spirit. The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh. Better *is* an handful *with* quietness, than both the hands full *with* travail and vexation of spirit.

“Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun. There is one *alone*, and *there is* not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet *is there* no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither *saieth he*, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This *is* also vanity, yea, it *is* a sore travail.”—ECCLES. IV. 1-8.

TOWARDS the close of the preceding chapter, Solomon had been dealing with the careless and carnal multitude, who live for time only and take no thought for eternity. By following such a course they were doing what they could to lower themselves to the base level of the beasts that perish. They were disregarding the momentous distinction between the immortal spirit of man which goeth upward, and the mortal spirit of the beast which goeth downward to the earth. In a word, they were sowing to the flesh, of the flesh to reap corruption—gaining the world at the expense of losing their souls. From his melancholy survey of this too numerous class of men, and from the solemn reflections it had suggested, he reverts, in the passage now before us, to a subject which had previously attracted his notice, and concerning which he had already spoken in brief but most significant

terms—"He returned and considered all the oppressions that were done under the sun." The spectacle was too exciting and painful to be soon or easily forgotten. It had taken a powerful hold of his just and benevolent mind. He had consoled himself indeed, in his former contemplation of it, with the sustaining thought that these iniquities were not without a remedy—that there was a day coming when these wrongs should be all redressed, when a righteous, infallible, and omnipotent Judge should vindicate the cause of injured innocence, and render to the authors of the injustice according to their deeds. But though he had thus pointed, in clear and explicit language, to the source of strong consolation which it is the privilege of all who know and fear God to enjoy under the trials to which, in this present evil world, their faith and patience may be subjected, he could not forget the distressing fact that, among the countless victims of injustice and tyranny, there were thousands and tens of thousands who were utter strangers to the blessed privilege now spoken of, and whose present sufferings were unrelieved by any hope of a better state of things beyond the grave. It was, perhaps, in meditating on the condition of this truly miserable class of men that his heart was affected with the deepest sorrow. "So I returned," he says, "and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter." Twice he repeats it, as the crowning feature of their affliction, that "they had no comforter." It is possible, indeed, that this language may mean no more than that they had no earthly friend—none who would venture, in the face of triumphant persecution, to speak a word for the poor victim, or to pour a single expression of sympathy and commiseration into his ear. We know, indeed, how selfish human nature is, and how ready the multitude are to forsake any one who has fallen, from whatever cause, under the frown of men in power. As Solomon elsewhere observes, "The poor is hated, even of his

own neighbour: but the rich hath many friends" (Prov. xiv. 20). Nor is it difficult to understand how deeply this feeling of desertion and loneliness, this absence of any human comforter, must aggravate the anguish of the unpitied sufferer. We can well imagine, for example, how the iron of this trying consideration must have entered into the soul of the youthful Joseph, when, overwhelmed by accusations that covered him with infamy, he found himself suddenly abandoned by every friend he had made in the land of Egypt, and, all-innocent as he was, cast, amid shouts of execration, into a dungeon, as if he had been the vilest of mankind.

It does seem, however, as if this significant statement, that "they had no comforter," were intended here to have a wider range and a deeper meaning. When he had spoken before, at the 16th verse of the preceding chapter, of the wrongs inflicted by injustice and cruelty, it seems natural to infer that the sufferers he had there more immediately in view were the sufferers for righteousness' sake. The consolation applicable to their case he derived from the fact that "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked." It could not be said of them that they had no comforter. Even in the very presence of their haughty oppressors they could encourage their hearts in the Lord. Daniel was not without a comforter when, in the face of the appalling prospect of being cast into the den of lions, "he gave thanks before his God as he did aforetime" (Dan. vi. 10). Stephen was not without a comforter when, at the very moment that his enemies were gnashing upon him with their teeth, and were preparing to stone him to death, he saw heaven opened, and his face shone as it had been the face of an angel (Acts vi., vii.) Our own Scottish martyr was not without a comforter when, with his foot upon the scaffold and dying by the ruthless hand of persecution for his testimony to Christ's crown and covenant, he exclaimed in an ecstasy of joy, "Farewell, sun, moon, and stars! Welcome, God and Father! Welcome, sweet Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant! Welcome, blessed

Spirit of grace and God of all consolation! Welcome glory! Welcome eternal life, and welcome death!"

These, and all such true witnesses for God, had an all-sufficient and unfailing source of comfort—one which the world cannot give, and which the world cannot take away. They had the comfort involved in that precious saying of our Lord, "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven" (Matt. v. 11, 12).

But there are, alas! sufferers from the oppression of their fellows whose distress has no such glorious alleviation—sufferers whom oppression is making miserable in the life that now is, and who yet have no well-grounded hope of deliverance beyond the grave. As regards their human oppressors, they may be innocent and objects of pity, but as regards God they are verily guilty, and yet they have been at no pains to learn what they must do to be saved. Of such, when earthly suffering overtakes them, it may be said with an awful force of meaning, that they have no comforter. This life is their all, and yet, in the circumstances which Solomon describes, it has been turned for them into a scene of gloom and wretchedness. It is as if the avenger had come to torment them before the time; it is as if the luxurious rich man of our Saviour's parable had, in the midst of his career, been stripped of his gay clothing and his sumptuous fare, and been made to exchange places with the diseased and helpless beggar that had been laid down at his door. If their view of life were the true one—if the possessions and pleasures of this world were man's chief good, then, upon such a footing, well might Solomon "praise the dead which were already dead, more than the living which were yet alive." Or, going further still, well might he adopt the conclusion that better than "both they is he which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work which is done under the sun." We cannot suppose this strong language to have been used in any

other than such a relative and restricted sense as has now been pointed out. If the dead have died in their sins, then it is not and cannot be better with them than with the living which are yet alive. The land of the living is the place of hope. However miserable man's outward condition in this life may be, there is still hope for the salvation of his soul; but in the grave there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, that can avail to recal that righteous but awful sentence—"The soul that sinneth it shall die."

It would seem, therefore, reasonable to infer that, in speaking as he does in the 2d and 3d verses, Solomon is looking at the world from the world's own point of view. He is dealing with worldly men, and he is trying to show them how foolish is the choice they have made in setting their affections on the things of sense and time. What could be more fitted to convince them of this truth than the fact here presented, that so many and so intolerable are the wrongs and miseries to which human life in this world is often subject, that if this world be all, it were better never to have been born into it? Such a consideration has no weight with the child of God. His treasure is in the heavens, and his heart is there also; and even the worst of those afflictions which on earth he may be called to endure, are all working for him a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory in the world to come. They are a part of the stern though salutary discipline by which he is trained for glory, honour, and immortality. But Solomon's argument is irresistible as regards the men of this world. They are seeking their good things in time; this life is the portion on which they have set their hearts. Is it a portion worthy of their choice? Is it not the very extreme of folly to stake their happiness on a state of things liable to such evils as are every day afflicting the temporal condition of man? Ought not the very circumstance that this world is cursed by such oppressions as Solomon has here in view—that men in multitudes are so harassed and trampled on, so robbed and spoiled by the tyranny and

cruelty of their fellows, as to make death preferable to life—nay, as even to raise the question whether it were not better never to have been called into existence, and thus to have been spared the misery of seeing “the evil work that is done under the sun;”—ought not the very circumstance that this world is the scene of such oppressions to wean men’s hearts from it, and to stir them up to seek another country, that is, an heavenly? Happy those who have learned to endure these, and all the other afflictions of this present time, as seeing Him who is invisible! He will not leave them comfortless; He will come unto them in every time of need. For “now, thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and He that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not, for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name: thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee: and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire thou shalt not be burnt, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour” (Isa. xliii. 1, 2).

But having thus sought to draw one proof of the vanity of this world from the fact that bad men have so often a high place in it, he proceeds to elicit another proof of the same thing from the fact that good men commonly meet in this world with a very ill reward. He had seen power on the side of those that were oppressors of mankind, and he had also seen ingratitude and enmity tracking the course and blackening the fame of those that were the benefactors of their age. “Again I considered all travail and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.” In looking abroad upon society Solomon had observed, here and there, men of a noble and generous spirit; men who laid themselves out to promote the welfare of those around them—who spent their time and strength in self-denying labours which had no other object but the public good. These were the patriots and philanthropists of their day. How were they treated?

They made for themselves a name, it is true; they attracted much notice; the world could not refuse to render a certain measure of homage to their superior worth, and to their enlightened zeal, and to their disinterested benevolence. But the very distinction they had thus gained embittered the spirit and sharpened the tongue of envy, and drew out against them the hatred and opposition of every mean and malignant mind. Need we wonder at this, when we remember how that acceptance with God, which the simple faith and humble piety of Abel secured for him, armed against him the murderous hand of Cain? how the mere prospect of Joseph's future elevation so envenomed the hearts of his brethren that they sold him for a slave? how even the pre-eminent meekness with which Moses bore his honours as the leader and the law-giver of Israel, could not save him from the envious insurrection of the rebellious company of Korah? how the acknowledgment of the signal services of David in the slaughter of the Philistine, and the consequent deliverance of his country, made him the victim of that remorseless persecution at the hands of Saul which again and again had so nearly cost him his life, and from whose dark malevolence he never escaped till Saul himself had perished? Solomon had no doubt himself experienced, in one way or another, substantially the same thing. He, too, had engaged in "much travail and in many right works." The studies he had prosecuted, and the learning he had acquired, and the services he had rendered, by his enlightened policy, to the stability and prosperity of his kingdom, and, above all, his great achievement of the building of the temple, and the setting in order of the things that belonged to the public worship of the God of Israel—these were labours which had made him deservedly renowned; and we may rest assured that all this fame had not gathered around him without stirring up the spirit of envy in neighbouring kings and princes whom his glory was casting into the shade, as well as in many of the chief captains and mighty men of his own land. It was so then, and it is so still. No man can rise far above his

fellows—however much of self-sacrificing travail it may have cost him to do so, and however right the works may be which have secured his elevation—without begetting a grudge in some jealous mind, and finding that many are ready to speak evil of his good. And what does this prove? It proves how poor a thing it is to labour for a mere earthly reward. If human virtue had no other or better acknowledgment than it receives at the hands of the world, it would have little indeed to sustain it. Even such a character and life as that of the apostle Paul could not save him from the detraction and dislike of the many would-be rivals who, in the presence of his illustrious labours and glorious successes, felt themselves sinking into merited insignificance. But none of these things moved him, because it was not his aim to please men, but to please God, which trieth the heart. Therefore it was that he accounted it a light thing to be judged of men, or of man's judgment. And only those who walk by the same rule, and live and labour for the same exalted end, can be enabled, like him, to rise above the troubled atmosphere of an envious world, and to have this for their rejoicing, even the testimony of their conscience that, in simplicity and godly sincerity, not by fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, they have their conversation in the world.

The reflection which Solomon had thus made on the unworthy treatment so often received by the man who has been devoting himself to right works, to useful and honourable labours, he follows up with a statement which, at first sight, appears somewhat obscure—"The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh. Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit." This is only one of many examples in which the rapid transitions, and the sententious brevity, characteristic of this book, create no inconsiderable difficulty in rightly expounding it. The meaning to be put on these two verses must be somewhat affected by the question—Do they belong to what goes before, or to what comes after them? does their connection lie with the preceding or with the succeed-

ing context? If they are to be regarded as a sequel to the statement contained in the 4th verse, they ought, apparently, to be interpreted thus: The fool, when he sees what has now been described,—when he observes how the laborious and self-denying man, who tasks himself so severely for the purpose of doing good to others, is, after all, so ill requited,—the fool, when he sees this, thinks himself entitled to conclude that the true wisdom is to take his ease, and not to burden himself with great efforts for any purpose whatever. Accordingly he folds his arms, and gives himself up to a life of indolent self-indulgence, heedless of the fact that by so doing he is eating his own flesh, preying upon his own comfort, wasting the means of his own support, and bringing himself thereby to inevitable want and ruin. To give a colour of wisdom to this folly, and to encourage himself in cleaving to it, he has recourse to the very excellent sentiment that “better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.” The maxim is just and true, no doubt, as expressing the contentment which a wise and good man feels in contrasting his little store with the riches and grandeur of the great. His “handful,” earned by honest industry, enjoyed with quietness in his own humble sphere, and sweetened by a sense of the favour and blessing of God, is a far better portion than “both the hands full,” surrounded with all the anxieties, and cares, and distractions which wealth and worldly rank usually carry in their train. This, or something like this, is the construction that must be put on these two verses, if we read them in connection with the statement by which they are immediately preceded. So understood, they convey an important lesson. They remind us that neither the travail—that is, the care and labour—which a life devoted to right works may involve, nor the ingratitude such a life may meet with at the hands of envious and ungenerous minds, should be allowed to deter us from adopting it and steadfastly pursuing it. They teach us that sloth and self-indulgence is like eating one’s own flesh—a process of self-destruction—a career which can lead to nothing

but misery and destitution ; and that, however noble a spirit of genuine contentment may be, there is no merit in being contented with a poverty that is self-imposed—that is the fruit of idleness and improvidence. “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim. vi. 6). “Better is little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure, and trouble therewith” (Prov. xv. 16). It is not the limited provision that is itself the good thing ; but it is the cheerful and child-like spirit that accepts it, such as it is, from the hand of God with thankfulness, and therefore receives His blessing with it. But this neither is, nor can be, the spirit of the fool who shrinks from self-sacrificing labour—who prefers his own ease to a life of useful and honourable toil, and upon whom want is sure to come in the long-run, “like an armed man.” He may pretend to moralize upon the superiority of a “handful with quietness,” to “both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit ;” but the result of his mean and discreditable choice will usually be, to have both the hands empty, and an abundant portion of travail and vexation of spirit besides.

If, on the other hand, these verses are to be read in connection with what immediately follows—if they are to be taken as introductory to the truly graphic picture of the miser which the 7th and 8th verses hold up to our view—it will be necessary to modify somewhat the exposition of them which has been already made. In this case, instead of putting the words of the 6th verse into the mouth of the fool, and treating them as the plausible pretence, by the help of which he seeks to excuse his own selfish indolence, they ought rather to be regarded as the words of Solomon himself, and as giving expression to the sentiment of true wisdom as contrasted with the self-destructive folly of the sluggard on the one hand, and with the self-tormenting folly of the slave of avarice, of whom he is now about to speak, on the other.

Upon the whole, however, the view previously stated, which assumes the connection of the 5th and 6th verses with what went before, seems the more natural and satisfactory, and best

accords with the tenor of the 7th verse, which is so expressed as to suggest the idea that Solomon is here entering on a new subject, distinct from anything in the preceding context. "Then I returned," he goes on to say, "and I saw vanity under the sun." Having disposed of that example of the vanity of this world, which he found in the envy that assails a life of useful and honourable labour, he now turns to another and still stranger instance of vanity—to that, namely, of the man who toils himself to death in amassing riches for no end at all—riches which he has no offspring to inherit, and which, nevertheless, he has not the heart himself to use. "There is one alone," he says, describing this unhappy and sordid being, "and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail." Such a passage as this occurring in a book that was written nearly three thousand years ago, is a striking confirmation of the identity of human nature. How true to the very letter is this pointed description, as applicable to multitudes at the present day! In every community, and in every grade of life, from the sweeper of a street-crossing to the ruler of a kingdom, specimens of this sort of vanity may always be found. Men have been known to spend their lives as wandering beggars, clothed in rags, and with scarcely a roof to shelter them, and yet leaving at their death an amount of treasure that would have sufficed not only for all their own wants, but that would have enabled them extensively to relieve the wants of others. And so, in different and far higher social spheres, there have been, and there now are, many who toil on to their dying day, accumulating and hoarding up piles of wealth which they have not the heart either to enjoy or to give away; and this all the while that there is perhaps no human being in whom they feel any special interest, or whom they have any pleasure in thinking of, as their successor and heir. Of all the forms of worldliness, this surely is the most

singular—that men should thus voluntarily starve themselves in the midst of abundance, and wear themselves out with labours which yield them nothing but an ever-increasing load of anxiety and care. Of how many sources of happiness are they robbing themselves by giving way to this penurious and selfish spirit! How unlike is their position to that of the open-hearted and open-handed patriarch who could speak of the manner in which he had used his prosperity thus: “When the ear heard me, then it blessed me; and when the eye saw me, it gave witness to me: because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him. The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me: and I caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy” (Job xxix. 11–13). Truly it is more blessed to give than to receive. Apart altogether from the account every man has to give, of the use made of his worldly means, at the coming of the Lord—apart from the explicit assurance that not even a cup of cold water given in the spirit of the gospel shall then lose its reward—there is in the very act of doing good—in alleviating human suffering, and lighting up the gloom of human sorrow—in bringing help, temporal or spiritual, to them that were ready to perish;—there is, in the very doing of such deeds of benevolence, a luxury of joy, which the poor narrow-souled miser, with all his heaps of gold, can never know. He seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him. The more he has, the less he is disposed to give. For such is the tendency of this consuming thirst of gold, the more it is indulged the more insatiable it becomes. And what a pitiable sight the old miser is! Loving none, he is by none beloved. Every day he lives is grudged by the hungry expectants of his treasure; and if they hasten to gather around his dying bed, it is not to smooth his uneasy couch, or to whisper words of consolation in his ear, but to be ready, like the gathering eagles, for the prey. Surely of such a life it may be emphatically said—“This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.”

Perhaps, however, it may not be out of place, in connection with this subject, to observe, that there are multitudes who will readily enough condemn the conduct of the miser, while yet their own way of life, though entirely different, is really no better than his. Mere sordid avarice is not the prevailing vice of the present day. It is not saving but spending—it is not penuriousness but prodigality, which is the characteristic of our times. Men are, indeed, hasting, with unprecedented eagerness, to be rich; but it is not, in general, so much with a view to amass and hoard up a fortune, as to indulge in luxurious living, and to surround themselves with everything that is fitted to gratify the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. At no previous period, perhaps, was the love of display and of carnal self-indulgence so prevalent or so conspicuous. Frugality seems everywhere to be giving way to a wasteful extravagance in dress, in the style of entertainments, and of pleasure-seeking in every form.

Who can doubt that this state of things is pregnant with evil? Is there not cause to fear, that by the shifts to which it tempts many to betake themselves, it is breaking down that commercial honour by which our country was wont to be distinguished, and begetting a laxity of principle in regard to pecuniary transactions, the painful results of which are becoming so common as almost to have ceased to startle the public mind. Every day is bringing to light frauds so flagrant, and breaches of trust so shameful, as are fitted to shake all confidence between man and man. If these distressing occurrences be traced to their source, they will be found, to a large extent, to originate in that passion for show and self-gratification which is one of the most noticeable, and, to a thoughtful mind, one of the most ominous signs of the times. Verily it would seem as if we were falling on those perilous times when “men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, . . . traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God” (2 Tim. iii. 1-3). It is surely high time that both the

pulpit and the press were lifting up a voice against this great and growing evil—an evil which, in proportion as it spreads, must sap the very foundations of spiritual life, and dissolve the very bonds which keep human society together.

The spirit now described is the very opposite of that which the religion of Christ dictates and inspires. “If any man will come after me,” said the Lord Jesus, “let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. xvi. 24). The Christian life—if it is to be really maintained and followed—demands the constant exercise of that noble self-restraint to which Paul made reference when he said—“Every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things” (1 Cor. ix. 25); “I keep my body under and bring it into subjection” (v. 27). Christianity, if it can live at all, most certainly cannot thrive in the relaxing atmosphere of habitual self-indulgence. It is a plant which needs, for its vigorous growth and full development, the bracing air of many an active effort, and the pruning-knife of many a sharp and cutting trial. “For 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, and godly in the present world; looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Titus ii. 12–14). Let all, therefore, and especially let the young, be upon their guard against that seductive, pleasure-loving spirit which is now so widely abroad, and whose fatal results are so painfully manifest in the increasing amount of profligacy and crime. “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever” (1 John ii. 15–17).

CHAPTER VIII.

DEEP THOUGHTS AND WISE COUNSELS.

“Two *are* better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him *that is* alone when he falleth; for *he hath* not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm *alone*? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

“Better *is* a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished. For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also *he that is* born in his kingdom becometh poor. I considered all the living which walk under the sun, with the second child that shall stand up in his stead. *There is* no end of all the people, *even* of all that have been before them: they also that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.”—ECCLES. IV. 9-16.

“Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter *any* thing before God: for God *is* in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few. For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice *is known* by multitude of words. When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for *he hath* no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better *is it* that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it *was* an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands? For in the multitude of dreams and many words *there are* also *divers* vanities: but fear thou God.

“If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for *he that is* higher than the highest regardeth; and *there be* higher than they. Moreover the profit of the earth is for all: the king *himself* is served by the field.

“He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this *is* also vanity. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good *is there* to the owners thereof, saving the beholding *of them* with their eyes? The sleep of a labouring man *is* sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.”—ECCLES. V. 1-12.

FROM the sordid and solitary miser, so vividly sketched in the immediately preceding context, Solomon is led to contemplate the happier condition of those who live and labour in close alliance and cordial fellowship with one another. The

miser passes his days in a state of friendless isolation. It is the penalty of his exclusive selfishness ; for the measure which a man metes out to his neighbours, is usually meted back to himself. If he cares for no one, it will generally be found that no one cares for him; and there is both justice and goodness in the constitution of things which causes this result to arise. If any one will so forget and disregard the claims of that common humanity to which he belongs, as to have sympathy for no wants but his own, it is well for him to be compelled to feel that his heartless indifference is bringing its punishment along with it, and that what he soweth he must expect to reap. The coldness he meets with when he is himself overtaken by adversity, may thus serve to correct his sin, and to teach him that he must love, if he would himself be loved. The affectionate response, on the other hand, which disinterested kindness seldom fails to call forth, furnishes a continual incentive to exercise that kindness, and thereby binds, by a thousand links, the human family together. The union and co-operation to which we are thus impelled, by a great law of our being, are indispensable to the welfare of mankind. It is not good for man to be alone. In giving him, at the first, an help meet for him, his Divine Creator proclaimed the fact, that he was meant for society. His physical comfort, and the development of his moral and intellectual nature, alike imperatively require close and constant intercourse with fellowmen. We are so formed as to be mutually and continually dependent on one another. Nothing, therefore, can be more natural and appropriate than the transition, by which the inspired writer of this book passes, from reviewing the dreary loneliness of the self-seeking miser, to the consideration of the many important benefits which flow from the relationships of social life.

The general proposition which he has it in view to establish and illustrate, he announces in these words—"That two are better than one."

This truth, indeed, may appear so obvious as to stand in no

need of argument. It does not follow, however, that we have sufficiently considered it. Selfishness is a principle so deeply seated in our corrupt nature, that we cannot too often, or too urgently, be put upon our guard against it. There are obviously two ways in which this may be done. The one is by exposing the sinfulness and folly of the thing itself; and this Solomon has already done, by holding up a very signal specimen of selfishness before us, and bidding us mark its odious character, and its miserable fruits. The other way is by commending its opposite; by presenting, in contrast with it, that more genial and brotherly spirit that makes us cling to our fellowmen, and prompts us to do unto others as we would that they should do unto us. It is this second way of dissuading us from selfishness which is followed in the passage at present before us. Selfishness tends to separation. It dislocates society; it shuts a man out, to a large extent, from the sympathy and the kindly services of those around him. He withholds those services and that sympathy from them, and as the inevitable consequence, they are commonly withheld from him. His greedy and shortsighted eagerness to do all, and have all, for himself, ordinarily, if not necessarily, leads to his being left to fight the great battle of life unfriended and alone. If he fall, there is none to lift him up. If the chill of some sore calamity seizes him, there is no warm friend at hand to cheer and revive him. If an enemy assail him, there is no arm raised in his defence. But how different, in all these respects, is the experience of the man who heartily acknowledges the claims of his fellow-creatures, who strives, through grace, to love his neighbour as himself, and who thus gathers around him the kindly feelings of all who know him. He finds how emphatically true it is that "two are better than one." His fellow-feeling brings its own reward. It assures him of help in every time of need. "Good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give" into his bosom.

But while this appears to be the leading idea that is meant to be

conveyed by the statements contained in the verses, from the 9th to the 12th inclusive, now under review, it may be proper to examine these statements somewhat more in detail. It is not to the benefits, in a general sense, of an unselfish, kindly, sympathizing spirit, that alone a reference is here intended; but also, and more specifically, to the benefits of that communion and co-operation which grow out of the various relationships of social life. Of all these, the relationships of the domestic circle are the type and source. The family is the germ and model of society. Of the two whom God hath joined in that primary and fundamental alliance, it is pre-eminently true, that they are better than one. They are the support and the solace of each other amid all the duties and difficulties, perplexities and trials, of their earthly career. In so far as the mutual obligations of their union are faithfully observed, they have a good reward for their labour. They never know what it is to suffer without sympathy, or to sorrow without consolation. And by their combined efforts—the one in providing the means of subsistence, the other in household cares—they secure, under the divine blessing, between them, the many inestimable comforts of a peaceful and prosperous home. Their children are like olive plants around their table, and in their God-fearing and well-ordered dwelling there is heard, morning and evening, the “melody of joy and health.” What could present a more beautiful or impressive contrast to the cold isolation of selfishness, or more conclusively demonstrate that two are better than one?

It is not, however, in domestic life alone that this superiority of union and combination is exhibited. When our Lord commissioned the seventy disciples to go out on their great errand to the towns and villages of Judea, he sent them forth two and two. It is true, indeed, that two cannot walk together except they be agreed. When Paul and Barnabas fell into discord they separated one from another; and while that discord lasted could no longer carry on conjointly their evangelistic work. It is not union, therefore, of any kind, and on any terms, that Solomon

means to celebrate; but union as the symbol and fruit of mutual sympathy and love. And yet, so indispensable is union to the successful prosecution of almost every undertaking in which man is called to engage, that when Paul and Barnabas could no longer continue together, each of them selected a new associate. "Barnabas took Mark and sailed into Cyprus; and Paul chose Silas, . . . and he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches" (Acts xv. 39-41). It is this felt dependence on one another—this instinctive longing for the countenance, encouragement, and aid of fellowmen—that has given birth to civil society itself, and to all those social and political institutions that have grown out of it. All organization and government, whether in the state or in the church, are simply the following out of Solomon's fundamental principle, that "two are better than one." We are so used to the many inestimable advantages which result to us, as a nation and people, from the working of that principle, that we are not always or adequately alive to their value. If society were dissolved, and every man were left to do that which seemed right in his own eyes, as in the days when there was no king in Israel, the terror, and misery, and helplessness of such a state of things would soon teach even the dullest to understand that two are better than one. What were the security for either property or life if no one could count on the assistance of his neighbour, to shield him from the cupidity and the violence of depraved humanity. It is union that gives to a kingdom safety and strength. It is union that gives to a church its moral force—that makes it powerful as the adversary of error and evil, and steadfast as the pillar and ground of the truth. How wise, then, and good is that constitution of our nature which not only inclines, but compels us to lean on one another for mutual support. It imposes a constant check and restraint on human selfishness, at the same time that it serves continually, and in a thousand ways, to cultivate and call forth all those kindlier and more amiable affections on which our earthly comfort and happiness so largely depend. Let it not, however, be for a moment for-

gotten that union and co-operation, whether in private or public life, are by no means synonymous with the renunciation of selfishness. Alas! how often are the closest confederacies formed both in the social and political world, for the very purpose of carrying into effect schemes of the grossest and most iniquitous selfishness. Herod and Pontius Pilate strike hands—the Gentiles and the people of Israel forget their enmities and form a league—to indulge their common enmity to the holy Son of God. Our mutual dependence, and the many intimate and endearing relationships to which it has given rise, do something to mitigate the inborn selfishness of our nature; but divine grace alone can subdue it. Charity—the love which the gospel of Christ, through the working of his Spirit, inspires—“is the bond of perfectness.” Where this bond is firmly established, *there* will all those happy consequences of which Solomon speaks, as resulting from the fellowships of human society, be abundantly realized. It is when the union is that of Christian hearts for Christian ends, that the sympathy is complete and the fruit truly blessed.

Allusion has been already made, in the course of these observations, to that great law of God's moral government according to which “what a man soweth that shall he also reap.” It is a part of this righteous law that the selfish man should forfeit the sympathy of his fellows. But as, in this present probationary state of being, God deals with men, not according to their desert, but according to His own abundant mercy, showing kindness to the unthankful and the evil; even so, if we would be the children of our heavenly Father, we too must walk by the same rule. “If ye love them which love you,” said the Lord Jesus, “what thank have ye, for sinners also love those that love them? And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye, for sinners also do even the same?” (Luke vi. 32, 33.) It is the duty and the privilege of the Christian to stand on a higher platform than that of rigid justice and naked right. God's grand and gracious aim in the gospel is to over-

come evil with good, and this must be our aim too. To the child of God it belongs to cherish the spirit, and to imitate the example, of Him who loved us and gave himself for us—not rendering evil for evil, but contrariwise, overcoming evil with good. It is according to this method that God has won every converted sinner back to himself. We love God because He first loved us. His love, gloriously manifested in the person and work of Christ, is the prime motive—the grand constraining principle which the gospel employs, to subdue the enmity and to soften the impenitence of our hard and stony hearts—to dislodge the fears and to engage the confidence of our unbelieving minds. As God has thus dealt with us, so should we deal with one another; for thus is it written—“Love ye your enemies, and do good and lend, hoping for nothing again, and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest” (Luke vi. 35). It is by thus heaping coals of fire upon the frozen heart of selfishness that we may hope, under the divine blessing, to dissolve it into sympathy and love. And just in proportion as we carry this forbearing, forgiving, fraternal spirit with us into all the relationships, whether of domestic or social life, may we expect them to be fruitful of good to those with whom we are associated, and full of blessing to ourselves. Then, if we fall, we shall never want one to lift us up, and never experience the woe that belongs to him who is alone when he falleth; in our season of affliction we shall never know the cold and cheerless desolation of unpitied sorrow; and in our conflicts with those who may desire to injure us, we shall not be left to vindicate our cause and character unfriended and alone. The family, the community, the church, the nation that is thus united by the bonds of reciprocal Christian love, will prove to be the “three-fold cord that cannot be broken.”

It is not easy to discern the link of connection between the subject of the verses we have now been considering and that of those which immediately follow. Some commentators imagine that they have found this link in the fact, that questions bearing

upon the advantages of civil society might not unnaturally suggest a thought as to the position of many of those who are the chiefs of civil society—of those, that is, who are at the head of nations as their kings or rulers. It is not necessary, however, to embarrass ourselves with any such wire-drawn theories. Solomon's great object in this book is to establish and illustrate that great truth, which is the key-note of the whole, that "all is vanity"—that this world cannot furnish a satisfying portion for man. For this end he looks around him on the wide field of human life, and brings from every part of it fresh proofs in support of his argument. These separate proofs may or may not be connected with one another. It is enough that they are all connected with his theme, and all tend to confirm his conclusion. We are not called upon, therefore, to show, as he brings them successively before us, that they form a connected series—that the one suggests the other. The fact is, that very frequently no such connection exists, and this appears to be the case in the instance at present before us. He had exhibited, in the foregoing context, one striking example of the vanity of this world, in the person of the slave of avarice—a selfish, solitary being toiling and tormenting himself to death in order to heap up riches, which all the while he has not the heart either to enjoy or to give away; and in doing so Solomon had taken occasion to describe, in contrast to so unprofitable and miserable a course, the advantage and the happiness of living with and for others. Leaving that case, and the wise and seasonable commentary with which he had followed it up, he now proceeds to adduce additional evidence of the vanity of this world, derived from a new and totally different source. "Better," he goes on to say, "is a poor and a wise child, than an old and a foolish king that will not be admonished. For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor."

The old and foolish king who will not be admonished, is obviously here the example of vanity. He prides himself in his high place and power. He is above taking advice. His will

must be law. His exactions are impoverishing his people. His arbitrary conduct is exasperating their feelings. His indifference to their comfort and welfare is breaking down their loyalty and filling them with disaffection. His counsellors, seeing plainly to what issue things are tending, remonstrate with him, and labour to induce him to adopt a more conciliatory tone and a more enlightened policy. But he will take no admonition. As in the case of Solomon's own son and successor, the murmurs of the people are met only with measures harsher and more oppressive still; and thus a point is at length reached when the popular discontent can no longer be restrained. It breaks out into open insurrection; and the imperious ruler, who would not be contented with being king unless he were allowed to trample his subjects beneath his feet, is driven from his throne; and though born in the kingdom, born a prince, born as the heir of royalty, he is in his old age reduced to poverty and shame.

Such a spectacle was no doubt to be seen in the days of Solomon; and there have been not a few examples of it in more modern times. It was that very wilfulness of which he speaks—that headstrong and haughty contempt for whatever might stand in the way of their own ambition or pleasure—that, in our own country, cost the Stuarts their crown, and reduced them to that abject and pitiable condition in which they finally died out and disappeared. At this very moment there are reigning monarchs who seem as if they were bent on furnishing fresh examples of the same catastrophe; reminding us how true is that saying of Solomon, that “the thing which hath been is that which shall be, and that there is no new thing under the sun!”

Better far surely than so foolish a king, whether young or old, is “a poor and wise child,” or youth, as the word, according to Hebrew usage, may signify. His wisdom is a nobler inheritance than mere rank or power. “Wisdom,” says Solomon elsewhere, “is the principal thing: therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. Exalt her, and she

shall promote thee; she shall bring thee to honour, when thou dost embrace her" (Prov. iv. 7, 8). Out of prison, like Joseph in Egypt, the poor but wise youth may yet come to reign. He will then adorn the exalted station which the old and foolish king disgraced; and instead of a curse will prove a blessing.

The lesson which Solomon here evidently designs to teach is the vanity of worldly greatness. It is a fatal snare to the pride of the human heart. It has a powerful tendency to nurse in its possessor that self-will and self-indulgence, that impatience of contradiction, that scornful contempt of the opinions or wishes of those who are beneath him, which are so ruinous to his own moral and spiritual welfare, and which may, in the end, bring him to ruin. When such an event occurs—when pride has had its fall, and the dethroned and discrowned monarch becomes a helpless mendicant—the hanger-on at some foreign court, or the despised pensioner of the very people who have driven him into exile—what a poor object he is! What a satire upon the pomp and power of royalty! What a telling commentary on that ambition which tempts so many madly to accept Satan's offer—"All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me!" (Matt. iv. 9.) How infinitely superior to all such earthly greatness is that moral dignity which wisdom confers even on the humblest of men! The poor and wise youth—the possessor of a cultivated and spiritual mind—a mind enlightened by varied knowledge, and sanctified by heavenly grace—has a kingdom within his own breast; for the kingdom of God is within him—a kingdom of whose noble treasures it is not in the power of any temporal calamity to deprive him. Even in this world he seldom fails, in some way or other, to come to usefulness and honour. But whatever his lot in this life may be, sure it is that out of prison he shall come to reign at the appearing and kingdom of Jesus Christ. For ever emancipated from the bondage of corruption, he shall then be introduced into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. "To him that overcometh," saith the Lord Jesus, "will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even

as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Rev. iii. 21, 22).

Still further to expose the vanity of worldly greatness, Solomon gives this additional illustration of it, in the closing verses of the chapter: "I considered all the living which walk under the sun, with the second child that shall stand up in his stead. There is no end of all the people, even of all that have been before them; they also that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and vexation of spirit." The second child that shall stand up in his stead, is evidently the heir apparent, the successor of the reigning king. This plainly appears from the 8th verse, where, speaking of the loneliness of the miser, the language employed was this—"There is one alone and there is not a *second*; he hath neither child nor brother." The king is not alone; there is a second in his case—a child who is destined to stand up in his stead—to come to his father's throne. And when Solomon considered all the living which walk under the sun—the great mass and body of the people—he saw that already they were with the future, rather than with the existing sovereign. The services of their aged king were forgotten. The generation that had witnessed these services and had experienced their worth, were now growing old, like the king himself; and many of them had already passed away. Meanwhile a new race has come upon the scene—a race whose sympathies are all with the gay young prince, who is erelong to occupy the throne. Nor was this fickleness a new thing. "For," continues Solomon, "there is no end of all the people, even of all that have been before them." The exact import of these words it is not easy—perhaps not possible—with positive certainty to ascertain. By many able and learned commentators it is held to mean that there is no end to this inconstancy, this changeful humour of all the people. Others, again, have concluded that the expression, "there is no end of all the people that have been before them," is equivalent to—"there is no end, no limit to the

multitude, of all the people that have been before, or in the presence of them'—that is, of such kings as Solomon is now speaking of. The next clause of the verse, however, certainly reads best with the former of these interpretations: "They also that come after shall not rejoice in him;" they shall be as fickle, that is, as their predecessors. They, too, will forget, in his turn, their new king, after whom they are now running so eagerly; perhaps when he has worn out his days in watching over the interests and welfare of the realm; and even before his career is ended, they will be found worshipping the rising, and neglecting the setting sun. This seems, beyond all question, to be the fact concerning which Solomon testifies that, "surely this is vanity and vexation of spirit." Vanity and vexation of spirit it surely is, for a king to find the tide of public favour thus flowing past him; leaving him in his old age like a stranded wreck, useless and neglected, upon the shore; and bearing gaily upon its bosom the gilded bark of his youthful successor, who has already, by artful dealings, stolen away the hearts of the people from him. Think of good old king David when the messenger came unto him in haste, saying, "The hearts of the men of Israel are after Absalom;" and when "David said unto all his servants that were with him in Jerusalem, Arise and let us flee, for we shall not else escape from Absalom; make speed to depart, lest he overtake us suddenly, and bring evil upon us, and smite the city with the edge of the sword" (2 Sam. xv. 13, 14). Look at the venerable monarch thus driven from his city and his throne, as he wends his way up the steep ascent of Olivet, his head covered, his feet bare, his face bedewed with tears. Remember that this is he, to celebrate whose youthful prowess as the champion of Israel, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of music, and the chorus of whose song was this—"Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands!" Remember that this is he who had led out and brought in Israel for forty years—who had, times without num-

ber, hazarded his life in defence of his country—and who, both by his public deeds and his private virtues, had earned the strongest claims to their veneration and love. That on such a king they should now have turned their backs, in order to set up in his stead his profligate and unnatural son—what could more impressively illustrate the vanity of this world! How poor a thing is human applause, which thus veers about like the shifting wind, and blows to-morrow from a point the very opposite to that from which it blew to-day.

Or again, to take an instance that more immediately concerned Solomon himself. David had expressly appointed Solomon to stand up in his stead, and to be his successor in the kingdom; and yet so ready were time-serving courtiers, and selfish warriors, and the fickle crowd, to follow any pretender, who would flatter their ambition or pander to their base desires, that they entered eagerly into the conspiracy of Adonijah, and went down to En-rogel to eat and drink before him, and to cry, “God save the king!” Solomon knew that it was only by a prompt and vigorous effort that the power of this conspiracy had been broken, and his own right to the throne of Israel secured. He had seen enough, therefore, to show him how unstable is the foundation on which earthly greatness rests, and what a vanity, after all, is a sceptre or a crown. Human nature is still the same: what happened in his day continues to happen in ours. And if it be thus undeniably true that even royalty itself, the very highest place on earth to which human ambition can ever hope to rise, is but a “vain show,” what folly is it to make a god of this world! Those who have most of it are often unhappier by far than the beggar without a home. “Verily, every man in his best estate is altogether vanity” (Psalm xxxix. 5). “What man is he that desireth life, and loveth many days, that he may see good? Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile. Depart from evil and do good: seek peace, and pursue it. The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry. . . Many are the afflic-

tions of the righteous, but the Lord delivereth him out of them all" (Psalm xxxiv. 12-15, 19).

If, however, there be much that is humbling in those views which are here set before us of the vanity of earthly greatness, there is much that is consolatory too. They remind us that to be happy it is not necessary to be great—it is necessary only to be good. Greatness, in any sense of the word, can be within the reach of but a few. Goodness is within the reach of all; for God's grace, which is the source of all goodness, is offered without money and without price to every one who will accept the inestimable gift. "Wisdom crieth aloud: she uttereth her voice in the streets: she crieth in the chief place of concourse; in the openings of the gates; in the city she uttereth her words, saying, How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity, and the scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn ye at my reproof. Behold, I will pour out my spirit upon you; I will make known my words unto you" (Prov. i. 20-23). "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not? Harken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear and come unto me; hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David" (Isaiah liii. 2, 3).

Solomon has been expatiating hitherto on the vanity of worldly possessions and worldly pleasures. He has been showing, by a great variety of examples, that in these things there is no satisfying portion for man. Nor is he yet done with the subject. He has still much more to say regarding it. It is the great theme of this book. Fully to set it forth, and faithfully to apply the solemn and momentous lessons which it teaches, is the very work which the Spirit of God has here given him to perform. It might seem, indeed, at first view, as if, in the verses at which we have now arrived (v. 1-7), he were departing from his previous aim, and were addressing himself to a question of a somewhat dif-

ferent kind. It is not the secularities of the world, but the services of religion, with which this passage is occupied. When we come, however, a little more closely to examine it, we soon perceive it to be in perfect harmony with the main scope and current of this inspired discourse. For the man of the world—the carnal, unrenewed, unspiritual man—all is vanity. That is Solomon's text. It is to this point he has been speaking all along, nor is he leaving it now. On the contrary, he is illustrating it by a case more impressive perhaps than any other he has adduced. He is virtually telling us that even the most sacred things are nothing better than vanities when they are handled in an unbecoming spirit. It is not to be hastily assumed, he would have us to know, that we are secure of happiness if only we attend on the exercises of devotion. These will be as empty and unprofitable, in so far as our true welfare is concerned, as the most worthless of worldly pursuits, unless they are gone about in faith, and in the fear of God. You who have long been accustomed to observe the ordinances of religion, and who, from the very fact of doing so, may be disposed, hastily and self-complacently, to assume that you have chosen the good part which shall not be taken away from you,—pause a little and consider. Is there, after all, any real difference between some of you and those worldly men of whom Solomon has been speaking? Apparently you are occupied with better things than they are. But how occupied with these better things? Is your piety sincere? Are your acts of religious worship anything more than a form? Is your life in keeping with your creed? If not, then over your religion too, as over everything else to which you can betake yourselves, must be inscribed the sadly significant sentence of Solomon—"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity."

If, then, we would guard against the too common and most fatal error, of making a vanity even of religion itself, let us take heed to those greatly needed and truly wise counsels upon this point which are now under review. They are three in number

—the *first*, referring to the spirit, or frame of mind in which it becomes us to approach the services of the sanctuary; the *second*, to the tone and character of our devotions; and the *third*, to the imperative necessity of following up our Christian profession with a consistent and corresponding practice.

I. “Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil.” To keep our foot is, in other words, to remember where we are going. When the angel of the Lord appeared unto Moses at Horeb, in a flame of fire out of the midst of the burning bush, his first impulse was to turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush was not burned. But Moses had not realized the awful majesty of that presence in which he was about to appear. Curiosity, rather than holy reverence, was the feeling that was uppermost in his mind. To arrest, accordingly, a movement so unsuitable, and to arouse him to a juster sense of the solemnity of his position, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said—“Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Exod. iii. 3-5). There is, not improbably, a reference to that memorable incident in the language before us. How many might be accosted every Sabbath, at the threshold of the sanctuary, in similar terms! When men and women are coming carelessly along to the house of God—thinking a little, it may be, of the preacher they are about to hear, but having no thought of the Great Master in whose name he is to speak; or thinking, perchance, about nothing at all beyond the news of the day, or their own worldly affairs—were the voice of the Lord to come forth from the sanctuary, as it did of old out of the midst of the burning bush in the wilderness of Horeb, would not its utterance to them be still the same—“Draw not nigh hither!” They are not keeping their foot. They are not advancing with the seriousness and the earnestness of those who believe and feel that they are going up to the place of the taber-

nacles of the Most High—that they are on the way to meet with God. When the patriarch Jacob awoke out of his sleep at Bethel, the place was outwardly the same solitude in which he had laid him down, with a stone for his pillow, the night before; and yet, how different was the feeling with which he now regarded it. “Surely the Lord,” said he, “is in this place, and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen. xxviii. 16, 17). What had produced the change? Nothing whatever but a sense, suddenly stirred up within him, of his nearness to God. And is not the Christian sanctuary,—the place “where prayer is wont to be made”—the place where the praises of God are sung and His word is taught—truly a Bethel! To assure us of this fact, is it not written—“In all places where I record my name, I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee?” (Exod. xx. 29). Has not the Lord Jesus expressly said—“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them?” (Matt. xviii. 20). If there be any truth or meaning in these great and precious promises, it is no light matter to go to the house of God. It is to approach that high and lofty One, who inhabiteth eternity, and whose name is Holy. True, indeed, He is everywhere. We need not, at any time, to move one single step in order to find ourselves near to God. He compasseth our path and our lying down. Whither shall we go from His Spirit? or whither shall we flee from His presence? There is no spot in all the boundless universe of which it does not belong to us to say with the Psalmist—Behold He is there! But this alters not the fact that His house is a special meeting-place with his people; a place where He manifests himself unto them through the ordinances of His grace, where He shows them His glory in the gospel of His Son, and where, by His Holy Spirit, he comforts and refreshes their souls with the blessings of His great salvation. What, then, can be more befitting than to keep our foot—to bethink ourselves of what we are doing—

when we are on the way to such an interview, and are preparing to engage in such services as these! Oh! how needful is it that we should be composing our minds, and seeking the preparation of the heart, and the answer of the tongue, which equally come from God. It is only by following this course that we shall act up to the exhortation of Solomon, and thus “be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools.”

To be ready to hear, is to be animated by a humble, devout, and teachable spirit. The giddy-minded, whose thoughts are wandering on the mountains of vanity, are not ready to hear. The cold and callous, whose hearts are like the beaten highway, are not ready to hear. The carnal and earthly, whose desires are going after their fleshly idols, are not ready to hear. The wise of this world, who all but disdain the foolishness of preaching, are not ready to hear. The proud and self-righteous, who are full of their own merits and who cannot bear to be told of their sins, are not ready to hear. These all are far more ready to give the sacrifice of fools. “They come,” said Ezekiel, describing a certain class in his day—“they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as thy people sit, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them; for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness” (xxxiii. 31). These were giving the sacrifice of fools. “This people,” said Isaiah, of others in his time, “draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me; and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men” (xxix. 13). These also were giving the sacrifice of fools. “The Pharisee,” said our Lord, vividly portraying those self-satisfied worshippers who have been numerous in every age—“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” (Luke xviii. 11, 12). He, too, was offering the sacrifice of fools. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a con-

trite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Psalm li. 17). "To this man will I look, saith the Lord, even to him that is poor, and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at my word" (Isaiah lxvi. 2). It is such a man as this that may be truly said to keep his foot when he goeth to the house of God, and to be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools. Those who do otherwise, whether they consider it or no, are doing evil; they are affronting instead of honouring God; they are injuring instead of benefiting their own souls.

II. Passing on from the first verse, which points, as we have seen, to the spirit or frame of mind in which it becomes us to approach the services of the sanctuary, let us next turn to the counsel contained in the 2d and 3d verses, which are meant to indicate what ought to be the tone and character of the services in which we there engage. "Be not rash," continues Solomon, "with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few. For a dream cometh through the multitude of business, and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words." The worshipper is here supposed to be no longer merely on the way to the house of God, but to have now come into the courts of the Lord, and to be about to enter on the high and sacred service for which the sanctuary is set apart. The words of the 2d verse may, undoubtedly, with reason be regarded as conveying a very solemn caution to those whose office it is to lead the devotions of others. They cannot too deeply or too earnestly consider how they are to address the Most High. If we feel how becoming and necessary it is studiously to arrange our thoughts, and carefully to order our discourse, when called upon to plead some important cause before our fellowmen, how unspeakably more ought this to be felt when we are taking it upon us to speak unto God. Both the magnitude of those interests with which we have to deal, and the glorious majesty of the Being who has all these interests in His hands, imperatively forbid us to be rash, in such a presence, with our mouth, or to

utter anything hastily before the Great Searcher of hearts. He is in heaven and we are upon earth; there is, that is to say, an infinite distance between us and Him. We are not worthy to appear before Him, or to take His name into our mouths, or to lift up our faces to the place where His honour dwells. No language can more justly or impressively describe the overwhelming sense of solemn awe and deep humiliation which it becomes us to feel in the august and awful presence of Jehovah, than that of the prophet Isaiah—"I saw," says he, recording his own experience, "the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims; each one had six wings, with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another and said—Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (vi. 1-5). Truly he that would speak either with or for this holy Lord God, had need that a live coal from the altar should be laid upon his mouth, and should touch his lips, and take away his iniquity and purge his sin. "This is it that the Lord spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified" (Lev. x. 3).

Whatever there may be, however, of special application in this verse to him who leads the devotions of others, the counsel it contains has a bearing upon every individual worshipper. The grand object of that counsel is to remind us that great fear is due unto the Lord in the meeting of His saints; and that there can be no true worship without some suitable sense of the divine glory. He that cometh unto God must believe that He is. God must be a reality to his mind. And as no man knoweth the Father but the Son, and he to whomsoever the

Son will reveal him, those alone who are taught of God can worship Him who is a Spirit in spirit and in truth. Nothing but divine grace can dispose and enable any son of Adam to hold communion with God.

Even, therefore, as regards the services of the sanctuary, this 2d verse conveys a much-needed exhortation to every one who takes part in them. The essence of the exhortation, as has been already explained, is this—that in approaching the throne of God, and making our requests known unto Him, whether by ourselves or by another, we must realize the sacredness of the work in which we are engaged; we must beware of trifling with God; our whole heart and soul must be in the exercise, and our desire and purpose must be to ask only those things which are agreeable to His will. Moreover, we must not limit Solomon's charge to the public worship of the house of God; the parent must carry it with him to the altar of domestic devotion, and each individual must carry it with him to his closet. There, as in the sanctuary, the same solemn sense must be preserved of the presence and majesty of God. To pour out, either in the one case or in the other, a multitude of unmeaning words, or of words whose meaning is not duly weighed, is to profane the holy exercise of prayer. Solomon illustrates the character of such prayers by likening it to the incoherence of a dream—"A dream cometh through the multitude of business." When the mind has been excited and distracted during the day by a variety of affairs, it is often again beset by them in the hours of sleep; they come crowding in upon it as before, but no longer in any settled or consistent order; they flit before it all out of place, or rush through it in utter confusion. And such a dream is a faithful picture of the discourse of a fool. The multitude of business, as it appears in the derangement and disorder of a dream, is like the multitude of words which proceed from the mouth of a fool—unconnected, inappropriate, unmeaning; they indicate unequivocally the emptiness of his mind, the levity of his feelings, the inconsideration of his thoughts. If such a

style of discourse be unsuitable in any case, it is pre-eminently unsuitable when addressed to Almighty God. If it be a duty, even when speaking to our fellow-creatures, to set a watch upon the door of our lips lest we offend with our tongue, how much more is it a duty when speaking to Him in whom we live, and move, and have our being! Better far, in such an exercise, to utter a single sentence, well considered, than a multitude of words devoid of propriety and of meaning. It is this, evidently, which is chiefly intended to be conveyed when it is said in the 2d verse, "God is in heaven and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few." Few, here, is evidently synonymous with select, well-chosen, well-considered. We must not use "vain repetitions as the heathen do," as if we were to be heard for our much speaking; but after "this manner" must we pray—"Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil: for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen" (Matt. vi. 7-13). Here is our divine model; here is a comprehensive summary of all that we need, and of all which it consists with the divine glory to give. The particulars here embraced we may and ought to vary and amplify, according to the circumstances in which we are placed, and to the measure of the Spirit of grace and supplication we have received. But whether the words we speak be few or many, so long as it is after this manner we pray, we shall utter nothing displeasing to God.

III. The design of the remaining verses belonging to this group is to set before us the imperative necessity of following up our Christian profession with a consistent and corresponding practice. They form, therefore, the natural and appropriate sequel to those we have already considered. "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it: for he hath no pleasure in fools. Pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldst

not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay." The law of Moses was very full and specific on the subject of vows. In the 30th chapter of the book of Numbers, and as introductory to a variety of examples, the great general doctrine of their binding obligation is thus expressed: "If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth" (verse 2). The same doctrine is repeated in the 23d chapter (21-23) of Deuteronomy, and, if possible, in still more explicit terms: "When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it; for the Lord thy God shall surely require it of thee, and it would be sin in thee. But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee. That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep, and perform: even a free-will offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the Lord thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth." The vows here in question were evidently self-imposed. It was a voluntary act to come under their responsibilities; but once undertaken, the engagement was imperative. A vow, indeed, like that of Jephthah, to offer up as a burnt-offering unto the Lord whatsoever, on his return, should first come forth from the doors of his house—or a vow like that of Saul, to put to death any one that should eat food on the day of the great slaughter of the Philistines at Michmash—or a vow like that of Herod, to give to the daughter of Herodias whatever she might ask—could never become morally binding. To make such a vow was to commit one sin, and to keep it must, of necessity, be to commit another. But a vow once made, and being in its own nature practicable and lawful, it must be performed. The mere fact that it might turn out more costly or inconvenient than had at the time been anticipated, could not, in the least, relax the obligation to keep it; and hence, among the Psalmist's characteristics of the man that shall abide in the tabernacle of the Lord, and dwell in His holy hill, this is to be found—"That he sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not" (Psalm xv. 4).

It is obvious to remark, that the obligation here in question attaches, under the limitation already expressed, to all contracts and covenants whatsoever. Though not made under the sanctions of a religious solemnity, or in the form of a direct engagement to God, He has witnessed the promise, and He will require it at our hands if we fail to make it good. Ananias and Sapphira, when they undertook to sell their possessions and to lay the price of them at the apostles' feet, did so, in all probability, without the form of an oath. But in professing to do one thing and practising another, they were publicly dishonouring God, and a sudden and terrible judgment overtook their sin. The cases, indeed, may be rare, in which the penalty of the broken vow is enforced in a manner either so signal or so immediate. But of this let us be assured, that no lawful vow which we have taken upon us, or obligation we have contracted, can be violated with impunity. "The Lord is not slack as some men count slackness" (2 Pet. iii. 9). He is, indeed, long-suffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. He may wait for years, and the broken vow may seem to have been forgotten; but the day of reckoning will come at last, and the covenant-breaker shall receive the due reward of his deeds.

In regard to the vows more immediately contemplated in the passage before us—vows by which men voluntarily pledge themselves by some specific solemnity to give or to do something for God—the very fact that He has been thus expressly called to witness such engagements must needs make the breach of them a more aggravated sin. And yet, is it not true, that many men, many professing Christians, are far more scrupulous about their covenants with men than about their covenants with God? There are men who would be ashamed to be found departing, not merely from a legal contract, but even from an honourable understanding—men who pride themselves in so acting as to show that their word is as good as their bond. But how little account are many of these very men making all the while of this, that times without number, and by the most

solemn acts of religious worship, they have been saying unto Christ—"Lord, Lord!" and yet are at no pains to do the things which He has commanded. They sit down at the table of the Lord and take the cup of salvation, and call upon His name, and say—"O Lord, truly I am thy servant; I am thy servant, and the son of thine handmaid: . . . I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving: . . . I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all His people" (Psalm cxvi. 16-18); and then they go away back to the world and bury themselves as deep as ever in the cares of this life, the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things. If we would guard against this too common and yet most flagrant and God-dishonouring sin, we shall do well to give earnest heed to these words of Solomon, "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it." Beware of putting off the payment of it. Nothing is more perilous in such a case than delay. The pretext for saying, At another time, at a more convenient season, may be very plausible. If I am to break with the world at once, and take up my cross and follow Christ, it will offend old friends—it will expose me to the ridicule of old companions—it will interfere with my worldly interests. I must take a little time. I must consider how I am to get rid of these entanglements. Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go and bury my father; let me first go bid them farewell which are at home at my house! But what is the answer the Lord makes to all these specious-looking pleas for delay? "Let the dead bury their dead." . . . "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke ix. 59, 60). Yes, there is an unspeakable weight and worth in that saying of Solomon—"Defer not to pay thy vow." To do so is to put one's self in the way of disowning it altogether; and God hath no pleasure in fools—no pleasure in those who thus bring dishonour upon His name and cause. Fools they are in the worst and strongest sense of the word; for by breaking their vow, they are trifling with an omniscient and omnipotent Judge.

Since it is so that God is not mocked—that He will not suffer His name to be taken in vain—there is great reason that in the matter of making vows, we should have special regard to the caution of the 2d verse, and not be rash with our mouth, nor let our heart be hasty to utter anything before God. It is in the way of bringing that caution to bear upon the making of vows that Solomon goes on to say—“Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice and destroy the work of thine hands? For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God.” By uttering a rash vow, and binding himself to some lawful, it may be, but still purely voluntary exercise of self-denial, many a man has put a stumbling-block in the way of his own conscience, and brought reproach upon the cause of God, and evil upon his own soul. This seems evidently what is meant by causing his flesh to sin. The very restraint imposed by the vow provokes very often, in the man’s carnal nature, the resistance by which the vow is broken. Hence the danger of attempting to set up stricter or purer rules of living than those which are embodied in the law of God. Where that holy, just, and good law has left man free, it is seldom safe to be bound. It is only too well known to what scandalous enormities the violation of this principle has led in the Church of Rome; how her forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, under pretence of promoting the attainment of angelic virtue, have issued, in the case of countless multitudes, not in raising them above the level of men, but in sinking them below the level of the beasts.

It is not the least of the many evils connected with these gratuitous vows that they lay snares for the conscience. Finding it vexatious to adhere to the vow, the man who has wilfully put himself under it is tempted to invent excuses for setting it aside. He says before the angel—“It was an error.” To the priest, whose duty it was, under the Old Testament economy,

to deal with religious vows, and who seems here to be spoken of under the name of the angel, or messenger of the Lord of hosts, all sorts of pretences were no doubt often alleged for getting rid of the obligations which the vow imposed. But by no such disingenuous devices could the force of the vow be broken. The vow might be rash; God had not required it at the man's hand; but he had freely, and of his own will, placed himself under it; and the dishonest attempt to escape from his pledge could have no other effect than to provoke the divine displeasure. He might deceive the priest, he might even so debauch his conscience as at length to deceive himself by his dexterous evasions; but God cannot be deceived, and lying lips are ever an abomination in His sight.

The consideration of such fatal consequences as resulting from rashly contracted vows, leads Solomon to revert to the comparison he had employed before to illustrate the utterances of the fool. Dreams are vanities, and so also are the fool's many words. Had he been more swift to hear, and more slow to speak, it had been better for him. Beware, therefore, of following in his steps. Cherish a more thoughtful and reverential spirit. "Fear thou God!" Remember that in all vows, and in all duties, it is with Him thou hast to do. Realize His presence, and do all things as in His sight. Let thy heart be right with God, and all shall be well!

At the 8th verse of the 5th chapter, Solomon returns to a subject of which he had spoken once and again before—the subject of the wrongs and cruelties which men are often called, in this fallen world, to suffer at the hands of despotic power. The light, however, in which it is here presented is not the same as that in which it was formerly exhibited; and the lessons which it is here his design to draw from it are different too. In his previous allusions to the oppressions that are done under the sun, our attention was chiefly directed to the victims of the tyranny; and the use made of the subject was simply to illustrate the vanity of this world. In the case with which we

have now to deal, it is rather the tyrants themselves who are held up to our view ; and the purpose meant to be served, is to guard us against a very fatal error into which the sight of their iniquitous proceedings might otherwise tempt us to fall. When we look at the victims—when we behold the tears of them that are oppressed—when we see them groaning under a yoke of bondage from which they have no power to set themselves free, the conclusion is obvious and irresistible—What a vanity must their life be, if they have no portion beyond death and the grave! It is a different and still more painful thought that suggests itself to the mind when we turn to contemplate the unjust judge, or the insolent and remorseless ruler, who is trampling them beneath his feet. Is the existence of such a state of things, we are ready to say, compatible with the idea of a divine government? Horrid doubts and dark suspicions begin to arise as to the character of the Supreme Being, who not only permits these enormities to be perpetrated, but seems also to allow them to go unpunished. In the immediately preceding context Solomon had been warning men to beware of mocking God with a feigned allegiance—of turning their acts of religious worship into an empty form—of saying to Him, Lord, Lord, and failing to do the things which He commands. “Fear thou God,” was the solemn injunction with which he had just wound up his earnest exhortations on that point. But was it possible to cherish this holy and reverential fear in the face of such crimes as God seems to wink at? It was, perhaps, to meet some rising thought like this that Solomon subjoined this 8th verse to those which had gone before it. It takes a stumbling-block out of the way of that piety which he had been seeking to inculcate. It virtually says,—Be not dissuaded from fearing God by any of those perplexities which beset the existing condition of things. “Fret not thyself because of evil-doers: neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity” (Psalm xxxvii. 1). “If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter.” Let not

such a spectacle startle or discourage any child of God; let him remember that this is a fallen world, where evil has, for wise though inscrutable reasons, been permitted for a time to get the upper hand. It will not be always thus. There is a Power, Almighty though unseen, that will yet rectify all these disorders, and render to every man according to his deeds; 'for He that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they.'

Even in this present world the oppressor is often made terribly to exemplify this truth. Take the case of Ahab and Jezebel, conspiring to destroy Naboth, in order to get possession of his vineyard. A mere whim of the king must be gratified, even at the expense of shedding innocent blood. The intended victim has right upon his side, but he has nothing more. On the side of the oppressors there is power, and they have no scruples about putting it in force. Naboth is doomed. Servile agents of the court charge him with blasphemy and treason. False witnesses are suborned to perjure themselves, and to swear away his life; and, guiltless though he be, he is torn from his weeping family, dragged from his peaceful home, condemned as a malefactor, and stoned to death. Power has triumphed; and the infamous Jezebel, exulting in the success of her nefarious scheme, hastens to Ahab with the news, exclaiming, as she enters the royal presence, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give thee for money; for Naboth is not alive, but is dead." Their chariot is called, their guards are summoned, and, in all the pride and pomp of their high place, they go down on the instant "to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it." But scarcely have they seized the prey when the tremendous discovery is made that He who is higher than the highest has taken up Naboth's cause, and that it is with Him they have now to deal. As they enter the vineyard they are confronted by Elijah the Tishbite, who thus addresses Ahab in the name of the Lord—"Hast thou

killed, and also taken possession? . . . Thus saith the Lord, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine. . . . And of Jezebel the Lord also spake, saying, The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel" (1 Kings xxi.)

Or, again, take the case of David in the matter of Uriah. The honour and life of that faithful servant of the king, the king himself most basely and cruelly betrays. First he robs him of his dearest earthly treasure, and then, to get him out of the way, secretly consigns him to certain death. How the heart swells to think of the trusty soldier, all unconscious of the wrong he has sustained, laying himself down to sleep at the door of the king's chamber—denying himself all self-indulgence—refusing even to cross the threshold of his own loved home—till the peril which menaces his king and country shall have been removed. Returning to the battle-field, and gladly accepting the post of danger which is insidiously assigned him, he rushes into the very thickest of the fight, and being there purposely deserted and left to be overpowered by numbers, he falls amid heaps of slain. Again power has triumphed; the deceived and dishonoured husband has been removed, and David's criminal passion may now have its way. But verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth. He that is higher than the highest has had His omniscient eye upon the deed, and, by a terrible stroke of retribution, David is made to condemn himself. No sooner has he sent and fetched Bathsheba to his house, than Nathan the prophet enters and addresses him thus: "There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds: but the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come

unto him; but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him. And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." Oh! the deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of the human heart. He condemns, on the instant, the imaginary crime; and yet, though weeks have passed, he continues utterly blind to his own real and flagrant wickedness. But Nathan said unto David, "Thou art the man. . . . Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in His sight? Thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon." And mark the fearful consequence—as he had sowed, so must he also reap. "Now, therefore," continued the prophet, "the sword shall never depart from thine house. . . . Thus saith the Lord, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour. . . . For thou didst it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun" (2 Sam. xi. xii.) Who that has traced the subsequent career of David; who that remembers the foul incestuous deeds of his own children, and how he was driven for a season by Absalom his son, at the point of the sword, from his city and his throne—how his sins were thus made to find him out, and his iniquities to correct him, by events that brought shame and sorrow upon his gray hairs;—who that remembers these things can fail to feel how truly and how terribly Uriah was avenged! Well, therefore, might Solomon say, "If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment in a province, marvel not at the matter: for He that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they." The mightiest of earthly tyrants are as nothing and vanity in the presence of Omnipotence. They may seem to prosper in their way, and to

be bringing, with impunity, their wicked devices to pass. Babylon may for centuries be drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. But there is a cry ceaselessly issuing from beneath the altar—"O Lord, how long dost thou not avenge our blood,"—and that cry is entering into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth. And at length, when the cup of iniquity is filled, He shall come forth out of His place to execute His work, His strange work. Then shall be fulfilled these awfully significant words—"Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double according to all her works: in the cup which she hath filled, fill to her double. How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her: for she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow. Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine; and she shall be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her" (Rev. xviii. 6-8.) Nor is it merely in the case of princes and great men, and on the theatre of public life, that the Most High asserts His righteous supremacy, and vindicates the cause of the poor and needy when they suffer wrong. There is no relation of human society in which injustice and oppression can be committed without bringing down the divine displeasure. The parent who is cruel to his child—the master who refuses to give to his servant that which is just and equal—the arbiter who gives a partial and one-sided award—the merchant who takes advantage of the ignorance or dependence of his customer, to extort from him more than is due—are all provoking the wrath of that All-seeing and Infallible Judge, and their sin, if unrepented, shall, in the end, meet with its merited condemnation. If, therefore, we would form a just estimate of the divine government, we must not limit our view to the scenes that may be passing before us. We must take in a larger field of vision. We must watch the course and development of things. We must trace actions to their issues, and if these issues fail to appear in time,

we shall be sure to discover them in eternity, where God shall bring every work into judgment, and every secret thing, whether it be good or bad. Following this rule, we shall cease to be disquieted with the thought that there is no remedy for the wrongs which men so often suffer at the hands of their fellows. While these wrongs bear mournful testimony to the fall of the human race, and to the deep depravity of the human heart, they are no proof that evil is destined to prevail, or that God is indifferent to sin. His providence, even now, unequivocally proclaims the fact that He is angry with the wicked every day; and His final and irrevocable judgment, at the consummation of all things, shall leave no iniquity unpunished but that which has been washed away in the blood of His beloved Son.

From this solemn subject, which furnishes, when rightly understood, only an additional reason for giving heed to the injunction, "Fear thou God," Solomon proceeds to discourse on the vanity of earthly riches. This theme occupies, as might have been expected, a large place in the book before us. Worldly wealth being, as it is, the key that gives its possessor access to almost all kinds of earthly enjoyment, which enables him to gratify to the full the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, is the favourite idol of worldly men—the idol at whose shrine they are often found to sacrifice ease and honour, nay, even health and life. No wonder, therefore, that in a book whose main design is to expose the vanity of an earthly portion, more than common pains should be taken to prove that riches is vanity. In entering upon this argument here, Solomon sets out with this very profound and pregnant remark—"Moreover, the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field." The earth is the common table of the human family. Great and small, rich and poor, young and old, are sustained by the bounty which it yields. It is large enough to accommodate them all; and if they rightly use it, it will be found sufficient for them all. Not one of them can dispense with the provision it supplies. The mightiest monarch cannot do without it. If

he will not consent to be fed from off this table, he cannot be fed at all. "The king himself is served by the field." His gold and jewels cannot satiate his hunger or quench his thirst. He is as dependent as the meanest of his subjects on the produce of the soil. This is all obviously implied in Solomon's significant saying. But there is evidently this further implied in it, that men's natural wants, whatever may be their diversities of rank, are very much the same. They need, and can consume, but a certain limited quantity of food; and they can require but a certain limited amount of clothing and shelter. Excess, even if they have ample means of indulging it, will do them no good. It will not make their bodies healthier or stronger. It will not prolong their lives. It will not increase their happiness. They may create, indeed, for themselves a multitude of artificial wants, and make themselves the slaves of their own effeminate habits and luxurious tastes. But their splendid way of living gives them no real advantage over the humblest of the sons of toil, who, having food and raiment, is therewith content.

Having laid down, as the basis of his argument, this broad and unquestionable fact, the royal Preacher goes on to illustrate thus the vanity of earthly riches:—"He that loveth silver, shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity." There are various grounds on which this assertion may be confidently made. He who sets his heart upon money shall never be able to make a satisfying portion out of it; first, because there is usually so much uncertainty connected with it. He has it to-day, but some turn of fortune may deprive him of it to-morrow; and therefore, the more he loves it, the more does the faintest fear of losing it disquiet his mind. But next, he shall not be satisfied with it, because of its inherent incapacity to yield real and solid satisfaction to such a being as man. There are ten thousand causes of disappointment, anxiety, and sorrow, which wealth can do nothing whatever either to remove or mitigate.

It cannot purchase exemption from the common calamities of life—from the anguish of bodily disease—from the affliction of domestic bereavements—from the attacks of envy and ingratitude—from the bitter grief of an ill-doing family—from the load of care which the very possession of great wealth never fails to impose. What could all the wealth of Nebuchadnezzar do for him when his reason fled, and he was driven from men and had his dwelling with the beasts of the field? What could the wealth of David do for him when his heart was broken by the death of Absalom his son? What could the wealth of Lot do for him when the confederate kings were dragging him away into captivity, or when Sodom and all that he possessed in it were sinking in the fiery abyss that swallowed it up? Riches, instead of raising men above the ordinary ills of life, does rather, by the envy it excites, and the temptations it creates, set up its owner as a broader mark for the devil, the flesh, and the world to shoot at. It multiplies both his griefs and his perils. But, further, and above all, he that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, because no amount of it can redeem his soul. It cannot pacify an accusing conscience—it cannot save him from going down into the dark valley of the shadow of death—it cannot deliver him from the wrath that cometh on the children of disobedience.

But, while these are grounds amply sufficient to sustain the statement with the consideration of which we are now engaged, it is, I apprehend, a reason distinct from all these which Solomon, in making that statement, has more especially in view. He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, because the more he gets the more he would have. He that loveth abundance shall not be satisfied with increase, because his covetousness and his ambition grow faster than his wealth. This appears to be the real point and hinge of the argument as to the vanity of riches which is here employed. The love of money, like all other passions, grows by what it feeds on. Indulgence serves only to strengthen it, and to render it the more insatiable.

What seemed a fortune before it was attained, dwindles into comparative poverty when it has been actually acquired. The height which looked so lofty when viewed from the plain, sinks down almost to the level of the plain itself, when, standing on its summit, the climber contrasts it with the far loftier eminences which have now come into view. He finds himself only as yet at the bottom of a vast mountain chain; the higher he ascends, the more distinctly this fact appears; and just so it is with the love of money. The sum that bulked so large in his eye at the outset, shrinks by and bye into a trifle. Once it seemed wealth, now it appears the barest competence. It is measured every year by a new standard—the standard of a higher grade of society—of a more ambitious style of living—of new wants and more expensive tastes. Things which at one time would have been accounted luxuries, have now become the merest necessaries of life. That which at an earlier stage of his career would have been counted extravagance, has now almost the aspect of meanness. The point at which he is prepared to say that it is enough, is like the horizon, to which the traveller, however far and however fast he journeys, never gets any nearer. The ease now described is, to the full, as common in our day, as it could have been in the time of Solomon. It must be familiar to every one who is at all acquainted with human nature and with human life; it has been at the bottom of much of that reckless hasting to be rich that has become so common, and that has been recently the source of so much misery and crime; and nothing can be more illustrative than such a case of the vanity of setting our hearts on the riches of this world.

The 11th verse is evidently designed to explain and bring more fully out the truth thus taught in the 10th. It makes the vanity of a life spent in pursuit of wealth still more apparent, by showing that he who follows such a life is only heaping together what others are to consume; that his very wealth, the more it accumulates, involves him the more in those expences which drain it away. For, says Solomon, “when goods

increase, they are increased that eat them." The man who is ambitious of worldly wealth may have begun life in a cottage, and he may end it in a palace; but how little has he thereby added to his own personal portion of worldly things. His food, his clothing, his dwelling may be somewhat finer and more costly; but that is nearly the whole amount of the difference. He has gathered around him a crowd of dependents. It is but a small part of his great income that the lord of the stately mansion needs, or actually uses for himself. His servants often fare more sumptuously than he. He is little more than the paymaster of the multitude of attendants with whom his wealth has surrounded him. For all the practical purposes of life, it may be more truly said, that he exists for them than that they exist for him. When we look on such an establishment, with all its grandeur and magnificence, and see how little more than nominal is the control which its possessor has of the outlay by which it is maintained, we may well ask, with Solomon, "What good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes?"

Nor is this the only consideration that illustrates the vanity of a life devoted to the pursuit of wealth. The more successful in gaining wealth the man has been, the less often is he able to enjoy it. Great possessions beget great anxieties. The burden of their management is not easy to bear. The complicated relationships and responsibilities to which they give rise distract and oppress the mind. The luxurious habits which they cherish enervate the body; and the man whom the ignorant world envies is oftentimes in reality an object of the greatest pity.

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."

The humblest cottager, if he knew all, would refuse to change places with the prince. "The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep." The labouring man's daily toil secures him at least his night's repose. He needs no artifi-

cial aids—no downy bed, no soothing music, no soporific mixture to allure that rest which so often flies from the kingly couch. However coarse or scanty may be his evening meal, and however lowly the roof beneath which he dwells, he has but to lay him down when the work of the day is done, in order to sink at once into the arms of

“Tired nature’s kind restorer, gentle sleep.”

Solomon is not here intending to speak of the spiritual condition of these two classes of men, but only of their external circumstances. His object is simply to show that riches is not so great a prize as men are apt to think it. He would have those in humbler station to understand that there is far less to envy in wealth than they may be sometimes tempted to suppose; and that the means of happiness, in so far as the things of this world have to do with it, are much more equally distributed than appearances might seem to imply. It is possible enough, indeed, for the labouring man to be miserable, and for the rich man to be as happy as human life in this fallen world can ever be. But if it be so, the fact is owing, we may be well assured, to some other cause than to the mere difference in their outward estate. The secret of the difference, when the case is carefully examined, will be found, not without, but within. A good conscience towards God is the only solid foundation on which human happiness can rest. “The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life” (Prov. xiv. 27). “Better is little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure and trouble therewith” (Prov. xv. 16). It is a very solemn and awful saying of our Lord, that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. No words could more forcibly express than these, how many and how formidable are the spiritual dangers with which wealth surrounds its owner; or more impressively warn him of the need he has of the grace of God to keep his feet from falling into some one or other of the countless snares which wealth lays for the soul. To be

humble in the midst of circumstances so flattering to human pride—to be self-denied when everything is inviting and ministering to self-indulgence—to be spiritually-minded when surrounded by a thousand seductive influences, all of a nature to corrupt and sensualize the heart—to walk by faith, and to live above the world, when so many earthly enjoyments are combining to draw down the man's thoughts, and feelings, and sympathies to the things which are beneath, is little short of a moral miracle. With man, indeed, it is impossible, but not with God. His grace can triumph over all these difficulties, and make even the man who has most of this world to be least in love with it. Divine grace can teach him how to make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness—how to turn that very gold which allures such multitudes along the broad way to destruction, into a means of helping him forward on the narrow way of life.

This is undoubtedly true; but this alters not the fact, that he is far safer, humanly speaking, whose lot in this world is that which Solomon so justly celebrates in these well-known words: "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain" (Prov. xxx. 8, 9).

And now that we have prosecuted thus far Solomon's illustration of the vanity of riches, and have seen how truly preferable, in many important respects, is that humbler sphere in which it is the necessary lot of the vast majority of men to live, let us return for a little to contemplate these diversities of worldly station in the light of that great general truth with which Solomon began—"that the profit of the earth is for all, and that the king himself is served by the field." Were this truth habitually realized, what a happy influence it would exercise on all the interests of society, and on all the relations of life! If the profit of the earth be for all, then how suitable is it that the rich should remember the poor—that those who

have abundance should be ready to give to him that needeth. No man liveth to himself. The wealth of the rich man was not given to him that he might clothe himself in purple and fine linen, and fare sumptuously every day, and meanwhile leave the poor Lazarus to pine and perish in unpitied wretchedness at his door. The profit of the earth is for all. Lazarus must have a share as well as he. If disease, or old age, or helpless childhood, or some natural calamity, have consigned certain of those around him to poverty and want, it is his duty and his privilege to be God's almoner in relieving their necessities. Nor let him look proudly down, from his more elevated station, on those who are toiling for their daily bread; he himself feeds at the same table from which their humbler wants are supplied; he is as dependent as they are on the bounty of their common Father. The king himself has to beg, so to speak, every day at that Father's door; he draws his subsistence from the same source; and if a larger portion has been dealt out to him than to others, he has nothing, after all, which he has not received.

But again, and on the other hand, if the profit of the earth be for all—if the Supreme Disposer of all things has made provision in the earth for the support of all the creatures that inhabit it, and pre-eminently for all the members of the human family—it is evidently His design that none should be idle—that if any man will not work, neither should he eat—that all, in short, should betake themselves to this common field of labour, and in the sweat of their brow eat the bread which it yields. If one man, by superior industry, intelligence, ability, and worth, obtains more of the profit of the earth than others, they have no right to grudge his greater prosperity, or to disturb him in the possession of its fruits. Let them rather emulate his efforts and his virtues; and if it so please Him who distributeth to every man severally as He will, they also may receive a like reward. But especially let all ranks and conditions of men remember this, that God hath made of one blood all nations of men, to dwell on all the face of the earth. The earth is their

common inheritance—their birth-place—their home—their grave. Let them, therefore, love as brethren; and let them remember this, that they have here no continuing city, and no sure place of abode—that the fashion of this world passeth away—that the earth, and the things that are therein, shall all be burned up; and let them, therefore, seek after a better and a more enduring substance. All are poor, in the truest sense of the word, who are destitute of an interest in Christ; and they only are rich who have a treasure laid up in heaven. Let the prosperous and selfish worldling, luxuriating in the midst of his wealth and grandeur, turn his eye for a moment to that scene so graphically depicted in the parable of our Lord—And it came to pass that the rich man died and was buried; “and in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom; and he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame” (Luke xvi.) Alas! it could not be! Beyond the grave there is a great gulf fixed between the saved and the lost. It is here and now that heaven is to be won, if it is ever to be won at all. And blessed be God, by rich and poor alike, it may be won on the easiest possible terms—without money and without price. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”

CHAPTER IX.

BROKEN CISTERNS.

“There is a sore evil *which* I have seen under the sun, *witely*, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt. But those riches perish by evil travail; and he begetteth a son, and *there is* nothing in his hand. As he came forth of his mother’s womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand. And this also *is* a sore evil, *that* in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind? All his days also he eateth in darkness, and *he hath* much sorrow and wrath with his sickne-s.

“Behold *that* which I have seen: *it is* good and comely *for one* to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him; for *it is* his portion. Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; *this is* the gift of God. For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth *him* in the joy of his heart.”—ECCLES. v. 13-20.

“There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and *it is* common among men: a man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it: *this is* vanity, and *it is* an evil disease. If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also *that* he have no burial; I say, *that* an untimely birth *is* better than he: for he cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness. Moreover, he hath not seen the sun, nor known *any thing*: *this* hath more rest than the other. Yea, though he live a thousand years twice *told*, yet hath he seen no good: do not all go to one place?

“All the labour of man *is* for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled. For what hath the wise more than the fool? what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living? Better *is* the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: *this is* also vanity and vexation of spirit.

“That which hath been is named already, and it is known that *it is* man: neither may he contend with him that is mightier than he. Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what *is* man the better? For who knoweth what *is* good for man in *his* life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?”—ECCLES. vi.

SOLOMON has already presented in this book some very striking examples of the vanity of earthly riches. In the 2d chapter he took up his own case as a notable instance in point.

Few men had ever attained to greater wealth than this splendid king. Not only were his revenues immense, but everything that money could purchase, he had been at pains to secure—palaces and gardens, chariots and horses, works of art, numerous attendants, men-singers and women-singers, and all the delights of the sons of men. So far, in short, as material appliances are concerned, he had surrounded himself with a kind of terrestrial paradise, and yet he had found himself erelong sickening at the very sight of his own grandeur. The thought that it must very soon—and it might be without a moment's warning—pass wholly and for ever away out of his hands, fell like a withering blight upon his heart. He felt that he was walking in a vain show; that the magnificence of his royal estate was little better than a brilliant phantasmagoria, which death should speedily dissolve and reduce to absolute nothingness. And this simple but solemn consideration of the fleeting and transitory nature of all those possessions and pleasures with which wealth can encompass its owner, broke the spell by which, for a time, it had charmed him, and brought home to his mind a painful and overwhelming conviction that by no such means could human happiness be procured.

After several brief and passing allusions to the same subject in the 3d and 4th chapters, he again returned to it more expressly in the 5th chapter, at the 9th and three following verses, where he exposed the vanity of riches on new and different, but equally decisive, grounds. There, his design was to show that the love of money, the more it is indulged becomes the more insatiable; so that the man who gives way to this passion can never have enough, and therefore can never be satisfied. To make the argument more conclusive and complete, reference was also made by Solomon, in that passage, to the unquestionable fact that the more the covetous man's wealth grows, the more the means of dissipating it multiply also. "When goods increase they are increased that eat them." A larger and more expensive establishment makes heavier and more numerous demands

upon its owner, until at length he finds that he can scarcely call his income his own. It passes out of his hands as fast as it comes into them, so that what it has cost him so much pains and labour to acquire he has nothing more than a sight of. It exists for others rather than for himself. And while his anxiety about the getting and disbursing of all this wealth, and perhaps also the luxurious habits it has induced, deprive him even of his nightly rest, the humble cottager, earning his bread in the sweat of his brow, and enjoying his unbroken and refreshing sleep when the work of the day is done, is oftentimes greatly more to be envied than he.

But there are other aspects in which this fertile subject has still to be viewed; and several of these, the somewhat lengthened passage on which we are now entering brings very vividly before us. Here is one of them—"There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun; riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt." It is abundantly notorious that in our day, as certainly as in that of Solomon, riches do often, and in various ways, tend to the hurt or injury of those in whose behalf they are accumulated or bequeathed. What more common than to find the heir utterly ruined by the mere prospect even of a great inheritance? Nursed by the servility of attendants and the flattery of foolish friends into an exaggerated and most pernicious sense of his own importance, and giving himself up in consequence to pride and self-will, he is totally unfitted, alike by his temper and his habits, for the place he is to occupy. The fortune kept for him with so much care, and which it has perhaps cost, on the part of his parent or predecessor, many long years of exhausting toil or penurious living to hoard up, has served no other purpose, in so far as he is concerned, but to unsettle his mind, to destroy everything like mental application or moral discipline, and to bring him at length, when he has come of age, upon the actual theatre of life in a state of utter incapacity for any good or useful end. For an illustration of what has now been described we have only to turn to Solomon's own son and successor, Reho-

boam. The riches of the illustrious father, acquired by the wise policy of a long and prosperous reign, was certainly kept to the hurt of its future owner, in whom it seems evidently to have fostered that haughty and head-strong spirit, and that heartless indifference to the wishes and the wants of others, which so completely alienated from him the affections of his people, and led to the dismemberment of his glorious kingdom. And how often do we see, at the present day, substantially the same results exhibited in less prominent and conspicuous spheres! How frequently is extravagance found treading on the heels of avarice, the one extreme begetting the other—wasteful prodigality scattering with both hands, in a few years, what a long and laborious life of grasping covetousness had slowly and painfully gathered together. The youthful heir, coming all at once into the possession of wealth which it has cost him nothing to acquire, and which he has perhaps never been taught how either to improve or to enjoy, becomes the easy prey of his own passions, and of the fawning parasites and gay companions that gather around him. His wealth, in such circumstances as these, proves a curse rather than a blessing. By the snares which it lays for his feet, and by the facilities it affords for gratifying the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, it makes him not unfrequently a pest to society, and in the end a burden to himself. Is not this a sore evil—that one man should exhaust his whole life in amassing what another is destined to ruin soul and body in spending! What a bitter mockery does the career of the spendthrift son stamp on the grudging parsimony and boasted money-making skill of the father! His ambition, it may be, was to make his son great. He has succeeded only in making him idle, and vain, and profligate. His aim perchance was to found a family. He has ended in but digging a grave for both his family and his fortune too.

How different might the case have been, if, instead of keeping this riches—if, instead of making it his one great business to

obtain and to augment this wealth—its possessor had been all along turning it to account for the glory of God and for the good of man! Honouring the Lord with his substance and with all the first-fruits of his increase, not only would he have been no loser in a temporal point of view—not only might he have experienced the faithfulness of the promise, “So shall thy barns be filled with plenty and thy presses shall burst out with new wine” (Prov. iii. 10); but his son and heir, guided by his noble example, and imbibing through grace his benevolent spirit, might reasonably have been expected to walk by the same rule, and thus to perpetuate the honour and the usefulness of his father’s name.

But while cases of the sort we have spoken of were no doubt present to the mind of Solomon, and are at least fairly comprehended under the statement which the 13th verse contains, it would seem from the verses that follow, that he had more especially in view an instance of a somewhat different kind. If we imagine such a history as this, it will probably help us to realize the state of things which the words of Solomon are intended to describe. A father has set his heart on aggrandizing his son. He saves up everything for that son’s sake. He subjects himself to a life of self-denying toil and care, in order that he may secure for his son wealth, and dignity, and ease. In his eagerness to enlarge the destined inheritance, he embarks in new enterprises and fresh ventures. But suddenly the tide of prosperity turns. Misfortunes begin to multiply and thicken around him. Agents to whom his interests had been confided betray their trust. The mildew blights the labour of his fields. Disease breaks in among his flocks and herds. The tempest engulfs in the deep the ships that were coming home laden with treasure. His riches perish by evil travail—by some ill-advised attempt to make them greater, that is—or by some afflictive providence which he has been unable to foresee or prevent. And though his longing desire to have an heir has been gratified—though he begetteth a son—there is now nothing in

his hand. The child that had been nursed in the lap of abundance and brought up with expectations of princely wealth, turns out to be absolutely penniless. The poor disappointed and distracted parent sees nothing but penury before either himself or his son. And how ill-prepared is that son to meet such a prospect! Trained to no business—accustomed to no exertion—unused alike either to work or to want—his position is truly pitiable. His father's riches have been his ruin. He cannot dig, and to beg he is ashamed. He has been leaning upon a support that has entirely given way; and a great wonder it will be, if, under the shock and burden of so great a calamity, he does not become, in his despair, the prey of some low vice or debasing habit, that will speedily consign him, in shame and misery, to the grave. Such cases we know are of not unfrequent occurrence, and most impressively do they bear witness to the vanity of worldly wealth—most strikingly do they show what folly it is to be building either our children's happiness or our own on such a foundation of sand.

Cases, we have said, such as the words of Solomon describe, are not imaginary; they happened in his time and they happen in ours. The annals of such a community as that in which we live, where the vicissitudes of worldly fortune are so sudden and so great, could furnish many examples in point. It is not alone, however, amid the manifold risks and proverbial fluctuations of trade and commerce, that such calamities arise. Even the highest literary genius has not been found sufficient to exempt its possessor from a like reverse. In a modern and memorable instance, which it can require nothing more than the slightest possible allusion to suggest to the majority of minds, at the very moment when that genius was achieving its most splendid triumphs—when its brilliant creations were gathering around their author a fame as wide as the civilized world, and crowning him with the more solid advantages of rank and wealth—the stroke fell that levelled his fortune in the dust, and left him literally “with nothing in his hand.”

Never, perhaps, were earthly hopes more completely dashed to the ground; and never, perhaps, more impressively, than in the case in question, was the saying of Solomon fulfilled—"Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity." The labour of a life, in so far as the profit of the labourer was concerned, perished in an hour. Everything which ambition had most coveted, and seemed most effectually to have secured—everything which a father's heart had been most earnestly striving after, and appeared most thoroughly to have attained—within a few brief years, came all to nought. The genius that had dazzled the world, eclipsed and darkened, sank into a mournful grave; and those who were fondly expected to inherit the fame and the fortune of its owner, became themselves ere long the tenants of the same narrow house. As a dream of the night, all this promise of earthly riches and honour passed away.

"As he came forth out of his mother's womb," continues Solomon, in order to bring out more fully the vanity of this pursuit of riches, "naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour which he may carry away in his hand." Even if the catastrophe previously spoken of had not occurred, and his worldly prosperity had continued uninterrupted to the close of his earthly career, it is to this, notwithstanding, he must have come at last. The distance that divides time from eternity is but a step, and yet the mightiest monarch cannot carry from the one to the other one solitary coin of all his treasure. His crown and throne, his sceptre and sword, his royal robes, his great possessions, must all be left behind when the dread summons arrives—"Prepare to meet thy God" (Amos iv. 12). No clang of trumpets, no gorgeous herald, no military pageant, no proud array of great officers of state, shall go before him to proclaim his coming, and to usher him into that awful presence. Unattended and alone he must meet the King of kings and Lord of lords. Jacob could send his servants before him with flocks and herds across the brook Jabbok, to deprecate the wrath and to propitiate the favour of his offended brother,

but no man can "carry anything in his hand" across the river of death to appease an offended God. The king and the beggar must stand on the same level, and appear in the same guise, at the judgment-seat of Christ. Surely this also is a sore evil for the man that is trusting in uncertain riches, making the gold his hope, and the most fine gold his confidence—that "in all points as he came so shall he go." He had nothing when he entered into this world, and he shall have as little when he leaves it.

If, indeed, the delusions of paganism and popery were true—if the building of a temple or the adorning of an altar, or the leaving of money to buy masses for the soul, could really avail to make atonement for sin, and to secure admission into heaven—then would worldly riches be worth all the pains and toil men so eagerly bestow in acquiring it. But who can thus redeem his brother, or give to God a ransom for himself? The wealth of the rich man of our Saviour's parable could not procure even a drop of water to cool his tongue. When we consider these things we may well ask, with Solomon, "What profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?" Is it not labouring for the wind,—labouring for what is as fleeting and unsubstantial as a breath of air—to be heaping up treasure for ourselves and forgetting to be rich towards God? Even for this life it is but a poor possession, if it be our chief good. For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? His wealth, even if the pursuit of it should be as successful as the most covetous heart could desire, cannot make him happy. It cannot save him from those thousand ills to which flesh is heir; it cannot protect him from disease and death; it cannot give him peace of conscience or peace with God. Even if he should escape those vicissitudes already spoken of, which so often occur amid the uncertainties of human affairs, and should be able to say with confidence to his soul, "Soul, take thine ease; thou hast much goods laid up for many years: eat, drink, and be merry," that very night his soul may be required of him, and then, whose shall those things be which he

has provided? They will no longer be his. His power over them is for ever at an end. They may gild his coffin, and gain for him a splendid funeral, and secure the erection of a stately monument beside his grave, but they can neither shield his body from corruption nor his immortal soul from hell. There is only one sense in which his wealth will be sure to follow him into eternity. It will follow him as a witness to that great and solemn assize at which he must now appear. It was in the view of this awful fact that the apostle James wrote these memorable words: "Go to now, ye rich men"—that is, ye worldly rich men—ye men who have chosen riches as your portion, who have made it your god, and worshipped it—who have sought it and used it for the gratification of your own avarice, or ambition, or pleasure—"Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries which 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. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days. Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth. Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter" (James v. 1-5).

All that is contained in the 15th and 16th verses of chap. v. is equally applicable, as has been already remarked, to the successful as to the unsuccessful votary of mammon. Whether the lover of riches loses his wealth by "evil travail," as in the case contemplated in the 14th verse, or retains it in undiminished abundance to the close of his career, his condition will be the same when he comes to die. He shall be no poorer in the one case than in the other, for in neither case shall he have anything "which he may carry away in his hand." In the 17th verse, however, it would seem that Solomon returns to the instance pointed at in the 14th verse, and

means to speak here again of the man whose riches, by some calamity, has perished, and who has been left with "nothing in his hand." It would appear, evidently, to be of this disappointed and heart-broken man, who has seen all his plans for aggrandizing his son and heir utterly overthrown, that he intends to say, "All his days, also, he eateth in darkness, and he hath much sorrow and wrath in his sickness." It is a true and terrible saying, that "the sorrow of the world worketh death" (2 Cor. vii. 10). The afflictions of worldly men breed nothing but mischief and misery; galling their pride, wounding their self-love, irritating their temper, souring their mind, rendering them sullen and dissatisfied, fretting them into impatience with men, and into rebellion against the providence and will of God. Under this fatal influence of unsanctified sorrow, the man whose riches has perished by evil travail passes his days in darkness—that is, in grief. In his sickness—whether it be the heart-sickness of his broken hopes and disappointed ambition, or the bodily sickness which the other often induces—he has much sorrow and wrath. His distress has none of those alleviations which soothe and sustain, when similarly afflicted, the child of God. The child of God, when adversity overtakes him, knows the rod and Him who hath appointed it; he knows it has been sent by One who afflicts not willingly, nor grieves the children of men. He hears a gracious and compassionate voice in it speaking unto him, and saying, "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him. For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (Heb. xii. 5, 6). He accepts it accordingly, and in humility, and faith, and patience, is exercised thereby; reverently regarding it as a part of that needful and salutary discipline which God appoints unto His people, not for His pleasure, but for their profit, that they may be partakers of His holiness.

How painful is the contrast to all this which is exhibited by the baffled and disappointed lover of this world, when his

golden idols are broken, and when the foundation on which he had been foolishly building the structure of his hopes and his happiness suddenly gives way, and overwhelms all in wreck and ruin! For him there is no balm in Gilead and no Physician there. A stranger to those views, and to that spirit which enabled Job, in the depth of his destitution, to say, "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job ii. 10); "the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job i. 21); the stripped and stricken worldling is ready, on the contrary, like Job's impious wife, to curse God and die.

But while the inspired writer of this book is at so much pains to expose the folly of trusting in uncertain riches, it is no part of his design to disparage any of the gifts of God. As regards temporal things, true wisdom consists in using this world as not abusing it. Every creature of God is good in its own place and measure, when it is sanctified by prayer, and used with thankfulness. Our worldly substance is no exception to this rule. There is no real virtue in a self-imposed asceticism, that refuses to enjoy God's bounty, and that frowns on all the outward comforts and amenities of life. Romanism may canonize such spurious sanctity, but the gospel disowns it. "Behold that which I have seen," says Solomon, recording the verdict of divine truth upon the subject, "it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun, all the days of his life which God giveth him; for it is his portion." This statement has no particular reference to any one class or condition of men more than to another. The rule which it lays down is meant for all. There is as much room for the labouring man as for the lord to "eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun." The grand requisite for doing so is not wealth, but contentment—is not rank, but gratitude and thankfulness. The man who reverently recognizes God's hand as dispensing to him his daily bread, enjoys it as truly and heartily

as Solomon himself could enjoy the revenues of his kingdom. And it is both "good and comely" that he should do so. It is "good"—that is, beneficial and profitable—for it greatly contributes to the man's own happiness and welfare that he should thus devoutly and cheerfully take the comfort of that provision which his gracious heavenly Father is continually making for his wants. It is "comely"—that is, appropriate and pleasing—because it is honouring to the Giver of all good. It exhibits a becoming sense of the loving-kindness of the Lord, and a desire to be satisfied with the gifts, be they less or more, which His providence supplies. When Solomon subjoins, as a reason for acting thus, the closing words of the 18th verse—"for it is his portion"—he evidently means that the "good" of a man's labour, the fruit or reward which it yields, is not an accidental result, but is dealt out by the only wise God, as being what He accounts right and needful. To receive it, therefore, in a sullen and complaining spirit is not only to defraud himself of the enjoyment it is fitted to yield, but it is to bring a rebellious accusation against the wisdom, and the rectitude, and the beneficence of the supreme Disposer of all things.

But while the counsel of the 18th verse is thus plainly intended for all, that of the 19th verse has to do more especially with those whose portion of the good things of this world is above the common average—has to do, in a word, with those who may be termed rich. It might be thought, at first sight, that such a class could have no difficulty in maintaining, as regards their worldly circumstances, the spirit and state of mind which Solomon had just enjoined. No great effort, it might be supposed, could be needed to cherish a contented and thankful spirit when men are surrounded with abundance. And yet it is impossible carefully to consider this 19th verse, without clearly perceiving that it suggests quite another conclusion. Solomon here proclaims it as a very noticeable fact, that every man who, having riches and wealth, is also found to have power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour, is

indebted, for his disposition and ability to do so, to the special grace of God. His great worldly substance is not more truly the gift of God, than are the temper and spirit that enable him rightly to enjoy and use it. His mere wealth itself will by no means suffice to cultivate and keep alive the habits and the frame of mind which it becomes him to maintain. On the contrary, human nature being what it is, the tendency of wealth is to foster tastes and sentiments of a very opposite kind. Apart from the influences of divine grace, a man is never so apt to forget God and his duty as when he is full—when he has all and abounds. Pride, self-complacency, luxury, covetousness, ambition, worldly-mindedness, are the easily-besetting sins of rich men. To be humble, unassuming, temperate, liberal, grateful, spiritual in the midst of all the seductions and allurements of wealth; this truly “is the gift of God”—a gift without which their wealth can be no blessing either to themselves or to others.

The rich man on whom this divine gift hath been bestowed “shall not much remember the days of his life, because God answereth him in the joy of his heart.” The days of such a man’s life glide swiftly by. A grateful sense of that divine goodness which has made his cup to run over, sheds a perpetual sunshine on his soul. Cheerfully and thankfully enjoying what God has given him, and dispensing with open heart and hand the bounty he has so freely received, he has neither leisure nor inclination to brood over the trials and afflictions that may befall him. Diligent in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, time never hangs heavy on his hands. Abounding in works of faith and labours of love, he finds in these a sufficient antidote to those troubles and vexations which so grievously discompose and harass the necessarily dissatisfied minds of the men of this world. God answereth him in the joy of his heart, and that joy of the Lord is his strength. “There be many that say, Who will show us any good? Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us. Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine in-

creased. I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep; because thou, Lord, makest me to dwell in safety" (Psalm iv. 6-8). It is thus that God, smiling upon his cheerful piety and grateful devotedness in doing good, answereth him in the joy of his heart—meets and responds to his love and labours by giving him some foretaste of the blessedness that is in store for those who, having finished their course and kept the faith, shall be met on the threshold of eternity with this gracious and glorious welcome—Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord. Thou hast been faithful in a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things!

In this changeful world some event is ever and anon occurring to lend additional impressiveness to those great practical lessons as to the right use of our talents and our time, which this book of Ecclesiastes inculcates, and which, in the exposition of it, we have been seeking to illustrate and enforce. Such an event has taken place while we write, and one seldom surpassed in respect either of the power or the pathos with which it is fitted to speak to the heart. A prince and a great man has fallen in Israel, and we are weak this day—the Christian Church is weak—Scotland is weak—the cause of divine truth, in relation to the oppositions of science, falsely so called, is weak—through this startling and terrible stroke. Great men are the rarest of God's gifts. It is but once in an age that such a man arises as the man whom society now mourns. Born in humble life, but endowed with that resistless energy and colossal strength of mind which no difficulties can keep down, he achieved for himself a place second to none in public usefulness and fame. It is not our part, however, nor if it were is this the fitting place, to pronounce his panegyric or to celebrate his deeds. Our business, if more simple, is also more solemn; it is to endeavour, in a few brief and broken sentences, to turn to account, in connection with the great theme of this book, one of the most affecting dispensations of Divine Providence which has happened in modern times.

To say that one of the greatest lights that shone in the firmament of literature and science has been suddenly and mysteriously quenched, is to say much; but it is to tell only the least part of the loss which the world has sustained. It was the special glory of that light which the lofty intellect of Hugh Miller shed on every subject on which it fell, that it threw fresh lustre upon the Word of God. Scientific research and literary genius were ever in his hands the consecrated tributaries of an enlightened and scriptural piety. More and more it had become self-consciously the great work and mission of his life, to vindicate and establish the perfect and beautiful harmony that subsists between God's works and God's word. The most startling discoveries of modern science—discoveries by which the infidel had hoped to overthrow the authority of the Bible—this remarkable man converted into triumphant arguments for the faith they were meant to destroy. In doing this great work he died. His latest achievement—an achievement completed but a few hours before he was for ever withdrawn from this earthly scene, was to show that, not Job's but God's words "were written—that they were printed in a book—that they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever"—on very purpose to make "the rocks" bear testimony that the God of nature and the God of revelation are one and the same. It was in giving birth to this, which was destined to be his latest legacy to Christian science, that the long overwrought mind gave way, and passed within the dark encircling folds of that awful cloud in which it finally disappeared from among the lights of earth, to emerge, through grace, as we firmly believe, among the brighter, purer, serener, more enduring lights of the firmament of heaven! In the view of such an event—an event which stamps such vanity on this world, and proclaims so loudly the infirmity that cleaves to the noblest of human powers—well may we say, in the humble words of the Psalmist: "Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is, that I may know how frail I am" (Psalm xxxix. 4). "Thus saith the Lord, Let

not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, saith the Lord" (Jer. ix. 23, 24).

In the closing verses of chap. v. Solomon had described a case exactly the opposite of the one which he has placed before us in the beginning of chap. vi. There we had a man "to whom God hath given riches and wealth," and to whom He hath also given "power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour." Here we have a man equally favoured as regards the abundance of his worldly possessions, but totally dissimilar as regards his capacity to enjoy them. To this man, too, God hath given abundance of all earthly things. In these respects he even excels the individual previously spoken of, and with whom, notwithstanding, he is about to be contrasted. He has not only "riches and wealth" like the other, but "honour" in addition. He occupies a distinguished position in society. He has either inherited rank, or his wealth has raised him to it. He moves in an exalted sphere, and fills a large space in the public eye. But there is a fatal flaw in his portion after all. Ample as it is, "God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it;" and it is of this unhappy state of things that Solomon says—"It is vanity, and it is an evil disease."

What we have now to do is to endeavour to make out the true import of this description. The evil, of which it is held up as an example, is one which Solomon had not only himself witnessed, but which he expressly declares to be "common among men." Most commentators have assumed the case to be that of the miser, and no doubt there are many things about such a man, of a nature to suggest the idea of his being the original of this painful picture. Avarice is, and always has been, common among men; and whether we consider the mischief it works to society, or the pernicious influences it exerts on

the heart, and habits, and life of the poor creature who is given up to it, we can have no hesitation in pronouncing it to be "an evil." We see men every day, under the impulse of this grovelling passion, amassing and hoarding up riches of which they have no power to eat. The desire to have, entirely overmasters the disposition to enjoy. They cannot bear to lessen, for any purpose whatever, the amount of their stores. To give their money away for any object, even of the highest philanthropy or purest piety, is like cutting off a right hand, or plucking out a right eye. They can hardly make up their minds to spend it upon themselves. They not only deny themselves every luxury, but stint themselves in the most ordinary comforts and conveniences of life. By this grudging and senseless parsimony they all but starve in the midst of plenty. And surely, of the life of such a man, it may most emphatically be said, that it is "vanity;" and of the spirit of such a man that "it is an evil disease."

At the same time there appears to be good reason to doubt whether, after all, the miser be the man of whom Solomon, in this passage, intends to speak. It is to be borne in mind that the miser's portrait has been already drawn in a previous portion of this book. In the 8th verse of chapter iv. he is sketched to the life; and the great moral which his story teaches is there very clearly and pointedly set forth. Moreover, the case here in question, whatever it may be, is evidently one of which the leading peculiarity is this, that a stranger gets the good of that substance which its possessor is somehow unable to enjoy. "God giveth *him* not power to eat of it, but a stranger eateth it." This is not the usual, at least it is not the necessary fate of the miser. He has not, it is true, power to eat of his wealth—to take the comfort it is fitted to yield. His sordid spirit will not let him do so. But his wealth may and does often pass, at his decease, into the hands of his own children; and they, and not strangers, ultimately possess and use the fruit of his cares and toil. On the ground of such considerations as

these we are disposed to look for the original of this picture in a different sort of case altogether. May not the history of the patriarch Abraham throw some light upon the point? Here was a man to whom God had given riches, and wealth, and honour. We read in the book of Genesis (xiii. 2), that "Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver and in gold." We know that he was at the head of a numerous household, to all of whom he was both king and priest. We have also abundant reason to believe and be assured, that he was held in high estimation in every land into which he came. But was this enough? Did this satisfy his every desire? On the contrary, all these things were as nothing, because of one thing that was yet lacking—and that one thing was a son and heir. Accordingly we hear him saying, in answer to the divine assurance that God was his shield, and his exceeding great reward, "Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and lo, one born in my house is mine heir" (Gen. xv. 2, 3).

It is true that in the case of Abraham there was an important specialty connected with this state of things. His childless condition seemed to be at variance with the divine promise that his seed should be "as the dust of the earth" for multitude. Should that promise fail, it was not he alone that would be the loser; for with that promise there was inseparably bound up a prospect of blessing to all the families of the earth. Such a consideration must of necessity have greatly aggravated those feelings of disappointment and anxiety with which the patriarch contemplated his want of offspring. At the same time it is sufficiently manifest from the tone and tenor of his language, that in the simple fact of his having no child—no one of his own blood and lineage to inherit his wealth and to perpetuate his name,—and that all his possessions seemed destined to pass into the hands of a stranger, there was something that sat heavily upon his heart, and that cast a dark shadow upon all his prosperity. Now,

if such a calamity exerted so depressing an influence on the mind of a man like Abraham—a man who was God's friend—a man who was the father of the faithful, the very type and pattern of the true believer, and who, as such, had sources of support and consolation under every earthly trial, such as worldly men can never know—it is not difficult to understand how effectually it must often mar the happiness of those who, when placed in similar circumstances, have none of those aids to fall back upon which religion supplies.

Conceive of such a man—a mere man of the world—but a man to whom “God hath given riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth,” with this one exception, that he has been “written childless.” That fact is like a canker at the root of all his glory. As he sits in gloomy solitude within his paternal halls, or looks around him on the extent and magnificence of his ancestral domain, or recalls to mind the long generations during which his forefathers have been connected with the great possessions of which he is now the lord, and the bitter thought breaks in, that within a few years, it may be to-morrow, all this grandeur will belong to one, with whom he has no sympathy—to one who cares not for him—to one who is perhaps at that very moment longing impatiently for his death—it is not difficult to understand the misery that for such a man there must be in such a thought. If he were a man of God, and had learned to recognize the hand of a heavenly Father in all the ordering of his lot, the dispensation would assume, in his eyes, a totally different character, and would weigh far less heavily upon his spirit. And yet, even to him, it would be a painful trial—an affliction which would not seem for the present joyous but grievous. To see it, however, in the light in which it is presented by Solomon, we must view it as occurring to one who is seeking his portion among the things of sense and time. To him it comes without any alleviation at all. It is the blasting of all his fondest hopes. It stamps a cruel mockery on all his accumulated wealth, and on

all his far-descended honours. The melancholy feeling which it breeds preys upon him like an "evil disease," and robs him "of the power to eat" of his splendid portion. It gnaws, like a worm, secretly at his heart to the end of his joyless career; and adds another to the many testimonies by which the great fundamental truth of this book is so conclusively confirmed—vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity!

But while singling out the particular case now described as that which appears to be especially contemplated in the verses before us, it is not undeserving of remark, that the means are very many and very various by which men may be, and often are, deprived of the power to enjoy the portion they have received of this world's good things. By those who are not themselves labouring under this disability, the fact now stated is very often and most ungratefully forgotten. They little think, many of them, how easily and how effectually they might be bereft of all capacity to derive any comfort or pleasure from their fortune or their family, or from anything connected with their outward estate. A diseased body, or a distempered mind, or a profligate son, might rob life of all its gladness, and make it little better to them than a burden of grief and pain. How seldom do we sufficiently consider or realize the obligations under which we lie for the exemption that may have been granted to us from such calamities as these. Because health of body and soundness of mind, and the absence of any peculiar domestic affliction, may to some be common and familiar mercies, they are accepted too frequently as if they were things of course,—things for which we were not called upon to feel or to express any strong sense of the divine goodness and favour. Let these mercies be taken away and then we speedily come to know their value, and how poor the want of them makes even the wealthiest and greatest of men's sons. Well then, surely, does it become those to whom God has given "power to eat of their worldly portion"—power to take the good of

it, whether it be less or more—to remember that this power is God's gift, that they are indebted for it to Him, and that to Him, therefore, belongs all the praise. Were this truth considered and cherished as it ought to be, how many a sacrifice of thanksgiving would it serve to call forth, and how much would it help all ranks and conditions of men to learn, like Paul, in whatsoever state they are therewith to be content!

The case which is put in the 3d verse appears to have been suggested by the one we have just reviewed. Those, indeed, who interpret the 2d verse as a description of the miser, seem disposed to regard this 3d verse as still referring to him; and have, in consequence, involved themselves in the somewhat formidable difficulty of explaining how it might come to pass that, even with an hundred children, his riches and wealth and honours might nevertheless become the portion of a stranger. Ingenious such explanations may be, but they are too far-fetched and unnatural to be really satisfactory. No such difficulty besets that view of the passage which we have ventured to suggest. According to that view Solomon has laid his hand, in the opening verses of the chapter, and as an example of the vanity of this world, upon the man who finds himself surrounded with riches and honours that are destined to become the inheritance of a stranger. The disappointed yearnings of his heart for a son and heir, and the thought, so humbling to his family pride or personal ambition, that one who is an alien to his affections and to his house is to come into his room and to enjoy all this affluence, preys upon him like an evil disease. Looking at such a case, the thought might perchance arise, that if this single want were only supplied all would be well, and that then the man of riches and wealth and honours would really find in the things of this world all the happiness his heart could desire. But no, says Solomon, such a conclusion would be altogether groundless and false. The evil I have spoken of is but one of many to which the possessors of worldly riches are exposed. Even if they should escape that

particular evil, there are many others by which they are liable to be overtaken. For, "if a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial, I say that an untimely birth is better than he."

Here Solomon makes a supposition of the most favourable kind for the man who is seeking his happiness in earthly things. In addition to ample worldly possessions, he has granted him two other things, which, in all countries and in all ages, have been greatly coveted—namely, a numerous family and length of days. By the Hebrews especially the former of these blessings was held in peculiar esteem. Among the posterity of Abraham—the race that was to inherit the Promised Land, and out of which the Messiah was to spring—to be without issue was not simply felt to be a misfortune, but was actually accounted a reproach. Hence the emphasis and the awfulness of the curse—"They shall bear their sin; they shall die childless" (Lev. xx. 20). And hence also the joyful language in which the Psalmist celebrates the condition of the man who has a numerous offspring growing up around him—"Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord; and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hands of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate" (Psalm cxxvii. 3-5). And as for the other blessing of length of days, there are few indeed of Adam's children by whom it is not earnestly sought. So deep-seated and so strong is the love of life, that all that a man has he will give for it. The ship may be laden with gold, but the gold goes at once into the deep whenever that step becomes the alternative to the saving of the crew. Even those whose poverty or personal discomforts might seem to have divested life of all its charms, do nevertheless, with few exceptions, cleave to it with a tenacity which nothing but the hopes of the believer can relax or impair. Be it observed, then, that the case suggested

by Solomon in this 3d verse is one which concedes to the man of the world both of these much-coveted blessings. He supposes him "to beget an hundred children"—that is, to have as large a family as heart could wish—and, at the same time, "to live many years, so that the days of his years be many." Will this insure his happiness? Alas! it only multiplies the points at which his happiness may be assailed. The visitations of sickness and death coming in from time to time upon the loved circle that surrounds the domestic hearth; or, more distressing still, the misconduct to which members of that cherished circle may be found giving way, breaking, like the sons of Eli, by their flagrant wickedness, the too fond parent's heart—how effectually may such events hinder his soul from being "filled with good!" His old age, in the midst of such causes of grief and shame, may be but an inheritance of misery; and when, at length, his gray hairs have been brought down with sorrow to the grave, those unnatural children may even grudge the cost of his funeral obsequies; and, by denying to his remains the honourable burial to which his rank and wealth entitled him, and which was held in such high account among the Hebrew people, may cover with a dark shade of dishonour his memory when he is gone. Of such a man—a man who all the while had been setting his heart upon the world, and who had no hopes or prospects of a better life beyond the grave—of such a man it is no exaggeration, but only the words of truth and soberness, to say, that "an untimely birth is better than he!"

What is the history of an untimely birth? "He"—that is, the still-born child—"cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness. Moreover, he hath not seen the sun, neither known anything." A humbling and affecting statement, but literally true. Such an existence—if existence it can be called—is no better than a shadow or a dream. It suggests the mournful thought of fond hopes crushed—of pain and sorrow endured for nought and in vain. And yet, says Solomon, speaking of the un-

timely birth, "this hath more rest than the other." If these ears have never heard the music of a mother's voice—if these eyes have never seen the heaven of a mother's face—neither have they been wounded by the many agonizing sights and sounds of a sinful and suffering world. There are here, indeed, no bright and sunny memories of joy; but neither are there any dark and distracting recollections of anguish and remorse. Such a rest may be only that of a sleep that has never been broken—of blank unconsciousness and everlasting oblivion; but is it not preferable to the eternal unrest of the man who has lived without God and died without hope?

The man, be it borne in mind, whom Solomon is here placing in contrast with the untimely birth, is a man who sought to fill his soul with good at the cisterns of this world. God had given him riches, and wealth, and honours—a numerous offspring and length of days, and these he had chosen as his portion. He had staked his happiness on these passing and perishable things of time, and he had lost it. The cisterns had proved but broken cisterns that could hold no water. He had built his house upon the sand, and when the floods came and the winds blew, and beat upon his house, it fell, and great was the fall of it. His undying soul was buried and lost in the ruins. Is it not as true of such a man as of the untimely birth, that "he cometh in with vanity and departeth in darkness," and that "his name shall be covered with darkness." The chief end of man is to glorify and enjoy God; and every man cometh into the world "with vanity,"—cometh into it in vain—in whose life that great end has no place. Christ is the light of the world; whoso followeth Him shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. And every man that will not come to that divine and saving Light must needs depart in darkness—must go away at life's close into the blackness of darkness for ever. They that be wise—wise unto salvation, through the saving knowledge of Christ—shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars, for ever and

ever. But the name of the impenitent and unbelieving, who have loved and served the creature more than the Creator—who have been lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God—their name “shall be covered with darkness.” There will be no record of it in the illuminated page of the book of life. It will be found, according to a significant and terrible paradox, only among them that are lost.

When we contemplate the words of Solomon in the light of such solemn and awful considerations as these, the conclusion to which he gives utterance in the close of the 5th verse comes home with irresistible force to the heart—“this,” the untimely birth, “hath more rest than the other.” For that other there is no rest at all. He had none in his vain, empty, and disappointing life, and, alas! he cannot find it even in death. In the grave, indeed, his ashes may repose until the great and notable day when they that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, and when the graves shall give up their dead. But there is no grave for the soul. When the body returns to the earth as it was, the spirit returns to God who gave it. And what rest can there be for a spirit burdened with a load of unforgiven sin! In time, in the day of grace, in the acceptable year of the Lord, that load might have been taken away. Christ was willing to bear it; in His love and in His pity he was continually calling to the sinner, and saying, Come unto me, and I will give you rest! But no such offer will be made in a future and eternal world. He who is now mighty and willing to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him, will then have no other function to discharge, towards those who have lived and died in their sins, but that of the righteous and infallible Judge. What men now sow, that shall they then reap. They who in this life sow to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption; while they who sow to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.

Still speaking of the man whose heart was set upon the world, Solomon goes on to say concerning him—“Yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, yet hath he seen no good:

do not all go to one place?" The mere prolongation of existence can do nothing for the real happiness of the man who is living without God. He is on the wrong road, and by that way he can never reach it. Length of days may indeed delay the awful hour that is destined to unfold to him the tremendous consequences of the course he is pursuing. But that hour must come at last. Nothing is more impressive or affecting in the Scripture records of the antediluvian world than the brief but most significant announcement that winds up the story of even a Methuselah: "and he died!" Yes; all go to one place. The infant that expires in the very moment of its birth, and the man of gray hairs, find their common resting-place in that silent and narrow house where the rich and the poor meet together, and where both alike must say to corruption, thou art my father, and to the worm, thou art my sister and my mother. And what mockery is *there* inscribed upon all the riches, and wealth, and honours of the world! The ambition which a kingdom could not satisfy must now be content with a few feet of earth. The body that was pampered with every luxury, and housed amid the splendours of a palace, must now be satisfied with a coffin and a shroud. The mirth and revelry of boon companions and joyous friends, must be exchanged for the gloom and the silence of the sepulchre. And meanwhile, the disembodied spirit, stripped of its fleshly vesture, and left with nothing but the imperishable memory of its follies and its sins, must abide its final and immutable award at the hands of that righteous Lord who loveth righteousness and hateth iniquity!

Does Solomon mean, by suggesting such thoughts as these, to frown upon the things of this world, and to tell us that there is no good to be found in them at all? We know that this cannot possibly be his design, because already, and more than once, he has declared the contrary. There is a legitimate place and use for the things of this world; and there is a certain kind and measure of enjoyment which they are fitted and intended to yield. Solomon's design, or rather the design of

that blessed Spirit of God by whose inspiration he wrote this book, was to guide us to the golden mean of using this world as not abusing it, and to teach us ever to remember that the fashion of this world passeth away. Following out this course of salutary and much-needed instruction, he proceeds, in the remainder of this chapter, to amplify the views previously presented of the vanity of a life devoted to this world. Of this truth what can be a more conclusive evidence than the fact stated in the seventh verse: "All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled." To sustain the life of the body is undeniably the immediate end of human toil. It is part of the primal curse, that in the sweat of his brow man should eat bread. But that end, rightly understood, is after all but a means to a higher and nobler end. Man liveth not by bread alone, but by every word of God. Worldly men forget this, and instead of eating to live, they rather live to eat; live, that is to say, for mere earthly aims and interests; live for objects and enjoyments which have to do with the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, to the total neglect of what concerns the life of God in the soul. Living for such ends, it is impossible, from the very nature of things, that they should ever find the satisfying portion they are seeking for. The wants which they supply to-day will clamour as loud as ever for a fresh supply to-morrow. It is true, not of our bodily desires alone, but of all earthly desires whatsoever, that "the appetite is not filled;" that no amount of indulgence or gratification contents these desires; that they are ever craving for more. So it is, not merely with hunger and thirst, but with the love of pleasure, vanity, ambition, avarice. The more they are fed the more they grow. They may be satiated and even sickened with one form of indulgence, but it is only to crave more impatiently for another. What folly, then, is it for men to embark on a voyage which only carries them farther and farther away from the destination at which they wish to arrive! In such a career the millionaire is no nearer his object

than the houseless mendicant, who knows not where he is to find the food or the shelter of to-morrow. Is there, then, no difference between one man and another, as regards the good to be gotten from temporal things? Are the possessions of this world alike worthless to all? This we understand to be the question raised in the eighth verse, when Solomon asks, "For what hath the wise more than the fool? what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living?" The answer to the question is evidently contained in the verse that follows. Like many, however, of the other sayings of Solomon in this book, it does not leave its meaning lying on the surface, so that the careless and casual passer-by may discern it at a glance. The saying must be closely examined, and diligently searched, otherwise its meaning may very easily be missed altogether. But so examined and so searched, the answer which Solomon gives to his own pertinent inquiry seems to be substantially this, that the wise man—the man who, though poor, yet knoweth to walk before the living—is satisfied with what he has of this world's goods, while the fool is ever seeking after something more. "Better is the sight of the eyes"—better to be contented with what God has been pleased to set before us—the portion actually possessed, be it less or more—than be a prey to "the wandering of the desire"—the restless, craving, unsatisfied spirit of the fool—one of the many who are continually saying, "Who will show us any good?" That "wandering of the desire" is also vanity and vexation of spirit. It leads to nothing but fresh disappointments. It is like the *mirage* of the desert, which mocks the parched and weary traveller with the semblance of waters that have no existence. It is the *ignis fatuus* after which the poor deluded worldling stumbles on, through the darkness that lures him further and farther away from the path of life; and leaves him too often, in the end, to perish in his sins.

In drawing this part of his discourse to a close, Solomon seeks to arrest attention upon the fact that the views he has been

setting forth of the vanity of this world are meant for all mankind. Men of the future, equally with the men of the past, would find it to be utterly futile to attempt to find happiness in created things. He has been speaking, not of this man or of that man, but of man in the general—of man as the creature of God. And as it was in departing from God that man lost true happiness, so it is Solomon's design to show, that it is only by returning to God that true happiness can ever be regained. What has now been stated appears to be the true import of the 10th verse. The language indeed is obscure, and especially as it stands in our English version. The original may be rendered more fitly, and somewhat more clearly, thus: "He who hath been is already (or long since) named, and it is known that he is man: neither may he contend with Him that is mightier than he." His Maker gave him his name at the first—a name significant of his origin—a name that should remind him, when he had become a fallen creature, that dust he was, and that unto dust he should return. In the day that God created our first parents, "He called their name Adam," because they were taken out of the dust of the ground. The weakness and dependence which that name implies, cleaves to every individual of Adam's race, great and small, rich and poor, young and old. In vain, therefore, shall any child of Adam—any child of the dust—contend with that Almighty Being to whom he is indebted for life and breath, and all things. He cannot alter that constitution of things which the omnipotent and only-wise God has established. Let him cease, therefore, to kick against the pricks. Let him learn to form a juster estimate of the real worth of earthly things. "Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better?" Seeing that the tendency and effect of many of those things which worldly men most eagerly covet, is to injure his best and highest interests, rather than to advance them, what folly is it to set his heart upon them, and thus to spend his life in accumulating the very obstacles that are shutting him out from heaven? "For who

knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?" There is, indeed, great force and significance in the question—"Who knoweth what is good for man in this life?" There are but few that know it. The majority of men are every day committing upon this subject the greatest and most fatal errors. Even God's own people, when left to themselves, are continually choosing as a good what, in reality, if it were granted to them, would prove their sorest evil; and continually labouring to shun what turns out in the long run to be the truest good. Ignorant, therefore, as they undeniably and confessedly are, "of what shall be after them"—of what the future is to bring forth—let them learn to be less solicitous about worldly things. Let them commit their way unto the Lord, and trust also in Him. Let them seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Let them choose the good part that shall not be taken away. Having a treasure laid up in heaven, it will not be in the power of any worldly adversity to take away their peace, and hope, and joy. Let them lay to heart, therefore, the words of Paul: "This I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth that both they that have wives be as though they had none; and they that weep as though they wept not; and they that rejoice as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away" (1 Cor. vii. 29-31).

SECOND PART OF THE BOOK.

CHAPTER X.

HARD BUT TRUE SAYINGS.

“A *good* name *is* better than precious ointment ; and the day of death than the day of one's birth.

“*It is* better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting : for that *is* the end of all men ; and the living will lay *it* to his heart. Sorrow *is* better than laughter : for by the sadness of the countenance the heart *is* made better. The heart of the wise *is* in the house of mourning ; but the heart of fools *is* in the house of mirth.

“*It is* better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so *is* the laughter of the fool. This also *is* vanity.

“Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad ; and a gift destroyeth the heart.

“Better *is* the end of a thing than the beginning thereof ; *and* the patient in spirit *is* better than the proud in spirit. Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry : for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.

“Say not thou, What is *the cause* that the former days were better than these ? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this.”—ECCLES. VII. 1-10.

IN the preceding portion of this book, Solomon has been dealing with one branch of the great subject of which it treats. From this point he goes on to deal with another. Hitherto it has been his object to show the vanity of this world, considered as a foundation for human happiness. Henceforth it is his leading design to exhibit the blessed results of a life of piety and godliness. In the six chapters we have already examined he has made us acquainted with his own personal experiences of a worldly life, and has also set before us the ripe fruits of his extensive observation and profound reflection regarding such a life as pursued by others. By these two methods he has sought, under the guidance of inspiration, to prove that it is not in the power of either the possessions or the pleasures of this world to furnish a truly satisfying portion for a moral, immortal, and

responsible creature like man. He has been discoursing, in other words, on the vital question of man's chief good; and having said so much on what may be called the negative side of that question, he now begins to view it on the positive side. He has told us what is not, and cannot be, the chief good of man; and, in addition to the many impressive arguments on that point already stated, he has still others to adduce. His main design, however, in this latter half of the book at which we have arrived, is to illustrate and commend that "better part" which it is our highest wisdom to choose, and in which alone the chief good of man can be found.

In turning to this aspect of his all-important theme, the first thing he singles out for commendation is a "good name." "A good name is better than precious ointment." To appreciate the force and beauty of this comparison it must be borne in mind that, in the East, ointments have always been held in very high and peculiar esteem. The refreshing fragrance which they yield supplies a grateful restorative amid the lassitude incident to the relaxing atmosphere of that part of the world. They were reckoned there, not only among the attributes of luxury, but almost among the necessaries of life. It was one of the first rites of hospitality to offer them to a guest, and hence the point of that rebuke to Simon the Pharisee, that was involved in our Saviour's touching commendation of the woman that was a sinner—"My head with oil thou didst not anoint, but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment" (Luke vii. 46). Among the Hebrews, moreover, ointments had not only their natural sweetness to recommend them, but they had this, in addition, to enhance their value, that they were symbolical, under the figurative dispensation of Old Testament times, of spiritual blessings. The Lord had expressly commanded Moses to make an oil of holy ointment, and to anoint therewith the tabernacle of the congregation, and the ark of the testimony, and the table and all his vessels, and the candlestick and his vessels, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt-offering: yea, and to

anoint, with the same, Aaron and his sons; and to consecrate them, that they might minister unto the Lord in the priest's office. This anointing oil was the emblem of the grace of the Holy Spirit of God. It was significant of sanctity; and, therefore, in the Song of Songs, it is said of the Divine Spouse of the church—that is, of Christ—"because of the savour of thy good ointments, thy name is as ointment poured forth" (i. 3). God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him, and hence the heavenly odour that breathes in every word and deed of the "Holy One." It is only when we have respect to this spiritual import of the expression that we arrive at the true sense in which it is used by Solomon in the passage before us. It was, after all, but an outward and ceremonial holiness which the anointing oil could communicate. Not a few of those on whom it had been poured, like the sons of Eli, were really, in heart and life, wicked and ungodly men. By how much, therefore, the thing signified is better than the sign, even by so much is "a good name better than precious ointment." It is on the same principle that the Lord hath said, "I desired mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt-offerings" (Hos. vi. 6). God is not mocked with the mere show and semblance of things. He looketh not on the outward appearance, but on the heart; and they only who have a pure heart shall see God.

By the method now employed to bring out the meaning of the first verse, we are effectually guarded against all misapprehension as to the kind of good name which Solomon intends to celebrate. A good name, according to the world's rule of judgment, may be one thing, and according to God's rule of judgment it may be quite another thing. The world often approves what He condemns, and condemns what He approves. It was for this reason that Paul said, in his first epistle (iv. 3) to the Corinthians, "With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment." There are still, as in the days of Isaiah, those "that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter

for sweet, and sweet for bitter; . . . which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him" (v. 20, 23). Those who go with the stream, who pander to the world's tastes, find it easy to gain the world's applause. And hence that solemn saying of our Lord—"Woe unto you when all men shall speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets" (Luke vi. 26). To prophesy smooth things, to prophesy deceits, as the false prophets did, is usually, in this fallen world, by much the shortest way to acceptance and favour. As for those whose language and whose life are a continual protest against the world's fashions, and follies, and sins, they must look for no such reward. Paul was such a man, and the result was that he was treated as the filth of the earth, and as the offscouring of all things. "Not he that commendeth himself is approved," in the true sense of the word, nor he that is commended by the world; but he is approved "whom the Lord commendeth" (2 Cor. x. 18). The good name, therefore, of which Solomon speaks as more precious than ointment, is a name whose goodness is genuine—a name that is approved of God. And be it observed that, however much the world may be opposed to the possessor of such a name, it is usually compelled, in the long run, to do homage to his worth. He has a witness on his side within the bosom even of his enemies themselves: their own conscience testifies in his favour. It is this which gives to real, steadfast, consistent piety and virtue, that ascendancy which they seldom fail to acquire over the minds of men. Slowly and reluctantly it may be, that, on the part of the more ungodly, the concession is yielded; but even when the public acknowledgment is withheld, they feel, within the secrecy of their own breasts, the restraining and overawing influence which such qualities exercise. Much, for example, as the licentious Herod disliked the bold and faithful preacher of the desert, we yet find it significantly said of him that "he feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him" (Mark vi. 20).

Such a reputation is a treasure of inestimable value. It invests its possessor with a far truer nobility than wealth or worldly rank can ever confer. ‘Whose son are you?’ said a proud hereditary peer, addressing, haughtily and scornfully, one who had dared to oppose his imperious will—one of humble birth, but whose incorruptible integrity, and whose many public services, had raised him to eminence in the legislature of his country, ‘I am the son of my virtues,’ was the calm and dignified reply. And how little and insignificant did the artificial honours of a dukedom appear in the presence of this high personal worth! Such a good name is indeed more precious than ointment. It impregnates with a sweet and wholesome savour the moral atmosphere of society around. The very life of the owner of such a name, even though there be no sword in his hand, is a terror to evil-doers and a praise to those that do well. The dying out of such men, in a community or in a church, is one of the most ominous signs of coming ruin. Hence that pathetic prayer of the Psalmist—“Help, Lord; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men” (Psalm xii. 1). And while such a good name is unspeakably precious to others, it is also most precious to the man to whom it belongs. It is something which the world cannot give, and which it cannot take away. Be his worldly condition what it may—be the difficulties and trials of his earthly career as many and as severe as ever fell to the lot of man—“his rejoicing is this, even the testimony of his conscience that, in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, he has had his conversation in the world” (2 Cor. i. 12).

It is necessary to have the fact before us, that it is still of such a man Solomon is speaking in this first verse, when, in its second clause, he goes on to say that “the day of death is better than the day of one’s birth.” This statement must be understood as meant to apply to the possessor of a good name—to the man, in other words, who has been approved of God. The day of

his death is undoubtedly better than the day of his birth. The day of his birth was the beginning of a painful and laborious journey through the wilderness of this present evil world. The day of his death is the beginning of that eternal and glorious rest that remaineth unto the people of God. To him to die is gain. To be present with the Lord—to be made perfectly blessed in the full and everlasting enjoyment of God—is “far better” than the best estate which can ever belong to even the most favoured of His people in this vale of tears. But to die is no gain to those who have lived without God: it is but to enter on the blackness of darkness for ever. However wretched may have been the state into which the day of their birth ushered them—and wretched, even in a worldly sense, the life of the ungodly often is, for “the way of transgressors is hard” (Prov. xiii. 15)—it cannot, for a moment, compare with the wretchedness of that lost eternity to which they are consigned by the day of their death. There the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.

We are evidently, therefore, to understand the second clause of this verse as only amplifying and confirming the truth proclaimed in its first clause. A good name is more precious than ointment; and while there are many ways in which its preciousness is exhibited during its owner’s life, there is, in addition, this crowning proof of its preciousness—that the day of his death is better than the day of his birth. In itself, no doubt, a birthday is a day of rejoicing, while a day of death is a day of sadness and gloom. But, nevertheless, it is undeniable, when all things are taken into the account, that the day of death, for the possessor of a good name, is the more propitious day of the two. *Here* he may have had the testimony of a good conscience and the approbation of good men—the happy sense of the divine forgiveness and favour, and the pleasing consciousness of having been honoured as the instrument of “serving his generation,” and doing it good. But the solace of such blessings has been, at the same time, much and often impaired by the envy and ingratitude of others, and by his own infirmities and sins.

There,—beyond death and the grave,—his happiness shall be without alloy. *There*, “God shall wipe away all tears from his eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. . . . He that overcometh,” saith the Lord, “shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son” (Rev. xxi. 4-7).

To the men of this world it might be an hard saying—that the day of death is better than the day of one’s birth. But not at all deterred by this consideration, Solomon immediately follows it up with another equally hard, that “It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting.” The house of mourning is, in the estimation of worldly minds, the place of all others to be shunned; and the reason which Solomon urges for resorting to it is precisely their reason for avoiding it altogether. Solomon says it is better to go to the house of mourning, because “that is the end of all men;” because, in the humbling event which has made it a house of mourning, we see what is awaiting ourselves. But this is the very thing of which the lovers of this present world least wish to be reminded. To them death is an utterly distasteful theme. Their constant aim is to banish the thought of it from their minds. But is this a wise or safe course to pursue? Is it not, on the contrary, a most grievous and criminal folly to be thus wilfully and obstinately shutting their eyes to an event from which they cannot by any possibility escape; and which is destined to fix their eternal and unalterable destiny in the world to come. “O that they were wise,” said the Lord, addressing such a people, “that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end” (Deut. xxxii. 29). “Lord,” said the Psalmist, recognizing this as the truest wisdom, “Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am” (Psalm xxxix. 4). To go to the house of mourning is a very impressive way of making us to know this. There we are brought into close and

affecting contact with "the end of all men." Standing by the side of the dying or the dead, the living must be cold and callous indeed if they fail to lay it to heart. In this way the house of mourning has been often blessed to awaken and to deepen feelings and convictions which have proved, through grace, the beginning of life to the soul.

In saying that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting, Solomon does not mean it to be understood that it is unlawful to go to the house of feasting—that it is necessarily wrong and injurious to resort to it in any case whatever. There is, as in this same book he reminds us, a time to laugh, as well as a time to weep—a time to dance, as well as a time to mourn. There are occasions in human life when it is fit and becoming for a man "to make merry and be glad" (Luke xv. 32). Our blessed Lord himself countenanced with His presence the marriage entertainment at Cana of Galilee; and deigned even to work a miracle to contribute to the means of a temperate and thankful festivity. Still it remains true, that it is not in the house of feasting the best and most salutary lessons for the guidance of human life are usually learned. Enjoyment rather than improvement is that which is there ordinarily sought and found. And as for those who make it their business to frequent such scenes—those with whom the house of feasting is the favourite and familiar resort—it may be very safely affirmed concerning them, that they are getting little there that will profit them either for this life or for that which is to come. They are getting, in all probability, a growing distaste for the sobriety, and seriousness, and self-denial which enter so deeply into the Christian life; and are acquiring, in the stead of these virtues, an increasing desire for the indulgence of those fleshly lusts that war against the soul.

Still further to enforce the great truth which the 2d verse teaches, it is presented again in another form in the verse which follows. "Sorrow," it is there written, "is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better."

Such a sentiment may sound strangely in the ears of the gay and thoughtless; and they may be ready to set it down as the morose and cynical expression of a soured and discontented mind. It is the sentiment, notwithstanding, of the truest wisdom, and one which it greatly concerns our highest interests to study well. In itself, indeed, sorrow is an evil. It is one of the fruits of sin; and no sane mind would seek it for its own sake. But, like the bitter medicine of the physician, it is needful and salutary. Though "it seemeth not for the present joyous but grievous, nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruits of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Heb. xii. 11). "Before I was afflicted," says the Psalmist, recording his own experience of its efficacy, "I went astray; but now have I kept Thy word." And, accordingly, his unhesitating testimony upon the subject is this—"It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes" (Psalm cxix. 67, 71). Sorrow sobers and subdues the mind—it rebukes ambition—it humbles pride—it exposes the vanity of this world—it robs wealth and pleasure of their dazzling and deceitful glare—it suggests solemn thoughts as to the shortness and insecurity of time, and flashes often, into even the most careless mind, vivid and impressive views of those dread realities that belong to the world to come. Well, therefore, might Solomon say, that "sorrow is better than laughter." He had himself tried, as he tells us in an earlier chapter of this book, what laughter could do. He had said in his heart, "Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure." And what was the result? A brief experience constrained him to say "of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?" (ii. 1, 2.) Here, again, let it be distinctly understood, that no condemnation is intended, in the words before us, of that occasional and innocent hilarity which seems almost indispensable to a healthful state of the mind. What Solomon means to affirm is simply this, that the moral tendency and influence of sorrow upon the human heart and

mind are such as to make it better for us than the most exuberant mirth. It may be true that "he that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast" (Prov. xv. 15); but it is not less true that such a feast will do little for the wellbeing of the soul. Perpetual mirth is like perpetual sunshine—bright and pleasing to the eye, but hardening and exhausting to the soil. Sorrow is like the shower that softens the earth, and blesses the springing thereof. How often is it when the dark cloud of affliction blackens the heavens, and discharges from its burdened bosom its plenteous rain of tears, that the seeds of divine truth, that may have lain long unquicken in the heart, begin to break forth into life, and to take root downward, and bear fruit upward, to the praise of God's glorious grace!

For this reason, doubtless, it is that, as we find it written in the 4th verse, "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning." The wise—those who have been taught of God—those who have been brought to set their affections, not on the things which are beneath, but on those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God—are ever ready to weep with them that weep. Not only do they esteem it a duty to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to give to the sufferers the solace of their sympathy, and the support of their counsels and prayers; but they regard the house of mourning as a school in which very profitable lessons may be learned by themselves. They go there, accordingly—not as many do, with reluctant steps—not to perform a painful and most unwelcome ceremony; but to enjoy a privilege—the double privilege of doing and of getting good. Their heart is there, even when they are not there themselves. Though absent unavoidably in body, they are present in spirit—present in the sense of pondering the instruction which the house of mourning conveys, and of bearing the mourners upon their hearts at a throne of grace. How different is it with fools! Their heart is in the house of mirth. Sorrow is a spectre on which they cannot bear to look. To banish care—to escape

from the humbling contemplation of distress—to hasten out of the cold and gloomy shadow which death casts wherever it comes—and to bask and sport, like the insects of a day, in the sunshine of gaiety and pleasure—this is their aim. Do not those who pursue it deserve the name of fools? If the life of man were no more than meat, and the body no more than raiment—if man had no higher destiny than the beasts that perish—it might be enough for the possessors of so ephemeral and objectless an existence to say, “Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die!” But in what light does such a course appear when we view it as the choice of a creature made in the image of God—made for an immortality of communion with the great and glorious Author of his being! Well, indeed, it were for the fools of whom Solomon speaks, if man did occupy the low place to which they seem so willing to be degraded. But their folly cannot alter the momentous fact, that man is destined to live for ever—to be the heir “of glory, honour, and immortality” in heaven—or “of shame and everlasting contempt” in the place of woe. Let them listen, then, ere it be too late, to the solemn warning of our Lord, “Woe unto you that laugh now, for ye shall mourn and weep” (Luke vi. 25). Their giddy joys and thoughtless mirth they are buying at the price of a lost eternity!

Such remonstrances as these, Solomon well knew, would be utterly revolting and offensive to those for whom they were designed. But he would have them to bear in mind that “It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools.” The rebuke of the wise will not be given unless it be needed; and when it is needed it is the greatest favour a man can bestow. It is an expression of the truest friendship, and one which it often requires no small amount of moral courage and real self-sacrifice to utter. Nor is there any better test of a man’s character and spirit than the way in which such a rebuke is received. “Rebuke a wise man,” says Solomon elsewhere (Prov. ix. 8), “and he will love thee.” Solo-

mon's father was a wise man, and accordingly we hear him saying, "Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head: for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities" (Psalm cxli. 5). Instead of rejoicing when, in their turn, the rebukers might come, by some painful providence, to be themselves rebuked, he would then, on the contrary, recall the obligation under which their former faithfulness had laid him, and would be ready to succour them with his sympathy and his prayers. Not such is the return which the rebuke of the wise calls forth from the great majority of men. "He that reproveth a scorner getteth himself shame: and he that rebuketh a wicked man getteth himself a blot" (Prov. ix. 7). If it takes much wisdom to administer a rebuke—to choose the fitting time and tone—it takes hardly less, rightly to accept and use it. At the same time it is literally true to say, "He that hateth reproof is brutish" (Prov. xii. 1); and such a man will do well to lay to heart these solemn words—"He that, being often reprovèd, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy" (Prov. xxix. 1).

It is more agreeable, no doubt, to the self-complacency of human nature, "to hear the song of fools"—to go where there will be nothing to wound our pride or to suggest unpleasant thoughts. The song of fools may evidently here be taken for the amusements and blandishments of the world; and what Solomon would have us to believe and be assured of is, that the rebuke of the wise is better than these. Pre-eminently better than these is the rebuke of the only-wise God, and yet how often is even His rebuke wholly disregarded! He is rebuking sinners every day by his Word, and very often by his providence, too. By his Word he is continually condemning their folly and their sin, because they are careful and troubled about many things, and are wilfully and obstinately neglecting the one thing needful—because they are far more concerned at the thought of losing the world than of losing their souls. "How long," He

exclaims, "ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my Spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you." And because they still turn a deaf ear, alike to His earnest remonstrance and to His gracious promise, therefore has He subjoined these appalling words—"Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: for that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord: they would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them" (Prov. i. 22-32). Carnal and unbelieving men may think it better to hear the song of fools than to listen to this stern rebuke of Him who is the wisdom of God; but there is a day coming that shall terribly reveal the madness of their choice.

But while the Lord is thus continually rebuking sinners by His Word, he rebukes them also, often and very solemnly, by the dispensations of his providence. He rebukes them by those many undeserved mercies which they daily and yet unthankfully receive; and he rebukes them with the rod of those afflictions by which ever and anon they are chastened. And yet they continue deaf to the voice of the Divine Charmer, charm He never so wisely. What an affecting proof does such conduct afford of the deep depravity of man! Let God's own people beware of so slighting the visitations of the Almighty. When His hand is laid upon them in some heavy trial, let them

betake themselves to the prayer of David—"And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in thee. Deliver me from all my transgressions: make me not the reproach of the foolish. I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it. Remove thy stroke away from me: I am consumed by the blow of thine hand. When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity. Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were" (Psalm xxxix. 7-12).

To illustrate the emptiness and unprofitableness of that enjoyment in which the votaries of gaiety and pleasure seek their happiness, and which they think so greatly preferable to the humbling rebuke of the wise, and to the saddening scenes of the house of mourning, Solomon concludes the passage thus—"For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity." The comparison is not more striking than it is just. The thorns make but a poor fire. The blaze is bright, but it lasts only for a little moment. Soon and suddenly it dies away, and the momentary flash renders only more dismal and disheartening the darkness by which it is succeeded. What could more exactly describe the boisterous mirth of the fool? Follow to his own home the man who has been the most successful in this poor art of setting the table in a roar—the man whose gift in this way makes him the idol of every company in which he mingles—and what a spectacle does the retirement of his own chamber often exhibit! By what a painful reaction is the temporary excitement followed! His strength, his spirits, his time, his intellect, perhaps his money and his health too, have all been exhausted in an effort to turn other men's thoughts and his own away from the great realities of life—from the solemn contemplation of its duties and its responsibilities, and from the contemplation of its end. There is no satisfaction in the review of such a scene. There is, on the contrary, an irresistible con-

viction that it is all hollow and false. The blaze is over and the darkness has now come, and the senseless and extravagant mirth has left nothing behind it but a painful feeling of self-humiliation and disgust. Truly, "this also is vanity."

Let all, and more especially let the young understand and realize the truth which Solomon has here taught. It is at their age the fascinations of gaiety and pleasure exert their most fatal power, and the dissipation of mind which they then often produce becomes, in cases too numerous, the habit of the whole after-life. Let them be exhorted to shun this snare. "If sinners entice thee, consent thou not" (Prov. i. 10). Keep far away from them who say, "Come ye, I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink; and to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant" (Isa. lvi. 12). Seek rather the company and the counsel of those that fear God and keep his commandments. Covet and cultivate that good name—that favour with God and men—which is better than precious ointment. Turn not away from the house of mourning, and refuse not to hear the rebuke of the wise. Above all, let the life you live in the flesh be a life of faith upon the Son of God; and, following these counsels of heavenly wisdom, your path will be that of the just that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. Such a life of growing purity, and goodness, and usefulness on earth, wrought out in you by the grace and blessing of God's Holy Spirit, is the only fitting prelude and preparation for the society and the services of heaven.

Solomon, as has been already explained, is now leading us on to his grand ultimate conclusion, that true happiness consists in fearing God and keeping His commandments. This, and this only, is wisdom. To have it is to have that good name which is better than precious ointment, and which will make the day of one's death better than the day of one's birth. But how is it to be acquired? What are the circumstances, and what is the course of life, most favourable to its growth? Some things, in the way of answer to such inquiries as these, he has set before

us in the group of verses we have just been considering. If we would learn this wisdom, we must be oftener in the house of mourning than in the house of feasting. Sorrow is a better teacher of it than mirth. The rebuke of the wise, however humbling to our pride, will do far more to instruct us in it than the flattering song of fools. Like all other really valuable acquisitions, this wisdom is difficult of attainment. Flesh and blood may grudge those sacrifices without which it can never be secured. But, nevertheless, it is well worth them all. And this being the case, how necessary is it to be put upon our guard against the many dangers to which it is exposed? If we fail to watch carefully over it, we may, after all, be robbed of it by the assault of some sudden and violent temptation, or allured into the surrender of it by some insidious and artful snare.

It would seem to be with the design of stirring up to the exercise of this much-needed vigilance all those who are seeking after true wisdom, that the remaining verses at present before us were chiefly written. Nor is it unimportant to remark, that the fact now stated, sufficiently explains the abrupt transitions from one topic, to another which the passage exhibits. The statements and exhortations which it embraces may appear, at first view, unconnected and desultory; but, in reality, they are all very closely related to the main subject, which is, to vindicate the excellence of heavenly wisdom, and to remind us of the many ways in which we may be spoiled of this inestimable treasure.

Here are two of the ways in which this may be done—“Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad; and a gift destroyeth the heart.” On these two opposite sides, and by these two opposite methods of attack, may the fortress of wisdom be assailed and taken. Ill treatment, in the form of injustice or cruelty, may so exasperate the wise man’s feelings, and so inflame his passions, as entirely to overbear his better judgment, and to hurry him into some course of proceeding so rash and violent as grievously to injure the reputation for wisdom

he had previously enjoyed, and to furnish matter for bitter and humiliating self-reproach throughout the remainder of his life. We read of Moses, the meekest of men, that when "he spied an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand" (Exod. ii. 11, 12). It was an act of the very kind at which the words of Solomon point. Burning under a sense of the wrongs and injuries which his countrymen endured, and, in this mood of mind, coming suddenly in contact with the particular outrage described, even the peaceful Moses became a homicide. Wisdom, thrown off its guard, was overpowered by the vehement desire of revenge. That momentary fit of passion cost him dear. Instead of gaining, it rather lost him the confidence even of his brethren. Instead of mitigating, it doubtless served rather to aggravate the rigours of their condition. It drove him out of Egypt, and had it not been for the grace and goodness of God, it might have deprived him for ever of the glorious distinction of being the deliverer of his people. Nor was this the only instance in which even a man so eminently wise as Moses suffered his better judgment to be thus overborne. When the people "chode with him in Kadesh," and forgetful of all the great things he had both done and suffered for their sake, broke out into actual rebellion against him, thinking more of his own personal provocation than of the dishonour that was done to God, he gave utterance to words which brought down upon him the divine displeasure, and shut him out from the Promised Land. We cannot fail, indeed, to pity the wise man who is thus betrayed into madness; nor will his madness lessen our detestation of the conduct by which it was produced. We sympathize with him, even when we cannot justify him; and the very desperation to which he is driven serves only to present, in a more hateful light, the oppression which led him astray. But we must not, on this account, forget the lesson which it is Solomon's design to teach, and which it is so needful for us to learn.

In speaking of that lesson, reference has hitherto been made

to that extremer class of cases which the strong language before us naturally suggests. But there are other cases of a more common and familiar kind by which the same truth is taught. Ill usage, though coming very far short of anything to which the name of oppression could be fitly applied, too often tempts even wise and good men to speak so unadvisedly with their lips, or to commit such practical indiscretions in their conduct, as seriously to tarnish their Christian character, and greatly to weaken their Christian influence. To be misjudged and opposed—to encounter what it is hard for human nature to bear—is only what every faithful servant of Christ must lay his account with in this present evil world. “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus,” says the apostle Paul, “shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. iii. 12). The Christian, therefore, has need of patience—has need to drink deeper every day into the spirit of Him whom no oppression could for a moment seduce from that magnanimity and benignity which never failed to return good for evil, and to repay a curse with a blessing.

It is not, however, on the side of wounded self-love and irritated passions alone that the wise man may be betrayed into folly. The snare that leads him astray may be of a precisely opposite kind. There is a fable which tells that the cloak which the tempest, with its utmost fury, was not able to strip from the traveller,—which it served, on the contrary, only to make him clasp more firmly and to wrap more closely around him,—the warm sunshine easily succeeded in inducing him to throw aside. And so it has often proved, that the integrity which no amount of injustice and cruelty could shake, has yielded to the fascinations of flattery and favour. Hence the need of cautioning even the wise man, that “a gift destroyeth the heart.” A gift here is evidently synonymous with a bribe. “And thou shalt take no gift,” said the Lord, in giving His statutes and His judgments to ancient Israel, “for the gift blindeth the wise, and perverteth the judgments of the righteous” (Exod. xxiii. 8). To the same purpose it is written

in the book of Proverbs, "He that receiveth gifts overthroweth judgment. A man that flattereth his neighbours spreadeth a net for his feet" (xxix. 4, 5). It was the saying of a great Roman commander, that no fortress was impregnable up to whose gates a beast of burden could carry a sack of gold. It was a stinging satire upon human nature; but history, both ancient and modern, has lent, there is cause to fear, only too much countenance to its truth. Even when the gift is presented in a much less gross and palpable form than that of a money bribe, its power to corrupt the mind and to bias its decisions is often painfully great. How often, in the history of the Christian church, have courtly honours and flatteries ensnared into courses of the most grievous defection, men who at one time had stood prominent among the champions of truth and duty! In the memorable history of the church of our native land instances not a few may be found in which, under the seductive arts to which I have just alluded, the glorious change in the career of Paul was literally reversed—in which men became persecutors of the faith which once they had preached—bitter enemies of the very cause to which they had originally and solemnly devoted their lives. So true is it that a gift destroyeth the heart. The man who permits himself, for any worldly consideration, to tamper with the dictates of conscience and the claims of Christ, is taking the most effectual means to deprave his own mind, to blind and to blunt his moral sense, to destroy all that is noble, manly, and independent in his character and spirit, and to degrade himself to the low level of a time-serving tool of the world.

In the exposition now given of this verse I have followed the sense of our English translation. From that translation, however, some commentators on the passage have thought fit to depart; not because the original does not fairly enough bear out that translation, but because the construction thus put on Solomon's words does not seem to them to comport with Solomon's design in using them. Their assumption is, that

Solomon's design here is to sound the praises of wisdom; and they have, accordingly, endeavoured to make the verse read thus—"Surely oppression gives lustre to a wise man, while the gifts of fortune corrupt the heart." And true, no doubt, it is, that the very darkness and terribleness of a wise man's adversities serve sometimes to make his virtues shine out with a clearer and more impressive light; and true it also is, that great worldly prosperity is too often fatal to the growth of piety and spirituality of mind. But it is a fundamental objection to this view of the verse, that it cannot be reached without a somewhat violent straining of the original. It bends the words to a preconceived sense, instead of making that preconceived sense bend to the words. But, furthermore, the sense which our English Bible gives is in the most perfect keeping with the general scope of the passage to which the verse belongs. Solomon had shown in the foregoing context how wisdom—true, spiritual, heavenly wisdom—is best promoted. He is showing here how it is most endangered. In doing this he brings before us two different and opposite ways in which it is often fatally assailed. There is a natural and beautiful antithesis between oppression and a gift. The one drives the wise man out of the right path; the other allures him away from it. And this leading idea, brought out in the 7th verse, may without difficulty be traced in several of the verses that follow—a circumstance which obviously tends very strongly to confirm the interpretation on which we have proceeded, as really conveying the true and intended meaning of Solomon's words.

"Better," he goes on to say, "is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit than the proud in spirit." Even as a general proposition, the first half of this saying may easily be made good. The end of a thing is better than the beginning of a thing, because not until it has reached the end can we rightly apprehend or fully estimate its destined scope and issue. A thing in the outset may look very dark and disastrous, which turns out, in the long run, to be full of benefit

and blessing. The beginning of Joseph's captivity, when his brethren sold him to the Ishmaelites, seemed to be an overwhelming calamity; but in the end it appeared in a totally different light. Time proved that what his envious brethren meant for evil, God meant for good: they sent him to Egypt that he might live and die in unknown and hopeless obscurity; but God was sending him thither to exalt him to honour, and to save even the lives of those who hated him, with a great deliverance. There is no child of God whose life may not furnish many illustrations of the same truth. Events of which, in their first aspect, he would have been tempted to say, "All these things are against me," he at length discovers to have been, of all others, the most conducive to his highest welfare. And the reverse of this statement is equally important and equally true. Occurrences which, at the moment they took place, seemed full of the promise of good, are seen afterwards to be pregnant with evil. But while it thus evidently requires little effort to vindicate the soundness of the maxim which the words in question express, it is only when we come to connect it with the statements of the preceding verse that we recognize its relevancy to the particular discourse into which Solomon has introduced it. If the wise man had waited to see the end of those oppressions by which he suffered himself to be so greatly moved, he would have learned to regard them with greater calmness; and would have been far less in danger of losing his usual equanimity, and of being driven into those intemperate acts or expressions into which the madness of the hour betrayed him.

And hence it follows, as an observation equally natural and just, that "The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit." Had the wise man been less proud and more patient, he would, in all probability, have escaped the loss and injury to his good name, as well as to his own peace of mind, which his temporary excitement and exasperation involved. A proud spirit takes fire at once, and provocation hurries it into many

a rash utterance and foolish deed. A patient spirit comes in aid of the decisions which wisdom is disposed to pronounce. It takes time to reflect, instead of giving way to the first headlong impulse. Pride lends fuel to feed the flame of passion and violence. Patience keeps down the fire, and quells the tumult; and thus secures for wisdom the leisure and the calmness which, in such circumstances, it so especially needs, in order to judge righteous judgment. The man, therefore—and this is the lesson Solomon has it here in view to teach—who desires to possess and to retain true wisdom, must be at pains to cultivate patience and to discourage pride.

The same lesson is still further enforced in the 9th verse, in which Solomon subjoins this appropriate exhortation—"Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools." If anger be sometimes needful, it is always perilous. The occasion may arise when even the wise man, the true child of God, does "well to be angry;" but certain it is that he can never be angry without being much tempted to sin. The state of mind which that term describes ought to be watched with peculiar vigilance, and especially by those who know it to be a state of mind to which they are prone to give way. "He that is soon angry," says Solomon elsewhere, "dealeth foolishly" (Prov. xiv. 17.) The man that is "hasty in his spirit" is hurried, by every breath that ruffles his irritable temper, into some rash saying or unbecoming deed. Nothing more completely blinds a man to consequences than the passion of anger. How often has it broken in a moment the friendships of a life, and made its unhappy victim the perpetrator of deeds that have involved him in lasting shame and ruin! Considering how fierce and ungovernable is the tempest which it raises in the human breast, it was with good reason Solomon declared in the book of Proverbs, that "he who is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city" (Prov. xvi. 32). It is one of the gracious and encouraging testimonies which Scripture has given us concerning God, that "He is slow to anger" (Neh. ix.

17), and that "neither will he keep his anger for ever" (Psalm ciii. 9); that "His anger endureth but for a moment" (Psalm xxx. 5). And yet what infinitely greater cause has God for being angry, and for retaining his anger against us, than we can ever have in the case even of our most-offending fellowmen! Did His wrath burn and break forth against the sinner as suddenly and vehemently as does the sinner's wrath against his offending brother, there is not a day or an hour in which the sinner might not be consumed.

If the wise man, under the pressure of persistent wrong and injury, be at length roused to anger, he will not nurse his wrath—he will not foster and cherish so perilous a frame of mind. Anger will not be suffered to *rest* in him. It "resteth only in the bosom of fools." Assuredly he is a fool in the most emphatic sense of the word who harbours such a guest. He is taking the most effectual means to destroy his own happiness and peace. No man can suffer half so much from this baneful passion as the man who indulges it. It eats like a corrosive acid into his own spirit, and fills it with bitterness (Eph. iv. 26). Those, therefore, who, by the force of some sudden and sore temptation—or who, under the influence of circumstances that may have seemed to justify such a state of feeling, have at any time been provoked to anger, will do well to beware of continuing to cherish it. Their safety consists in speedily dismissing it. For let it only be fanned into a flame by brooding over the occasion of it, and ere long it may snap, like threads of tow in the fire, all those restraints which reason, and conscience, and Christian principle would otherwise have imposed upon its violence; and may hurry its victims headlong into some excess or outrage such as shall bring down upon them the malediction that fell upon Simeon and Levi of old—"Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel" (Gen. xlix. 7). Hence the need of pondering that beautiful exhortation of the apostle Paul, "Let not the sun go down upon thy wrath" (Eph. iv. 26). The departing day reminds us of de-

parting life, and of the coming night when no man can work—when there will remain only the dread account we have to give of the deeds done in the body. If the closing day naturally suggests to the Christian such thoughts as these, and calls him, under a sense of the manifold offences he has committed against God, to seek anew for the forgiveness he needs through the blood of the Lamb, how can he dare to ask or to expect that God will cease to be angry with him, if he himself be, at the same moment, carrying to his couch an unforgiving spirit? To suffer anger thus to rest in our bosom is literally, as the language of the apostle, in the passage already alluded to, plainly intimates, “to give place to the devil.” It is to open a door and smooth a way for his entrance into our souls; it is virtually to surrender ourselves into his hands. Anger is near of kin to hatred. He who cherishes the one will soon be found indulging the other; and Scripture tells us that “he who hateth his brother is a murderer” (1 John iii. 15); he is animated, that is to say, with the spirit of a destroyer—the very spirit of him of whom this is the terrible mark, that he was a murderer from the beginning.

The connection is not obvious between the 10th verse and those which immediately precede it. The link, however, that joins it to the context probably lies here. Solomon had spoken of oppression as making a wise man mad; and, having respect to the provocation such a state of things implies, and to the consequent danger of losing the command of one’s own mind amid its harassing trials, he proceeded to commend that patience which waits for the issue of things, and to condemn that hasty and resentful spirit that kindles at a touch, and flames out on the instant in rash words and deeds. Now, in a time of such oppression, one of the rash conclusions at which an impatient mind might very readily be tempted to arrive would be this—that his lot had fallen on peculiarly evil times. Solomon accordingly anticipates such an occurrence, and addresses the supposed murmurer thus—“Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not

inquire wisely concerning this." The tendency here pointed at—to over-estimate the past and to undervalue the present—is one that is very common, and most especially, perhaps, among good men. They are painfully affected by the evils which they see around them—by the ignorance, immorality, and impiety which they know to prevail among large classes of the existing generation—and by the little amount which they can discover of self-sacrificing zeal and holy devotedness even among the people of God. On the other hand, they dwell with a fond enthusiasm on the traditions which have been handed down of the godliness of other times. In our own country, for example, the Willisons and Bostons, the Bruces and Rutherfords, the Wisharts and Hamiltons, of our earlier history, shed a lustre on the periods to which they respectively belonged, in comparison with which the religious life of the present day is made to appear feeble and cold. And truly, when the question is asked, "What is the cause that the former days were better than these?" it is not always wisely that this question is considered. There is a previous inquiry that is very often overlooked, and that is,—Whether what we assume to be a fact be actually true? Are we sure that the former days really were "better than these?" True, indeed, the former days did produce noble specimens of faith and goodness—men whose names must be held in everlasting remembrance. Moses and Daniel, Paul and John—where now are such men to be found? But be it so that we look around us in vain to find graces and gifts that will match with theirs, it does not follow, by any means, that the days in which they lived were better than ours. When we recall the fact to mind that Moses was the contemporary of that stiff-necked and rebellious generation whose carcasses fell in the wilderness—that Daniel's bright name shone amid the darkness of an age whose aggravated iniquities brought on the heavy judgment of the Babylonish captivity—that Paul and John belonged to a time when the nations were but beginning to emerge from universal heathenism—when men of God had trial

of their faith in cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover, in bonds and imprisonments—when they were stoned, were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword—and when even the churches of Christ were full of such errors and corruptions as we read of in the epistles to the Corinthians, or in those to the seven churches of Asia—When we recall to mind facts like these, the subject begins to present itself in a totally different point of view; and instead of envying the former days, we are rather moved to give God thanks and praise that those days were not our own, and that we have fallen on far other and better times.

This, then, is one way in which men often fail to inquire wisely as to the superiority of other and earlier periods of the world's and the church's history. They found their inquiry on an entire mistake. As regards even the favoured land of our birth, whose religious history has so many epochs and incidents on which we love to dwell—and to some of which we are so ready to assign the character of Scottish piety's golden age—there cannot, after all, be any reasonable doubt in the minds of those who are competent to form an opinion on the subject, that with all its defects—and they are many and great—the present day will bear a most advantageous comparison with any that has ever preceded it. Looking back over those remoter periods is like casting one's eye over a mountain landscape about the time of the going down of the sun. We are fascinated with the glory of that radiance that gilds the summits of the everlasting hills, and forget the darkness that covers the vales. The few names that towered aloft, bright with the hues of heaven, above the common mass of men, attract our eye; and while we fondly gaze upon the few, we all but forget the many. While we venerate the memory, and strive to catch the spirit and to emulate the deeds of the saints of old, let us not be blind to the fact, that their days were not better than ours. They knew much of that oppression which maketh a wise man mad, while we sit under our vine and fig tree in safety and peace, none making us afraid.

We enjoy means and opportunities for the diffusion of the gospel, at home and abroad, such as to them were in great measure unknown. Attempts to convert the heathen had then been all but abandoned. Now they constitute one of the most characteristic and grandest features of the age. And though it be, indeed, mournfully true, that every form of evil, and every class and combination of Antichristian influence are actively at work—imbued with fresh life and energy, and busy everywhere,—blessed be God it is also true that the servants of the Most High, the friends and followers of Him who is the Truth, have also been “holpen with a little help;” and are coming forth, with something of the church’s first love and zeal, to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty.

But, again, men often fail to inquire wisely as to the difference between the present and former days, by not sufficiently considering God’s hand and purpose in the state of things of which they are disposed to complain. In a time of actual oppression, such as Solomon seems to have had more especially in his eye, this source of misapprehension might naturally be expected to be extensively prevalent. When persecution, for example, broke out upon the infant church at Jerusalem, in connection with the martyrdom of Stephen, and when Saul of Tarsus and the myrmidons of the Jewish Sanhedrim were haling men and women to prison, the little flock of disciples might be tempted to regard the event as an unmitigated evil, fraught with nothing but ruin, and to sigh for the period of tranquillity by which it had been preceded. But when they had subsequently learned to recognize the working of that overruling hand which made the dispersion of the apostles and evangelists the means of hastening the spread of the gospel—how, in short, the persecution that was meant to extinguish that hallowed fire was, in fact, only spreading it abroad, and kindling the world into that blaze of heavenly truth, in which both Judaism and heathenism shall be finally consumed, and by which the knowledge of the glory of the Lord shall be made to enlighten every land—when

they had learned to understand this, their sorrow and despondency would be turned into hope and joy.

Might we not find an illustration of the same truth in much more recent times? In the spring of 1843, when a long and agitating controversy in the Scottish church was on the point of reaching its startling climax in the dismemberment of that ancient and honoured institution;—when the minds of many were failing them for fear, and for looking on those things that were coming upon the land, and more immediately on their own families and on themselves;—when it seemed as if those terribly significant words of the Lord Jesus were receiving a new fulfilment, “Think ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division;”—and when, as of old, there were often five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three; the father against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother;—in those eventful and anxious days, when an earthquake was shaking the whole ecclesiastical framework of our country, and threatening, by the confusion and disorder it was likely to create, to serve no interest but that of the common enemy, what lamentation there was over that trying and painful season, and what wistful looking back to the peaceful and prosperous times that seemed to have passed for ever away! To those who were then, in effect, asking, “What is the cause that the former days were better than these?” how justly might it have been replied, “Thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this.” They were overlooking the hand and purpose of God, and forgetting His plan and His power to bring light out of darkness and good out of evil, and to make even the wrath of man to praise Him! Better, truly, is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof. The day that dawned in so lowering a sky has broken out into a glorious sunshine. The thunder and the lightnings that rent the firmament have passed away, and the heavens are calm, and the atmosphere is fresh and clear, and the earth, made soft with the stormy

shower, is yielding a larger spiritual increase than before. A noble and enduring testimony has been lifted up for conscience and for Christian truth. The world has been taught, by a new and impressive example, that there is a reality in religious belief; that faith in God and His Christ is not an empty name. The obligation to honour God with our substance—the grace, in other words, of Christian liberality—has been developed and strengthened to a degree which, as compared with former times, seems altogether marvellous; while an impulse has, at the same time, been given throughout many churches and many lands to every work of faith and labour of love. In a word, that which frowned upon us only a few years ago as a formidable calamity, has ushered in a time of reviving and refreshing from the presence of the Lord, and has produced results which constrain even the most thoughtless, with mingled wonder and gratitude, to exclaim—What hath God wrought?

And what, then, is the sum of these things? Is it not this—Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is? He that believeth shall not make haste. The most cruel oppression shall not unduly discompose his mind. He will not fear them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. He has learned how good it is that a man should both hope, and quietly wait, for the salvation of God. “Therefore will not we fear though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea” (Psalm xli. 2).

CHAPTER XI.

PRAISES AND FRUITS OF WISDOM.

“Wisdom is good with an inheritance; and *by it there is profit* to them that see the sun. For wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence; but the excellency of knowledge is, *that wisdom giveth life* to them that have it.

“Consider the work of God: for who can make *that* straight which he hath made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him.

“All *things* have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just *man* that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked *man* that prolongeth *his life* in his wickedness. Be not righteous over-much; neither make thyself over-wise: why shouldst thou destroy thyself? Be not over-much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldst thou die before thy time? *It is good* that thou shouldst take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all.

“Wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty *men* which are in the city. For *there is not* a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

“Also take no heed unto all words that are spoken; lest thou hear thy servant curse thee: for oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others.

“All this have I proved by wisdom: I said, I will be wise; but it *was* far from me. That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who can find it out?

“I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason *of things*, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness: and I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her. Behold, this have I found (saith the Preacher), *counting* one by one, to find out the account; which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found. Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.”—ECCLES. VII. 11-29.

THE statement in praise of wisdom which Solomon makes in the outset of the above passage appears, at first view, somewhat equivocal. To say that “wisdom is good with an inheritance,” might seem to imply that in itself, and alone, it is of no great value; and this is, in point of fact, a very common and popular

opinion. Wisdom, if it be associated with wealth, has a venerable name; but, if wedded to poverty, the world is seldom disposed to pay it any great homage. In the vocabulary, indeed, of a very large class of men, wealth and wisdom mean pretty nearly the same thing. The wise man who knows everything but the art of making money they regard as a fool; while the millionaire who, with a lamentable deficiency of higher gifts, has contrived to amass a fortune, receives all the deference and consideration due to the man who is pre-eminently wise. It can need no argument to prove that Solomon could never mean to lend any countenance to so gross a method of estimating the worth of things. True it is that wisdom when combined with wealth may justly be said to acquire additional weight and force, in so far as wealth puts it in the wise man's power to exert a larger and more beneficial influence upon society. Not only does it predispose many to listen with greater respect to his counsels, but it enables him to take the lead in a multitude of enterprises by which his piety and philanthropy may be brought, most advantageously, to bear on the personal and social improvement of his fellowmen. Nor is it less true that even the amplest inheritance without wisdom is but a poor possession; without wisdom it will, in all probability, be soon squandered and lost, or so used as to bring little credit or comfort to its owner, and to be of no real service to those around him. But all this would be obviously beside the mark as regards the design of Solomon's discourse. His design is to commend wisdom; but this would rather be to commend wealth.

These considerations would naturally set any thoughtful reader of the passage, in quest of an outlet from the difficulty which the words, as they stand, so plainly involve. Nor is it needful to go far in order to find it. Our explanation of the perplexing word in the verse will be at once aided and vindicated by a reference to verse 16, chapter ii. That verse, in our English version, runs thus: "There is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever." Rendered literally, the Hebrew reads as fol-

lows:—"There is no remembrance for the wise *with* the fool for ever." But as in this case, the preposition 'with' evidently and necessarily means 'equally with,' or 'like as,' the translators of our English Bible have correctly employed a corresponding form of expression. The examples indeed are numerous in which the word in question is used in this way, of making a comparison of one thing with another. Now, it is this same word that occurs in this other verse at present under consideration; and we have only to construe it here in the same way, in order to arrive at a meaning altogether satisfactory. Solomon is here speaking in praise of wisdom, and what he says of it is this: That it is good *with*—that is, equally with, or like as—an inheritance. He is not to be understood as asserting or allowing that it is no better than an inheritance. By and bye he will show it to be greatly better. But for the present he limits himself to the statement, that it is good or valuable even as an estate or inheritance is good or valuable. "Wisdom is good, like as an inheritance is good: and by it there is profit to them that see the sun;" that is, by wisdom there is profit not to one class only, but to all living men. How does this appear? It appears in this way: that though it be quite true that an inheritance—a fortune, money, in short—confers some important advantages, so that one may say truly enough "Wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence," yet the unspeakable superiority of the one over the other is proved by this great and unquestionable fact, that while the benefits of money are material and temporal, those of wisdom are spiritual and eternal. In a word, "the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it."

Taking then, Solomon's words in the opening verse of this passage, in the sense now explained, let us consider the grounds on which he rests the statement they contain. In doing so it can hardly be necessary to remark that the wisdom of which he designs to speak, is not mere intellectual knowledge, or human sagacity, or worldly prudence, but wisdom in the highest sense—the wisdom

which consists in fearing God and keeping His commandments. By this wisdom there is profit to them that see the sun; profit, that is to say, by way of eminence—profit in such a sense and to such a degree as can by no other means be attained. The profit of an earthly inheritance is not only limited, uncertain, and transitory, but there is this drawback in addition, that only a few can hope to acquire it. Wisdom, on the other hand—the knowledge, the fear, and the favour of God—may become the possession of all. To this best inheritance “not many mighty, not many noble are called;” but God hath “chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which He hath promised to them that love Him” (James ii. 5). While they see the sun—so long as they are still in the land of the living and in the place of hope—this treasure is within their reach, and may be had for the seeking; “For if any of you lack wisdom,” says an inspired apostle, “let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James i. 5). Now, if any inquire wherein lies the superiority of wisdom over wealth—of the heavenly over the earthly treasure—the answer is ready, and it is complete. In giving that answer Solomon means no disparagement to a worldly inheritance. He freely allows that “money is a defence;” as he says elsewhere, “The rich man’s wealth is his strong city” (Prov. x. 15). It keeps want from his door. It surrounds him with conveniences and comforts in which the poor can seldom share. It gives him an easy command of all those human resources by which health is preserved and restored. “The rich, moreover, hath many friends.” His money is a defence against that neglect to which the poor man is so often exposed in this selfish world. As Solomon himself testifies in a later chapter of this book, “Money answereth all things.” It is the master-key that unlocks every door in the great store-house of this world’s possessions and pleasures. But will even those who make the most of this fact deny that wisdom too is a defence, and a defence of a far better and more perfect kind? Money may defend its

owner from a certain class of physical evils, but it can do nothing to shield him from those far more formidable moral evils, which bring ruin upon the immortal soul. It cannot protect him against the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. On the contrary, it lays him only the more open to their perilous assaults. And hence that terribly significant saying of our Lord: "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God" (Matt. x. 23). But wisdom—heavenly wisdom—arms him against all these foes, and teaches him, as its first great lesson, what he must do to be saved; and it disposes him, at the same time, to choose that good part which shall not be taken away; and in so doing it enables him, humbly and calmly, to bid defiance to the devil, the flesh, and the world. In acquainting him with God, it gives him a peace which the world's greatest prosperity cannot confer, and of which its direst adversity cannot deprive him. Wisdom, therefore, is a defence for all the best and highest interests of man; and the excellency which distinguishes it above any earthly inheritance is this, that it "giveth life to them that have it."

In that beautiful and remarkable impersonation of wisdom which Solomon has set before us in chapter viii. of the book of Proverbs, and which is so evident a shadowing forth of Him who is emphatically "the Wisdom of God," the sons of men are addressed in such words as these: "Receive my instruction, and not silver; and knowledge rather than choice gold. For wisdom is better than rubies, and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it. . . . Now, therefore, hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death" (*v.* 10, 11, 32–36). Is not this the utterance of the same voice which in after ages thus spake upon earth, in that ever-memorable intercessory

prayer which is recorded in chapter xvii. of the gospel of John: "Father, the hour is come: glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee: as thou hast given him power over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (1-3). This saving knowledge—partially revealed in the days of Solomon, but now fully disclosed in the glorious gospel—is the only wisdom that "giveth life to them that have it." For "this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life" (1 John v. 11, 12). Money can do nothing to procure this inestimable blessing: and yet without it how worthless is the greatest earthly inheritance which any son of Adam can ever receive! "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark viii. 36, 37). Well, therefore, might Solomon say, as he does in the book of Proverbs (iv. 5-9, 13): "Get wisdom, get understanding: forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth. Forsake her not, and she shall preserve thee: love her, and she shall keep thee. Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. Exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honour when thou dost embrace her. She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver unto thee. . . . Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life." It is substantially the same counsel as that which Paul gives to Timothy, when, in chapter iii. (14, 15) of his second epistle, he wrote to him in these words: "But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus."

Having thus asserted and vindicated the infinite superiority

of heavenly wisdom to all earthly possessions, Solomon proceeds to address certain practical and important counsels to all those who desire to follow its dictates: "Consider," says he, "the work of God." It is the folly and the sin of unspiritual men that, in observing the course of events, they make little or no account of the hand and purpose of the supreme Ruler. They have a quick eye to discern the second causes—the immediate agencies and instruments through which certain results are brought about; but what God may have to do with these results, or whether He have anything to do with them at all, is a thought with which they seldom trouble their minds. But Solomon would have us to understand, as the first lesson on this subject which divine wisdom teaches, that the Lord reigneth, that the hairs of our head are all numbered, and that "without Him not even a sparrow falleth to the ground." We are not in a position to judge aright of the things that are befalling us, or to be suitably affected by them, until we come to consider them as "the work of God." "He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest thou?" (Dan. iv. 35). Vain man, in his ignorance and presumption, may arraign the fitness of this or the other providential arrangement; and in his impatient selfishness may fret and murmur at the personal loss or suffering it may have entailed upon him, or at the obstacles it may have placed in the way of the success of his own worldly schemes. Even the people of God may, and do often give way, in a measure, to the same unbecoming spirit; and all from failing duly "to consider the work of God." To check and subdue such a spirit, Solomon, in the first place, reminds those who indulge it, that it is all to no purpose. In rebelling against the ordinations of providence they are only fighting with omnipotence—kicking against the pricks. They may and must, in pursuing such a course, injure themselves, but they cannot affect or alter the purpose of Him whose counsel shall stand, and who will do all his pleasure.

“Who can make that straight which He hath made crooked?” Solomon does not mean, in so saying, to teach or countenance the revolting doctrines of fatalism; he does not mean that we are to regard ourselves as being in the iron grasp of a blind and remorseless power, that gives no heed to what we say, or think, or do; and in regard to which we have no resource but passively to leave ourselves in its hands. The government of God, in so far as it concerns His moral, rational, and responsible creatures, is a government in harmony with their nature and condition. It is a government which appeals to their reason and to their conscience; which demands their submission on the ground, not more of its sovereign authority than of its absolute and unchangeable rectitude; and which, by its rewards and punishments, presents the strongest motives to cease from evil and to learn to do well. But, under this government, man is the subject and God is the Ruler. It is His will—the will of the only wise, just, and holy Jehovah, and not that of His ignorant, erring, and fallen creature—that is to decide what shall be. Let man, therefore, humbly and reverently acquiesce in what the Lord is pleased to ordain as to his earthly estate. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

God’s ways, it is true, are not our ways, neither are His thoughts our thoughts; neither doth He give account of His matters. His plan and purpose are often shrouded in mystery. Events are ever and anon taking place in regard to which His way is in the sea, and His path in the great waters, and His footsteps are not known (Psalm lxxvii. 19). The son, that was the stay and hope of a widowed mother, dies. The mother, on whom some little group of helpless children leaned for counsel and for care, is taken from the midst of them, and they are left alone. The youth full of promise, when his long and laborious training for some high and honourable walk of life has just been completed, is struck down at the very outset of his career, like some noble and richly-laden bark that founders in the very act of putting to sea. The man of matured wisdom and worth—

the very prop and pillar of the church or community to which he belonged—falls before some fatal disease at the very moment when his services seemed to be most needed. Be it so. Our part is to say, with David, “I was dumb, I opened not my mouth, because thou didst it” (Psalm xxxix. 9); or with Job, “The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (i. 21).

It is not enough, however, that we accept what the Lord is thus pleased to send. We must study, and strive to learn and improve the lessons, which the dispensation, of whatever nature it be, is designed to teach. Afflictions are meant to exercise us in one way, and propitious events in another; therefore, says Solomon, “In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider.”

It is not only natural, but suitable, that we should be glad when some dreaded calamity has been averted, or when some important benefit has been received. Giving expression to this law of our nature in the parable of the prodigal son, the father is made by our Saviour to say, in reply to the querulous complaint of the elder brother, “It was meet that we should make merry and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found” (Luke xv. 32). The joy, it is true, which the day of prosperity should call forth, is not the boastful exultation of gratified pride, nor the heartless glee of successful selfishness. “I will punish,” said the Lord, “the fruit of the stout heart of the King of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks. For he saith, by the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom; for I am prudent.” Such an irreverent forgetfulness of God, and vainglorious magnifying of the arm of flesh, is as if the “axe should boast itself against him that heweth therewith, or as if the saw should magnify itself against him that shaketh it; as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up; or as if the staff should lift up itself as if it were no wood” (Isaiah x. 12–15). The first movement of the heart’s joy in the day of prosperity should be

an act of worship, in devout and grateful acknowledgment of Him from whom every good gift and every perfect gift cometh down. "It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises to thy name, O Most High : to shew forth thy loving-kindness in the morning, and thy faithfulness every night. . . . For thou, Lord, hast made me glad through thy work : I will triumph in the works of thy hands" (Psalm xcii. 1, 2, 4). Alas! that prosperity, instead of thus drawing the soul nearer to the great fountain of all blessedness, should, on the contrary, serve so often only to wed it more closely to the world! It is in this way that "the prosperity of fools shall destroy them" (Prov. i. 32). As was exemplified in the case of Israel of old, "Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked: thou art waxen fat, thou art grown thick, thou art covered with fatness: *then* he forsook God which made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation." Therefore the Lord said, "I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be" (Deut. xxxii. 15, &c). Solomon himself had painfully illustrated, in his own personal history, this fatal tendency of outward prosperity to alienate the heart from God. The wisdom, and wealth, and power with which the Lord had so remarkably endowed him, became his snare. In that dark season of spiritual declension he tried to be joyful. He said in his heart, Go to; I will prove thee with mirth. He withheld not his heart from any joy; from any joy, that is, but one. He had ceased to joy in God. And how empty and unsatisfying did his earthly joys prove! Of the best of them he had nothing better than this to say, "It is vanity." When he, therefore, with all this experience, says, "In the day of prosperity be joyful," let us be well assured he does not mean us to repeat his own error; but rather that, taking warning from that error, we should turn every blessing we receive, whether temporal or spiritual, into a fresh argument for stirring up our souls and all that is within us, to praise and magnify the great name of our God.

As much as joyfulness becomes the day of prosperity, so much

does sobriety and thoughtfulness become a day of distress. "In the day of adversity consider." The exhortation is general. It condescends on no particulars; but it is, notwithstanding, singularly suggestive. Who can be at a loss, in the circumstances pointed at, for materials of consideration? Our first duty is to "Hear the rod, and who hath appointed it;" to recognize the visitation as from the Lord. "Affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground" (Job v. 6). We consider it to very little purpose if we look no further, and no deeper, than to the outward means through which the calamity may have assailed us. And, further, while we trace it up to God, and, therefore, humble ourselves under His mighty hand, we must be at pains to learn for what end it has been sent. "Is there not a cause?" "He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men" (Lam. iii. 33). For their own pleasure merely, earthly fathers may chastise their children; but there is neither caprice nor passion with our Father who is in heaven. When He chastens, it is not for His pleasure, but "for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness" (Heb. xii. 10). In the day of adversity, then, let us consider wherefore it is that the Lord has found it needful so to deal with us. In the affliction that has overtaken us, has He been breaking some idol that was getting too strong a hold, and too engrossing a place in our hearts? Or has He been rending asunder some of those insidious ties that were binding us too closely to the world? Or has He been disciplining us for some approaching work of sore sacrifice and self-denial which He has in store for us to do; and for the doing of which the present adversity is part of the fitting and needful preparation? Or is it that we have been giving way to some secret sin, in which the Lord would thus have us to know that He has found us out, and that by this blow which he has struck at our fortune, or family, or health, He is, sternly and yet graciously, bidding us "Go and sin no more, lest a worse thing befall us." If in the day of adversity we are at pains, humbly

and prayerfully, to consider such things as these, we shall not fail to find, that though "No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous but grievous, nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruits of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Heb. xii. 11).

In this life God hath wisely intermingled sorrows and joys. Neither the one nor the other, alone and exclusively, is adapted to our present probationary state of being. It is by the tempering of the one with the other that a state of things is produced, the most favourable to the sanctification of the soul, and to the growth and development of the moral and spiritual nature of man. "God also hath set the one over against the other," says Solomon, "to the end that man should find nothing after Him." The latter part of this sentence is somewhat obscure. It seems doubtful whether the expression "after Him," should not rather have been rendered "*against* Him." Either way the meaning of the words appears to be substantially this—that God hath thus wisely meted out and proportioned prosperity and adversity in the lot of man, so as to manifest His own unerring wisdom, and to leave no room for any to complain. We may think, indeed, before we have seen the true tendency and final issue of things, that we could have found out a better way,—that if we had come after God, and been permitted to revise His plans, we could have corrected them, or at least have discovered some materials for bringing an accusation "against" Him. "For," as Zophar, the Naamathite, truly said, "vain man would be wise, though man be born like a wild ass's colt" (Job xi. 12). But God will be justified in His sayings, and will overcome when He is judged. He has so adjusted His providence to the wants and the welfare of the human race, that if we fail to profit by His dispensations towards us, the fault assuredly is not His but ours.

Leaving this important subject, of the manner in which it becomes wisdom to deal with the work and the ways of God, Solomon turns, at the 15th verse, to one of those stumbling-blocks, in connection with divine providence, by which even the

wise man may be perplexed and discomposed. "All things," he observes, "have I seen in the days of my vanity; there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that longeth his life in his wickedness." Solomon had been both an extensive and an accurate observer of human life. Even in the days of his vanity—the days when he was living without God in the world—"he gave his heart," as he had already told us in chapter i. of this book, "to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven." Among the facts which had then arrested his notice, the one now specified had come under his view, and had evidently taken a powerful hold of his mind. And no doubt such facts are, and always must be, a source of endless and hopeless perplexity to the man who surveys them through any other medium than that of the Bible. Philosophy seeks in vain to account for such a phenomenon as a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man prolonging his life in his wickedness. Philosophy can neither explain it nor amend it; and this, too, in the days of his vanity, Solomon had been made to see; for this was his own humbling confession—"That which is crooked cannot be made straight, and that which is wanting cannot be numbered." However true such a conclusion might be, there was little comfort in it for the merely philosophical mind. And perhaps it was in those days of his vanity, when he had been speculating on such questions according to the wisdom of this world, that he had heard, from some of those to whom he presented the difficulty, such maxims propounded as these: "Be not righteous over-much; neither make thyself over-wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? Be not over-much wicked; neither be thou foolish; why shouldest thou die before thy time?"

We cannot suppose that these maxims are introduced here as expressing Solomon's own mind. They may have been the mind of Solomon in the days of his vanity—the mind of a sceptical philosophy, or of the cold and compromising and selfish morality of the world. But they certainly are not the

mind of Solomon as the inspired teacher of the mind of God. The unexplained abruptness with which they are interjected into the passage leaves the reader somewhat at a loss as to their intended place and meaning in this general argument; and even commentators have differed considerably in the theories by which they have sought to expound them. The view at which we have already pointed, however, seems to be both the simplest and the most satisfactory. His reference to the days of his vanity—as the days in which he had been led to observe the painful cases described—reminds Solomon of the sort of reflections to which, in worldly and unspiritual minds, such cases were wont to give rise. In point of fact, it is very much in the same way that such minds reason to this hour. When “the righteous man is seen perishing in his righteousness”—bringing himself, that is, to loss and ruin, or, it may be, to the scaffold or the stake, by his unflinching adherence to the cause of conscience and of Christ,—worldly wise men account him a fool. They think him “righteous over-much”—too strict, too uncomplying, too scrupulous. On the other hand, they disapprove no less of the opposite extreme. The man who runs riot in sin—who scorns all religion and defies all morality—they consider “over-much wicked.” He loses caste in society; he wastes his fortune, he destroys his health; perhaps even exposes himself to the lash of the law, and brings his very life to a premature and disgraceful end. The wise men of this world condemn equally both of such classes of persons as these. They flatter themselves that they have found out the golden mean between these contrary forms of error. They stand up for moderation in all things. They consider it to be as foolish and dangerous to rise above the world’s standard of right and wrong, as to fall below it. A man’s religious principles, according to their view, ought neither to be so high and unbending as to bring him into collision with the world’s tastes and customs, nor so lax and heretical as to shock the received opinions and proprieties of respectable life. There is no attentive observer of society who

can have failed to discover that a style of opinion such as has now been described is, and always has been, common in the world. It is well and needful therefore that it should thus be held up by Solomon before us, not as a model to be imitated, but as a snare to be shunned. It is, at the best, a mean, cowardly, contemptible compromise between truth and error, between duty and self-interest, between the service of God and the service of the devil. Men may flatter themselves with the notion that they can thus serve two masters, and be the friends of the world without being the enemies of God. But the thing cannot be. He that is not with Christ is against Him. He who loveth father or mother more than Christ, is not worthy of Christ. He that is ashamed, for any cause, of Christ and of his words, in this evil and adulterous generation, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed when He cometh in the glory of his Father and of the holy angels.

This, substantially, is the dictate of that divine wisdom which Solomon has been celebrating, and commending to our acceptance. And, therefore, from all such worldly reasonings as he had now briefly glanced at, he returns to the grand theme of his discourse, and, in the face of those reasonings, entreats us to cleave to the better part and the wiser choice. "It is good," says he, "that thou shouldest take hold of this : yea, also, from this withdraw not thine hand ; for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all." Strait, it is true, is the gate, and narrow is the way, that leadeth unto life. He who would be the disciple of wisdom, must lay his account with facing many dangers and suffering many trials. In this world, where evil abounds, and where so many influences are arrayed against true piety and godliness, he who would preserve his integrity, who would keep himself pure, who would maintain an unswerving allegiance to God, must make up his mind to endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivereth him out of them all. "In the world ye shall have tribulation," said our Saviour to

his disciples, "but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." He will be a very present help in trouble. As their days, so shall their strength be. He will not suffer them to be tempted above that they are able; but will, with the temptation, make for them a way of escape, that they may be able to bear it. The trial of their faith may be painful; but it is much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire; for the result through grace shall be unto praise, and honour, and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

"Rest, therefore, in the Lord, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass. . . . A little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked. For the arms of the wicked shall be broken: but the Lord upholdeth the righteous. The Lord knoweth the days of the upright; and their inheritance shall be for ever. They shall not be ashamed in the evil time; and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied. But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the Lord shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume; into smoke shall they consume away. . . . The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord; and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with His hand. . . . The salvation of the righteous is of the Lord; He is their strength in the time of trouble. And the Lord shall help them and deliver them: He shall deliver them from the wicked, and save them, because they trust in Him" (Psalm xxxvii.)

It will be remembered that in dealing with the immediately preceding context, the 16th and 17th verses were regarded as setting forth, not Solomon's code of morality, but that of the wise men of this world. The cases he had described in the 15th verse—that of a just man perishing in his righteousness, and that of a wicked man prolonging his life in his wickedness—might seem at first view to cast some doubt upon the wisdom of following such a course of life as Solomon had been recom-

mending. If fearing God and keeping His commandments was to be the means of bringing the just man into trouble, and if the wicked man prospered by trampling all such considerations under his feet, did not this seem to imply that some standard more flexible and accommodating than the divine law would be the most conducive to human happiness! Solomon had heard such opinions broached. In the days of his vanity he had, perhaps, himself been disposed to regard them with favour. To make a compromise between principle and policy—to be neither righteous overmuch, nor overmuch wicked—to avoid the self-sacrifice of the one and the disgrace and damage of the other—is the true golden mean in the eyes of worldly prudence. It was so in Solomon's days, and it is so in ours. In reality, however, it is a shallow and short-sighted scheme; contemptible in itself, and miserable in its fruits. Solomon's inspired counsel accordingly is to have nothing to do with it. In the face of all its plausibilities and its promises, let those who value their own welfare, here and hereafter, rather take hold of heavenly wisdom—yea, from that divine guide let them not withdraw their hand. In following the wisdom of God, they may be often called on to deny themselves, and to take up their cross; they may have to suffer for righteousness sake; but it is the only safe course after all. There is such a thing as saving one's life, and thereby, in another and higher sense, losing it; and there is such a thing as losing one's life, and in that other and higher sense finding it. Many and formidable as the trials and perils awaiting the disciples of divine wisdom may be, "he that feareth God shall come forth of them all."

This is substantially the view we have presented of the somewhat difficult passage to which reference has now been made. And it certainly well accords with that view, to find that "wisdom" is the very first word of the verse which immediately follows. It shows what was in the mind of Solomon when he said, in the 18th verse, "It is good that thou shouldest take hold of *this*; yea, also from *this* withdraw not thine hand."

Wisdom, heavenly wisdom, was the guide to whom he was there exhorting men to cleave. And to confirm them in that course, as unspeakably the safest and the best, he pronounces this further eulogy upon wisdom—that “it strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men which are in the city.” Even in the lowest and most secular sense of the word, wisdom is far more powerful than brute force. “A wise man,” as Solomon expresses it elsewhere, “scaleth the city of the mighty, and casteth down the strength of the confidence thereof” (Prov. xxi. 22). It is due to this inherent and immense superiority of intelligence and forethought, over mere numbers or animal energy, that the few in all ages have controlled the many—that a handful of cultivated and civilized men have triumphed over whole nations of barbarians—that some thousands of our own countrymen, have recently sufficed to restore, in India, the sovereignty of this kingdom over one hundred and fifty millions of the human race. It is wisdom, in the sense of knowledge and intellectual skill, that has subdued the material world, and made it tributary to the convenience and comfort of mankind; that has turned the very elements of nature into man’s most submissive servants; that has tamed and trained the very lightnings of heaven, so as to make them rend the rocks asunder at his bidding, or bear his messages with the speed of light to the ends of the earth. Solomon certainly was not the man to undervalue wisdom, even in this more ordinary and earthly aspect of the term. He knew, as well as any philosopher of modern times, that knowledge is power; but he had also discovered, what some of our modern savans have still to learn, that knowledge is not goodness, is not happiness; and that its possessor may be, after all, both very depraved and very miserable. It is not human science, therefore, however great its achievements may be, that he intends to celebrate when he tells us that “wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men which are in the city.” A wise man, that is, a God-fearing man, is, in this fallen world, like a beleaguered city. “Behold,” said the Lord Jesus, reminding his

followers of this truth, "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves" (Matt. x. 16). Their integrity is continually assailed and endangered by corruption within, and by an evil world without, and by their great adversary the devil, who goeth about seeking whom he may devour. "Ten mighty men,"—chosen captains, leaders skilful and experienced in the whole art of war—would justly be regarded as adding greatly to the security of a besieged city. Their very presence would inspire confidence, and under their able direction even a comparatively feeble garrison might be able successfully to repel the foe. But more than these mighty men, with all their skill and energies combined, could do for such a city, can wisdom do to strengthen its possessor against the devil, the flesh, and the world. It was this wisdom that enabled the youthful Joseph to preserve his purity amid the seductions of Egypt, and to prefer a dungeon to sinning against God. It was this wisdom that strengthened Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, to face the burning fiery furnace, rather than renounce their allegiance to the one living and true God. It was this wisdom that sustained the Christian constancy of Paul, amid bonds, and stripes, and imprisonments, and death. It is this wisdom which nerves the believer, in the every-day walks of life, to deny himself, and to take up his cross and unflinchingly to follow Christ. The moment he ceases to take hold of this divine source of strength—the instant he withdraws his hand from it—and, in the stead thereof, begins to lean to his own understanding, and to make flesh his arm, and to suffer his heart to depart from the Lord, he becomes "weak as other men," and falls an easy prey to the tempter's art. His great strength lies in that faith which brings omnipotence to his aid; which insures to him the fulfilment of that promise—"My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. xii. 9). "The righteous shall hold on his way; and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger" (Job xvii. 9). "Even the youths shall fail and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but

they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah xl. 30, 31).

The word "for," at the beginning of the 20th verse, would appear to imply that the statement which the verse contains is connected, in the way of inference or illustration, with the preceding context. It is difficult, however, to trace any connection of the kind. There is, on the other hand, a very obvious and important connection between the statement of the 20th verse and the other statement which follows in the 21st and 22d. Taken together, they form a complete and natural series, and convey, to all who would be guided by true wisdom, a much-needed and most salutary piece of advice. Simply, therefore, changing "for" into "because," which the original allows, the passage we have now to consider will read thus—"Because there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not; also (or, for that reason), take no heed unto all words that are spoken; lest thou hear thy servant curse thee: for oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others." Even wise and good men are often unduly fretted and disquieted by the harsh and uncharitable things that may be said of them in this censorious and envious world. They err in giving way to such angry or disappointed feelings. They forget that even the best of men have still many failings—that there is no perfection among our fallen race; and while this fact should remind them that they themselves are not infallible, and that they may really have given some cause for the accusations of which they complain, it should also teach them not to form unreasonable expectations as to the conduct of others. Considering that there is so much selfishness, and malice, and ignorance, and thoughtlessness in human society, they should lay their account with being sometimes misunderstood and misrepresented. If they would save themselves from a great deal of needless annoyance, they will not be too keenly alive to

what is thought or said about them by ill-natured minds or carping tongues; and least of all will they lay themselves out to discover what others may be whispering behind their backs concerning their merits and conduct. There is much point, as well as truth, in the familiar saying—that eavesdroppers seldom hear good of themselves. They do not deserve to hear it. It is well that their craving curiosity and morbid vanity should be thus rebuked and humbled. The candid man—who reflects how often he himself has done less than justice to others—how frequently he has allowed himself to cherish hard thoughts or unkind feelings against his neighbour without sufficient cause—will be disposed to bear with similar offences when they return upon his own head.

The fact set forth in the 20th verse, and which we have now treated as the foundation or ground of the practical exhortation that follows, is one of a very solemn and humbling kind. It corresponds to that searching question which we meet with in the book of Proverbs (xx. 9), “Who can say, I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?” And to that still more explicit declaration made in his 1st epistle (i. 8), by the apostle John, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” It is an affecting thought that there is not even “a just man” upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not. The just man here is evidently the man approved of God. If even to him sin still cleaves, the conclusion is inevitable, that his acceptance with God must rest on other merits than his own. It is not a partial and imperfect obedience that can satisfy the divine law; “For whosoever,” says an inspired apostle (James ii. 10), “shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.” And hence the irresistible conclusion elsewhere laid down, that “by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in God’s sight” (Rom. iii. 20). There is no other righteousness that can avail to justify the sinner but that of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is good, therefore, to take occasion from this 20th verse to set forth the

gospel of God our Saviour. If even the holiest of the saints of God be still chargeable with many sins, and must build their hope of heaven exclusively on the atoning sacrifice and meritorious obedience of the Lord Jesus, what is to become of those who have no part nor lot in Christ at all! God himself hath told us that "He will by no means clear the guilty" (Exod. xxxiv. 7). There is no condemnation, indeed, to them that are in Christ Jesus, because He hath redeemed them from the curse of the law, by bearing it in their room. But out of Christ our God is, and can be no other, to sinners, than a consuming fire. To suffer sin to go unpunished, would be to subvert the authority of that law which is the pillar of His own moral government, and to unsettle all distinction between evil and good. Let, therefore, fond and self-pleasing sentimentalists say or think what they may, there are but two alternatives. The sinner must be either pardoned or punished; and as there can be no pardon, consistently with the honour and integrity of the divine law and government, save that which rests on the substitution and sacrifice of Christ, there is no other name but His under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John iii. 36).

But while this that has now been noticed is a great truth on one side, there is a truth hardly less important, to which we must give earnest heed, on the other side. Because it is entirely and absolutely on the footing, not of our own righteousness, but of the righteousness of Christ, that we become just with God—just in the eye of His holy law, and therefore freed from condemnation and invested with a covenant right or title to eternal life;—because this is so, we are not, therefore, to conclude that our own personal righteousness or sanctification is a matter of no moment; and that little or no account will be made of our having, or not having it, at the appearing and kingdom of Jesus Christ. "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord" (Heb.

xii. 14). There must be a "meetness" for the inheritance of the saints, as well as a legal right to enjoy it; and these two, though in their own nature distinct from one another, are yet never in reality separate. He who, by faith, becomes a partaker of the righteousness of Christ, is made, by that same faith, a partaker of the spirit of Christ. Christ is made of God to every true believer, "wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor. i. 30). The possession of the spirit of Christ, is the test of the possession of the righteousness of Christ. True, indeed, there is not even a just man—a justified man—upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not; that doeth good so exclusively and so perfectly as to be without sin. The law of sin, which is in his members, still wars against the higher law of his regenerated mind, and more or less at times prevails. But there is this grand and fundamental distinction between him and all the impenitent and unbelieving, that the germ of a new and divine life has been implanted in his soul. The love of God has been shed abroad in his heart. He is a new creature. Old things are passing away, and all old things are becoming new. He is putting off, through grace, the old man, which is corrupt with the deceitful lusts, and is putting on the new man, which "is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him" (Col. iii. 10). That process is going on in his soul which is destined to issue in the spotless purity and consummate blessedness of heaven. "As with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, he is changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. iii. 18).

The great and momentous truths which Solomon, in the foregoing context, has been setting forth, he had searched out and studied in the diligent use of that divine wisdom, whose excellency it is his main object to commend. That the possessions and pleasures of this world could none of them furnish a satisfying portion for man, and that such a portion could be found only in fearing God and keeping His commandments—

“all this he had proved by wisdom.” These were conclusions which this only infallible authority had fully sanctioned and established. He did not mean, indeed, to affirm that he had been able to solve all the mysteries of human life, or to penetrate into all the deep things which lie hidden in the mind of God. He had said, indeed, “I will be wise.” He had set his heart on understanding all mysteries and all knowledge. In that vain confidence to which at one time he had given way, he had imagined himself to be equal to the task of unlocking every secret, whether of nature or of Providence, and of leaving no difficulty unexplained. Time and the trial had undeceived him, and had taught him to form a humbler and juster estimate of the powers that are given to man. Profound and comprehensive as his understanding was, a thousand things eluded its grasp. The dark problems which he had thought to solve remained, many of them, as far from solution as ever. Such was the experience of Solomon, and such will, and must be, the experience of every finite mind. He alone who called this vast and complicated universe into being can scale all the heights and sound all the depths of its mighty plan. As for man, even the wisest of men, he is but of yesterday, and knows nothing. Feeling and confessing the incompetency of the human mind to grapple with those many questions that arise,—connected with the being and government of God, with the phenomena of the material world, and with the nature, condition, and destiny of man,—he makes this significant statement, “I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me: that which is far off and exceeding deep, who can find it out?” Shallow minds think that they know all. Intellects, like Solomon’s, of a higher order, vividly realize the fact, that even the commonest things are full of mystery. We speak familiarly, for example, of the instinct of the animals of the lower creation—of that singular power by which they know, without a teacher, what to choose and what to avoid in seeking their food—when and where to go when the rigours of one climate make it needful to find another of a more genial kind. “The stork in the heaven

knoweth her appointed times ; and the turtle, and the crane, and the swallow observe the time of their coming" (Jer. viii. 7). We give this power a name, but who can describe its nature and working, or tell what it is? It is not experience, for it goes before experience. It is not reason, for it is wholly independent alike of proof and argument. The philosopher, bent on finding it out, may say with Solomon, "I will be wise;" but, like him also, he will be constrained to acknowledge, as the issue of all his investigations, that it is far from him. So it is with ten thousand other things. Of facts and phenomena we know something, but of the essence or principle of things we know nothing at all. Who has ever been able to detect and disclose the hidden principle of life either in the animal or vegetable world? We can trace the growth of a plant or flower, and we can tell what will help or hinder its development, and we can describe all the parts of which it is composed, and trace their mutual relations and uses ; but how its life began, or in what its life consists, or why it takes invariably its own determinate form, and size, and texture, and colour, who can tell? We can get no further than this—to refer it all to the will and power of the great First Cause. And yet to what does this amount but to a confession of our ignorance? For in so speaking we have only passed from a less to a greater mystery. What do we know of the relation between the life of the invisible Jehovah, and that of the weed or worm which we tread beneath our feet? What do we know of the principle of that life that pulsates within our own breasts? What do we know of the essence of the human spirit, or of the nature of that union which, in our present state of being, makes *it* and the body one—one, and yet two—two, and yet one. And if from the creature we ascend to the Creator, from the nature of man to the nature of God, how utterly are we lost in the vain endeavour to fathom, or even to form any definite and tangible conception of, such mysteries as the trinity of persons in the one glorious Godhead—the eternity and immensity of His being—the origin and execution of His decrees—the existence of evil under His holy

and righteous government—His dealings with men in providence and in grace;—when we venture to confront such subjects of contemplation as these, it is like looking into the face of the noonday sun. The eye of even the strongest mind is overpowered by that “light inaccessible and full of glory,” in which Jehovah dwells; and bowing down into the dust, in humble and holy reverence, before His infinite and adorable majesty, we can but say with the Psalmist of old, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it” (Psalm cxxxix. 6); or with the apostle Paul, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been His counsellor? or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Rom xi. 33–36).

From the tenor of the 25th verse, it would seem as if Solomon, baffled in his vain attempt to search out things that were altogether beyond his reach, had subsequently given to his inquiries a humbler but more practical and useful turn, by directing them towards questions that bear more immediately on man’s own personal responsibilities, dangers, and duties. “I applied mine heart,” he goes on to say, “to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness.” Hitherto—that is in the days of his vanity—he had been drifted or driven about, upon a sea without a shore. The speculations in which he had indulged had conducted him to no certain or satisfying conclusions; while the pleasures he had pursued, like the storms of the deep, had left him weary and exhausted, and had only carried him further away from that haven of happiness and rest and peace, at which he had longed to arrive. Schooled by this sad experience into a better frame of mind, his desire now was to find a surer guide than his own erring nature. He felt that he had yet to learn—or at least to

learn over again, by going back to his purer and happier youth—what true wisdom is. This grand discovery at length he had fully made. Aided by this divine light, and estimating all things by this divine standard, he had looked into the reason of things—into the causes to which particular and prevalent forms of evil were to be traced. Especially had he sought to know what were the worst, the most insidious, the most perilous shapes which evil assumes. Connecting the latter part of the 25th verse with what immediately follows in the 26th verse, this that has now been stated would appear to be the idea meant to be conveyed by knowing “the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness.” Folly, in Scripture, is another name for ungodliness. Of this folly there are many kinds. To know the wickedness of folly, the wickedness of foolishness and madness, seems equivalent to knowing the worst species of it. He is evidently pointing, moreover, to his own personal experience. In his own wild career he had come in contact with folly, and he had himself wrought folly of many sorts. And now, comparing all these one with another, so as to ascertain to which of them the pre-eminence of evil should be assigned, this was the conclusion at which he had arrived, “And I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands.” The case of the man whom she is permitted to assail is all but desperate. “Whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her.” These terribly significant words point plainly to the same seducer of whose base and destructive arts so startling a picture is given in chapter vii. of the book of Proverbs, where Solomon thus speaks, “Hearken unto me now therefore, O ye children, and attend to the words of my mouth. Let not thine heart decline to her ways, go not astray in her paths. For she hath cast down many wounded: yea, many strong men have been slain by her. Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death” (v. 24-27).

This is a painful subject, and one of which it were a shame

even to speak, at least here, in any other than remote and distant terms. To be wholly silent, however, regarding it, and especially when the exposition of God's Word brings it immediately into view, were to fail in a great and fundamental duty. Would that Solomon's warning counsel were no longer needed! But who that knows anything of the "wickedness of folly," can need to be told that she whose "heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are as bands" is still, as of old, dragging thousands to perdition. "In the twilight, in the evening, in the black and dark night, . . . she is loud and stubborn; her feet abide not in the house. Now is she without, now in the streets, and lieth in wait at every corner," in prosecution of her shameless, loathsome, and infamous trade. And yet, dark and revolting as her wickedness may be, there is a wickedness more revolting and darker still, and that is the wickedness of those who have made her what she is. Let all such remember that if there be truth in the testimony of God they shall have their part,—unless divine mercy interpose to snatch them from the abyss,—in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone, where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched!

Well might Solomon kindle this beacon light to scare others from the pit in which himself had been so nearly lost for ever. When we read chapter xi. of the 1st book of Kings, we find no difficulty in understanding the strong, or, as it may at first sight appear, harsh and exaggerated statement, which, in the 27th and 28th verses of this passage, he proceeds to make. "Behold, this have I found, saith the Preacher, counting one by one, to find out the account: which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found." We are not surely to understand this as a general charge against the female sex; or as meaning to assert that piety and virtue are more rarely to be found among them than among the male portion of the human race.

There can hardly be any reasonable doubt that the very con-

trary is true. Never, perhaps, has there been any period in the history of the visible church of God, and certainly never in these more modern times concerning which we are best informed, in which the majority of those who lived in the fear and love of God were not women. Solomon here is evidently speaking, and that as a humbled penitent, of his own particular case. He had loved "many strange women;" outdoing, in this respect, the laxity and the luxury of the heathen monarchs around him. In reckless defiance of the warning voice of the God of Israel he had broken loose from all the restraints of domestic purity; and from among the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites, had taken to himself, after the custom of oriental kings, a multitude of wives and concubines, who turned away his heart from the Lord—"For it came to pass," we are told, in the history of his reign, "when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. And Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, and went not fully after the Lord, as did David his father. Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods. And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the Lord God of Israel" (1 Kings xi. 4-9).

Is it any wonder that in such a household, even among the thousand he had gathered into it, one solitary example of real goodness could not be found? Among his male attendants and courtiers, gay and dissolute as the society of the palace had become, one might now and then be met with who had not forgotten the piety and the integrity of other and better days. Such a result was exactly what might have been expected from

the very nature of the case. And now he refers to it, not as it it were fitted to excite surprise, but rather that he might hold it up as a warning to all others to beware of pursuing the course which had brought about this painful and humbling state of things. The passage, in short, is to be regarded as an earnest and solemn pleading against the indulgence of those fleshly lusts that war against the soul; those irregular and unlawful desires, by the base gratification of which such multitudes are drowned in destruction and perdition.

It is a pleading for conjugal fidelity and domestic purity, in harmony with the great primeval law by which polygamy and concubinage are alike condemned, as fatal equally to the happiness and to the holiness of man. As Solomon had sown, so had he also reaped. Disregarding the law of his God, and following the ways of the world and the inclinations of his own sinful heart, he had forfeited everything like domestic happiness and comfort, and had made all but shipwreck of his faith. Among all those many women whom his pride and his passions had gathered around him, "counting one by one to find out the account," he had not found even one in whom he could confide—not one on whose honour and love he could rely. Perhaps it was to this bitter and humiliating experience we are indebted for that beautiful picture which he has elsewhere drawn of the true helpmeet for man. "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life. . . She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens. . . . She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. . . . She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. . . . Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. Favour is

deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised" (Prov. xxxi. 10-30).

The review which Solomon had thus been making of human folly and wickedness, brings him to this very solemn conclusion—"Lo! this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions." Though his wisdom, deep and large as it was, had failed to solve the great mystery of the fall of man, it had clearly taught him this—that the fall was a fact; that however the two things were to be harmonized, both of them were undeniably true; that man was originally pure and holy, and that now he was guilty and depraved; that man, and not God, was chargeable with this melancholy change. And as it was so at the first, so is it still. "Let no man," therefore, "say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed" (James i. 13, 14). Let us rejoice, and give God thanks, that, as by the offence of one, even of the first Adam, judgment came upon all men to condemnation, even so, by the righteousness of one, *i. e.*, of the second Adam, the Lord from heaven, the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DOCTRINE OF WISDOM AS TO RULERS AND
SUBJECTS.

“Who *is* as the wise *man*? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? a man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the boldness of his face shall be changed.

“I *counsel thee* to keep the king's commandment, and *that* in regard of the oath of God. Be not hasty to go out of his sight: stand not in an evil thing; for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him. Where the word of a king *is*, *there is* power: and who may say unto him, What doest thou?

“Whoso keepeth the commandment shall feel no evil thing: and a wise man's heart discerneth both time and judgment. Because to every purpose there is time and judgment, therefore the misery of man *is* great upon him. For he knoweth not that which shall be: for who can tell him when it shall be?

“*There is* no man that hath power over the spirit, to retain the spirit; neither *hath he* power in the day of death: and *there is* no discharge in *that* war; neither shall wickedness deliver those that are given to it.”—ECCLES. VIII. 1-8.

TOWARDS the close of the preceding chapter, Solomon had been led to speak, with deep humility, of the infirmity of the human mind—of the limited range and grasp of its powers—of its utter inability to grapple with the mysteries of nature and of providence, or to search into the deep things of God. In the vain confidence which his remarkable gifts and attainments had, in the days of his folly, inspired, he had at one time forgotten this truth, and had been fain to persuade himself that no question could be too difficult for his profound and penetrating intellect to solve. Time and experience had rebuked this presumption, and taught him to form a far lower and juster estimate of what is competent to man. In making this confession, however, it was no part of his design to undervalue the distinction between knowledge and ignorance, or to abate in the very least, any one of the strong expressions in which he had been previously celebrating the praises of wisdom.

It is well, indeed, and most necessary to keep the fact constantly in view, that there are limits beyond which no finite understanding—not even that of the loftiest archangel—can penetrate. The things that are revealed belong unto us and unto our children; the secret things belong unto the Lord. But, at the same time, not less needful is it to remember and to realize this other consideration, that what *is* revealed—what God has placed within the reach and capacity of human intelligence—it is at once our duty and our privilege to endeavour to learn. To stop short where God has set bounds to our knowledge—where He has said, *Hitherto shalt thou come and no further*—and to be contented that the proud waves of human speculation and philosophy should here be stayed—is only the fitting homage which the finite mind of the creature offers to the infinite mind of Him whose knowledge is unsearchable, and whose ways are past finding out. But to remain wilfully and contentedly ignorant of those works and ways of God which He has opened up to our inquiries, and invited us to search and study, is to do him flagrant dishonour, and to degrade our own nature itself. “For the soul to be without knowledge, it is not good” (Prov. xix. 2). “The works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure in them” (Psalm cxi. 2). God made man after His own image, and one of the grand distinctive features of that glorious model after which man was thus formed, was knowledge. God himself is the supreme intelligence, and with a portion of that intelligence He endowed the human soul. That intelligence, it is true, as regards things spiritual and divine, fallen man has lost. His mind is blinded, his understanding is darkened through the deceitfulness of sin; and not without the aid of the regenerating, enlightening, and sanctifying Spirit of God can this darkness and blindness be done away. Most truly, therefore, is it said, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That humbling sense of personal guilt and unworthiness—that realizing apprehension of the divine majesty and glory—that sentiment of

humble and holy reverence with which the Spirit of God fills the renewed mind and draws it towards Himself—lies at the very foundation of all true wisdom. It is under the guiding, solemnizing, purifying influence of this fear of the Lord, that things begin at length to be seen in their true light, and to be judged of according to their real character and worth. A mind under this gracious influence finds God everywhere, in His works as well as in His Word; and he values the discoveries which these impart, chiefly as making him better acquainted with God's adorable perfections and blessed will, and as thereby fitting him more fully, intelligently, and heartily to glorify and to enjoy the God of his salvation.

The wise man, of whom Solomon intends to speak in the opening verse of this chapter, is evidently a man wise in the large and comprehensive sense now described—a man not only of a spiritual mind, but of a mind cultivated, expanded, and strengthened by much converse both with the kingdom of nature and with the kingdom of grace. Though it be true that even he, with all the aids which both divine and human learning may have given him, must still confess that he knows nothing yet as he ought to know, how immense, notwithstanding, are his advantages, and how eminent his position, as compared with the ignorant and thoughtless crowd who care for none of these things. Not only are a thousand things easily understood by him of which they can make nothing at all, but there are endless sources of instruction, and enjoyment, and usefulness open to him, from which indolent, and depraved, and grovelling minds are wholly excluded. "Who, therefore," asks Solomon, "is as the wise man? and who knoweth (knoweth, that is to say, as he knoweth) the interpretation of a thing?" His wisdom is a far nobler possession than wealth or worldly greatness! What an unspeakably grander achievement is it to have enlarged the bounds of human knowledge—with the key of science to have unlocked some of the great secrets of nature—or by profound learning and patient research to have thrown fresh light upon the works or upon the Word of God—than to have amassed a

fortune, or inherited a peerage, or spent a life in luxurious ease and pleasure! Who would not rather be the Paul who shook to its very foundations the heathenism of the ancient world, and planted the holy and beneficent religion of Christ upon its ruins; or the Luther, or Calvin, or Knox, who broke up the sleep, and stagnation, and superstition of the dark ages, and emancipated half the nations of Christendom from the soul-destroying tyranny and corruption of the Church of Rome?—Who would not rather be one of these than the proudest and mightiest of those princes and potentates with whom, in their godlike work, these men were called, at the hazard of their lives, to contend? Or even, if we descend from sacred and spiritual to mere secular things—who would not rather be the Gutemberg whose illustrious invention of the art of printing has given wings to knowledge, and scattered it abroad over all the earth, and called into existence a power on the side of freedom, and humanity, and truth, mightier than the sword, and stronger than the armies of confederated kings? Who would not rather be the Newton whose immortal discovery of the law of gravitation solved the great problem of the material universe, and taught us to understand how it is that, in the words of Job, the earth “hangeth upon nothing;” and how, through the vast regions of immensity, the hand of the Almighty guideth “Arcturus with his sons?” Or yet again, who would not rather be the once humble, but now world-famed James Watt, to whose inventive genius the nations are indebted for that motive power, whose gigantic force, and whose thousand marvellous adaptations constitute the wonder of our age?—Who would not infinitely rather be one of these wise men, than the owner of millions or the heir of a crown?

It is true that knowledge and virtue—science and godliness—have not always been found walking hand in hand. The one, alas! has too frequently been arrayed against the other. Morality has never, perhaps, been more flagrantly outraged, nor the gospel more virulently assailed, than it has sometimes been

by men who were chiefs in all the learning of this world. But surely there is nothing in the nature of the case to necessitate this variance. All truth, whether natural or revealed, is and must be harmonious. The most enlightened student of the works of nature ought to be the most reverent student of the Word of God—a combination, indeed, of which many beautiful examples have at all periods been exhibited, and never, perhaps, have these been more numerous than in the present day. After all, they are the smatterers, rather than the masters, of human science, who have oftenest signalized their hostility to the Bible. The conceit and half knowledge of a little learning may provoke men to scepticism, but deeper knowledge, as has been observed by one of the profoundest thinkers that ever lived, rather brings them back to religion. Through a process of this very kind Solomon himself had passed. And it is only when, as in his case, science is baptized by a spirit of the fear of the Lord, that its possessor becomes truly wise. Till this divine light illumines his soul, his wisdom is no better than foolishness with God. But when thus guided and sanctified by an influence from above, what a precious attainment is knowledge!—what elevation and dignity does it impart to the character of its possessor!—with how mighty an influence for good does it clothe him!—how many means of usefulness to his fellowmen does it place in his hands! It is in the view of such a man—a man informed with varied knowledge, and imbued with heavenly graces—that we recognize all the meaning and fitness of Solomon's words, "Who is as the wise man? and who (as he) knoweth the interpretation of a thing? a man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the boldness of his face shall be changed."

In the latter part of this verse there is considerable difficulty. The expression that "a man's wisdom maketh his face to shine" appears to point to the power which a pure and cultivated mind unquestionably exerts upon the human countenance, imparting to it that look of life, and intelligence, and benignity, by which it is so easily and so broadly, in most cases, distinguishable from

the countenance of the untutored savage, or of the wretched slave of ignorance and crime. When Moses came down from the mount in the wilderness, where he had been during forty days in immediate converse with God, his face shone, we are told, with a supernatural effulgence; as if it had caught some faint reflection of that light inaccessible and full of glory that surrounds the presence of the Most High. Even so, although without the operation of any other than purely natural causes, does the face of the wise man catch somewhat of the heavenly glow of those divine and ennobling thoughts with which his soul is exercised and filled. They do literally "make his face to shine." So far all is sufficiently plain. But when it is added that "the boldness of his face shall be changed," we find it less easy to decide as to the interpretation which this clause of the sentence should receive. Attempts have been made by various commentators to bring out a clearer and more satisfactory signification, by suggesting a different translation of the original words. These attempts, however, appear to be hardly justified, either by the results they have produced or by the somewhat violent straining at the expense of which they have been reached. 'Boldness' is, perhaps, scarcely an adequate representative of the corresponding Hebrew term, which may with greater strictness and accuracy be rendered by 'effrontery' or 'arrogance.' Modified to this extent, what Solomon seems here to say is, that wisdom communicates to the face of its owner an aspect of meekness and gentleness very different from that air of imperious and boastful confidence which once it wore. None is so arrogant as the ignorant or half-instructed; none so unpretending as the man of largest knowledge and deepest thought. So understood, the sense of the passage is both simple and self-consistent, and fittingly and gracefully completes that tribute to the excellence and attractiveness of wisdom which the verse, as a whole, is so manifestly designed to convey.

No one, we apprehend, can intelligently and candidly consider this verse, either in itself, or in its relation to the foregoing

context, without arriving at the conclusion that it is meant to commend, not piety alone, but, in conjunction with piety, everything that bears on the culture and development of the moral and intellectual nature of man. True, indeed, the fear of the Lord, as has been already said, is the foundation and essence of that wisdom which Solomon has it in view to celebrate; but not less true it is that there is included in that wisdom everything that belongs to a thoroughly instructed mind. Though piety is always a lovely and a sacred thing—even when it is that of the humblest and most unlettered member of the human family—and never fails, where it is consistent and earnest, to shed grace and dignity around the lowliest and obscurest walks of human life—not less certain it is that piety reaches its loftiest stature and its most perfect symmetry only in those in whom it is associated with the varied knowledge, the large intelligence, and the sober judgment of an assiduously cultivated, justly balanced, and well-accomplished mind. To the highest forms of such a character it may be within the compass of comparatively few to rise; but to make some progress in the direction of such a character is more or less within the reach of all. Nor is it one of the least hopeful and encouraging features of the times in which we live, that there seems to be a growing disposition, and especially among young men, to seek something better than those worthless pleasures and frivolous amusements by which their leisure time was wont to be consumed. There appears to be now an increasing desire and relish for a purer and more intellectual class of enjoyments and pursuits. The recent and rapid multiplication of those numerous associations for mutual improvement, and for the acquisition and diffusion of knowledge, which constitute so prominent a characteristic of this age, and to which men of the best minds and of the first rank in the country are willingly lending their aid, are all strongly indicative of the working and the progress of this gratifying change. To all such efforts we gladly avail ourselves of the opportunity which the exposition of this portion of the divine Word affords,

of saying, God speed. They are unquestionably in the right direction, and, so far as they go, they are of a thoroughly right kind. They are important helps towards a better state of things; but let it never be forgotten that although, without this higher mental training and these larger intellectual acquisitions, none can hope to be "as the wise man" of whom Solomon speaks, there is something else which, to make up the character of such a man, is more essential still; and that is a living and abiding faith in the glorious and momentous truths of God's holy Word. There is but one book that can make men wise unto salvation, and that is the Bible; and he alone whom the Divine Spirit has disposed and enabled to sit down as a little child at the feet of Jesus, and to be taught by Him who is the power of God and the wisdom of God, can ever himself become truly wise.

From pronouncing this high commendation upon wisdom itself, Solomon proceeds to deliver some of those practical admonitions which wisdom suggests. "I counsel thee to keep the king's commandment, and that in regard of the oath of God. Be not hasty to go out of his sight: stand not in an evil thing; for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him. Where the word of a king is, there is power: and who may say unto him, What doest thou? Whoso keepeth the commandment shall feel no evil thing: and a wise man's heart discerneth both time and judgment." This passage evidently has respect to the duty of civil obedience—the obedience, that is, which subjects owe to the constituted authorities under which, in God's providence, they find themselves placed. Civil government is an ordinance of God. He "is not the author of confusion but of peace;" and this not less in the state than in "all the churches of the saints" (1 Cor. xiv. 33). To avoid confusion and secure peace, government is indispensable. Without it, society would be speedily dissolved. Let it not be thought, therefore, to be beneath the dignity of divine wisdom to issue its inspired and authoritative counsels on a subject like this. In the New Testament the same thing

is done in the most explicit terms. "Let every soul," writes the apostle Paul in his epistle to the Romans (xiii. 1-5), "be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation (or condemnation). For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou not then be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake."

These last words of the apostle, "for conscience sake," are simply a repetition and reinforcement of this far older saying of Solomon, "and that in regard of the oath of God." Civil obedience is not a question between man and man merely; but, as we are here emphatically reminded, it is also a question between man and God. Both the ruler and the subject, in all their mutual relations and obligations, are under law to the King of kings and Lord of lords. Nor is it unworthy of notice that the same "oath of God" expressed or understood, by which the subject is bound to keep the king's commandment, limits and regulates the very obligation which it imposes. So long as obedience to the king's commandment does not involve disobedience to any commandment of God himself, obedience is imperative; and that not only "for wrath," not only from a prudent regard to the punishment by which resistance to it may be followed, but "for conscience sake." The oath of God exalts loyalty into a religious duty. The king, it is true, may err in the exercise of his authority. His laws may be neither just nor wise. They may, in many respects, be hurtful rather than helpful to the interests of his people; but so long as they do not require the subject to sin, his duty is to obey.

There is nothing, indeed, in this fundamental doctrine in the very least to restrain the subject, from using all competent and constitutional means to have an injurious law repealed, or to obtain redress of any civil grievance of which he may have cause to complain. Under a government so happily constituted as our own, such means are always accessible, and, when rightly employed, they seldom fail to gain their end. But still, while the commandment is in force—while the law stands—to resist it, is to resist the ordinance of God. There is a point, it is true, where submission ceases to be a duty and begins to be a crime. When the three youthful companions of Daniel were commanded to fall down and to worship the golden image which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up in the plain of Dura, the oath of God, instead of binding them to obey, bound them, on the contrary, to refuse obedience. Accordingly, when they were threatened with the king's wrath, this argument, unsupported by the higher one of conscience, had no power. They were not careful as to the consequences of a course which, however it might displease the king, they knew would be approved of God. The case was the same when, at a later period, Daniel himself, instead of being commanded to worship an idol, was forbidden to worship the one living and true God. This commandment of Darius the king he could not and would not keep ; but went, in open disregard of it, to his own house and kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God as he did aforetime. The principle which these memorable cases exemplified we find still further illustrated in New Testament times. When Peter and John were expressly prohibited by the rulers of the Jewish Sanhedrim from speaking at all or teaching in the name of Jesus, they did not hesitate for a moment as to the course which duty required them to pursue. The oath of God could never bind them here, because God could never issue contradictory decrees—decrees, obedience to the one of which involved disobedience to the other. Their God and Saviour had expressly

commanded them to go and preach the gospel to every creature. The opposite command now issued could obviously, therefore, have no sanction from Him. And their reply, accordingly, to those who gave it, was prompt and decisive: "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts iv. 19, 20).

Having respect, however, to the implied and important limitation which the oath of God itself thus places upon the binding authority of the king's commandment, the great general doctrine already laid down remains—that, subject to this limitation, obedience to the commandment is a duty owing, not to the king only or chiefly, but to God, the supreme Lord and Ruler over all. Therefore, says Solomon, "Be not hasty to go out of his sight." Beware of rashly casting off allegiance to your lawful sovereign under any temporary impulse of wounded pride or passion; or of being led away into sedition or rebellion by the specious plea of reforming the existing order of things. Ahithophel did this in the days of David, and he came, in consequence, to a miserable end. The case must be strong and clear, indeed, that will justify rebellion and civil war. Or, again, if any man have been seduced by evil counsel, or hurried by resentment or ambition into some unlawful attitude or act, let him not "stand" in the "evil thing." To persist is only to aggravate the offence, and to make its punishment more inevitable and more severe. When we are conscious of having committed any wrong, whether against God or man, it is alike our duty and our safety to confess it and to cease from it at once. To enforce this wholesome counsel, Solomon reminds those whom it concerns that the king's power—the power, in other words, of law and government—is very great. The law never sleeps. It has a retentive memory, and it has long arms. Joab, proud and imperious, and confiding in the impunity which his position at the head of David's army appeared to give him, trampled on the king's commandment again and again, and especially by his ruthless deeds in slaying

Abner and Amasa ; but, nevertheless, he found to his cost, in the end, that where the word of a king is there is power. The insulted majesty of law and justice was at length and terribly avenged, when Joab was slain at the very horns of the altar, and his blood returned upon his own head.

It is, no doubt, strong language to use in reference to any earthly potentate, "Who may say unto him, What doest thou?" We readily, indeed, recognize its fitness when we find it applied, in the book of Daniel, to the Great Jehovah—of whom it is there said, in testimony of his absolute supremacy, that "He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest thou?" (iv. 35). But though it be with reference to God alone that the words in question can be absolutely and without qualification employed, there is also a most important, though a more restricted sense, in which they are applicable to an earthly king. Regarded as the chief and ultimate authority in the realm, there is no appeal from his decision ; there is no higher tribunal on earth to which the cause can be transferred. When the Roman governor at Cesarea would have adjudged Paul to be carried back to Jerusalem, where Paul knew that wicked men had banded themselves together to take away his life, he could, and did arrest that judgment, by appealing unto Cæsar ; but when the imperial sentence should once have been pronounced, who could say unto Cæsar, What doest thou? To no other earthly power was he subject or responsible ; and therefore his decree, be it wise or unwise, just or unjust, must take effect. There is, indeed, an appeal of which even the humblest victim of despotic power, suffering for righteousness sake, can never be deprived—the sublimest appeal that can be taken upon earth—the appeal which the persecuted patriot or martyr addresses on the scaffold or at the stake to the righteous Lord of all. Before the dread tribunal of that Almighty and Infallible Judge the greatest monarch must one day stand, side by side with the meanest of those whom on earth he had

trampled in the dust. Then shall he receive the final and the due reward of his deeds, and then shall all wrongs be redressed. In this fallen world we may still see, too often, what Solomon beheld of old—"the place of judgment that wickedness was there, and the place of righteousness that iniquity was there;" but, at the bar of the Sovereign Judge, they that were oppressed shall find a comforter, and on the side of the oppressors there shall be power no more. The mightiest of these oppressors shall then find how terribly true it is—that "He that is higher than the highest regardeth, and that there be higher than they" (v. 8).

While such observations as these naturally suggest themselves in connection with such a passage of Scripture as the one before us, it is proper, at the same time, to bear in mind that Solomon, in uttering these counsels of divine wisdom, is contemplating, not the abuse, but the right and legitimate use of civil power. Laws, neither divine nor human, are made for exceptional cases. When these laws confer authority, they of necessity assume that it will be lawfully exercised. If exceptional cases arise, they will generally be found to make sufficiently plain, to those who have to deal with them, the path of duty. The Word of God does not define the precise circumstances in which it may become lawful for children to resist the authority of their parents. It makes obedience the rule, and leaves the exception, when it occurs, to explain itself; as it will seldom fail to do to any sound and sober mind, by the help of those other principles, elsewhere laid down, which are of a nature to bear upon it. In like manner, the Word of God does not define the precise circumstances that may justify a people in taking up arms against the government under which they live. When such an unhappy contingency arrives it will speak for itself. Authority could never command respect, or be invested with its fitting character of sacredness, if it were compelled to bear upon its very front a proclamation of the conditions upon which it might be set at nought. Hence the unqualified language in which Solomon speaks in this passage,—and in

which the apostle Paul speaks in the corresponding passage already quoted,—of the authority and power of a king. Having this consideration in view, every difficulty in the way of either interpreting or accepting that language, disappears. On this footing, “whoso keepeth the king’s commandment shall fear no evil.” According to God’s institution, “rulers are not a terror to good works,” and therefore the loyal subject has no cause to be afraid. While he does that which is good, he is entitled to have, and ordinarily will receive protection, if not praise. He shall “feel no evil thing;” the strong arm of the law is around him, to shield him from harm.

Moreover, there is, to the wise man, this further reason for keeping the king’s commandment, even when it may appear to him to be oppressive and unwise—that the “wise man’s heart discerneth both time and judgment.” He will bear the wrongs or the hardship now, when there is no means or opportunity of redress; and will wait patiently for the fitting season and the right method of obtaining justice. He will not rashly and rebelliously take the law into his own hand, or, by placing himself in causeless and hopeless collision with it, aggravate the evils to which he is exposed, and bring himself to inevitable ruin. It is indeed a truly happy and blessed thing for the people of this favoured land that they have so little occasion for being exercised upon such questions as these. It is not given to us to deal with any of the painful and perplexing difficulties to which unlawful or abused authority has so often given rise. Our fathers, in less auspicious times, have had more than once to pass through the fire of the terrible problems, which such a state of things may compel a people to solve. As for us, we sit under our vine and under our fig tree, with none to make us afraid. Rulers are not with us a terror to good works—as, alas! they still too often are in many other parts of the world—but to the evil alone. Let us give the praise to Him who hath appointed the bounds of our habitations in so privileged a kingdom, and who hath bestowed upon us so goodly an heritage; and let us study, through grace,

in our several stations and callings, to lead "a quiet and peaceable life, in all godliness and honesty; for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour" (1 Tim. ii. 2, 3). And while we render, according to the apostolic precept, to all earthly authorities their dues—"tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour" (Rom. xiii. 7)—let us ever look above and beyond the rulers of earth to Him who is over all—God blessed for evermore. His law is holy, and His commandment holy, and just, and good. Its requirements are never grievous; and in the keeping of them it is ever found that there is a great reward. If, indeed, it were by the test of obedience to the divine law that our eternal destinies were to be decided, there could be no other portion for any of us but "a certain fearful looking for of judgment." But though the law be our rule and guide, it is not our master. Thanks be unto God, we are not under the law, but under grace. Of all who are acquitted and accepted in the great and notable day of the Lord, the unvarying testimony must be that of the apostle Paul—"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which He shed on us abundantly, through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that, being justified by grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus iii. 5-7).

In the immediately preceding verse Solomon had observed that "a wise man's heart discerneth both time and judgment." The wise man recognizes the great truth laid down in an earlier chapter of this book, that "to everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven" (iii. 3). Accordingly, when he has any important work to do, or end to gain, he avails himself of the best means and the fittest opportunity. He does not expect, in reckless disregard of the course of nature, to reap his harvest in the spring, nor does he impatiently snatch the fruit from the tree while it is still unripe and useless. He

makes his calculations and lays his plans. At the right season he sows his seed, and like the far-sighted husbandman, he has long patience for the reward of his toil. Even if the king's commandment should be unjust and oppressive, he is not hasty to go out of his sight: he commits himself to no rash and ill-advised course of futile opposition. When, at the instigation of Haman, Ahasuerus had issued his decree for the destruction of the Jews, Esther did not rush on the instant and unbidden into the royal presence, at the expense of violating the established usage of a despotic eastern court, and thereby precipitating, it might be, the very calamity she was so eager to avert. She first addressed herself for a period of three days to solemn fasting and prayer, and solicited others to engage in the same exercise, in behalf of her momentous and yet perilous enterprise; and having thus committed her way unto the Lord, she took pains to bring about an interview with the king, in circumstances the most favourable to her design; and thus discerning "both time and judgment" she became the deliverer of her people. Neither she nor they felt "any evil thing."

In prosecuting even the purest and worthiest aims this prudent forethought is not by any means always exhibited, and great mischief and unhappiness are often the consequence. Every day the best intentions are frustrated, and the noblest schemes made to miscarry, on account of the indiscretion and inconsideration with which they are followed out. Even good and pious men fail, too often, to realize the fact, that "to every purpose there is time and judgment;" and as the necessary result they bring, not unfrequently, much misery both upon others and upon themselves. In the outset of the passage before us, Solomon is at pains to point out this source of danger, as one against which it becomes the wise man to be upon his guard. It is not enough that we mean well, and that the object we have in view is right and good. There is such a thing, as the apostle Paul plainly intimates (Rom. xiv. 16), as making even our good to be evil spoken of. If we would avoid this injurious result, we must have due

regard to those proprieties of time, and place, and circumstances which common sense and Christian courtesy require us to observe. We may set all such considerations at nought; and we may try to persuade ourselves that in doing so we are displaying, in a superior degree, the high qualities of boldness, and faithfulness, and zeal. Not such, however, is the decision which divine wisdom will pronounce upon our conduct. Nor must we consider ourselves as persecuted or ill-used—as sufferers for righteousness sake—when our own folly or petulance thus brings us into difficulties, or exposes us to dislike and opposition, or mars all the good which it was perhaps really and honestly in our heart to do. Our Lord did not think it unnecessary or unsuitable to caution his followers to be “wise as serpents,” as well as to “be harmless as doves” (Matt. x. 16). It was by becoming all things to all men—by remembering, in other words, and acting on the principle, that to every purpose there is time and judgment—both a right season for every duty, and a right manner of performing it—that Paul gained so many to Christ. And no man ever was or ever will be very successful in any department of human affairs, and least of all in those which relate to the kingdom of God, who does not endeavour to observe the same rule. Certain it is that the neglect of that rule brings often great misery upon men.

So far we have been examining the statement contained in this 6th verse in the light of what goes before it. The wise man whose heart discerneth both time and judgment—who discreetly selects the proper moment and the prudent way to carry out his purpose—gains his point, when the foolish man, who pays no heed to such considerations, utterly fails. When, however, instead of looking back to what goes before the 6th verse we look forward to what comes after it, it may seem at first sight, as if it could be of no use to be thus forecasting the future, and regulating our conduct by any anticipated contingency seeing we are so completely ignorant of the course which things may take, and of the events which may be destined to arrive.

These may be such as entirely to overthrow all our most confident calculations, and to nullify all our most skilful plans. In short, taking the 6th verse in immediate and exclusive connection with the 7th verse, it may appear to imply that the misery of which it speaks arises, not from disregarding the fact, that to "every purpose there is time and judgment," but rather from *this* circumstance, that we do not and cannot know what is going to happen at all. In reality, however, there is no inconsistency between these two aspects of the statement, that "to every purpose there is time and judgment." It is true that no man knoweth "*what* shall be," and that neither can any one tell him "*when* it shall be;" but this is no reason why either the '*when*' or the '*what*' that may thus lie hidden in the inscrutable future, should be to us a matter of no concern. It is not by being utterly careless and indifferent upon the subject, that we can escape the evil that may be impending over us. It is true that we may aggravate that evil, or even create it when it has no actual existence, by tormenting ourselves with excessive or groundless anxieties and fears. As regards those futurities, against which no foresight can provide, the part of true wisdom is to follow the counsel of our blessed Lord—"Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matt. vi. 34). But this very uncertainty which hangs over the future—this impossibility of finding out what shall be on the morrow—binds us to be only the more careful how we act to-day. Instead of exempting us from all responsibility, and leaving us at liberty to give way to the impulse or caprice of the hour, this uncertainty rather requires that we should observe the utmost circumspection, and be ready, so to speak, for any emergency that may arise. It is only when we have done all that is competent to us, and which the nature of the case calls for, or allows, that we are in a position to await with calmness the destined result. It is then we are truly in circumstances to leave the case and ourselves, without undue solicitude, in the hands of Him who

doeth all things according to the good pleasure of His will. It is true that the graud protection against the disquietude which our ignorance of the future might otherwise produce, is a simple and realizing faith in the overruling providence of the all-powerful and only-wise God; and in His gracious promise, that all things shall work together for good to them that love Him. But the very existence of this faith implies and demands the diligent use of all requisite and suitable means. If pains without prayer be impiety, prayer without pains is presumption and mockery. "Wherefore criest thou unto me," said the Lord unto Moses, when, appalled by the difficulties of his position, hemmed in as he was between the sea and the hosts of the Egyptians, and discouraged by the clamours of the people, he was forgetting for the moment what it belonged to himself to do—"wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward" (Exod. xiv. 15). It is when the child of God pursues this course—when he has done his own part, and has cast his care as to the issue on his Father who is in heaven—that he learns to say with the Psalmist, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? . . . Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident" (Psalm xxvii. 1, 3).

Viewed in such lights as these, how important is it to remember this saying of Solomon, that "to every purpose there is time and judgment!" Because this is the fact, and because thoughtless and improvident, or wilful and self-pleasing men will not regard it, therefore are they continually involving themselves and others in numberless evils. If these evils were sufficiently considered—if Christian men, especially, would reflect on the countless and incalculable mischiefs which are done every day to the cause of Christ, and to the interests of truth and righteousness, by rash acts, and by hasty and foolish words—the wisdom commended by Solomon would be more highly prized and more

assiduously cultivated than it is. If, indeed, those who are chargeable with such offences could but see beforehand the whole amount of the injury which their indiscretions are destined to produce—if they could see the great fire, the devouring conflagration, which the “little matter,” as they perhaps accounted it, of some intemperate proceeding or expression of theirs, becomes the means of kindling—they would surely have taken any course rather than one so pernicious. Just because we know not *what* shall be, and that no one can tell us *when* it shall be—because the future is thus shrouded in impenetrable obscurity—the more imperative is it upon all to walk circumspectly in the world, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time. In that future there is one thing that is inevitable—one event which we must make up our minds to face—one enemy from whose hands there is no escape. “There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death: and there is no discharge in that war; neither shall wickedness deliver those that are given to it.” There is a day coming, that is to say, when the earthly house of this tabernacle must be dissolved, and when the union that now subsists between the material and mortal body and the immortal and immaterial spirit shall be broken up. When that day arrives we may shrink from the impending change; we may cling with stronger tenacity than ever to life; and we may exhaust every effort which human skill and means can employ to prevent the dreaded catastrophe. But all in vain. There is no human hand that can arrest the departing spirit, or even for one brief and passing moment delay the appointed time of its going hence. The most skilful physician feels and acknowledges, in that day, his utter impotence. His most potent remedies cease to operate. The last enemy has grasped his victim, and refuses to let go his fatal hold. He is heedless alike of the tears of affection and of the agonies of despair. No price can procure a discharge from this mortal conflict. No substitute can relieve the sinking sufferer by taking his place. No ransom can redeem the cap-

tive whom the remorseless victor is bearing off to the grave. Up till that terrible day the now doomed and dying man may have had no fear of God before his eyes. He may have so hardened himself in sin as to have lost all concern about his prospects in a future world. But his wickedness cannot avail to rescue him from death. To the dust his lifeless body must now return as it was, and his spirit—loaded with all its sins, unpardoned, unsanctified, unsaved—must return to God who gave it.

If, then, divine wisdom be needed, in order to deal rightly and profitably with the affairs and interests of time, how much more in order so to deal with the interests and affairs of eternity! If it be folly to run into temporal dangers, which prudence and forethought might have taught us to shun, how unspeakably greater the folly of rushing upon the thick bosses of the Almighty's buckler, and losing our souls! In the view of such an event as Solomon has here set before us, how appropriate is the Psalmist's prayer—"So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom!" (Ps. xc. 12). If we consider how few they are—how quickly they are passing away—how soon and how suddenly they may come to a close—and yet how much depends on our making a right use of them, what madness must it appear to be trifling them away as so many do, without almost a thought beyond the present hour!—careful and troubled, it may be, about many things, but wilfully and obstinately forgetting the one thing needful. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. vi. 2). It is on this side the grave, if ever at all, we must "win Christ." It is to-day, if we will hear his voice. The sinner may say, "At another time—at a more convenient season;" but he does so at his peril. To every purpose there is time and judgment. If we would succeed, even in the most ordinary earthly enterprise, we must watch for the fitting season, and be at pains to find out and follow the fitting course. If the husbandman idle away his spring, he must inevitably lose his

harvest; nor, if he employs himself in sowing tares, can he expect to gather wheat. Men are alive to such considerations when the concerns of this life are at stake; but how often are they utterly disregarded in relation to the infinitely greater concerns of the life to come! In the case of countless multitudes it would seem as if, in their view, time had nothing to do with eternity at all—as if they might live here without God, and yet possess His image and enjoy His favour hereafter. Let it never be forgotten that what a man soweth, that shall he also reap: they who sow to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; while they only who sow to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. That solemn charge which all have received—“occupy till I come”—has respect to the entire period of our earthly existence. It does not mean that we are to bethink ourselves of the account we have to give only when disease or old age shall have brought us to the brink of the tomb; nor does it mean that in this world we may apply the talents the Lord has committed to our trust according to our own carnal taste and pleasure, and that it will be time enough to apply them for His glory in the world to come. The lot we choose on earth will determine our lot in eternity. As the tree falls, so shall it lie. “He that is unjust,” such is the Lord’s righteous decree, “let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still” (Rev. xxii. 11). Blessed, therefore, are they that do His commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. To do His commandments, is to believe on Him whom God hath sent; for through the infinite merits of Christ alone can any of our fallen race ever acquire a right to the tree of life—a right to a place in the paradise of God: “I,” said the Lord Jesus, “am the way, and the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John xiv. 6).

CHAPTER XIII.

VERILY THERE IS A GOD THAT JUDGETH IN THE EARTH.

“All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: *there is* a time wherein one man ruleth over another to his own hurt. And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done. This *is* also vanity.

“Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his *days* be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong *his* days, *which are* as a shadow; because he feareth not before God.

“There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just *men*, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked: again, there be wicked *men*, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous. I said, that this also *is* vanity. Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry; for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life which God giveth him under the sun.

“When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth: (for also *there is* that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes: then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek *it* out, yet he shall not find *it*; yea farther, though a wise *man* think to know *it*, yet shall he not be able to find *it*.”—ECCLES. VIII, 9-17.

SOLOMON is again and again at pains to remind the readers of Ecclesiastes, that he is not setting before them mere abstract reflections or speculative views, but rather the practical results of his own observation and experience. It is that which he had himself seen, and heard, and handled, and tasted, which here, under the guidance of inspiration, he declares. With a special intimation to this effect, he introduces that series of statements on which we are now entering—“All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun.” He had laid himself out to

gain a large and exact acquaintance with the state of things existing in the world around him. In particular, he had been a close and careful observer of human life; of the many vicissitudes to which it is liable, and of the causes which tell upon its happiness and welfare. He had been at pains, too, to trace out the course and issue of events, and to learn the lessons thereby taught, as to the working of Divine Providence, in rewarding good and punishing evil. Of all this, various illustrative examples have been already given, and here is another of the same kind: "There is a time [this also Solomon had seen] wherein one man ruleth over another to his own hurt. And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this also is vanity." There are few things of which men are more ambitious than of power. What toils have been endured—what dangers have been confronted—what crimes have been committed, in order to compass this coveted possession! When the prophet Elisha told Hazael, with tears, through what scenes of treachery and blood that servant of Benhadad, the king of Syria, should yet make his way to the throne, he exclaimed, in seeming and perhaps real abhorrence and amazement, "Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this thing?" And yet, no sooner had the thought of gaining so envied a height got a hold of his mind, than he began to rush headlong on the very career which the prophet had described. "He departed," we are told, "from Elisha, and came to his master; who said to him, What said Elisha to thee? And he answered, He told me that thou shouldest surely recover. And it came to pass on the morrow, that he took a thick cloth, and dipped it in water, and spread it on his face, so that he died: and Hazael reigned in his stead" (2 Kings viii. 13-15). It is a history which, though not always in the same dark and frightful form, has been often repeated in this fallen and selfish world.

To restrain this guilty ambition, Solomon reminds those who are disposed to give way to it, that it is full of peril.

Success in such a pursuit may be far more fatal than failure. It may be to his own grievous loss and damage, that he acquires the power he has so eagerly sought. It is so always when the power is either in its own nature unlawful, or is unlawfully used. Of this fact the system of slavery is still a conspicuous and terrible proof. That system involves, indeed, many and most formidable evils to its unhappy victims—depriving them of liberty and independence—degrading them to the level of mere beasts of burden—treating them as goods and chattels, incapable of exercising any will, or possessing any rights of their own—subjecting them to every indignity and brutality which caprice or passion may dictate; and yet enormous and intolerable as these evils are, they are exceeded by those which the system entails upon the men by whom it is administered and maintained. They, most emphatically, rule over others to their own hurt. Their moral sense is blunted, and all the better feelings of their nature depraved by the sights which the system compels them to witness, and by the deeds which it requires, or at least tempts them to do. Even if the injury and oppression which the system inflicts should produce no violent recoil, the fear of it must often haunt the oppressor's mind, driving sleep from his couch, and peace from his breast. He may indeed live out the usual term of human life; but in the demoralization of his own character, in the pollution of his habits of life, in the perversion of all his views of moral obligation and religious truth, he has sustained, meanwhile, an injury of the deadliest kind. Besides all which, there is a day coming when the slave shall be freed from his master, and when the master himself shall be made to know that verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth. "This," says the patriarch Job (chap. xxvii. 13-17), "is the portion of a wicked man with God, and the heritage of oppressors, which they shall receive of the Almighty. If his children be multiplied, it is for the sword, and his offspring shall not be satisfied with bread. Those that remain of him shall be buried in death, and his widow shall not weep. Though he heap

up silver as the dust, and prepare raiment as the clay: he may prepare it, but the just shall put it on, and the innocent shall divide the silver;" his very name and memory, that is, shall be an abhorrence among those who survive him. It will bring reproach and shame upon his lineage. The fabric of earthly greatness he had reared upon the ruin of other men's rights and hopes shall perish and come to nought. And as for himself, in that awful eternity into which he has gone, that most significant sentence shall have a terrible fulfilment: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. xii. 19).

What were the forms of oppressive ruling, which Solomon had seen, we are not informed. They seem, however, to have been of that kind of which the retribution is reserved for the world to come. The "storm," of which Job speaks, had not come, as in all ages it has frequently done, in the case of tyrannical rulers, "to hurl them from their places." Those of whom Solomon speaks were buried, and apparently with all the outward honours which usually attend on rank and power. Moreover, unjust and cruel as they were, they had maintained throughout their lives a profession of religion. "They had come and gone from the place of the holy." Some commentators, indeed, have thought that this expression refers to the seat of judgment, which ought, undoubtedly, to be the place of the holy, seeing that he who fills it does so as the minister of God, as administering a divine ordinance, and as being, therefore, bound by the most sacred obligations to act in strict accordance with the dictates of justice and truth. There is nothing, however, in Scripture language to sanction such an interpretation of the words in question. It is much more natural to understand the words in the more common and obvious sense of the house of God, the place where "the holy"—the saints or people of God—are wont to meet. Those oppressors whom Solomon saw had been accustomed to frequent that place of the tabernacles of the Most High, as oppressors often do still. They were like those of whom the Lord spake to Ezekiel, saying, "They come unto thee

as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them : for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness" (Ezek. xxxiii. 31). But what then! Their hypocrisy deceived neither men nor God. No sooner were they buried than "they were forgotten in the city where they had so done." The "mouth honour" which, while they lived, had been reluctantly yielded to them, came at once to an end. Relieved from their hated yoke, society was in haste to obliterate every trace of their presence and power. The laws they had made were abolished—the monuments they had reared, thrown down—the favourites they had encouraged, displaced and disowned—in a word, that whole state of things which it had been the aim of their selfish pride to establish, was swept away so soon as they were laid in the grave. Well might Solomon say, "This also is vanity ;" for what could more impressively proclaim the folly of such a career, than the fact of its being followed, so immediately, with such oblivion, and contempt, and shame.

Nor was this a new thing under the sun. The father of Solomon had beheld it before him. "I have seen," said David, "the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree. Yet he passed away, and lo! he was not : yea I sought him, but he could not be found." Nor had David failed to mark the contrast between this and the opposite class of men—"The arms of the wicked shall be broken : but the Lord upholdeth the righteous. The Lord knoweth the days of the upright : and their inheritance shall be for ever. . . . I have been young and now am old ; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread" (Psalm xxxvii. 35, 36, 17, 18, 25).

Having described this case—the case of those who rule over others to their own hurt,—as a warning against ambition and tyranny, he subjoins this profound reflection, as suggested by it, that "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." The men of whose case Solomon had spoken,

iniquitous as their conduct was, had nevertheless passed through life without meeting with anything like a sentence of retribution. Their schemes had prospered. They had gained the object on which their ambition was placed. On their side was power, and the subjects of their oppression had none to comfort them. What was the inference to be drawn from these things? Was God blind or indifferent to the conduct of men? Was His government of the world nothing better than a name? The spectacle in question might seem to give some countenance to this repulsive conclusion. In contemplating scenes of the same kind, even David had been ready to let go his hold of the great principles which governed his life. "As for me," he says, "my feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men are: neither are they plagued like other men. Their pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. . . . Therefore His people return hither, and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them. And they say, How doth God know, and is there knowledge in the Most High?" (Psalm lxxiii. 2-6, 10, 11). Such are the dark thoughts to which, in their haste and impatience, even good men have occasionally been tempted to give way, when contemplating what seemed to be the impunity with which iniquity is sometimes committed. And if piety, when faith is weak, may be thus sorely troubled and perplexed by such events, it is easy to see how impiety may be emboldened by them to become more audacious in crime.

But, adds Solomon, in order to expose these errors both of the one class and of the other, "Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him: but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God." The sinner may seem to have all the advantage

upon his side. Fortune smiles on him, while it frowns upon the man of conscientious principle and piety. The one has a favouring breeze and a flowing tide, which carry him in every enterprise prosperously on to land; while baffling winds and an ebbing sea are continually drawing or driving the other back into the deep. But though the sinner may thus grow gray in an unchecked career of successful wickedness, the God-fearing man shall have the better part, notwithstanding, in the end. "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace." "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and He delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with His hand" (Psalm xxxvii. 23, 24). Be his lot in this life what it may as to outward things, he can say with the Psalmist, "Thou (Lord) hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased" (Psalm iv. 7). "His rejoicing," like that of Paul, "is this, the testimony of his conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, he has had his conversation in this world" (2 Cor. i. 12).

And when this fleeting life shall at length have come to an end—when that day of death previously spoken of shall arrive—a day beyond which, not for one moment, can the wicked man's earthly existence be prolonged—then these words of Solomon shall have all their momentous meaning fully explained. Then it will appear how infinitely preferable it is to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. To the prosperous wicked man it shall then be said, with awful emphasis, as to the rich man of the parable of our Lord, "Remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented" (Luke xvi. 26). "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them" (Rev. xiv. 13).

The statement contained in the 14th verse appears, at first sight, to agree very ill with the views laid down in the foregoing context. Solomon had been celebrating wisdom. He had been praising it as man's best possession, and as his only sure guide. He had been saying substantially this, that to follow its dictates was to be safe and happy—that to despise it was to be inevitably involved in danger and ruin. But can this be true if it turns out to be the fact, that in reality it sometimes proves worse with the disciples of wisdom than with those of folly?—that good men are found, not unfrequently, to be subject to great adversities, while bad men are seen coming to honour?—that integrity and piety are visited with loss and suffering, while irreligion and ungodliness bask in the sunshine of prosperity? It may seem hard to reconcile such a state of things with what Solomon had been setting forth as to the excellence of wisdom, and the unspeakable advantage of acting upon its high and holy principles. And yet it could not be denied that the state of things in question did often arise. Solomon frankly confesses this to be the case. He admits that “there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked;” and again, “that there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous.” In other words, there be good men that meet with the treatment of evil-doers, and bad men that meet with the treatment of well-doers. But while the royal Preacher concedes the fact, he is quite prepared to dispute the inference, that wisdom is on that account one whit the less deserving of all the commendation he had been bestowing upon it. To the grounds on which he does dispute and set aside that inference, we shall come in due time. But first let us look in the face, as Solomon himself does, the apparently adverse fact itself. He evidently brings it in as an objection, which an opponent of the great doctrine laid down in the preceding verses might start, and which he felt it needful, therefore, both to anticipate and to answer. In introducing it, as he does, with these words, “There is a vanity which is done

upon the earth," it may, perhaps, be open to question whether he is simply using the language of the supposed objector, or is here actually expressing his own mind. Those who consider the language to be that of the objector, understand it in one sense; while those who consider it to express Solomon's own mind, understand it in another. If it be the objector who speaks, he means, of course, that the thing he is about to specify stamps vanity upon that wisdom which Solomon had so highly praised. On this supposition, it is as if the objector had said to him—There is a thing done upon the earth which makes a fool of your boasted wisdom. You say that 'whoso keepeth the commandment shall feel no evil thing;' 'that it shall be well with them that fear God, but that it shall not be well with the wicked.' But how, then, does it come to pass that 'there be just men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; and wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous?' Do not such facts write vanity upon that wisdom which you have been at so much pains to commend?

If, on the other hand, it be Solomon that speaks—if it be he himself who is here pronouncing the facts so specified to be "a vanity"—the expression must be taken, not as a reproach attempted to be cast upon wisdom, but only as a further illustration of what he has all along been insisting on, that it is folly for any man to seek his portion in the present world. If temporal prosperity be so uncertain that virtue itself cannot be sure of attaining to it, why should men set their hearts upon it? Why should they stake their happiness on a thing so fickle and variable as worldly fortune?

Though there is certainly some difficulty in choosing between these alternative views, I am inclined to regard the verse as containing, from the very outset, the language of the supposed objector; and, therefore, to accept the term vanity in this case as an intended reproach cast by him in the face of wisdom. Nor can there be any doubt that it does seem, when cursorily

considered, to exhibit wisdom in the light of vanity—that the man who has most of it should meet with the hardest fate, and he who has least of it with that fate which is most prosperous and pleasant. Look at Joseph in the dungeon. He has been a disciple of heavenly wisdom. He has resisted a strong temptation to sin, and it has happened to him according to the work of the wicked. As the immediate fruit and consequence of taking counsel from wisdom, he is overwhelmed with calumny—he is loaded with reproach and shame—his prospects of advancement in life are utterly blasted—he is left to languish in his prison, either forgotten or despised. Look at Paul bruised and bleeding, where he has been all but stoned to death at the gates of Lystra, or writhing under the cruel and ignominious scourge at Philippi, or dragged through the streets and beaten by the infuriated populace at Jerusalem. He, too, has been an assiduous follower of wisdom, and this is his reward. Or, once more, to take a far more illustrious example than either of these—look at Him who was the very impersonation and living embodiment of wisdom. Was He not all His life long a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief? Was He not despised and rejected of men? And did He not terminate His earthly career upon a malefactor's cross?

It is, then, no mere fancy, no unreal extravagance, to say that “there be just men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked.” It happened in Scripture times. It happened often, at a later day, in our own land, as many a martyr's grave, and many a gloomy prison, and many a bloody scaffold could tell. It happens to this hour all over the world; for never has that saying lacked many proofs to confirm its truth—“Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”

Nor has the other and opposite side of that strange picture which this 14th verse exhibits, ever wanted its counterpart in actual life. Hazael murders his master, and gets a throne by the deed. Judas betrays the innocent blood, and he is rewarded with

thirty pieces of silver. The unscrupulous trader defrauds his customers, and grows rich by his dishonest gains. Honours pass over the head of the upright Mordecai, who has saved the king's life, and light upon that of the wicked Haman. In short, it is undeniable that there are, and always have been, "wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous." And here it may be observed, that what goes to corroborate the supposition that it is not Solomon, but the objector who pronounced such a state of things to be vanity, is, that now,—at the close of the verse,—Solomon intimates that at one time he had himself been disposed to view the matter in the same light. "I said, that this also is vanity." The objector says it still; and once I said it too. In the days of my folly I gave in to the notion that it was a vain thing to follow that self-denying course which wisdom prescribes. I was disposed to plead such facts as those which the objector has adduced, as furnishing, if not a solid argument, at least a very plausible one, for making light of wisdom—for casting off the restraints which it imposes, and for adopting a more easy-going and self-indulgent rule. In that mood of mind I gave my voice for a life of pleasure. "*Then* I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun."

The reference in these words appears to be to that part of his career alluded to in the close of the first chapter of Ecclesiastes and in the commencement of the second. Disgusted with the utter failure of his attempts to rectify the seeming disorders of Providence—to make that straight which he found crooked, and to supply that which he found to be wanting—he ran headlong into a career of gaiety and dissipation. Why should he be virtuous and self-denied if this was all that was to come of it—that vice was still often seen to prosper, and virtue to be the losing side of the great game of life? He recalls that state of mind now. It helps him to understand what the objector

means when he disparages wisdom, and holds up the facts just noticed as stamping it with vanity. But Solomon has got more and better light upon the subject since that dark and disastrous period of his history. He has been brought, by that very wisdom which the objector would fain depreciate, to take deeper and larger views of man's condition and destiny than those on which the objector proceeds. He had come to be fully convinced that a life of so-called pleasure is a life of real unhappiness. Experience had taught him to say—"of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?" It had shown him that there were ten thousand causes at work which the lover of this world's pleasures could neither foresee nor prevent, and by which, at any moment, either the portion he had chosen might be snatched out of his hands, or its possessor be utterly disabled for enjoying it.

Solomon does not mean, indeed, to make no account at all of the good things of this life. Already, in preceding chapters, he had pointed out the right use to make of them, and had described the kind and amount of enjoyment which they are fitted and designed to afford. When men use this world as not abusing it—when they accept what they receive of it with cheerful and thankful hearts—when they turn it to account in the way of providing for their own personal and domestic comfort, and in promoting the good of others, they are really getting all out of it which it was ever meant to impart. But what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Time is but the threshold of eternity. A man's true life consisteth not in the abundance of the earthly things which he possesseth: God's favour is life, and His loving-kindness is better than life; and therefore, he only whose estimate of the worth of things takes cognizance of man's relation to God, and to the world to come, is truly wise. So estimated, even such apparently stumbling facts as those the objector had specified, cease to be a source of perplexity. Seen in the light of that

great and notable day which is to try every man's work of what sort it is, and to deal with it accordingly, it will assuredly be found that the suffering just man, with whom, in this present fleeting earthly scene, it happened according to the work of the wicked, has, after all, made a far wiser and happier choice than the prosperous wicked man, to whom, for a brief hour, it had happened according to the work of the righteous. Things and men shall then be all put in their own proper place; and then shall Solomon's previous saying be amply vindicated, that "though a sinner do evil an hundred times"—do it, that is, an hundred times with impunity—"and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him: but it shall not be well with the wicked."

Solomon would have it known that he had been at great pains to come at the truth on this momentous subject. Those perplexing events to which the objector alluded had not escaped his notice; on the contrary, he had given the whole energies of his powerful and capacious mind to the solution of the difficulties which they involved. He had sought earnestly "to know wisdom"—to discover, that is, what wisdom had to say regarding such things. He had made the condition and character of men in this world a matter of deep and thoughtful study; he had spared no pains "to see the business that is done upon the earth." The parenthetical sentence thrown in at the close of the 16th verse has been generally understood by commentators to refer to what Solomon had seen in prosecuting his survey of human life; and to be intended to describe that ceaseless toil and wakeful anxiety which is the lot in this world of not a few. It may be so; though one is at a loss to perceive the relevancy of such a statement to the matter in hand. A more simple and natural way of explaining the words in question would appear to be this—to take them as descriptive of the intense solicitude and untiring assiduity with which Solomon himself had pursued the inquiries of which he had just been speaking. The unreflecting multitude, whose minds are never exercised on such questions

at all, have no conception of the amount of both time and effort which it costs to master them. They do not know, though it is a fact, that there are men who, in handling such profound problems as the mysteries of Divine Providence, in connection with the state and prospects of the human race, present, "neither day nor night see sleep with their eyes." So understood, the parenthesis falls easily and without constraint into the verse to which it belongs—illustrating, as it does, both the sincerity and the strength of purpose with which he had given himself to search out the truth in regard to such difficulties as the objector had proposed. He had sacrificed even his natural rest in trying to learn what wisdom's decision might be regarding these deep things; and what was the result? It was twofold.

First, as he distinctly intimates in the 17th verse, he had been brought to the conclusion that there was a mystery about the existing condition of things which he was unable to penetrate—that the subject had a length and breadth, a height and depth, that baffled all his powers. "Then I beheld," he says, "all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, he shall not find it; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it." In thus saying that a "man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun," and that even "a wise man shall not be able to find it," we cannot suppose that he is merely giving utterance to the obvious truism that man's powers of observation are limited, and that it is impossible for him to make himself acquainted with every particular of human life and with every member of the human family. Ten thousand things are continually going on, even at our very doors, of which we never do know, nor can know anything. Only Omniscience and Omnipresence can lay bare the tangled and complicated labyrinth of this whole world's affairs.

It was surely no such familiar fact as this that Solomon designed, in this 17th verse, and with so much emphasis, to announce. No. But what he wished to make known was rather

the humbling truth that, even in those very events with which we are most familiar, we meet with difficulties which we cannot resolve. Mere human reason could do nothing to explain the origin or the existence, under the government of an allwise, almighty, and infinitely righteous God, of a state of things in which it should ever happen to just men to be treated according to the deserts of the wicked, or to wicked men to be treated according to the deserts of the righteous. There is no human philosophy that could ever have thrown one ray of true and satisfying light on an anomaly so great. Even divine revelation itself, though it tells us how it came to pass—though it tells us, in other words, how man fell from his original righteousness, and how the world became that strangely disordered scene which we actually see before us,—it does not tell *why* this was permitted. That it was permitted for God's glory, we do indeed confidently infer and unhesitatingly believe, because that is and must be the grand final cause of all things. But still, as regards the principle that is to harmonize the existence of sin and misery in God's universe with the infinite perfections of His own being, it is altogether hidden from us—it is far above and beyond the grasp, in at least its present enfeebled condition, of any human mind.

Nay, on a far lower level than that of so high and unsearchable a mystery as the origin of evil, there are many things through which we cannot see, and which mock all our endeavours to find out why they are so. The daily providence of God is full of mystery. Events fall out oftentimes in a way the very opposite of that which our views of what the occasion required would have led us to anticipate. We see young men, full of promise, cut off at the very outset of a career of usefulness, while mere cumberers of the ground are allowed to live on to gray hairs. We see truth, even the very truth that alone makes wise unto salvation, put down, and its disciples silenced by the ruthless hand of despotic power; while soul-destroying error is exalted to influence and honour in its stead. We see the godly man ceasing and the faithful failing from the earth,

while the wicked flourish and spread "like a green bay tree." Contemplating such providences as these, we feel how true it is that God's ways are past finding out—that His ways are not our ways, neither His thoughts our thoughts. The deep darkness which wraps them round we are not able to penetrate. "Yea, though even a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it." He has no resource but to fall back on such a reflection as this, that what we know not now we shall know hereafter.

Nor is it unimportant that we should remember and realize the fact which Solomon, in this 17th verse, sets before us. It is good and necessary that we should learn humbly and heartily to acquiesce in that state of dependence and comparative ignorance in which we have been placed; and to be contented oftentimes with knowing no more than this, that the Lord reigneth. There is, let us be assured, a good and sufficient reason for everything He has ordained, however hidden it may be from us. The Psalmist meekly recognized this fundamental truth when, under a sore calamity that had befallen him, he said, "I was dumb, because thou didst it." Had it come from the hand of man, or in so far as man had to do with it, he might have had some complaint to make, or reason to urge, against it; but the thought that the only wise and all-gracious God had appointed it, silenced every murmur and answered every objection. To those who would act otherwise in a like position, the Lord utters this high command, "Be still, and know that I am God."

But the result announced in the 17th verse is not all that Solomon discovered as the fruit of his earnest desire and effort to know wisdom. While it taught him that in God's dealings with men in this world there are mysteries which the human mind cannot fathom, it taught him another and a much more consoling truth—that God is never unmindful of His people—that His eye is upon them continually—and that all things concerning them will come right in the end. "For all this I considered in my heart," he goes on to say in the 1st verse of

chapter ix., "even to declare all this, that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God." It may appear to careless onlookers—and sometimes, perhaps, when faith is weak, even to God's people themselves—that He has forgotten them; but never was there a more groundless thought. "Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God? Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?" (Isaiah xl. 27, 28).

It is here that Solomon finds the true answer to the objector's plea for undervaluing heavenly wisdom. Be it, as the objector says, that "there be just men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked;" be it, in other words, that those who take divine wisdom for their guide find oftentimes that the path by which it leads them is rough and toilsome—that it brings them not unfrequently to worldly loss and trouble—let them not on that account be dissuaded from following it. Those who take a different way—those who walk according to the course of this world—who seek their own pleasure, their own ease, their own self-indulgence—may seem, for a time, to fare all the better for doing so. The advantage may appear to be all on their side. They laugh, while the followers of wisdom weep. They are clothed in purple and fine linen, and fare sumptuously every day; while the others, it may be, like Lazarus, are left to lie in unpitied poverty at the gate. Of them all men speak well; the world praises and honours them: while the names of wisdom's children are cast out as evil. Nevertheless, there is a day coming when all this shall be changed. Let this present evil world treat the righteous and the wise with what indignity and injustice it may, they and their works are in the hand of God, and He shall yet bring forth their righteousness as the light, and their judgment as the noonday. He will redress all their wrongs, and abundantly compensate them for all their sufferings; for their light affliction, which is but for a moment,

will be found, in the long run, to have been working for them a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

All this is evidently implied in saying of the righteous and the wise that they and their works "are in the hand of God." Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? He cannot be deceived by any amount of misrepresentation and calumny as to their true character. If all the world should have combined to hunt them down, and to cover them with reproach and shame, He will rescue them from even the lowest depths into which their enemies may have degraded them; for He raiseth the poor out of the dunghill and setteth him among princes. "He shall judge the poor of the people, He shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor. . . . He shall redeem their soul from deceit and violence: and precious shall their blood be in His sight" (Psalm lxxii.) And is not this enough to reconcile the child of God to any and every trial of his faith and patience he may be called in this life to endure? Here is a support and a solace of which no earthly adversity can possibly deprive him—that he and his works are in the hands of God. Knowing and believing this, he may well say, with Paul, when the world misjudges and wrongs him—For me it is a very small thing to be judged of you or of man's judgment; He that judgeth me is the Lord. Having this for his rejoicing, even the testimony of his conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not by fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, he has his conversation in the world—he endures as seeing Him who is invisible.

How different is the case of him who dare not appeal to God at all! What avails the success that may have attended his worldly schemes? What avails it that by his lax morality and latitudinarian principles he may have escaped the inconveniences, losses, or sufferings in which men who walk by conscience and Scripture truth often find themselves involved? What though the unworthy arts by which he has paved his way to fortune—the selfishness, the dishonesty, the flattery, the oppression he has

practised, in order to overreach others, and to aggrandize himself,—have never been exposed, and that he has escaped, in consequence, the shame and dishonour he deserved? What though, on the contrary, the world may be casting itself at his feet, and crying when he speaks, as did the venal multitude before Herod, “It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.” What avails all this, when conscience whispers with its still small voice, that he is a guilty and unpardoned sinner? or when death stares him in the face, and summons him to a judgment-seat where there is no respect of persons, and where every man shall receive the due reward of his deeds? The thought, so precious to the righteous and the wise, that they and their works are in the hand of God, is to him pregnant with terror and dismay. In this life he may have received his good things, but in the world to come he cannot but foresee that there are none but evil things in store.

Let us, then, be admonished to take Solomon’s counsel, and whatever it may cost, to cast in our lot with the righteous and the wise. Better, infinitely better is it, to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. And who are the righteous, and who are the wise? Not those who go about to establish their own righteousness—not those who are wise in their own conceit. The righteous, who are in God’s hand, and whom He keeps until the coming of His kingdom, are those who are found before Him, not having their own righteousness, which is of the law, and which is as filthy rags, but having the righteousness of Christ, even the righteousness which is of God and by faith. The wise, who are in God’s hand, and whose works He loves, are those whom He Himself, by his Word and Spirit, has made wise unto salvation; who have chosen the good part, and are walking in the way of the divine commandments. When this world, with all its troubles and sorrows, its wrongs and injuries, shall have come to an end, then shall they that be wise shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE APPARENT INDIFFERENCE OF PROVIDENCE TO THE
DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE EVIL AND THE GOOD,
AND THE ANSWER TO THIS DIFFICULTY.

“For all this I considered in my heart, even to declare all this, that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, *are* in the hand of God; no man knoweth either love or hatred *by* all *that is* before them. All *things come* alike to all: *there is* one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good, and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as *is* the good, so *is* the sinner; and he that sweareth, as *he* that feareth an oath. This *is* an evil among all *things* that are done under the sun, that *there is* one event unto all: yea also, the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness *is* in their heart while they live, and after that *they go* to the dead. For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any *thing* that is done under the sun.

“Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that *is* thy portion in *this* life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do *it* with thy might; for *there is* no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”—ECCLES. IX. 1-10.

IN the close of the preceding chapter, Solomon was dealing with a certain objection that might be urged against that heavenly wisdom he had been so greatly commending. Heavenly wisdom enjoins men to be pious and holy—to fear God and to keep His commandments. “But what is to be gained by following this doctrine,” asks the sceptical opponent, “if ‘there be just men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked,’ and if ‘there be wicked men, to

whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous!" That the state of things which these words describe is only too common in this fallen world, no intelligent and impartial observer of human history can possibly deny. Solomon admits that it is so, but disputes the inference which the objector would deduce from it. The circumstance that good men frequently suffer for their goodness in this present life, and that bad men often prosper in their wickedness, is no proof that in the long run it shall either be well with the wicked, or ill with them that fear God. To think so, is to reason in a very shallow and short-sighted way. Solomon had one great fact to set over against such reasoning that was quite enough to nullify it all; and the fact was this, "that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God." The Lord reigneth: let that suffice. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do that which is right? Wisdom—that is, the wisdom Solomon had been celebrating—is but another name for the mind and will of God, and He cannot contradict Himself. He cannot and will not fail to condemn and punish what He hates and forbids; and to approve and reward what He loves and commends. Be it, therefore, that the perplexities of the existing condition of things are often such as even Solomon himself could not solve, here is the short and decisive answer with which the disciple of wisdom may fearlessly face even the subtlest of her foes. They may throw these perplexities in his way, to make him stumble—they may taunt him with them as casting ridicule on his godly and self-denying career; but none of these things move him. What he knows not now he shall know hereafter; and, meanwhile, he knows this, that in the hands of Him whose mercy is in the heavens, and whose faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds, whose righteousness is like the mountains, and whose judgments are a great deep, his interests are safe. Let it be with him outwardly in this world as it may—let him meet from the hands of his fellowmen with what wrongs and cruelty they may please to inflict—they cannot

rob him of the testimony of a good conscience,—of the blessedness of the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose mind is stayed upon God.

The first thing that must strike the thoughtful reader of the passage at present before us, is, that Solomon is in no haste to be done with the objector's difficulty. To refuse to see difficulties, or to slur them over with a slight and passing notice, is the common artifice of special pleaders; but one who has truth upon his side, and especially one who, like Solomon, has upon his side truth taught, sustained, and shielded by inspiration, is not afraid to look in the face, and to search to the bottom, whatever can be urged against it. Instead, therefore, of dropping this difficulty, arising out of the seeming want of any plan or principle in the events which we see falling out in the world around us, he returns to it. He has already shown that it makes nothing against the course of life he is pleading for; but he will show, before he leaves it, that it does make very much against that opposite and evil course which the enemies of heavenly wisdom would fain have men to pursue. He has shown that the trials, to which the sufferings of this present time subject the faith and patience of the righteous, must and shall issue in ultimate good. But he will now show, on the other hand, that the earthly good things which the wicked may get here, are only serving to lure them on to misery and woe hereafter.

In returning, as he now does, to the objector's difficulty, Solomon puts it as broadly as the objector himself could desire. Even he could not venture to say that fortune favours the wicked alone, and that upon the righteous temporal prosperity never shines. The very utmost length to which the events of human life and the facts of human history could be represented as going on the objector's side, is exactly as Solomon states it; viz., this length, that such are the seeming contrarities of providence in its dealings with men, that "no man knoweth either love or hatred"—knoweth, that is, whom providence loves or whom providence hates—"by all that is before them." When

we look, indeed, at one class of cases only—when we see vile men high in place and power, while good men are persecuted and despised—when we see, for example, the control of a kingdom committed to such a man as the sensual and selfish Herod, and a John the Baptist losing his head for daring to speak the truth,—we might be tempted to conclude that, in so far at least as this world is concerned, goodness is altogether on the losing side. But this dark picture has sometimes, at least, a bright reverse. The pious, generous, patriotic son of Jesse, though long and cruelly hunted like a partridge upon the mountains, is seen at length sitting on his persecutor's throne. The weeping and heart-broken youth, whom his envious brethren have sold for a slave, emerges at length from his dungeon and his chains, and rises to influence and honour, while those who wronged him bow in submission at his feet. Putting the one class of cases alongside of the other, the most that could be made of them, in the way of opposition to Solomon's argument, would be this—to say that the man who disregarded Solomon's counsel, and who refused to take wisdom for his guide, was as likely to fare well in this world as he who followed a quite contrary course. The very utmost, therefore, that the objector can possibly ask for his view of that state of things which providence exhibits, is conceded by Solomon, when, in speaking of it, he makes use of such words as these—"All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good, and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath."

Solomon makes these admissions because, in a certain sense, and within certain limits, they are undeniably true. There is very often one event in the affairs of time "to the righteous and to the wicked." They are equally partakers of the common ills and of the common earthly solaces of human life; they have both of them their domestic bereavements and their

domestic comforts—their alternations of prosperity and adversity—of health and sickness, of joy and grief. “The good and the clean”—those, that is, who love and practise goodness, and who are, through grace, of a pure heart—cannot well be distinguished, by the providences that befall them, from those that “are unclean,” who are living in their natural state of moral and spiritual defilement. The one class may be next door neighbours to the other; and the passer by, looking merely at their worldly circumstances, might find it utterly impossible to distinguish the one from the other. Of two men whom we may meet any day in the street, it may be true that the one “sacrificeth” and that the other “sacrificeth not”—that the one, in other words, as is plainly implied in this Old Testament language, is a man who is strict and conscientious in attending to his religious duties, in waiting on the ordinances of the gospel, in secret and domestic prayer, in devoting a stated portion of his worldly substance to the service of God: it may be true that the one is such a man as this, and that the other is a man who makes little or no account of religion at all—who seldom appears in the place of public worship, is a total stranger to the exercises of personal devotion, and knows not what it is to make any sacrifice whatever of either time, labour, or money for the sake of God’s cause. It may be true that such and so opposite, in these important respects, are the two men in question; and yet there may be nothing in the position and course of their temporal affairs to indicate this difference. The irreligious man’s business may be as prosperous as that of the man of God; and the stream of life, so far as the course of outward events can throw any light upon the question, may be flowing as smoothly in the one case as in the other. In short, “as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath.” In this life Providence does neither, by a visible mark, so bless the one nor so brand the other, as to make any broad and palpable distinction between them.

Solomon admits all this, because, as has been already said, in a

certain sense and within certain limits, it is all undeniably true. It is not true, however, absolutely and without qualification. For even as regards man's temporal concerns and his present state of being, there is, after all, very much to distinguish the righteous from the wicked; and to show that the providence of God is on the side of the one and is not on the side of the other. Godliness is profitable to all things, and has promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come. Godliness commands respect; it inspires confidence; it disarms opposition by its forbearance and kindness; it gains friends by its fidelity and truth. Its tendency, therefore, when accompanied with discretion and diligence, is undoubtedly to promote even the temporal interests of its possessor; and not more certain is it, on the other hand, that ungodliness has a tendency of the opposite kind. The lax morality which is its common accompaniment begets distrust; its selfishness alienates sympathy, and often defeats its own ends. It has, and can have, no blessing from Him who loveth righteousness and hateth iniquity. Again, godliness is promotive of health. The temperance which it teaches, the activity which it prompts and sustains, and, above all, the inward peace with which it fills the soul, are all most favourable to that sound state of body on which so much of human comfort in this life depends. Ungodliness, on the contrary, is the malaria that spreads and the fire that feeds disease. The vices which are its usual associates—the loose living, the sensual indulgence, the irregular habits which so often characterize an ungodly life,—carry, for the most part, their own punishment along with them. They may be sweet in the mouth, but in the belly they are bitter. These, and facts like these, are amply sufficient to show that when it is said, "All things come alike to all, and that there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked," we must confine the meaning of these expressions within certain limits. Even here, in this present world, there is quite enough continually taking place, under the providence of God, to prove to the thoughtful and

spiritual mind that "He is angry with the wicked every day," and that "the way of transgressors is hard;" and also to prove that "wisdom's ways are pleasantness, and that her paths are peace."

But still it remains true that, taking things in the gross, and as they appear to the common eye, the general statement we have been considering holds good. To a large extent, good and evil are neither discriminated nor dealt with, on this side the grave, in such a way as to mark the greatness of the difference which subsists between them, or of the distance by which they are really divided in the sight and estimation of God. It might appear to the superficial observer as if, oftentimes, Providence regarded them with an equal eye. Nor do we need to tell any enlightened reader of the Word of God why this is so. This life is not the last act in the great drama of human history. It is not here and now that men are receiving the due reward of their deeds. After that curtain shall have fallen that is destined to cover up and close the latest of the shifting scenes of time, it will rise once more to bring into view a vaster, grander, and more awful stage than time ever displayed. Of all the countless actors who ever strutted their brief hour on the stage of time, not one shall be absent on that great and notable day that is to usher in eternity. Multitudinous as the leaves of the forest, or as the grains of sand on the sea-shore, the successive generations of the human family, from Adam to the latest born of his race, shall be gathered together in one mighty throng. Men of every tribe and tongue, of every age and nation shall be there. Abel will be there, the first martyr for the truth of God; and there also will be Cain, with the foul stain of his brother's blood still fresh upon his hands. Enoch will be there, and the ungodly generation by whom his prophecy was despised. Noah will be there, and all that antediluvian world of the ungodly for whom the long-suffering patience of God waited one hundred and twenty years, until the flood came and took them all away. Moses will be there, and Pharaoh, who defied the God that sent him.

Joshua will be there, and the Canaanites, whose abominations doomed them to his exterminating sword. The prophets and holy men of ancient Israel will be there, and there also will be the people by whom they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword. Above all, the Son of man will be there and there also will be all of every creed and clime who have taken part against him—who have rejected the Holy One and the Just, and who have been crucifying to themselves the Son of God.

Then, at last, the disorder and confusion that now reign on earth shall have a full and final end. Then and there shall cease for ever that state of things in reference to which it was said, in the words before us, that “all things come alike to all,” and that “there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked.” Crowded, confused, commingled as the precious may be with the vile, when the whole human race shall be assembled on that day of the resurrection from the dead, He that sitteth upon the great white throne shall separate them as easily and as unerringly, one from another, as the shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats. And then shall wisdom be justified of all her children; for then shall these words of Solomon be amply vindicated, that “it shall be well with them that fear God,” but that “it shall not be well with the wicked.”

All this that has now been briefly sketched is incessantly drawing on, and Solomon is about, ere long, to speak of it. It is important and necessary, however, for the purposes of his argument, that he should first direct attention to the too common effect which is produced upon men by the apparent impunity with which they are allowed, in this present world, to indulge in sin. The fact that Providence seems to take so little account of how men live,—seems to be as favourable often to the wicked as to the righteous, to the evil as to the good,—this fact the supposed objector had urged as a reason for disregarding the dictates of heavenly wisdom, and for refusing to lead that pure, and holy, and self-crucifying life which it requires of all its followers.

But it is not because God is indifferent as to whether men be righteous or wicked that He makes so little distinction outwardly between the one class and the other in this present world: it is because He will have it, in this way, tested and put to the proof whether men be prepared to love and follow righteousness for its own sake, and for His sake, apart from any reward or privilege which it may ultimately carry in its train. This is another and a more special reason for God's method of dealing with men in this present world, additional to that great general reason already set forth—that the present life is not the period of judgment and retribution, but the season of preparation for these great and final developments of the moral government of God.

In the view of that great day of accounts, God lets men, so to speak, alone, to see whether or not they will obey Him. He is kind even to the unthankful and the evil. But men, blinded by sin, take encouragement from His goodness, to continue in their wickedness. Because sentence against their evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Solomon had made this pregnant observation in the preceding chapter; and here he substantially repeats it in a slightly different form. In doing so he begins by laying down the position that “this is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all.” It was no benefit, no advantage, even to the wicked themselves, that they were permitted to sin with comparative impunity: it was serving only to foster that tendency to evil which was already too strong; for, as Solomon goes on to say, “the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live.” Out of the heart, said He who needed not that any should testify to Him of man, because He knew what was in man—out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, wickedness, covetousness, an evil eye, pride, blasphemy, foolishness. Encouraged and emboldened by the divine forbearance, these guilty desires are allowed to have their own

way, and the evil nature of ungodly men thus grows into a madness which hurries them on from one iniquity to another, till, perhaps, it has brought their earthly career prematurely to an end; and "after that they go to the dead."

Here, then, is the issue and landing-place of such a life—a life by which the dictates of heavenly wisdom are set at nought. Let the objector with whom Solomon has been dealing consider this fact; let him look a little way before him, and see what is to be the end of those who may think it a sufficient reason for refusing to fear God and to follow holiness, that such a life is as likely to bring them into trouble as a life of selfishness and sin. If they will rather take their own way, in order to have their ease, and pleasure, and self-indulgence, rather than take God's way, at the expense of bearing the cross—which is the necessary accompaniment of His service—let them, at least, sit down and count the cost. Let it be granted that, as regards the things of this world, the righteous are to be no better, perhaps even worse, than the wicked; let it be granted that the righteous, all along, will have to row against both wind and tide, while the wicked or worldly will go with the stream; let it be granted that the wisdom Solomon has been commending to their choice will often bring them to loss and suffering, which, by casting that wisdom aside, they may easily escape; let all this be granted—but let it also be borne in mind that the question has another side. This is the view of the question which time exhibits. Eternity will present it in a totally different light. When they go to the dead, both the righteous and the wicked shall enter on a new and totally different state of things. Death shall bring equally to an end the trials and afflictions of the people of God, and those pleasures of sin which, for a season, the wicked have enjoyed. Beyond death there is glory, honour, and immortality for the one; shame and everlasting contempt for the other.

Evidently, it is this dark and dreadful prospect of a lost eternity which Solomon here intends to place before the wicked. If death were, indeed, an eternal sleep; if it were not true that

after death is the judgment, then indeed might the objector's argument have some apparent force. To get through so brief and transient a career as man's threescore and ten, or even fourscore years,—if that were the whole of it,—in the way that promised to give least trouble and to bring most ease and pleasure, might seem to be a high enough aim for so inferior and ephemeral an existence. But if man's short life on earth be but the beginning of an existence that is to last for ever—if it be but the preparation for, and the pathway to the tribunal of our Sovereign Judge—if it be a seed-time from which is to spring either the precious wheat that shall be gathered into the Lord's garner, or the chaff which the Great Husbandman shall burn with unquenchable fire—if these things be so, what folly, what madness is it either to grudge any service or sacrifice that may be needful to make us meet for heaven; or to gain the ease, the honours, the wealth, or the pleasures of the world, at the expense of losing our souls!

To show that these momentous and awful considerations are what Solomon is really pointing at in the passage before us, he goes on, in the 5th and 6th verses, to contrast the living with the dead, and to contrast them in a way that could have no fit and proper meaning, or bearing upon his argument, apart from those great interests that lie beyond the grave. "For," he continues, "to him that is joined to all the living there is hope." Hope of what? Not hope of escaping death; for he says, a little further on, "the living know that they shall die." But to the living there is still hope of escaping the doom to which the wicked, who have already gone to the place of the dead, are unchangeably and eternally consigned. And because of this vital and all-important distinction, the very poorest, meanest, most wretched among living men, occupies an infinitely more enviable position than the mightiest monarch who, having walked according to the course of this world, and having received his good things—the things he chose as his portion on earth—has at length been summoned away to receive his evil

things in eternity. "The living dog is better than the dead lion." Be it that the living man, in the case supposed, were among the lowest and most degraded of his fellows,—the very image and impersonation of that which the term dog would call up to an oriental, and especially to an Hebrew mind,—he is still within the reach of divine mercy. His heart, hard and stony as it is, may still be softened into penitence: his mind, blinded though it be by the deceitfulness of sin, may still be made, by God's blessed Word and Spirit, wise unto salvation: his soul, polluted and debased as it has hitherto been by the indulgence of fleshly lusts, may yet be cleansed and created anew: in a word, he whom Satan was leading captive at his will, may yet be brought into the glorious liberty of the sons of God, and not hell but heaven may be his eternal home. As regards him that is joined to all the living, there is still room for this glorious hope. But as for the dead who have died in their sins, their state is already fixed for ever: a great gulf—an impassable abyss, which not one of all their number can ever get over—yawns between them and the mansions of the redeemed.

It is true that Solomon's language on this awful subject is of a nature that rather hints at the condition of the lost in a future world than fully explains it. No one, indeed, can carefully study the revelations of Scripture on the subject of a future world, and especially on the subject of the state of the dead between the close of their life on earth, and the day of final judgment, without being struck with this, that in point of fulness and clearness, these revelations, as contained in the New Testament, are very greatly in advance of those in the Old. This indeed is the general characteristic of all the revelations of Scripture, that are specially connected with the coming and the work of Christ. It is He who, by way of eminence, has brought life and immortality to light; and no wonder that till He appeared, so much of comparative obscurity and darkness should have hung over all that lies beyond death and the grave. It belongs to the very nature of this progressive

opening up of the dark secrets of the future world, that the state and the place of the dead should, in Old Testament times, have been shrouded, to Old Testament believers, in a degree of dimness and mystery, which for us have, in great measure, passed away. Accordingly, when Solomon, in describing the career of the wicked, has conducted them "to the dead"—that is, to the place of the dead—he leaves them there wrapped up in gloom and darkness. "The dead," he says, "know not anything, neither have they any more a reward ; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy is now perished ; neither have they any more a portion for ever in anything that is done under the sun." The description, it will be observed, is altogether negative. It tells us what they have *not* merely—not what they *have*. And yet, limited as is the view here given of the change death makes in the condition of those who have lived and died without God—for it is of them, as the context plainly implies, that Solomon is speaking—it is sufficiently humbling and awful. From the moment they die, their connection with this world is at an end. This world was their all, and they have lost it. They know nothing of it now. Its rewards cannot reach them in the grave. Their very name and memory very soon pass away out of the world altogether. They may have sat on thrones, and wielded the forces of empires, but they are powerless now. Their love and their hatred are alike impotent. The one cannot benefit, the other cannot injure, even the meanest of living men. It is true, terribly true, that this is not all. But is it not enough to write vanity and mockery upon a life devoted to this world,—occupied and engrossed with nothing better or more enduring than the things of sense and time? Oh! how infinitely preferable to take up our cross, and to follow Christ, and to seek those things which are above! Be it that the way to that celestial inheritance is both a rough and a narrow way, and that if any man will pursue it, he must be content to deny himself. Be it that in such a life he may have to endure hardness, and to face a great fight of

afflictions, and to be involved in one incessant warfare with the devil, the flesh, and the world. The very struggle is ennobling. It is lifting him at every step into a region of higher and purer enjoyment. The faith by which he fights is purifying his heart, working by love, and overcoming the world. It is daily bringing him nearer to God. It is filling him with the Spirit, and making him liker to Christ. It is the trial and the training that are to fit him for entering finally and eternally into the joy of his Lord!

To perceive the precise import and bearing of the somewhat remarkable exhortation which is contained in the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th verses, it is necessary attentively to mark the point, in Solomon's inspired discourse, at which it is introduced. He had been dealing, as we have taken occasion to show, with a difficulty which seemed to lie in the way of his argument. His object was to commend wisdom—heavenly wisdom—as the most precious of all treasures, and as the only sure guide. His aim was to show that to follow wisdom's dictates was the certain way to happiness and peace. But how, the objector might ask, was this assumption to be reconciled with the state of things which we see actually existing around us? The fact was too notorious to admit of dispute, that the disciples of wisdom—in other words, the pious and the good—are frequently greater sufferers in this life than the irreligious and the wicked. The very integrity of godly men often brings them into troubles which the laxer principles of the worldly or the wicked, enable them easily to shun. Solomon at once, and unhesitatingly, admitted this to be the case. He admitted, moreover, the course of events in this present earthly scene to be a tangled maze full of intricacies and perplexities, through which, after the closest and most careful study of them, he had many times found it utterly impossible to make his way. In countless instances he had been quite unable to discover why it was that there were just men, to whom it happened according to the work of the wicked; and wicked men, to whom it happened

according to the work of the righteous. But, undaunted and undeterred by this difficulty, he adhered as firmly as ever to his former ground, that wisdom, after all, is the principal thing; and that, be the present cost what it may, no man is safe but the man who loves and obeys it. To establish this conclusion he fell back, as we have seen, on this decisive consideration, that "the righteous, and the wise, and their works are in the hand of God." Solomon might not be able to unravel the mystery of God's dealings with men, but it will and must come all right in the end.

Having met the objector's plea against wisdom with this weighty and unanswerable reply, instead of being in any haste to turn away from the difficulty which the objector had thus interposed, he, on the contrary, returned to it, and put it over again, in the earlier verses of chapter ix., in terms as broad and strong as the objector himself could have ventured to do. He described the course of human affairs in this present life to be such that "No man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them." Such were, at least, the seeming contrarities of Providence that, judging from the existing condition of things, one might well be at a loss to say who was, and who was not, the favourite of the supreme Ruler. Who was loved, and who was hated, could not well be known where so much uncertainty and irregularity appeared to characterize the dispensation both of evil and of good. At the same time, in the very act of making this admission, Solomon took occasion to indicate that it was really no boon to the ungodly to be thus allowed oftentimes to go unpunished. Their success in sin was proving their snare. It was luring them on to destruction. It was encouraging them in a course that must inevitably, in the long run, bring them to ruin. Their life on earth must soon come to an end, and after "that they go to the dead;" to Sheol—the place of the departed—a place that would cut off for ever their connection with this world, and reduce to utter vanity and nothingness all that they now gloried in, and in which they now found their

portion and their pleasure. For them hope would exist no more. The meanest of the living should then be more to be envied by far than they. Flattered and honoured as they might have been during their brief career of worldliness and ungodliness on earth, they should find themselves utterly deserted and helpless in the state of the dead. On earth they might have sat on thrones, and have had nations at their feet; but when they descended into the gloomy region where the spirits of wicked men must await their final doom, their appearance there should excite no other commotion than that which the 'prophet so graphically describes as signaling the entrance of the once mighty king of Babylon into that prison-house of the lost soul. "Hell,"—that is Sheol, the place of the dead,—“hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming: it stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth; it hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations. All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us? Thy pomp is brought down to the grave, and the noise of thy viols: the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee. How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell; to the sides of the pit” (Isa. xiv. 9–15).

Here, then, at this point it is that Solomon, breaking off from the discussion of the objector's difficulty, gives utterance all at once, and without preface or prelude, to this rather startling exhortation, “Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart.” The first question is, To whom is this addressed?—for on the settlement of this question must depend the nature of the construction to be put on the exhorta-

tion itself. That it is not quite easy to answer the question may be inferred from the fact, that commentators of learning and capacity have taken quite opposite views regarding it. Some have held it to be meant for the opposers of wisdom—for the worldly and the wicked—for those who are lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; and that it is, consequently, to be understood in an ironical sense, as if Solomon, having just pointed out what must be the inevitable issue of a career like theirs, had meant to say—‘Go on as you have been doing. Eat, drink, and be merry. Make the most of it while it lasts. It is all you are to have, and it will soon be at an end!’

Others, however, and, as it appears to us, with greater reason, have come to the conclusion that the address in question is intended, not for the opposers, but for the disciples of wisdom. They had been, so to speak, standing by and looking on while Solomon was in controversy with the objector. But now, when he has settled the point, he turns round to wisdom’s children, and tells them not to be discouraged by any of those perplexities which the present aspect and condition of things may exhibit. Let no adverse providence, even for a moment, betray them into the idea that God is indifferent as to the life they lead. They may have to suffer for well-doing; the principles of that wisdom which they have chosen for their rule and guide may bring them often into collision with the opinions and customs, the tastes and fashions of the world. If they were of this world, the world would love its own; but just because they are not of the world, they must make up their mind that the world will hate both them and their ways. Let them not distress themselves on this account. However the world may frown upon them, they have the approval of One whose favour is life, and whose loving-kindness is better than life. “Go thy way, therefore,” says Solomon, addressing them, “eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.”

These last words seem to decide the point as to the true

interpretation of this passage. God cannot possibly be said to accept the works of the ungodly. The works of the righteous alone are well-pleasing in His sight. And the pertinency of the remark, as brought in here, lies obviously in this—that whereas it was the whole drift and aim of the adversary's objection to make it appear at least doubtful whether the righteous had any greater acceptance with God than the wicked, Solomon proclaims this insinuation of the adversary to be wholly groundless; and would have the righteous to know, believe, and be assured that, let present appearances be what they may, God is on their side—that not only will He acknowledge and reward them in a future state of being, but that even here and now, He regards them with complacency, and is smiling graciously on everything they either do or suffer for His name's sake.

The exhortation being thus understood as addressed to those who are striving, through grace, to walk in the ways of wisdom, there is no longer any difficulty in explaining the terms which it employs. Plainly these terms are not, and cannot possibly be meant, to recommend a life of thoughtless gaiety and sensual pleasure. No; but they are meant to recommend the cheerful, thankful, grateful use of whatever portion of this world's enjoyments the Lord may be pleased to dispense to His people. Let them accept the gift as coming from a Father's hand—from one who loves them, and who desires their happiness. Religion was never meant to make men morose and gloomy. Bringing them, as it does, into fellowship with a reconciled God, and drawing out their hearts in love to Him and to all men for His sake, it is an exhaustless spring of peace, and contentment, and happiness in the soul. It belongs to it to lighten, not to aggravate our griefs—to enhance and intensify, and not to impair our joys. It belongs to it, in a word, to do for all, in every age of the world's history and in every sphere of life, what it did for those primitive disciples of Christ of whom it is testified that, “continuing with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread

from house to house, they did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people" (Acts ii. 46).

The bread, then, and the wine of which Solomon speaks are not the bread of luxury and the wine of excess; they are simply the provision which the Lord supplies for the body's wants, and to be used accordingly for its good; not abused for its hurt. The white garments for clothing and the ointment for the head are simply the symbols of spiritual joy and health. Living joyfully with the wife of the heart's affection, is but another way of inviting the disciples of wisdom, to draw from domestic life that sweet and enduring solace, which, when rightly ordered, it never fails to yield. And here it may be, in passing, observed that this reference to the happiness to be derived from conjugal affection goes powerfully to corroborate the view that has been adopted of this passage, as intended, not for the wicked and the worldly, but for them that fear God. It was not the way of those who walked according to the course of this world, in Solomon's days, to lean much for their happiness on the quiet scenes of domestic life. The 9th verse is a virtual protest against that polygamy and concubinage that were then so common; and in which Solomon himself, in the days of his sin and folly, had gone so far and so fatally astray. For the hardness of men's hearts God had tolerated, but had never approved, that pernicious deviation from His own pure primeval institution; of which He gave the example and the model in the creation and the union of Adam and Eve. The proportion then established between the sexes, and ever since observed, laid the foundation for that law which polygamy violates, and always with grievous loss and injury to man.

Upon the whole, therefore, there does seem to be no reasonable doubt, that this exhortation is neither more nor less than a call and encouragement to the disciples of heavenly wisdom, to take from the possessions and relationships of this present world, that kind and measure of enjoyment which they are

fitted and designed to yield. Whatever trials they may have to meet—whatever privations or sufferings, losses or injuries, their adherence to truth and righteousness may bring upon them,—let them not be troubled, neither let them be afraid. He that loveth his life shall lose it ; but he who, in God's service, loseth his life, shall not fail to find it. Let this trust in God be their stay; let this joy in the Lord be their strength; let it embolden them in danger; let it cheer them in adversity; let it be a very present help to them in trouble. Nor is it easy to estimate the immense additional influence which religion acquires, when it is thus associated with a contented, hopeful, and happy spirit. There is a charm about such a religion that wins a way for it, into the hearts even of the thoughtless and unspiritual children of this world. They wonder what it can be that keeps the mind so serene and peaceful amid life's sorrows—so patient and steadfast in discharging even the most distasteful duties—so bright and hopeful in looking forward to an eternal world. And thus it comes to pass, that others, seeing the good works of God's people, learn to glorify God in the day of visitation—in the day when God, in His love and pity, comes to reveal Himself to their own souls !

The fact that they, too—these disciples of wisdom—must at length, like the wicked, “go to the dead,” is an urgent reason why they should redeem the time—why they should be working while it is day. When they shall have passed away out of this world, their present opportunities, whether of getting or of doing good, shall all have come to an end. Nothing that has been neglected here can be attended to there. If we fail to perform a duty in this life, there will be no opportunity of performing it in the place of the dead. If we have errors to confess, or wrongs to repair—if we have any bad influence to undo, or any good influence to employ—if we have any evil habits to unlearn, or any gracious tendencies to cultivate, now is the time. Therefore, says Solomon, “whatsoever thy hand

findeth to do, do it with thy might: for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest."

It is not meant, in saying this, that in the grave, or place of the dead, man sinks into a state of utter unconsciousness and mere oblivion, in which no capacity of any kind remains to the disembodied spirit. Everything that Scripture teaches on the subject leads to quite a contrary conclusion. But this is no doubt meant, that as regards the making up of our account for a judgment-day, our opportunities shall then cease. The account from that day will be summed up and closed. Not one item of all its particulars can, from that moment, be altered. We can add nothing to it, and as little can we take anything from it. There it must stand, just as it is, till the books shall be opened, and till the dead shall be judged out of those things which are written in the books. That rich man who had lived in pleasure on the earth, if he could not now escape from torment himself, would fain, at least, have had his five brethren warned to cease from a way of life that must, otherwise, land them, ere long, in the same dismal place. But it could not be. That work could not be done now. Though one cry from the pit could save them, they should never hear it. How awful the thought! With what a voice of thunder should it speak to those who are saying, "At another time—at a more convenient season!" With how sharp a spur should it prick the sides of our intent, when we have something to do for God—some warning to utter in the ears of a sinning brother—some counsel to give to an erring neighbour, or friend, or child—some seasonable word to speak for Christ to those who may be setting him at nought—some gift of time, or money, or labour, to lay on God's altar, with a view to the furtherance of His cause and kingdom! Hell, it has been said with terrible significance, is paved with good intentions. Let none of ours, by indolent off-putting, by sloth and self-indulgence, be turned to such a use. Let our good intentions become *acts* at the very

earliest possible opportunity. Never leave till to-morrow what can and ought to be done to-day. Let this be the lesson learned from this passage by the children of God. And as for the children of the wicked one—those who are living to themselves and to the world, serving divers lusts and pleasures—let them be admonished to learn this from Solomon's words,—to trifle not another day, not another hour, with the interests of their immortal souls. “FOR there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, whither *thou* goest!”

CHAPTER XV.

THE ISSUE OF EVENTS IS OFTEN UNCERTAIN, BUT
WISDOM IS ALWAYS A SURE GUIDE.

“I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race *is* not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds *that are* caught in the snare; so *are* the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.

“This wisdom have I seen also under the sun, and it *seemed* great unto me: *there was* a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man. Then said I, Wisdom *is* better than strength: nevertheless the poor man’s wisdom *is* despised, and his words are not heard.

“The words of wise *men are* heard in quiet, more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools.

“Wisdom *is* better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good.”—
ECCLES. IX. 11-18.

IN this passage, Solomon resumes once more the subject already so largely commented on, of the apparent contrarieties of Providence, and of the actual uncertainties of human life. “I returned,” he says, verse 11, “and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” In the literal race, when the runners were contending for the prize, a single false step might bring the foremost and swiftest headlong to the ground, and leave another to reach the goal before him. In like manner, upon the field of fight, where, in mortal conflict, the combatants were striving for the mastery, the inexperienced stripling might, by an unexpected blow, pre-

vail over all the strength and skill of the most practised warrior. A stone from the sling of a shepherd boy prostrates in the dust even the gigantic Goliath. A bow, drawn at a venture, sends an arrow into the joints of the harness of the mail-clad king of Israel, and decides the fortunes of the day. How often by such seemingly chance strokes, have the issues of great battles, and even the fate of kingdoms, been determined!

And if, instead of thus taking the race and the battle in their strictly literal sense, we take them in that far wider and more comprehensive acceptation, in which they become descriptive, of the ever-varying contests of ordinary human life, how often is this statement of Solomon realized among all ranks and classes of men! He whose education and position—whose acquirements and influence—seemed to point him out as pre-eminently sure of success in the profession to which he devotes himself, fails, perhaps, after all; while some nameless and unfriended adventurer rises beside him, in the very same profession, to the highest places and honours it has to bestow. So true is it, that “neither is bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill.” The saying is not, of course, meant to be pushed so far as to imply, that wisdom is of no avail in gaining a livelihood; that intelligence is of no service in the acquisition of wealth; or that practical sagacity is worthless as a means of rising in the world. What is meant by the saying is simply this—that even with these great advantages, the results in question cannot always be reached. The wise man, by some unfortunate combination of circumstances, may be reduced to want. The man of understanding—the man, for example, most conversant with both the materials and the principles of commerce—may never come to wealth. Unforeseen events may derange his plans, and disappoint his calculations. Unpropitious seasons may blight the produce of his fields. Storms may sink his ships in the deep. His confidence may be betrayed and his property wasted by those in whose hands he had placed it. And while this man of large and cultured in-

telleet may come to old age in comparative poverty, some ignorant and illiterate boor, who started in life alongside of him, may have swelled into a millionaire. Once more—to exhaust Solomon's series of examples—"men of skill"—men whose varied knowledge, whose fertility in expedients, whose aptitude for affairs, whose ability to deal with all sorts of questions, might seem to have placed the world's choicest favours at their feet—even such men are seen occasionally to miscarry, and to come to nought. Some indiscretion into which they are led, gives offence; or envy blows upon their reputation, and blasts it; or some illness disables them at the very moment when their services were needed, and the tide of fortune flows into other channels. In short, adroit and ingenious as they are known to be, they somehow fall out of notice. More bustling and less modest competitors push in before them, and succeed in carrying off the honours and rewards, which they had seemed so much likelier and so much fitter to reap.

Contemplating such cases as these—cases which are still of daily occurrence—it was impossible to deny that, in a certain sense, "time and chance happeneth to all." Strictly speaking, indeed, there is, and can be, no such thing as chance under the government of God. Chance implies the entire absence of design or pre-arrangement; it implies the occurrence of an event regulated by no law, and having no place in the settled order and constitution of things. To suppose such an occurrence to be possible, were, in other words, to suppose some want, either of wisdom or of power, on the part of the supreme Ruler. His providence is as minute as it is comprehensive. While it controls the movements of suns and stars, it determines equally the falling to the ground of a sparrow or of a leaf. The very hairs upon our head are all numbered.

Still there is a meaning which chance has in common language, and in which it is allowable to use it. When a thing happens which, in so far as man is concerned, was altogether unintended and unforeseen, we speak of it as an accident or a

chance. It had a place in God's plan indeed, but it had none in ours; and yet it may have sufficed to overthrow our plan altogether, and to render it utterly nugatory. Things of this kind occur every day; and it is to these Solomon refers when he says that "time and chance happeneth to them all"—that the wise man, equally as the fool, is often overtaken by events which entirely cross his purposes and frustrate his best-laid schemes. "For," Solomon goes on to say, "man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time when it falleth suddenly upon them." These are examples by which he illustrates the statement which the 11th verse contains. The swift, the strong, the wise, the men of understanding, the men of skill—are, all of them, liable to misfortunes and adversities which may take them quite by surprise—which blast oftentimes their fondest hopes, and involve them, it may be, in loss and ruin at the very moment when they were anticipating triumphant success. When "they are saying peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them." The fish is pursuing its own course through the waters, in search of its prey and unconscious of danger, when all at once it finds itself hopelessly entangled in the folds or caught in the meshes of the fisher's net, and there is no escape. The bird is following its instinct in quest of food, when the limed twig, or the baited trap on which it alights, robs it of its freedom, and consigns it into the hands of the fowler. As blind, oftentimes, is man himself to the coming stroke, which is to smite him to the dust. "Thy sons and thy daughters," said the messenger, when he rushed without warning into the presence of the patriarch Job—"thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: and, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead: and I only am escaped alone to tell thee" (Job i. 18, 19). Do not the events of every day illustrate the same thing? How many have recently, and by

just such unexpected calamities, been plunged into the deepest distress, in connection with the great convulsion that has been shaking the whole commercial world. What multitudes have been reduced from abundance to a state of absolute destitution! And how frequently do we hear of the last enemy arresting his victim, perhaps in the very street, and dragging him away on the instant, from the light of the sun and the bustle of the world's affairs, to the darkness and the silence of the tomb. There is no human sagacity or strength that can either foresee or repel these inroads upon the fortune or the life of man.

And what is the lesson which they are fitted to teach? Not surely that we should shut our eyes to these hazards and go heedlessly on, as if we were infallibly sure that to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant. Not surely—to take another and a different alternative—that we should recognize these uncertainties, and by way of showing our contempt for them, should adopt the reckless maxim—“Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.” No. But the lesson they loudly and impressively teach is, that we should set our affections on things above, and not on those things which are upon the earth; and that we should be like unto those servants, that wait for the coming of their Lord.

If our tenure of the possessions and pleasures of this world be so insecure—if at any moment, and in spite of all our efforts to prevent it, they may be either taken from us or we from them—how foolish is it to build our happiness on such a foundation of sand! How needful to choose, and earnestly to seek after, a better and a more enduring substance: a treasure which moth cannot corrupt, nor any thief break through to steal! And is not such a treasure within the reach of all? Is not the gospel daily offering it, even to the chief of sinners, and that without money and without price? Is not God, by that gospel, at this very moment, commending His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us; and assuring us, that whosoever believeth on him shall not perish, but shall have

everlasting life? What has the world to offer us compared with the salvation of the soul—compared with the pardon of sin—with peace of conscience, and peace with God—with a new heart and a right spirit—with joy in the Holy Ghost—with a hope full of immortality? In possession of blessings so satisfying, so exhaustless, so imperishable as these, we can bid calm defiance to all the ills of time. For neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!

The connection between verses 13–18, and the immediately preceding context, it is somewhat difficult to trace. At first sight, at least, the passage has a detached and isolated look; as if the anecdote which it relates had been a sort of episode brought in at this point, rather for the sake of the interest inherently belonging to it, than on account of any particular bearing it may have on the main discourse into which it is introduced. In the foregoing verses, Solomon had been treating of the uncertainty that hangs over all human affairs. The voyage of life is continually exposed to so many cross currents, and baffling winds, and sudden storms, that let men steer towards the point they are aiming at as skilfully as they may, they never can be sure of reaching it. Even wisdom itself cannot always avail, to avert such temporal calamities. Now, if some special example was to be cited, by way of illustrating the general doctrine thus laid down, it might have been supposed that the example in question would be one that should tend to exhibit the impotency of wisdom, in contending with those obstacles and dangers, which it had been already shown to be often totally unable either to foresee or to prevent. But this is not the character of the instance actually adduced. It is, on the contrary, an instance which evinces the amazing power of wisdom, and the singular service of which it may prove to men, even in the concerns of this present world. The instance is described

in the following words:—"There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city." Solomon had himself personally witnessed what he thus relates. The incident had at least come within the range of his own knowledge. "This wisdom," he says, "have I seen also under the sun, and it seemed great unto me." It had made a strong impression on his mind. The testimony which it bore to the value and efficacy of wisdom appeared to him to be most remarkable. On one side there was a king, backed by a powerful army, and having at his command, for the capture and destruction of the little and feebly garrisoned city he had come to assail, all the arts and appliances of war. On the other side was a solitary individual, of no note or name, without wealth or station, or social influence; having no other strength than that which was derived from his own personal worth, and no other resources than those of a God-fearing, sagacious, and thoughtful spirit.

Solomon does not tell us by what concurrence of circumstances it was that a city, apparently so insignificant, came to have arrayed against it the military force of a kingdom. Little as it was, it may have occupied such a position, strategically considered, as made it the key of the country to which it belonged. Guarding some perilous pass on the frontier, its fall might have involved the laying of the whole interior open to an invading enemy. The war was perhaps suddenly declared, and the small and solitary citadel was in consequence taken at unawares. There were "few men in it;" and, among those to whom the care of it had been committed, no one at all competent to face the terrible emergency that had arisen. Both the governor and the garrison were at their wits' end. It is to them and their proceedings, probably, that reference is meant to be made in the 17th verse, where the "cry of the ruler"—his loud and imperious command—is spoken of, as drowned and lost

amid the turbulence of the distracted and terrified citizens, who will no longer obey him. They have perhaps no confidence in his leadership; and at any rate they think it madness to resist the besieging army by which they are already hemmed in on every side.

But meanwhile, as has often happened in a like extremity, help is coming from a quite unexpected source. As Solomon's father had truly and beautifully said in the book of Psalms—"There is no king saved by the multitude of an host: a mighty man is not delivered by much strength. An horse is a vain thing for safety; neither shall he deliver any by his great strength. Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him, upon them that hope in His mercy" (Psalm xxxiii. 16-18). In that beleaguered city, there was at least one who knew that the fear of the Lord is wisdom; and that to depart from evil is understanding. When the hearts of all others were failing them for fear, this man was full of the calm confidence of those who trust in the Lord, and whose minds are stayed upon God. Realizing the momentous nature of the crisis, he addressed himself to the task of devising the means of deliverance. What were the measures he adopted, we are not informed. He may have suggested a new and more skilful method of conducting the defence, and have thereby protracted the siege till an adequate force was sent to relieve the city; or, more likely, he may have secured its deliverance by himself heading some such daring and dexterous night attack, as that by which Gideon spread a sudden panic through the host of the Midianites; causing them, in their confusion and terror, to fall on one another, and to become their own destroyers. Certain it is, that the poor wise man, by his wisdom, did save the city; and that he did this when its immediate and utter destruction appeared otherwise inevitable. However true, therefore, it may be, that "time and chance happeneth to all," wisdom is not on that account to be despised. It might seem, indeed, as if by the case now brought forward, Solomon were not only not following

up and fortifying the positions he had just before been laying down, but as if rather he were subverting and overthrowing them. Here was a case in which wisdom proved stronger, than both time and chance put together. Here was a case which showed that, after all, men do succeed when they make use of the proper means; and that there is no need, therefore, to be giving way to that feeling of helplessness and hopelessness to which the statement might give rise, that "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill."

Such, perhaps, is the sort of impression which a first reading of the passage before us, may leave upon the mind. Viewed in such a light, it may seem to be somewhat at variance with, if not in positive opposition to, the statements previously made: and at any rate to have no intelligible connection with them. When more closely and carefully considered, however, this first and hasty conclusion will be found speedily to give way. Let it be observed, that there are two distinct things set forth in the preceding context. *First*, wisdom is there commended as the choicest of all treasures—as the only guide which it is safe for man to follow, and as never failing to conduct to true happiness, all who listen to its counsels, and walk in its ways. And *second*, this general statement is coupled with a free and full admission of the fact, that wisdom does not secure to its followers an immunity from temporal trials and sufferings: that on the contrary, it may and does often bring those who cleave to it into difficulties and distresses, from which wicked or worldly men are altogether free. Both of these positions Solomon had clearly laid down, and the incident introduced in the passage before us will be found, when narrowly examined, to bear partly on the one and partly on the other; and thus after all to have real and important links of connection, to bind it up, with the main scope and design of the discourse in which it occurs.

For *first*, this incident shows that Solomon did well to commend wisdom. See what wisdom effected even in the hands of a poor man! It was better than strength; it was better than weapons of war. It was more than a match for all the resources of military power. It extricated a city, and perhaps through that city, a country from imminent peril. And observe further, that the wisdom which proved of such eminent advantage was not mere science or secular skill—not mere tact or genius. It was that wisdom, the beginning and essence of which is the fear of God. Not only is this fairly to be inferred from the whole strain of this book,—in which Solomon's object throughout is to exalt and teach this heavenly wisdom,—but it is further and still more directly to be inferred from the terms of this very passage itself, in the close of which the poor man who had proved so great a benefactor by his wisdom, is directly contrasted with the sinner, as his true and proper opposite. The wise man is a source of blessing, just as the sinner is a public curse, destroying, as he continually does, much good.

But while the example cited by Solomon thus goes to illustrate and confirm all that he had been saying before, of the excellence of wisdom, let it be observed, in the *second* place, how it confirms and illustrates, not less pointedly, what he had also said as to the trials to which the wise are often subjected, at the hands of their fellowmen. Was the poor wise man, who delivered the city, rewarded as he deserved? Did he receive at the hands of those whom he had been the means of rescuing from destruction, the tribute of honour and gratitude that was his due? Did his fellow-citizens, when their safety had been secured, gather around him to do him homage? Did his sovereign hasten to confer upon him, some special and distinguished mark of his royal favour? Did his country erect a monument, to hand down to posterity the memory of his noble deed? They did nothing of the kind. "No man remembered that same poor man." He was allowed, so soon as the danger had passed away, to sink into his former obscurity. His triumph,

like that of the stripling David over Goliah, rendered him, not improbably, an object of aversion to the chiefs of the city; who had themselves been proved so utterly incompetent to the task which he had performed for them. As is very common with little and ungenerous minds, they were perhaps mortified that one, whom they considered so much beneath them, should have thrown them so completely into the shade. Instead of celebrating his praises, they were most likely at pains to disparage and depreciate what he had done; and to ascribe the success which had attended his plans to any other cause rather than to his merit. In short, the base neglect and ingratitude with which he was treated made him a conspicuous example of that very thing of which Solomon had been speaking, so far back as in the 14th verse of the preceding chapter, "that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked."

This incident, therefore, instead of being at variance with the positions previously laid down, or having no connection with them, is, in reality, a most appropriate and instructive commentary upon both of the aspects of wisdom in which Solomon had been presenting it: by one part of the story which it tells, encouraging us to covet and to cleave to wisdom, as man's best portion; and, by another part of it, preparing us to understand that wisdom, if it is to be chosen, must be chosen for its own sake: in other words, that if any man will go after Him who is the Wisdom of God, he must take up his cross and deny himself.

This case of the poor wise man suggests a thought that seems not undeserving of notice. It was a physical danger—a danger to life and limb, to person and property—he was the means of averting from the city to which he belonged. It was also, in all probability, by a physical effort or contrivance, of some sort or other, that this object was accomplished. But there are other dangers, to which cities and communities are exposed, besides that of the sword. There are moral and spiritual

dangers, which are far more formidable to the true safety and well-being of human society, than any of those which are of a merely external and material kind. Ignorance and irreligion, error and ungodliness, are enemies far more deadly, and far more difficult to deal with, than the common forces of war. The assailants that had come up against the city spoken of, in the passage now under review, were still outside the walls. They had placed it, indeed, in a state of siege, and had built great bulwarks against it; and from these artificial heights their slingers and their bowmen were, perhaps, raining their destructive missiles upon the little company of its defenders. But, nevertheless, they had not yet scaled the ramparts, or gained a footing within the city itself. In this other case of which it is now proposed to speak, the state of things is altogether different. Here the enemy is already in the heart of the city, and has, it may be, a great part of the citizens engaged on his side. He has emissaries at work in every street. Walls, however high, gates, however closely watched, are powerless to keep them out. They are like the pestilence that walketh in darkness, and the destruction that wasteth at noon-day. Here, with bloated visage, intemperance is opening her countless and fatal haunts; and, with her intoxicating cup, is setting on fire all the worst passions of the human heart. There lewdness, with brazen forehead, is busily prosecuting her shameless trade; and luring the unwary and the sensual to that house of which Solomon, in another place, says, with terrible emphasis, that its gates lead down to hell. Elsewhere mammon, with greedy eye and grasping hand, is busy with his golden bribes, tempting eager crowds to buy the world at the expense of losing their souls. In the narrow lanes and bye-ways of the city, poverty and ignorance are tyrannizing over their numerous and wretched victims—filling their homes with misery and their hearts with bitterness, and preparing them as fuel, with which to set the city on fire, when the fitting hour of political disaffection and disorder may arrive. While, finally, in dark corners of the city, infidelity

and atheism are insidiously disseminating,—in workshops and club-rooms—by the platform and by the press—those pernicious principles which wither up and deaden all the better feelings and nobler aspirations of humanity; which make either an utter blank or a fond delusion of the unseen and eternal world; and which leave the human soul, like a ship in the midst of the mighty ocean, without compass or helm—without steersman or star—to be drifted or driven at the sport of the wind and waves.

That man must know little of the existing condition of society, even in a country so highly favoured as our own, who considers the picture now sketched as either unreal or overdrawn. And if there is to be deliverance for such a city, whence is it to come but just from “the poor wise man?” He is the true salt of the earth, and light of the world. The presence and influence—the labours and prayers of such as he—are, under God, the true defence and safeguard of every community in which they have a place. The teacher of the humble Sabbath-school, who is quietly plying his vocation among the little ragged group that surrounds him; the local missionary, who, altogether unnoticed, and out of sight of the great world, is making his daily or nightly round, down the dark alleys and up the darker stairs of some dingy and neglected district; the tract distributor or Christian visitor, who is dropping here and there, in waste places of the city, the good seed of the kingdom; the pious parent who, unseen by any but the all-seeing Father above, is training up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; the faithful minister of Christ, who is from week to week declaring, in the pulpit and from house to house, the whole counsel of God; persuading all to whom he has access, by the terrors of the Lord to flee from the wrath to come, and beseeching them, by the mercies of God, to lay hold on eternal life;—These, I repeat, and such as these, are doing infinitely more for all the best and highest interests of man—nay, even for the peace, and safety, and prosperity of civil society itself—than all

the other agencies put together, which the wise men of this world can employ.

What was it, that rescued the nations of the ancient world, from the universal heathenism in which they were sunk; from the gross superstitions and multiplied abominations of an all-prevailing idolatry? Not the poetry and literature, not the arts and philosophy, of Greece and Rome—but the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those humble peasants and fishermen, who issued from the upper chamber in some obscure street of Jerusalem, were the poor wise men that delivered the cities of the ancient world.

Who was it that, at the blessed and glorious era of the Reformation, recovered, for so many lands, the light and liberty which the Papal Antichrist, during his long reign in the dark ages, had so completely taken away? It was neither the colleges of Italy, nor the chivalry of France; it was neither the philosophy of the schools, nor the power and policy of princes. It was such men as Luther, the miner's son,—and Knox, the child of parents so humble, that the very place of his birth is matter of dispute. It was such men—poor but wise men—men full of that wisdom that cometh from above, of that faith which is the victory that overcometh the world—who delivered half the cities and nations of Europe, from the soul-destroying dominion of the Man of Sin and Son of Perdition.

Who was it, once more, to take an example from more modern times,—who was it that tamed the ferocious cannibalism, and broke up the foul idolatry of the islands of the South Sea, and turned whole races of brutal savages, into an orderly society of civilized and Christian men? It was not the chiefs of European science—the men who issue from academies and institutes, and whose great names are blazoned on the very forehead of fame. No; it was a little company of the followers of John Wesley—obscure individuals of whom the world had never heard—men with a spade or a saw, a hatchet or a hammer, in one hand, and a Bible in the other—men who were contented to go away to

the ends of the earth, and to live among barbarians, and to labour, and pray, and wait, altogether out of the great world's sight, for weary months and years; hoping against hope, and looking up steadfastly to Him, who honoured them at length to be the instruments of making these solitary places glad, and of causing these wildernesses to blossom as the rose.

This is a wisdom that has been seen under the sun, more or less, in all ages—which, blessed be God, is to be seen in many places at this hour. And surely, if we rightly consider it—if we are at any pains to understand and to estimate the glorious results it has achieved in days gone by, and which it is achieving in our own day, it cannot fail “to seem great unto us;” so great that there is nothing comparable to it upon earth. And yet, is it not true, that those who have most of this wisdom, are often little regarded by the world? Society gets, in the form of many most important temporal benefits, the good of their labours. To these labours it is mainly indebted for the maintenance of civil peace and social order; and for the industry and honesty, on which the wealth and prosperity of nations so largely depend. But while they reap these fruits of a harvest, which they themselves have done little, perhaps less than nothing, to produce, how seldom do they exhibit any corresponding sense of obligation to the poor wise men who have delivered the city?

As regards the great world—the world of rank and fashion, of place and power—how true is it, on the contrary, to say, that no one remembered these poor wise men? Instead of being commended and honoured, how often have they been “evil entreated,” nay, persecuted and put to death! Paul was one of these poor wise men, and his reward, in so far as this world was concerned, was bonds and stripes, imprisonments, and death. At this very moment, how many men of this class are labouring, by the dissemination of that gospel truth which alone can make any people free, to deliver the city or country in which they live from ignorance and vice, from error and wickedness,—and are doing it at the peril of their lives! And even in our own land, though,

blessed be God, there is in it a growing appreciation of the worth of those services, that are rendered to society, by the example and by the efforts of God-fearing and spiritual men—does it not still remain to be said, that much criminal neglect of, and indifference to, these self-denying labours continues to prevail? Yes, even in this Christian land of ours, the man who will amuse society—the man who will charm it with a song, or the woman who, like Herod's daughter, will please it with a dance, or the individual of either sex who can make it laugh or weep with unreal, dramatic mirth or tears—is far more sure of both applause and substantial acknowledgments, than the humble, homely, self-sacrificing servant of God, who is remarkable for nothing but for quietly and conscientiously doing good. Let him not on that account be discouraged. Verily he shall in no case lose his reward. He may be little regarded or remembered here, but there is a book in which it is written: "They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever!" (Dan. xii. 3). Though he be poor in this world, he is one of those whose blessedness it is "to make many rich;" and though his wisdom may be despised on earth, it will be both esteemed and honoured in heaven. Having helped to save one city on earth, he shall be made ruler over many cities, in his Master's kingdom above. Nay more, even as regards this present world itself, his wisdom is not thrown away. It may not have so large, or so enthusiastic an audience, as that which gathers around those whose aim is, not to profit but, to please. It may be often drowned and lost for the time, amid the noise and turmoil of the cares of this life, the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things. But after all, "the words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools."

Whether the word 'quiet,' in this sentence, have reference to *times* or to *men*, in both senses it is equally true. Quiet men—men of calm and dispassionate minds—give heed to the words of wisdom, though noisy fools may disregard them. Also, in quiet

times, in the hours of retirement and reflection, when the distractions of the world are shut out, the words of wisdom come back upon the mind and sink into the heart. How unlike in this respect to the cry of him that ruleth among fools! Even at the moment it is uttered, his cry may fall powerless upon the thoughtless, ignorant, or impatient crowd to whom it is addressed; and this it may do, for no other or better reason, than because it does not suit the fancy or frenzy of the hour. At any rate, and in any case, its influence is but transitory; its power short-lived. What avails it that Herod's oratory makes him the idol of the moment, so that the venal multitude hail his voice as that of a god, and not of a man? Next day, eaten of worms, dying a loathsome and miserable death, he and his oratory are alike forgotten. So is it with the cry of all those who rule among fools. Whether it be the "imperious Cæsar" who once, Colossus-like, bestrode the world; or only some Yorick of infinite jest, the war-cry of the one is now as impotent as the wit of the other—the world has long ceased to think of or care for either. But mark the difference in the case of the words of the wise. A jail was deemed good enough, while he lived, for such an one as John Bunyan; and yet the words of that "poor wise man" have gone over all the earth, and are read in the language of almost every nation of the world. "The righteous shall be held in everlasting remembrance, but the memory of the wicked shall rot!"

For such reasons as those now stated, Solomon follows up the story of the poor wise man with this pointed and significant saying—that "wisdom is better than weapons of war." War wounds, but wisdom heals. War overturns, but it is wisdom that builds up and restores. War is the hurricane that sinks the ship; wisdom is the favouring breeze that wafts it to the desired haven. War is the torrent that furrows the earth, and sweeps its soil into the sea; wisdom droppeth softly, like the rain or the gentle dew from heaven, to refresh the thirsty ground and to bless the springing thereof. In a word, war and all its

weapons belong to the bloody brood of him who was a murderer from the beginning; wisdom is the attribute and gift of Him who came to bring peace on earth, good-will to men, and glory to God in the highest!

As a foil to the graphic picture which Solomon, with the hand of inspiration, has thus sketched of the "poor wise man," he sets over against it, in the closing words of the passage before us, the picture of the sinner. He has shown us what an amount of benefit even a single wise man, however humble and obscure his station, may be honoured to confer. But not more truly is he a fountain of blessing than is the sinner a source of mischief and peril. "One sinner," even one, "destroyeth much good." One solitary Achan brought reproach and wrath upon the whole camp of Israel. One Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, made a whole nation to sin. One Satan tarnished all the glory of this fair creation—polluted the innocence and blighted the beauty of Eden—brought death into the world and all our woe. So it has been from that fatal day until now. Some one or other, of the seed of the serpent, is continually marring the work of the seed of the woman. Nor is it, merely, in the public history of churches and nations, that we find evidence of the truth of Solomon's words. That history, indeed, is full of such evidence. In the case of the Christian church, how often has its unity been broken—its peace destroyed—its progress in the great and God-like mission of regenerating the world and saving souls from death, ruinously impeded, by the perversity of some obstinate schismatic, or by the contentiousness of some fierce polemic, or by the errors of some insidious or ambitious heretic! In the case of civil society, how often have nations been driven or dragged into the most destructive wars—wars which have desolated whole kingdoms and deluged the earth with blood; and all, it may be, to gratify the whim, or to indulge the malice, of the worthless favourite of some imperial tyrant!

Of such examples public history, both civil and ecclesiastical, is full; and so also is the less conspicuous history of common

life. In the little circle of private companionship, how much good does one sinner often destroy by his seductive influence and example—drawing his associates aside from those paths of piety and virtue in which they had been trained, and plunging them, perhaps, in the long run into the depths of vice and crime. In the still narrower and more sacred circle of a family, what ruin and misery, what blighted hopes and broken hearts, may too frequently be traced to the undutiful or profligate conduct of some one of its members. In all the relations of society deep and lasting injury is thus continually resulting from the words, and from the actions, and from the influence of individual men. What renders the fact still more painful and melancholy is, that these individuals may sometimes, after all, be men who have something in them of the grace of God. The sinner of whom Solomon designed to speak was, in all probability, one who had no fear of God before his eyes—a carnal, ungodly, unregenerate man of the world. He, no doubt, pre-eminently is a destroyer of much good. But, nevertheless, it greatly concerns even God's own people to bear in mind that they too are sinners, and that they too may be found, on many occasions, exemplifying the truth of Solomon's words. Let it never be forgotten that not one *sinner* only, but even one *sin*, may be, and often is, the means of destroying much good. One word of malice or envy, of falsehood or folly, spoken even unadvisedly with our lips, may leave consequences behind it upon the minds and hearts of others, and upon our own good name and character, which we may never afterwards be able to do away.

CHAPTER XVI.

FOLLY CONTRASTED WITH WISDOM.

“Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom *and* honour.

“A wise man’s heart *is* at his right hand; but a fool’s heart at his left. Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh by the way, his wisdom faileth *him*, and he saith to every one *that* he *is* a fool.

“If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding paci-fieeth great offences.

“There is an evil *which* I have seen under the sun, as an error *which* proceedeth from the ruler; folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place. I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth.

“He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.

“Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith; *and* he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby.

“If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom *is* profitable to direct.

“Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment; and a babbler is no better. The words of a wise man’s mouth *are* gracious: but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth *is* foolishness; and the end of his talk *is* mischievous madness. A fool also is full of words: a man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell him? The labour of the foolish wearieeth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.

“Woe to thee, O land, when thy king *is* a child, and thy princes eat in the morning! Blessed *art* thou, O land, when thy king *is* the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness!

“By much slothfulness the building decayeth; and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through.

“A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry: but money answereth all *things*.

“Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bed-chamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.”—ECCLES. x. 1-20.

IN the opening verse of chapter vii., Solomon had emphatically said that a good name is better than precious ointment. It may have been this very comparison which, afterwards, suggested the striking and most important thought to which ex-

pression is given, in the outset of the passage at present before us. The very sweetness of a precious ointment—the very exquisiteness and delicacy of its odour—exposes it to be the more easily injured. It may be so tainted by the corruption of even a dead fly, as to have its perfume spoiled. By so seemingly trifling a cause, may all the cost and skill bestowed on it by the apothecary, be rendered of no avail. And how true a picture does this illustration exhibit, of the fatal injury which a little folly is sure to inflict, upon the good name of the man who is had in reputation for wisdom and honour! Indiscretions that would never be noticed in men of inferior character, are ruinous to him. Nor is it difficult to understand how this result should arise. On a soiled garment, even a fresh stain makes no very conspicuous mark; but a spot catches the eye at once, on a snow-white robe. Men who walk according to the course of this world—who make no pretensions to be guided, in their way of life, by any higher standard than may be found in the world's habits and maxims, fashions and tastes—excite no surprise when they commit a folly or a sin. The man of pleasure, may be seen following his gay or licentious career—the vain and frivolous, wasting their money in dress and display, and their time in idle and unprofitable amusements—the selfish and unscrupulous, sacrificing the feelings and the interests of others to their own—the irreligious and profane, neglecting and despising sacred things; all this may be seen, and is seen among men of the world every day, without calling forth, perhaps, even a passing remark. Their character and their life, are in perfect keeping with one another. To serious and thoughtful minds, indeed, the spectacle they present may be both pitiable and painful; but it produces no wonder. The case is altogether different, when such things are seen, in those to whom we have been taught to look up, with reverence and esteem. The utterance of one single profane or polluting word—the commission of one solitary act of dishonesty—the tampering, even in one instance, with truth—the giving way, in any circumstances, or in any

one case, to inebriety—the breaking out, for only one moment, into some burst of intemperate heat and passion—the deviating, though in but one isolated example, from the principles of integrity and honour ; the doing of any one of these things by a man who bears the reputation of fearing God and professing godliness, may suffice to inflict the most serious damage upon his name and fame.

Such a man is like a city set on an hill, that cannot be hid. The higher the estimation in which he has been held, the more he is observed ; and the more do even his lightest acts and words, attract the notice of all around him. Such a man, moreover, is measured, and justly, by a stricter rule than that which is applied to mere ordinary men of the world. They regulate their conduct, avowedly, by worldly principles. He is professedly guided by the principles of the Word of God ; and these principles, though practically disowned by themselves, even worldly men apply at once to him. Nor has he any right to complain of their doing so. It may be no zeal for a pure morality—and much less for the honour of God's cause and truth—by which they are actuated in opening their mouths so wide against him, and in being in such haste to condemn his fault. Even when they affect to be influenced by such high considerations as these, their real motive, after all, may be envy and ill-will. His previous repute for piety and purity—for spirituality and holiness—had been felt as a continual testimony and reproach, against their own careless and carnal way of life. They were waiting for his halting, and his fall is to them a source of sneering and malignant triumph. But while the fact of their being animated by such unworthy feelings, may sufficiently condemn them, it does nothing whatever to acquit or justify him. The very circumstance that so many are ready to proclaim his error, and to turn it into a handle against religion, should only have served to keep him more studiously upon his guard, and to stir him up to greater prayerfulness and circumspection. Look at that one act of violence on the part of Moses,

in smiting and slaying the Egyptian; how he lost by it the confidence of his fellow-countrymen, and was compelled to flee away into exile. Or look at that one dark passage in the history of David, connected with "the matter of Uriah,"—how infidels and scoffers in every succeeding age, even until now, have made it an occasion for pointing at him the finger of scorn, and for deriding the piety that breathes in his inspired and holy psalms, and which shone on many occasions so brightly in his life. Even when the offences of good men are far less grave than these, they still exert a most pernicious influence upon the cause of God. Christ is never so sorely wounded, as when He is wounded in the house of his friends. It is impossible, therefore, to make too much account of this significant saying of Solomon, that is now before us. God's people cannot sufficiently watch and pray, lest they enter into temptation.

Having thus pointed out how easily this precious treasure of heavenly wisdom may be injured or lost, even after it has been largely acquired, Solomon proceeds to specify some of the distinctive marks by which its presence may be known. "A wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart is at his left." The heart is here evidently to be understood, as identical with the whole mind. It is not to be taken, that is, as the seat of the affections merely, but as inclusive of the understanding also. But what is meant by saying that the heart or mind, of the wise man, is at his right hand? The right hand is the chief instrument of action. To have the heart or mind, therefore, at the right hand, is to have it in a state of readiness for any emergency that may arise. When distinguishing, in chap. ii., between the wise man and the fool, Solomon took occasion to say that the wise man's eyes are in his head, whereas the fool walketh in darkness. In that place it was the *enlightening* property of wisdom of which he designed to speak. It enables its possessor to see around him. It foresees dangers, and avoids them. It unravels perplexities, and finds a way through them. It walks in confidence and security amid temptations and trials

by which the fool is overborne. The fool is like one who has no eyes—who knows not whither he is going—and who is, in consequence, stumbling and falling at every step.

Here, on the other hand, it is not so much the *enlightening power*, as the *practical efficiency* of wisdom, that Solomon intends to celebrate. The wise man is always in circumstances to meet the call of duty. If an opportunity of doing some good work presents itself, he is ready to take advantage of it. If an occasion offers for speaking a seasonable word, whether of encouragement or warning, he knows what to say. He goes about, in consequence, not only *wishing*, but *doing* good. In contrast with this state of continual readiness for action, the fool is always unprepared. His heart is at his left hand. He is like the soldier who goes to the battle, and there finds out, when the trumpet sounds, that he has forgotten his sword. He is like the artisan whose work is before him, but who has mislaid his tools. He is, in consequence, always missing his opportunity. The wind has fallen, before he has found out how to hoist his sail. The tide has ebbed, before he has been able to launch his boat. His folly makes him useless,—a hinderance rather than a help where anything really important has to be done.

Alas! if we look around us, how few are the wise men, and how many are the fools, of whom Solomon, with the hand of inspiration, has by these few rapid touches, sketched the picture! Let it be carefully observed, that to be wise in the sense here intended, it is not enough simply to possess the grace of God. There are many, of whom we dare not doubt that their souls have been renewed, and that they have the root of the matter in them, whose hearts, nevertheless, could not be said, save in some very limited sense, to be at their right hand. Their minds are ill-informed—their judgment is weak—their temper is not under control. They are wanting in patience, in self-denial, in steadiness, in habits of application and mental discipline. Their piety, in consequence of these defects, exerts little influence on others. Not only does it not tell on general society; it is hardly felt as

a power, even in their own families. Nay, by reason of these defects, they are often, perhaps, the means of bringing religion into disrepute. They expose it to suspicion by their inconsistencies, or, it may be, sometimes to ridicule, by their foibles and follies. If all this were considered as it ought to be, greater heed would be given, to these earnest exhortations of Solomon, to cultivate wisdom. It is true that the beginning, the foundation, the very essence of true wisdom, is the fear of God. He who is destitute of this is a fool, however many and various may be his intellectual acquirements and gifts. That faith which apprehends God in Christ, is the root of all that is good and gracious in any human soul. But faith is not all, that goes to make up and complete, the character of a Christian. "Besides this," we must give all diligence to "add to our faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly-kindness, and to brotherly-kindness charity." And the same apostle who delivers this exhortation tells us, at the same time, that it is only "if these things be in us and abound," that we shall be "neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." Nay, more, he declares that "he that lacketh these things is blind and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins" (2 Peter i. 5-9). In other words, lacking these things he is to a large extent like him of whom Solomon says, that "his heart is at his left hand." His religion, though it may be such as to consist with the salvation of his own soul, is of little service to others. It presents but a feeble testimony for God's cause and truth, and is all but impotent, as either a guiding or restraining force, amid the errors and corruptions of the world. It is true that there are diversities of gifts, both of nature and of grace. But were all to stir up, as becomes them, the gift that is in them—were all, that is, at pains to cultivate the gifts, whether of grace or nature, which God has bestowed upon them—what a much nobler, more influential, and beneficent thing would their Christianity be. In

other words, did we all set more habitually and earnestly before us that divine model after which God has predestinated all his children to be conformed—did we consider Christ—did we strive, through grace, to copy Him who is the wisdom of God—then should we be all far liker to Solomon's wise man, whose heart is at his right hand. A Christianity thus ripe and full, would make even the humblest believer a mighty power, on the side of godliness. It is the reproach of the religion of our day, not simply that there are so few conversions, so comparatively limited a number whose hearts have been turned to the Lord; but that, among these, the number is so small who have made any considerable progress in the life of God—who have grown up unto a perfect man—to anything approaching "to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

Having thus pointed it out, as a marked distinction between the wise man and the fool, that while the wise man is ready for every call of duty, the fool, on the contrary, is like one taken at unawares—is like those thoughtless and improvident virgins of the parable, who had the oil to seek for their lamps when they should have been already lighted—Solomon proceeds to notice it as a further characteristic of the fool, that he is continually betraying his folly. "When he walketh by the way his wisdom faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool." He cannot hide it. Not that he intends to convey this impression, but that, in point of fact, he does convey it. So long, indeed, as "he holdeth his peace," even a "fool may be counted wise" (Prov. xvii. 28). But he has only to open his lips in order to let out the secret, and to show what he really is. His ignorance, his petulance, his indiscretion, his self-complacency and presumption, let all who meet him know that he is a fool. Every one sees it but himself; for as modesty and humility are usually found to be the accompaniments of real wisdom, self-conceit and vanity are as generally the attendants of folly. He talks loudly and confidently on subjects, regarding which, wiser men hardly venture to give an opinion. The wise

are like deep rivers, which flow quietly. The fool is like the shallow stream, which brawls and makes a noise. The character, as Solomon describes it, is a most contemptible one, and the picture is true to the life. Let us seek to be as unlike it as possible, for, surely, this is the design of inspiration in setting it before us.

At the 4th verse Solomon returns to a subject of which he had taken some notice in a previous chapter. "If," he says here, "the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding pacifieth great offences." In the former passage (viii. 3), he had given, substantially, similar advice, saying, "Be not hasty to go out of his sight"—out of the sight, that is, of the king—"for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him." In both places he is giving counsel, as to the right way of dealing with princes. There is a deference due to the civil ruler in virtue of the office he fills. The powers that be are ordained of God; and in all things lawful we are to be subject, not only for wrath, but for conscience sake. Even when the ruler's commands are harsh and unreasonable, the man that fears God must not allow himself to forget his allegiance. Only the very gravest extremity will justify a breach, between the subject and the ruler. Though the spirit of Saul rose up often, in bitter and causeless enmity, against David, he never, for one moment, took up the attitude of rebellion. He withdrew, indeed, at last, and of necessity, from the king's presence; but never from his proper place as the king's subject. It is a perilous step *that* man takes, who commits himself to treason. In a country like ours, where law is supreme, and binds the sovereign as firmly as the subject, there is, happily for us, little occasion for being much exercised about such precepts as the one which this 4th verse lays down. Under the more arbitrary rule of ancient times the case was, no doubt, very different. Many of the rulers of both Judah and Israel, whose reigns Scripture records, must have often placed those about them, under great temptations to do what Solomon here condemns. Oppression makes

even wise men mad; as has been too frequently proved, both in older and in later times. It was not without need, therefore, that, among the counsels of wisdom, there should be something found, bearing on such a state of things. When the God-fearing man did find himself tried, by the spirit of the ruler rising up against him,—under the influence, it might be, of some injurious misrepresentation, or perhaps of mere caprice and passion,—what was he to do? In the first place, let him do nothing hastily. Let him exercise patience. Let him rather suffer wrong than do wrong. Let him watch his opportunity. By yielding for the moment he may, by-and-bye, get ample justice. There is a wonderful power in the arts of conciliation. A soft answer turneth away wrath; and what is better still, when a man's ways please God, *He* maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him. Esther and Mordecai succeeded in getting the persecuting edict of Ahasuerus recalled, by committing their way unto the Lord, and by waiting for the fitting moment to speak. A wise man's heart, as Solomon had elsewhere said, discerneth both time and judgment. And well it were, for the interests of peace and love, if, in less conspicuous spheres of life, the same prudent course were always followed. How often are lasting enmities and divisions caused, simply for want of a little of that yielding, whose power to pacify even great offences, Solomon so justly celebrates. Pride or passion insists on resenting the wrong, and the breach becomes irreparable. Let those, who may be in danger of so acting, remember these words of the apostle Peter, "If, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow His steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth. Who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed himself to Him who judgeth righteously" (1 Peter ii. 21-23). The natural man thinks it degrading to yield, to submit, to bear injustice. It is not degrading if it

be done for conscience towards God. It is, on the contrary, to win a great moral triumph ; and he who, in the face of, it may be, great provocation, can so rule his own spirit as to do this thing, is greater than he that taketh a city.

In the case alluded to in this 4th verse—the case of umbrage being taken by the ruler against the subject—it might be the ruler himself that was in the wrong, or it might be the subject that was in fault. There is nothing said, positively to determine this point, either way. If cause had been given, by the subject, for the spirit of the ruler rising up against him, all the more would it be his duty to yield. But even if no adequate cause, or no cause at all, had been given for it, Solomon's counsel would still apply. There is no such ambiguity, however, about the cases specified in the verses that follow. Here, obviously, Solomon intends to single out acts, in which the ruler had grossly abused his power. "There is an evil," he says, "which I have seen under the sun, as an error which proceedeth from the ruler. Folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place. I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth." A greater error than this, the ruler could not well commit. There is no function belonging to rulers which they are bound to exercise with greater impartiality, prudence, and caution, than that of selecting the men who are to fill the great offices of the state. These men have, oftentimes, the destinies of a nation in their hands. The places they fill give them a power, for good or evil, of the most momentous kind. To place, out of mere favouritism or caprice, or even from a want of sufficient care and inquiry, an unrighteous or incompetent judge in the seat of justice ; an ignorant or dishonest administrator in charge of the revenues of the country ; a cruel or rapacious governor at the head of a province of the kingdom ; an unskilful or inexperienced leader in the command of an army ;—for rulers to do such things is to trifle with interests of the greatest magnitude, and to betray a trust of the most solemn and responsible kind.

In oriental governments, such as those that must have been in Solomon's view, evils of the kind now stated were no doubt painfully common. They are the opprobrium of most oriental governments to the present hour. The caprice of an imperious despotism, or the venality of court intrigue, may be seen in such governments every day, elevating even slaves to almost a level with the throne, and reducing to obscurity and poverty the ancient chiefs of the land. In all countries, alas! even in those where both truth and freedom are best established, evils of the same class are very far from being unknown. When passages of Scripture that treat of such questions come before us, we are apt, perhaps, to think that because they do not very much concern us, there is hardly any need for their having been introduced into the Divine Word at all. We forget, in giving way to such a notion, that the Bible is for all men, high and low, rich and poor, young and old together; and that in consequence it must have something to say to all. God will have princes and great men to know that He is not indifferent to their conduct; that they, as much as the meanest of their people, are subject to Him; and that they cannot, with impunity, disregard His will. "He that is higher than the highest regardeth, and there be higher than they." This unrighteous and violent dealing of theirs shall be made to come down on their own head. For "he that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him. Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby." The first of these figurative expressions appears to refer, to such plots and intrigues as those by which violent changes, of the kind pointed out in the 7th verse, are usually brought about. Those who by such base means circumvent others, will often be found to reap as they have sowed. The measure they have meted out, is, one day, meted back to themselves. Those whom they have been laying snares to destroy at length combine against them, and into the pit which they have digged they themselves fall.

The other figurative expressions that follow about breaking a hedge, removing stones, and cleaving wood, would seem, from the analogies of Old Testament language, to allude to the invasion of other men's rights and interests—to the breaking down of the old landmarks, which usage or law had set up as fences around the persons, properties, and rights, whether of the community at large or of its individual members.

Rulers, who, like Ahab, in the case of Naboth, abuse their power and authority to trample on whatever stands in the way of their own arbitrary will and pleasure, will find a serpent to bite them, in the hedge they are unjustly breaking through—a stone to fall on them and bruise them, from the house they are pulling down—a splinter from the wood of the trees they have been cutting and destroying, to wound their own flesh. Even in this world, such iniquities are seldom allowed to go unpunished. Verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth. "In the place," said the Lord, by his prophet, to Ahab—"in the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine." Nor is it merely on the great field of public and political life that this retributive justice is dealt out, and that men are often made to drink of the cup of bitterness, which they have been mingling for others. That saying of our Lord has a wide range of application—"With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be meted to you again" (Matt. vii. 2). But here the question arises—What precisely is the bearing of these various statements, upon the main theme of Solomon's discourse? That they are both true and important in themselves, is sufficiently obvious; but what light do they throw on the great questions of which this book treats? The design of the book, as we have seen, is twofold; first, to proclaim and illustrate the vanity of this world—the utter impossibility of finding in it a really satisfying portion; and second, to show that wisdom, heavenly wisdom, alone can guide man safely through the world's perplexities and perils, and lead him to happiness and peace.

Now, the verses we have just been considering touch, very closely, both of these points. If it be so, that there is so much uncertainty and insecurity in every sphere of human life; if even those who are highest in place and power may be, without cause, suddenly reduced to poverty; if they are liable to be ruined by the intrigues of enemies, or by the mere caprice and passion of some despotic prince; if it may be their lot, any day, to exchange places with men of whom, like Job, they might be disposed to say, that once they would not have set them with the dogs of their flock; does not all this write mockery on the riches, and grandeur, and honours of this world? Does it not prove that men had much need to seek a better and a more enduring substance?

But, again, if it be so, that the path of life is strewn so thick with perils and snares, how necessary must it be to seek the aids of a better wisdom than our own to direct us, and to keep us, from the evil that is in the world! Animated by that wisdom, the ruler himself will be taught, to beware of pursuing a policy, so false and pernicious as that which Solomon had seen under the sun. Animated by that wisdom, the subject will know how to meet the wrongs and injuries of such a policy, if he should be made the victim of it. He will learn, from this wisdom, to commit himself to Him that judgeth righteously—to remember that vengeance is the Lord's, and that He will repay; and to wait patiently for the issue of things.

It would seem to be this latter lesson, regarding the practical uses and worth of wisdom, which the 10th verse is meant to convey. Solomon had been speaking of rash and violent acts on the part of rulers—acts by which they invaded and violated old prescriptive rights—and that without regard to either prudence or justice. Such acts, he had shown, commonly bring their own punishment along with them. The ruler is, no doubt, armed with the sword. Where the word of a king is, there is power. But as Solomon had said before, "wisdom is better than strength." It is of far greater avail in surmounting

obstacles, and in removing difficulties, than mere brute force. The unskilful workman, when making little way with his blunt instrument, puts to more strength. If he insists on getting at his end by such a means, there is nothing else for him; and yet, when he has tasked his strength to the uttermost, he, perhaps, succeeds in nothing but in exhausting himself; and, it may be, in breaking, with his rude handling, the very instrument he wields. Wisdom would suggest a different course. Wisdom would "whet the edge" of the blunted tool, and thereby accomplish, with ease and safety, what mere force could never achieve. "Wisdom is profitable to direct." This is the moral of the passage. Let the ruler, therefore, who would govern with success and honour, consult this divine guide. It will remind him that rulers must be just, ruling in the fear of God; and will, thereby, restrain him from abusing his power. It will show him that the stability of his throne, and the welfare of his people, are equally concerned in his consulting, in all his policy, the great interests of justice, humanity, and truth. It will teach him that such a policy is the fine edge, that will cut its way through a thousand difficulties, on which mere despotism will only exhaust, and, perhaps, in the end, destroy itself. By despising the counsels of wisdom, and choosing to take the other method of mere force and arbitrary power, Solomon's own son Rehoboam, lost the better part of his kingdom, and rent the tribes of Israel in twain.

In the 11th and following verses, Solomon is still pursuing his forcible and graphic contrast between folly and wisdom; that he may thereby stir men up to eschew the one, and earnestly to seek after and cultivate the other. He had spoken in the preceding context of the practical inefficiency of the fool—of his utter inaptitude for any useful work. Now he proceeds to notice the pernicious and senseless character of his talk: his words are as unprofitable and mischievous as his deeds. It belongs to every creature to act according to its nature. The raven croaks, the dog snarls, the wasp stings, the serpent, unless

it has been tamed by the enchanter, bites. And even so it belongs to the fool to be a babbler—to annoy and wound every one he meets, with some rude and offensive speech. In reality he is no better than the serpent. He cares not, and often seems hardly to know when, or whom, he hurts. Folly is of various kinds. There is the folly of mere silliness and imbecility, which, though it may be very tiresome and very useless, is not usually capable of doing much harm. But there is also the folly of ignorance, and presumption, and recklessness; the folly of petulance and narrow-mindedness; the folly of a captious, peevish, and censorious humour; and, worse than all, the folly of an impure or malevolent heart, of a profane and ungodly mind. It is not too much to say of those whose speech such folly animates and seasons, that they are no better than serpents. Their tongue, as the apostle James testifies, is a world of iniquity, that setteth on fire the course of nature, and is itself set on fire of hell. Like the mouth of the serpent, their mouth also is full of deadly poison. Their hard speeches, their filthiness, and foolish talking and jesting, which are not convenient, inflame the worst passions of the human heart. They pollute the minds of companions; they irritate and alienate the feelings of friends; they break the peace of families; they breed enmities, and strifes, and divisions in society, and in the church of Christ. The folly, therefore, of which Solomon means to speak—the folly that comes out through the tongue—well deserves the utmost of that censure, with which it is here condemned.

To render its odiousness still more manifest, he goes on in the 12th verse to set it over against the speech of the wise man: “The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious.” They are kindly, amiable, conciliatory. They have a winning power about them, that finds its way into the heart. They disarm opposition by their gentleness; they beget love by their affectionateness; they allay excitement by their mildness; they command respect by their judiciousness and propriety; they inspire confidence by their truthfulness and honesty. The gracious desires, feelings,

and thoughts, which God's Holy Spirit has breathed into the wise man's own soul, become so transfused into his speech that it cannot be otherwise than gracious. His conversation is always with grace—seasoned with it, as with salt. What was said of Job will be said of him: "Behold thou hast instructed many, and thou hast strengthened the weak hands. Thy words have uphelden him that was falling, and thou hast strengthened the feeble knees" (iv. 3, 4). He suffers no corrupt communication to proceed out of his mouth, but only that which is good to the use of edifying, and which ministers grace to the hearers.

How opposite to all this is the speech of the fool! "The lips of a fool will swallow up himself." Not only is what he utters irksome, unprofitable, pernicious to others; it is, not unfrequently, the means of his own ruin. As the Psalmist says, when speaking of such men as he, "They make their own tongue to fall upon themselves" (lxiv. 8). It was the folly of Herod that made him utter the rash promise, which stained his soul with the crime of murder. It was the folly of another Herod that prompted the profane and self-glorifying oration, which drew down upon him the vengeance of the Almighty. Thus it is that "a fool's mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul" (Pr. xviii. 7). "The beginning of the words of his mouth," Solomon goes on to say, "is foolishness, and the end of his talk is mischievous madness;"—the tendency, that is to say, of the fool's discourse is from bad to worse. From the very first there is nothing good in it. It is the outflow of a vain and frivolous, or of a sordid and selfish, or of an earthly and sensual, or of an irreligious and infidel mind. It aims at nothing that is excellent or noble—at nothing that can either purify the heart or reform the life. And how much of such talk is there to be met with, in almost all the society in which men daily mingle! How much that has in it the foolishness of mere idle, time-wasting, mind-enfeebling gossip! How much that has in it, the worse foolishness of envy and evil speaking! How little that has anything really fitted to minister solid instruction to the understanding, or godly edifying to the

heart! But to aggravate this evil, the words that begin in simple foolishness, end, not unfrequently, in something of a still darker and more disgraceful kind. Especially is this to be looked for, when men meet for no rational end, but only for the low and degrading gratifications of the flesh—for feasting, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and such like. How truly may the end of such men's talk be spoken of as "mischievous madness!" It was doubtless with reference to the tendency of such indulgences to fire the blood, and to unloose the tongue, and to beget "mischievous madness," that Solomon said elsewhere, "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise." And hence these warning words, "Who hath woe, who hath sorrow, who hath contentions, who hath babbling, who hath wounds without cause, who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine, they that go to seek mixed wine." "Look not," he therefore adds, "upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder" (Prov. xxiv. 29-31).

"Let every man," says the apostle James, "be swift to hear, slow to speak." Referring to the same subject, in the book of Proverbs, Solomon takes occasion to observe that "he that refraineth his lips is wise." It is one of the marks of true wisdom, that is, to be sparing of speech; and not to be uttering mere random thoughts and hasty opinions, which the mind has never maturely considered or calmly weighed. A wise man has respect to the proprieties of time and place in expressing his views. He is restrained, moreover, by a sense of duty, both to others and to himself, from pronouncing judgment on matters on which, it either does not belong to him to interfere, or in regard to which, he is not in possession of materials for coming to an intelligent and dispassionate conclusion. There is no doubt, as is said elsewhere in this book, "a time to speak;" and when that time comes the wise man will declare himself honestly and faithfully. If it be a time that calls for the utterance of

what he knows will be distasteful to others, he will come out with it notwithstanding, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear. But he remembers, what the fool is sure to forget, that there is a "time to keep silence;" and, while that time lasts, he will not suffer himself to be hurried, or provoked, into any rash and unseasonable utterance. He sets a watch upon the door of his lips, lest he should speak unadvisedly—lest he should offend with his tongue.

It is altogether otherwise with the fool. With him it is always a time to speak, as is testified in the 14th verse of the passage before us. "A fool also is full of words." He is continually talking; his mouth is never shut. He is like the empty drum that sounds at the lightest touch. His self-conceit persuades him that he is competent to decide, off-hand, matters on which deeper, more thoughtful, more conscientious minds are slow to say anything at all. "A man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell him?" These are difficulties which wiser men feel and acknowledge. Because of this uncertainty and obscurity, in which human affairs and the course of events are so much involved, it is very often hard to say what view should be taken of particular occurrences or proceedings. The wise man waits for more light. The case is not ripe for judgment—he can as yet neither approve nor disapprove; he can neither acquit nor condemn; and accordingly he refrains his lips. Not so the fool: the restraints which modesty and diffidence impose on others, are unknown to him. He is the first, the longest, and the loudest in every discussion; and the most peremptory and absolute, in laying down, what he holds to be, the law of the case.

This seems to be, the most natural and satisfactory interpretation, of the 14th verse. Other constructions, indeed, have been put upon it. According to one of these it has been assumed that Solomon, after characterizing the fool as one "who is full of words," intends the remainder of the verse as a specimen of his folly—of his loose, rambling, disjointed speech. But the

obvious and fatal objection to this construction is, that the remainder of the verse is not a specimen of foolish speech. It embodies, on the contrary, grave and important truths—truths which Solomon himself had previously set forth, as the conclusions of solid wisdom. Another and more plausible view, of this second part of the verse, is that which goes to regard it as a description of the fool's fluent and copious talk. Full as he is of words, no one can tell what to make of his meaning. His speech is so incoherent, so irrelevant, so incongruous, that no one could venture to say what will come next, or to what conclusion, when he shall have finished his discourse, he means his hearers to come. There may be ingenuity in this conjecture; but it is too far-fetched to carry conviction to the mind of any sober interpreter of the verse. It would, moreover, be putting a meaning on the expressions in question, altogether at variance with that which they uniformly bear, when used in other parts of this book. Upon the whole, therefore, the view first suggested appears to be much the most preferable. If the fool has few ideas, few well-considered thoughts, he is at least "full of words;" he is not afraid to enter on any subject, however profound. Calmer, larger, more reflecting minds pause: they are arrested by the complexities of the subject: there are things connected with it which have not yet come to light: Providence has not yet cleared it up. They cannot tell how it may appear when it has been more thoroughly investigated or more fully developed; they are therefore withheld, by their imperfect knowledge, from saying anything. Thus understood, the latter part of the verse gives prodigious point and force to the former part of it; it presents that very contrast between wisdom and folly which runs through the whole passage to which this verse belongs; and, in particular, when thus understood, it conveys this important practical lesson—to beware of pronouncing hastily on matters which are not fully before us. By neglecting this salutary lesson, men are every day involving themselves and others in mischief. They want either the sense, or the

patience, or the magnanimity, or the common fairness, to wait till all the materials for a judgment are before them. Whichever of these defects it be, that prompts them to grasp prematurely at a conclusion, they are equally guilty of folly in adopting that conclusion. Nor is the folly the less, but the greater, if it be the folly, not of mere ignorance and incapacity, but of prejudice or passion, of self-interest or self-will.

In the 15th verse, a still further illustration is given, of the way in which the fool becomes a nuisance. "The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city." The fool is a helpless being, and is continually making himself a burden to his neighbours. His inaptitude for the practical business of life had been already set forth, by the forcible figurative expression, which represented him as a man whose heart or mind "is at his left hand;"—as a man, that is, who, when the moment for action arrives, is always at a loss what to do. Next, the annoyance and the injury he inflicts by his unprofitable or mischievous talk, have been not less impressively described by comparing his words to the bite of a serpent, and his mouth to a pit that often swallows up himself. At one time his rash and offensive utterances are dropping like a poison into the ears and hearts of those around him; at another, they are provoking consequences, of which he becomes himself the victim. Such a man cannot fail to be a source of vexation and trouble, wherever he comes. Whatever he takes in hand is mismanaged. His very labour "wearieth" every one around him. He is a hinderance, and not a help. He needs so much watching and directing, in doing anything he undertakes, that those who have the misfortune to employ him, would gladly be rid of him;—it would cost them less trouble and anxiety to do the work themselves. "He knoweth not how to go to the city." The phrase is evidently a proverbial one, intended to denote extreme incapacity. Of all roads, the one that leads to the city, is usually the most patent and familiar. Every rustic, in all the country round, is acquainted with it. A child

would not lose his way on so common a track. No figure, therefore, could be better fitted to convey the idea of utter uselessness, than this of not "knowing how to go to the city."

It is true that there are men, who are in this pitiable position, from a natural and inherent weakness of mind. Such persons are the objects of compassion rather than of blame. It is not to be supposed, however, that it is of such mere wittlings Solomon designs to speak. The fool he has in view is a culpable fool—is one whose folly has much more of the moral than of the intellectual, in the defect which it indicates and implies. He is one whose heart is much further wrong than his head. The tongue of a mere imbecile cannot bite like a serpent. His words can never assume the grave character of mischievous madness. Solomon's fool is not so much a silly man as a sinful man; not so much a weak man as a wicked man. And most worthy it is to be continually borne in mind, that in the highest and truest sense of the word, all wicked men are fools. There is a city—a mighty city—a glorious city—to which not one of them knows how to go; and that is the new Jerusalem, the city of the living God. Not that the way to it is hard to find. On the contrary, the way is so plain that the wayfaring man, though intellectually a fool, shall not err therein. The way to it is like that which led to the ancient cities of refuge in Judea. All along there are finger-posts to point out its course; and over every one of them the words in clear and most legible characters are written—"This is the way, walk ye in it" (Is. xxx. 21). And yet with all these facilities, the fool of whom Solomon, in common with all Scripture, speaks, knoweth not how to go to this city. Much as he may possess of the wisdom of this world, he is not wise unto salvation. His folly blinds him both to the worth of that salvation, and to the way that leads to it. Seeing he sees not, and hearing he hears not, neither does he understand. And yet till he come to Christ, who is Himself the way to the heavenly city, the fool can never become truly wise. But let his eyes be opened to know the Lord: let him once pass through

the strait gate and enter on the narrow way, and from that day he will be another man. The venom of the serpent will no longer drop from his tongue to poison the minds of others; his lips will no longer open as a pit, to swallow up himself. He will thenceforth be less full of words, and more full of thoughts. And his discourse, instead of beginning in foolishness and ending in mischievous madness, will begin with the humble confession of his own unworthiness, and end with praise of the goodness and grace of God. From that day forward, his labour will cease to weary his neighbours and friends. "Diligent in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord," will henceforth be his motto and his rule; and men will begin to take knowledge of him, as a new man—as one of those who has been with Jesus, and who has been learning of Him who is the Wisdom of God.

The folly which Solomon had thus been at so much pains to expose and reprobate, while it is pernicious in all, is pre-eminently so in the case of a ruler of the people. Already he had pointed out errors which he had seen proceeding from rulers; and had adverted to the perilous consequences to themselves, which these errors seldom fail to produce. In returning, at the 16th verse, to the case of those who occupy the exalted and responsible station of rulers, his object is to notice, not the injury to themselves, but the injury to their country, of which folly in them is sure to be the cause. "Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning!" In those eastern countries, more immediately contemplated by Solomon, where civil liberty was unknown, and where everything, as regarded the character of the government and the political welfare of the people, depended on the personal character and qualities of the reigning sovereign, it was usually a great calamity for any nation to have a child for its king. The period of the royal minority, was generally one of great misrule. The reins of power not being in responsible hands, but held, perhaps usurped, for the time, by intriguers and adventurers, whose sole aim was to make the most of their brief tenure of authority in

the way of aggrandizing themselves, the land was made the victim of lawless and cruel oppression.

It would hardly seem, however, as if the term *child*, in this passage, were meant to be quite literally understood. The 17th verse is evidently the antithesis of the 16th; and, therefore, if the word *child* in the 16th verse had been intended to describe a state of nonage, its opposite in the 17th verse would have been some expression significant of mature years. Such, however, is not the case. "Blessed art thou, O land," Solomon continues, when proceeding to exhibit the reverse of the lamentable state of things depicted in the 16th verse,—“Blessed art thou, O land, when thy king is”—not a man of full age, but when he is “the son of nobles;” that is, when he is a noble-minded prince—a prince competent and qualified to rule.

Read in the light of this contrast, *child* must obviously mean a child in capacity—a silly Absalom, or a self-willed Rehoboam—a man destitute of the gravity, and intelligence, and experience, and still more destitute of the high sense of responsibility and duty which true wisdom inspires; a man more taken up about his own amusements and pleasures, than with the affairs and interests of his kingdom. In such hands everything must speedily fall into inevitable disorder. The courtiers would be sure, with their customary servility, to copy the idleness and loose living of the king. It is this, no doubt, that is pointed at by the “princes eating”—that is, feasting—“in the morning.” The morning in all countries, and especially in the East, was devoted by princes to public affairs. Then it was that, as judges, they sat in the gate, to hear and determine the causes and questions, which the people might have to bring before them; or that they assembled in the council chambers to deliberate on the great matters of the state. If, instead of being thus employed, the morning—even the morning—was given up to sloth and self-indulgence—to feasting and revelry—alas for the land! All things, under such misgovernment, would soon be out of joint. The ill example of the court would ere long contaminate society. The subject would

not be slow to imitate the ruler in disregarding the obligations of his position. Dissoluteness of manners, social disorders, personal crimes, would multiply on every hand; until at length, by civil broils, or by the invasion of foreign foes taking advantage of the nation's weakness, the kingdom might be rent asunder, and covered with desolation and ruin.

In contrast with this picture of the unhappy condition of a people whose king is a fool, Solomon next sketches the happier lot of that country whose king is wise. A king, the son of nobles, as already noticed, is one possessing true nobility of mind. To be merely of high lineage would, of itself, be no security for the possession of those qualities of which Solomon here evidently intends to speak. Neither virtue nor wisdom is the necessary accompaniment of high birth. In all periods of the world's history, from Solomon's time until now, it has been a thing only too common to find far-descended princes who had nothing else but their pedigree of which to boast—whose personal qualities were as low and base, as their ancestry was illustrious and exalted. Wisdom is not hereditary—it does not run in the blood—as Solomon's own son sufficiently proved. It is God's gift; and he who possesses it, whatever may be his parentage, possesses the truest nobility. Where such a king reigns, men of like spirit will be gathered around him. His princes will "eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness." Their time will not be wasted in sloth and self-indulgence. They will not, like gross and grovelling sensualists, live to eat; but, temperate in all things, they will eat to live. To acquit themselves of their sacred and responsible trust, will be their great concern; and under their active, energetic, enlightened, and, above all, God-fearing administration, the land will be truly blessed.

Far as earthly princes may come short of this high standard, it is our comfort and our confidence to know that there is one Ruler, in whose government it is perfectly and gloriously realized. "The Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice" (Psalm xcvi. 1).

In proportion as His kingdom is extended and established in this fallen world, shall righteousness run down our streets as waters, and judgment as a mighty river. "In his days shall the righteous flourish, and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth." (Psalm lxxii. 7). Yes; let us be assured of this, that in nothing but in the universal diffusion of the gospel of Christ, can we ever hope to see an end put to the oppression and misgovernment, under which so many nations groan.

In the 16th verse it would seem to be the personal profligacy of princes, to which reference is chiefly made, as the source of woe to the land over which they rule. But there are other ways in which they may abuse their office and injure their people. "By much slothfulness the building decayeth; and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through." A kingdom, like a house, needs constant repair. It is only by constant care and watchful supervision, and the timely application of the needful remedies, that its institutions and interests can be preserved from falling into confusion and decay. Mere neglect on the part of its governors will, of itself, suffice ere long to insure the decline and fall, of even the most powerful kingdom. And while this pregnant saying of Solomon, contained in the 18th verse, holds true on the great scale of a nation, it holds equally true on the small scale of a family, or of an individual's personal affairs. "He that is slothful in his work," says Solomon elsewhere, "is brother to him that is a great waster" (Prov. xviii. 9). "I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding," says he yet again, illustrating the consequences of this fatal habit into which so many fall, "and lo! it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down. Then I saw, and considered it well; I looked upon it and received instruction. 'Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep.' So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth: and thy want as an armed man" (xxiv. 30-34). Let it be understood, then,

that slothfulness belongs to the fool. It is not a fault merely, but in God's sight a great sin. And therefore is it one of those counsels of wisdom which the inspired King of Israel is here laying down, to shun slothfulness if we would desire to prosper, either for time or for eternity. Let the young especially be on their guard against it. It is an insidious disease, which creeps upon those who do not watch against it by insensible degrees, until they are at length so drugged by its Lethean opiate as to become, in the end, incapable of sustained effort in any work or service whatever, whether secular or sacred—whether in the things of man or in the things of God.

There can be no doubt that the two evils that have thus been specified, very often go together. Those who “eat in the morning”—who give themselves up to sensual indulgence—soon lose all relish for active exertion in any department of labour. A life of mere pleasure is sure to breed slothfulness; and slothfulness, in its turn, never fails to cultivate a taste for debasing pleasures. It is perhaps by keeping this connection between these two vices in view, that we shall best understand the somewhat enigmatical statement of the 19th verse—“A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry, but money answereth all things.” It is as if Solomon had said, It is true that a life of pleasure may have its transient enjoyments, such as they are. It may yield mirth and laughter for the moment. But mark, at what a cost. The wastefulness, the neglect, the slothfulness, inseparable from such a life, are meanwhile consuming the resources of the nation. Its revenues are impaired. Its means of upholding the interests, the power, the honour of the kingdom, are consequently dissipated. And be it remembered, that while feasting and wine may procure such poor and paltry benefits as senseless laughter and idle mirth, money answereth all things. The building is decaying, and the house is dropping through for want of means to uphold and repair it; but the means no longer exist. The revenue,—the money of the nation,—which would have met every exigency, and supplied every

material want, is lost; and your feasting and wine have thus made you powerless to arrest the decay and ruin of the realm! We are not to suppose, therefore, that Solomon intends here to set up money as the panacea for all human ills. He is to be understood as speaking of it simply as an important means, necessary to the stability of empires and to the subsistence of families—a means which those who give themselves up to sloth and self-indulgence, cannot hope long to possess. Their luxury and laughter will end, by and bye, in want and misery. The love of money is the root of all evil. It is not, it cannot be, that base passion Solomon designs to commend. His design is to commend industry and frugality, diligence and temperance, as essential in all ranks of life,—whether high or humble,—to human happiness and welfare.

One other verse of this passage remains; and its connection with the foregoing context it is not difficult to trace. The errors Solomon had pointed out as proceeding from the ruler, and the terrible woes that have come on so many lands through the vices and misgovernment of their kings, might too readily prompt feelings of indignation and disloyalty among their suffering subjects. To give expression to these feelings, however, might be only to imperil their own safety, without effecting any practical good. The caution, therefore, here subjoined, is one which the very nature of the preceding discourse rendered peculiarly appropriate and necessary. In all countries, and especially under despotic governments, the ruler has long ears. Even a whisper of discontent or disaffection, is sure to reach the sovereign, who knows that he does not reign in the hearts of his people. The very consciousness he has of the oppressive nature of his own rule, and of the disfavour in which he is held, make him jealous and suspicious. His emissaries are everywhere on the watch to detect the first symptom of discontent; official spies and servile sycophants will be always at hand, to catch up the slightest indication of the smouldering fire, which he knows must be gathering beneath his feet.

It is a mistake, I apprehend, to suppose that in this 20th verse Solomon is intending to teach, or to refer at all, to the duty of subjects to their sovereign. Had this been his purpose, he would doubtless have spoken in quite other terms. He would have exhorted the subject to refrain from cursing the king, not because there might be danger in doing so, but because it is wrong to do so; because the king's office, so long as he holds it, entitles him, in so far as submission to a higher rule allows it, to deference and obedience. The fact that Solomon makes no allusion at all to any considerations of that kind, but puts his exhortation entirely on the footing of prudence and caution, seems plainly to imply that he is dealing merely with that aspect of the question, of a subject's relation to the ruler, that was actually in hand. "Curse not the king; no not in thy thought: and curse not the rich in thy bed-chamber; for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter." The subject, who accepts the counsel of wisdom, will not allow the wrongs done by the ruler, to hurry him into a rash and hasty utterance, that may serve no other end but to compromise himself. Even where wrong is done, men must not take the law into their own hands. Let the people of God especially learn to commit their way, in such circumstances, unto the Lord, and to wait patiently for Him. He that believeth shall not make haste. Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord. His peace shall be as a river. The place of his defence shall be the munition of rocks. He shall be as Mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever. For "as the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about them that fear Him, from henceforth even for ever!" (Ps. cxxv. 2).

CHAPTER XVII.

WORKS OF FAITH AND LABOURS OF LOVE.

“Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth. If the clouds be full of rain, they empty *themselves* upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be. He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what *is* the way of the spirit, *nor* how the bones *do grow* in the womb of her that is with child; even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand; for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both *shall be* alike good.”—ECCLES. XI. 1-6.

SOLOMON is now drawing towards the close of this inspired discourse. In doing so his observations begin to converge, more and more, upon the main and leading truth which, all along, he has had it especially in view to illustrate and enforce. It has been his aim to show, what is that good for the sons of men, which they should do all the days of their life. To make his argument more complete and conclusive, he has tried the question at issue, both in the negative and in the positive form. On the one side he has been at pains to prove, that man's chief good is *not* to be found, in loving and serving the creature. On the other side he has been at equal pains to prove, that man's chief good *is* to be found, in loving and serving God. To seek it in the one way, he has demonstrated to be the course of folly. To seek it in the other way, he has demonstrated to be the course of true and heavenly wisdom. In speaking of these two opposite courses, he has taken occasion to enter somewhat at large, into

the subject of wisdom and folly. He has held up wisdom to admiration and honour, by expatiating on its inherent excellence and worth; and by pointing to the many great and blessed consequences which ensue from following its dictates. He has held up folly to abhorrence and shame, by exposing its native odiousness, and by pointing out the ruinous results to which it inevitably leads.

In now retiring from that larger field of discussion, it is only to return more directly to the matter in hand. Henceforth he will fasten our attention, immediately and exclusively, on the great lesson which this whole book is designed to teach. He will tell us plainly and finally what is our chief good. As regards worldly things, he will state distinctly what is the right use to make of them; and, as regards divine things, he will declare solemnly, and once for all, that they do constitute the only satisfying portion for man. His ultimate decision on the former of these two particulars is contained in the passage at present before us; and to which accordingly we now advance.

In regard to this question,—of the right use to be made of worldly things,—Solomon had glanced more than once at the true answer to it, in several preceding chapters; and more especially in the 12th verse of chap. iii., where he had expressly and emphatically testified that in worldly things there is no good for a man but this—“to rejoice and to do good in his life.” To hoard them up, for a future which is all buried in uncertainty and darkness; or for successors who may abuse them to their own hurt and to the injury of others, he had by many striking considerations and examples shown to be the veriest vanity. To lay them out for the gratification of pride and ambition, or of sensual self-indulgence, he had proved by reasons and by facts equally cogent, to be, if possible, a greater and more pernicious error still; issuing, as it must inevitably do, in nothing but disappointment and misery. What then? Are worldly possessions to be thrown away as being only either a useless incumbrance or a perilous snare? Is the lesson on this subject which Solomon,

speaking by inspiration, means to teach, that those who would be wise must impose upon themselves vows of poverty, and become ascetics and anchorites? By no means. This would be to follow not wisdom, but only another of the many shapes and forms of folly. Worldly possessions, be they less or more, are talents, neither to be wasted in riotous living, nor, by covetous hoarding, to be buried unprofitably in the earth. Like all the other talents which God may be pleased to bestow upon us, they are to be laid out for His glory; so that when He cometh to reckon with us for them, He may receive His own with usury. Thus are we to use them. "Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight: for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth."

Bread is evidently to be understood here as bread-corn. The original word is so translated in Isaiah (xxviii. 28), where it obviously can have no other meaning. "Bread-corn," it is there said, "is bruised, because he will not ever be threshing it." It is true the husbandman does not usually cast his bread-corn or seed-corn "upon the waters," but upon the ground. For this reason it has been suggested by some critics on the passage that, instead of "upon the waters," the expression should be rendered "before the waters;" that is, that the seed should be sown at the proper season of the year, before the rains fall; so that it may be ready to receive the quickening impulse which these rains will communicate, when God visiteth the earth and watereth it, and maketh it soft with showers, and blesseth the springing thereof. But the difficulty, from which this forced and unnatural translation seeks to escape, is founded on an obvious mistake. It is not, at all, Solomon's meaning, that we must be careful to seize the precise moment at which it becomes fit and seasonable to sow our seed. His assumption, on the contrary, is that, in regard to this kind of sowing of which he intends to speak, we really do not, and often cannot, know the fitting time; and his very object in making use of the figurative exhortation here

employed is to show, that we ought not to be deterred from sowing the seed, by the fact of our not knowing exactly what is to become of it.

It is well known, indeed, that in southern and eastern countries there are departments of husbandry, in which the very thing here pointed at is done, and must be done, if there is to be any hope of a harvest at all. The seed-corn of the rice-plant may, without any great or unusual freedom of language, be said to be "cast upon the waters;" the flooding of the fields being an indispensable preparative, for the sowing of this kind of grain. And even if the uncertainty which undoubtedly exists, as to whether this particular species of grain was in use, in the days of Solomon, either in Judea or in any of the adjacent countries, should preclude the idea of its being here pointed at; it is by no means unlikely that the well-known peculiarity of Egyptian agriculture, where the inundation of the Nile has scarcely subsided when the seed is sown, may well enough have sufficed to suggest this figure of casting the bread-corn upon the waters. Such, at least, is a view that has been very commonly adopted in regard to the origin of this figurative expression. But, after all, there is really no need to seek, in any usage of actual husbandry, a groundwork for this particular form of speech. It is quite possible, perhaps even probable, that Solomon, in employing it, had no reference to any real usage of agriculture whatever; and that what he intended was simply this—by a bold and striking figure to illustrate the spirit of confiding trust and free-handed liberality, in which benevolence and charity ought to be exercised. What could seem more rash and improvident on the part of a husbandman than to be casting his bread-corn upon the bosom of a river, lake, or sea! Be it so. Literally understood, the act might be a foolish one; but not in the sense in which it is here meant to be taken. He that giveth to the poor, lendeth to the Lord. The kindness done will not be thrown away. The means expended in doing the generous deed may be large, and little good may seem, at the time, to have come of it; but let not this thought discourage the

generous heart or paralyze the generous hand. "Thou shalt find it after many days." Sordid and short-sighted worldliness may condemn the outlay, as uncalled for or excessive. "Why," it may say, like Judas, "was not the ointment sold for so much, and given to the poor?" But there is One who will judge otherwise. Selfish men may object; but "God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have showed toward His name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister" (Heb. x. 10). He that soweth bountifully is often made, even in this present world, to reap also bountifully. "The liberal deviseth liberal things; and by liberal things shall he stand" (Isaiah xxxii. 8). "Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal, it shall be measured to you again" (Luke vi. 38). There are principles in human nature, and laws in the moral government of God, which secure that result—principles which abundantly vindicate the truth of that seeming paradox, "There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, and it tendeth to poverty" (Prov. xi. 24).

This, then, is one reason to encourage a large-hearted liberality in dispensing our worldly substance, that, in so far as it is done in a right spirit—done with an eye to God's glory—it is sure, in one way or another, and at one time or another, to bring a blessing. But Solomon enforces the exercise of this beneficence by a further consideration still—namely this, that amid the great and continual uncertainties of human life, the laying out our money in acts of beneficence, may turn out to be both the best, and safest, investment we could possibly have found for it. "Giving a portion to seven, and also to eight"—responding, so to speak, to every call of distress that reaches us—never growing weary of giving—being ready, like the widow of Sarepta, to share even our last meal with the poor and needy,—to practise liberality on a scale like this may look like mere improvidence;

and yet, after all, it may turn out to be the truest prudence—to be the very best and wisest thing we could possibly have done. We know not what evil shall be upon the earth. A state of things may speedily come round in which our money, however securely and carefully we may have kept it, may be of no avail to deliver us out of the difficulty or danger into which we have fallen. During the late appalling outbreak, for example, in our Indian empire, of what service was wealth, or rank, or former power and influence to deliver from the enemy, those who had fallen into their cruel hands? There are instances recorded in connection with that direful history, in which money was offered, almost without limit, for bare life, and yet rejected with scorn—rejected with the terrific reply, We want not their money but their blood. And yet at the very time that this fiend-like ferocity was in full play, it is well known there were cases, not a few, in which the memory of acts of kindness, proved stronger than the thirst for blood—cases in which the recollection of such kindness not only turned the sword aside from the intended victim, but raised it in his defence, and produced the most determined and devoted efforts, at all hazards, to save him. In such an occurrence we see, at least, one way, in which these significant words of Solomon may be made good, “Give a portion to seven, and also to eight ; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.”

There is, however, another, and, in a country like ours, a much more common way, in which the reason here assigned for the exercise of a generous liberality, may come to be exemplified. The means we have of exercising it now, may not continue. Evil days may arrive that will strip us bare, and leave us, it may be, largely dependent on the kindly feelings and good offices of others. If, in the days of our prosperity, we see our brother have need, and shut up our bowels of compassion from him, what can we expect, should a season of adversity overtake us, but to reap as we have sown—to meet with the same want of sympathy we had ourselves displayed? It was to provide for such an emergency, that the unjust steward conferred his dishonest favours, on

the debtors of his master. "I am resolved," said he, "what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship they may receive me into their houses" (Luke xvi. 4). But that very wickedness of his, illustrates the power and efficacy of the course, which the words of Solomon recommend. He who, when Providence smiles upon him, gives portions to seven, and also to eight, is not likely to be left unpitied and unfriended should he come to be himself in want. Not, indeed, that he is to dispense his bounties, under the influence of any such interested motive. He is to do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; but just because he has thought of nothing, in bestowing his bounty, but of doing good, his bounty will come into more grateful remembrance in the day of his own calamity. Selfish and unthankful as human nature is, it is not often that true-hearted, consistent, considerate kindness is altogether forgotten. The man who practises that kindness most assiduously and most generously when his own cup is running over, will be found to have been taking the very best and strongest security for having his cup replenished by others when, in some evil day, his own resources are found to fail.

Even if his former beneficence should not be remembered by others as it ought to be, it will be an unspeakable solace, in the midst of subsequent misfortunes, to remember it himself. On the contrary, how must it aggravate the unhappiness of the selfish man—the man whose love of money would not suffer him to open his heart to any call or claim, whether of temporal or of spiritual destitution—to think, in the day of his calamity, that his riches have made for themselves wings and have flown away, without having done any real good either to himself or to others! Might not the events of the late commercial crisis read, on this subject, a lesson to multitudes all over the world. Even a tithe of the thousands they have lost, had it been wisely and seasonably expended in works of philanthropy and piety, might have been the means of wiping away many a tear, and of soothing many an aching heart; nay, of saving, it may be, some soul

from death. But they grudged even a farthing of their means for such objects as these. Perhaps they had been excusing themselves on the plea, that they were not yet rich enough to begin to give away—that they could not yet afford to set apart a portion of their substance to meet the claims either of humanity or religion. When their possessions should become more ample they would perhaps have something to spare, but, meanwhile, they had no portions to give—not to say to eight, or to seven, but even to one. So they may have reasoned then; but what think they of that reasoning now? The money is gone, and with it the opportunity of doing the good which once it placed in their power. They have lost both; and let them be assured there is a day coming when the discovery will be made that the latter loss is the greater loss of the two. “Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl 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. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days. . . . Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter” (James v. 1–3, 5). If, then, any one should ask in what circumstances he is to practise this beneficence, the answer is—Just as soon and as often as you have the means of doing it. “If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth.” Take a lesson from the clouds. Do as they do. When they have sucked up, into their spongy folds, the moist vapours of the deep, they do not keep these watery treasures shut up within their own dark bosoms. They let them drop, now here, now there, upon the pastures of the wilderness; and thus do they make “the little hills to rejoice on every side;” and thus it is that, through their unconscious agency, “God visiteth the earth and watereth it,” and crowns the year with His goodness. In that beautiful and wonderful economy of the material world, He maketh “His sun to rise on the evil and on

the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust ;” and thereby teacheth us that if we would be the children of our Father which is in heaven, we must imitate His goodness; we must study, through grace, to be “merciful as our Father also is merciful,” and then shall our “reward be great, and we shall be the children of the Highest: for He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil” (Luke vi. 35, &c.)

A cloud full of rain, and yet leaving the earth beneath it parched and desolate, would be an anomaly in the natural world; and is not a griping, narrow-souled, selfish rich man an anomaly of the same kind? God has given him the means of making “his very paths drop fatness.” He has put it in such a man’s power in a thousand ways to benefit his fellowmen; to relieve want—to foster industry—to help those who may be struggling with difficulties—to promote, in so far, at least, as the outward means and agencies are concerned, the furtherance in this fallen world of the kingdom of Christ. In what manifest opposition, then, to the ways and to the will of God does such a man live, when no drop of this plenteous rain is emptied upon the thirsty earth! when he lives only to hoard and heap up his accumulating treasures, or to lay them out only for the gratification of his own vanity and ambition, or of his sensual ease and pleasure. Such a man is a kind of monstrosity in the moral world—fit to be the object of no other feelings than those of contempt and pity, on the part of his fellows; and certain to inherit the displeasure and wrath of Him, whose tender mercies are over all His other works.

It can hardly be doubted that the view now given of the first clause of this 3d verse is the true one. So understood, it simply illustrates, by a beautiful example, borrowed from the economy of nature, the duty which the immediately preceding verses enjoin. The bearing, however, of the second clause of this 3d verse is not quite so obvious—“And if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there shall it be.” Upon the whole

the interpretation, which appears to be at once the most natural and the most satisfactory, is that which construes these words as a warning to beware of deferring and putting off, what is our present duty. We are not to say, in answer to Solomon's exhortation to the exercise of a prompt and liberal benevolence, that the fitting time has not come, or that the proper occasion or object has not yet presented itself. Just so it is that selfishness deals, with the demands addressed to it. It will not venture to say, that in no case, and at no time, will it give anything to relieve the wants of the poor, or to further the cause of Christ. But there is always something wrong about the particular claim actually made. It comes from a wrong quarter; or it is made in an improper spirit; or it is in favour of some enterprise which the selfish man disapproves; or it finds him pressed by other demands, so that he cannot afford to give anything. Selfishness is never at a loss for an excuse. It deals with any call for money as the Roman governor did with Paul's faithful and therefore distasteful preaching—"Go thy way," it says to every petitioner, "for this time; when I have a convenient season I will call for thee." Be it so; but meanwhile the Lord of the vineyard, coming again and again to this barren tree seeking fruit, and finding none, at length, in righteous displeasure, issues the command—"Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground;" and where it falls "there it shall be." Death brings the period of probation to an end; and after death is the judgment. The design, in short, of this abrupt reference to the fall of a tree, and to its remaining precisely in the place where it fell, seems to be meant to speak in substantially the same language which Solomon employed in a previous chapter, when he said, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, whither thou goest" (ix. 10).

What immediately follows in the next and succeeding verses, is, to say the least of it, altogether in harmony with this interpretation; if we may not venture to go further; and to say, that it

conclusively confirms it. In the next verse, Solomon begins by a series of most forcible and felicitous illustrations, to expose the folly of those pretexts and evasions which selfishness employs, to excuse itself from present duty. It says 'at another time'—'at a more convenient season'—'but I must wait till then.' On such a footing, Solomon virtually asks, what really good or important work could ever be accomplished at all? "He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap." If we are never to do an act of kindness till we are perfectly sure that it will not be abused, and that it will really and fully accomplish the purpose we intend by it, we shall never perform any such act at all. If I am never to give an alms, until I know the whole history, past and future, of the individual who is to receive it; if I am never to befriend one who is in difficulty and distress, till I can be positively assured that he will prove himself worthy of it; if I am never to bestow my money on any undertaking for promoting the temporal or spiritual welfare of my fellowmen, till I have infallible proof that there shall be no mistake committed in the management of it, and that it shall effect all the good which its authors are looking for and aiming at, I may as well resolve at once to do nothing, in the way of spending my worldly substance, for the interests of religion or humanity at all.

Men do not make such unreasonable demands—they do not ask for such impossibilities—as the condition of giving either their labour or their money in prosecuting their ordinary affairs. The husbandman does not refuse to plough and sow his fields, unless he can be made sure, that the season is to be propitious and the harvest great. The merchant does not insist on a positive guarantee for a profitable return to his trade, before he will lay out his money in providing the materials, with which it is to be carried on. The sailor does not refuse to unmoor his ship, unless some voice from heaven will tell him that he is to meet no tempest, and to suffer no shipwreck, upon his voyage. No; there is no such folly committed by men in conducting the common

business of life. They know and acknowledge that many things must be done, the issue of which is wrapped up in darkness and uncertainty; and they are quite contented, in prosecuting their own worldly affairs, to proceed on this footing. Why, then, should they be unwilling to follow a similar course in doing good works? Let them by all means employ their best foresight and caution; let them make every necessary inquiry; let them satisfy themselves that the object is good, and the means fitting, and the time suitable. This is not merely lawful—it is their duty. But, having done this, let them hesitate no longer; let them give, not grudgingly, nor of necessity, but cheerfully; and let them leave the issue in the hands of Him whose kingdom ruleth over all. He may have designs of which we are ignorant—designs which may turn out to conflict with our plans, or which in the long run may crown them with complete and glorious success. Reminding us of this important truth, Solomon goes on to say, “Thou knowest not what is the way of the Spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.”

Having thus exposed the foolish or disingenuous pleas, which men are ever too ready to put forward, by way of cloaking their selfish unwillingness to meet the calls of duty, Solomon returns to the exhortation with which he began, and presses it anew, with the added force of the important considerations which he has meanwhile interposed. “In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand; for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.” Here he drops the bold figure of casting the seed upon the waters, because he has now in view a somewhat different aspect of the duty he is dealing with, from the one pointed at in the beginning of the chapter. *There* it was his aim to stimulate the exercise of a free, generous, adventurous beneficence—a beneficence which, in its earnest, disinterested unselfish longing to do good, will not be always timidly or too

nicely calculating, what is to be the issue of the efforts, or of the gifts which the work demands. *Here*, while he has still that former object before him, he—or rather that blessed Spirit whose words he utters—has another, though quite a kindred purpose in hand; which is, to urge the importance, nay, the necessity, of steadfast, unflinching perseverance in whatever work of faith or labour of love our hand findeth to do. Just because we cannot foresee the final issue of things—because the labour that seemed most hopeful may turn out in the end the most fruitless, while that which appeared the most unpromising may ultimately result in the most unexpected and complete success—therefore must we never weary in well-doing, but, in the face of whatever difficulties or discouragements may arise, must still go on, trusting in the Lord and staying our minds upon God. To Him it belongs to command success; but to us it belongs, in faith and prayer, to use the appointed means.

Such, then, as regards the use to be made of worldly possessions, is the great lesson taught in this book by the wisdom of God. It is, for substance, the same lesson which our Lord Jesus founded on the parable of the unjust steward, when He said, “Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations” (Luke xvi. 9). Thus honouring the Lord with our substance, and with all the first-fruits of our increase, we shall be made instruments of blessing to others; and, at the same time, shall most surely bring down multiplied blessings upon ourselves. What we lend unto the Lord—what we give of our portion of this world’s goods to promote His glory,—if it should be lost to us on earth, “we shall find after many days,” laid up for us as a treasure in heaven.

Let us be assured, then, that that saying of Solomon is literally true, that, as regards these earthly things, there is no good in them for a man, but to rejoice and to do good in his life. And what an infinitely nobler use is this, for a man to make of his worldly means, than to grasp them with the hand of a miser,

or to spend them on merely personal and selfish objects of his own! To have fine houses, and gay clothing, and costly feasts; to make these our idols, and to devote to them so large a proportion of our means, as to leave ourselves poor for everything else—is not this, after all, vanity of vanities—vanity of vanities! Better far to be the poor Lazarus at the gate, with the dogs licking his sores, than to enjoy for a little season the fine linen and the sumptuous fare, and then to go away to endless and unutterable woe. Not thus, surely, should life be spent by those, who profess to have been redeemed unto God, by the blood of His blessed Son. They, at least, may be expected to have some better thing to aim at, than their own selfish ease and pleasure. If they, indeed, know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ—how that though He was rich, yet for their sakes He became poor, that they through His poverty might be rich,—they will scorn so ignoble a career, as that of living to the flesh and to the world. They will look, not on their own things alone, but also on the things of others—they will seek, not their own things, but the things which are Jesus Christ's. Their aim, their prayer, their continual effort, through grace, will be, to be like Him who pleased not himself—whose life was one great act of self-sacrifice for the good of others—whose meat and whose drink it was to do the will of His Father, and to finish His work.

In the interpretation thus given of the passage before us, it has been assumed, from the language it employs, and from the general scope of the book in which it is found, that its immediate object and main design, is to show the true way to find happiness in worldly things. To employ them in doing good—good to the possessor of them of course included—is the true secret for extracting out of them, the utmost amount of happiness which it is in their nature to afford. The doctrine upon this subject which is taught here is entirely at one with that of the 112th Psalm: "A good man showeth favour and lendeth; he will guide his affairs with discretion. Surely he shall not be moved for

ever: the righteous shall be in everlasting remembrance. He shall not be afraid of evil tidings: his heart is fixed trusting in the Lord. . . He hath dispersed (his bounties), he hath given to the poor: his righteousness endureth for ever: his horn shall be exalted with honour."

At the same time it is impossible not to feel, in studying this passage, how applicable it is to heavenly things: and how truly and beautifully it describes the spirit, and the principles, under the influence of which God's people should be aiming, each in his own sphere and according to his own opportunities and means, to dispense the bread of life. That bread, that good seed of the kingdom, it is pre-eminently our duty to cast upon the waters—to present as occasion offers, even to those who may seem least likely to receive it. How often, in such cases, has it been found after many days! How often have a father's counsels, and a mother's entreaties, prevailed, through grace, with a prodigal son, to turn his heart to the Lord—long, it may be, after the lips that uttered them had been closed in death! How often has the martyr's testimony for the truth, though stifled for the time in a dungeon, or silenced upon a scaffold, come back in after years like a voice from heaven—come back to arouse a whole people from the sleep of religious indifference, and to perpetuate among them, for long generations, abhorrence of the oppression under which he suffered, and devotedness to the cause for which he died. The bread-corn of the precious seed of the Word, which such witnesses cast upon the waters, was not thrown away. The floods of iniquity, to whose dark and swelling bosom it was committed, may, for a season, have prevailed. But the incorruptible seed, like the ark of Noah, survived the angry deluge; and when the waters were assuaged, it found a more genial soil, where it brought forth fruit unto God.

Have you received this inestimable treasure—this true riches? See that ye dispense it. Freely ye have received; freely give. Remember the saying of Solomon—"If the clouds be full of

rain they empty themselves upon the earth." This best of all blessings was not meant for yourselves alone. Are you parents that have it?—bestow it upon your children. Are you masters?—bestow it on the members of your household. Are you friends?—bestow it upon your companions. Be not discouraged by the apparent unlikelihood of its being well received. Cast it upon the waters. It will not be lost. If they reject it, they will sustain a loss: but you will not fail of a gain. It will be recorded in those books of remembrance which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall open in the great day: and it will be acknowledged in that sentence, the most blessed and glorious that can be heard by human ears—"Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

And be not weary in this noblest form of well-doing. The time is short. The night cometh when no man can work. The axe shall soon be laid to the root of the tree, and "in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be." Let this thought stir up all who have any work to do, or any word to speak for God, to do it now. To-day alone is ours—to-morrow it may be too late.

Above all, let this thought stir up those who have still to seek Christ for themselves—who have never yet, in right earnest, come to Him who is the true bread that giveth life to the world. O sinner—O poor perishing prodigal—there is enough and to spare of this living bread in thy Father's house; and why shouldst thou perish with hunger? Let thy prayer be—"Lord evermore give me of this bread." Offer that prayer now, and thy soul shall live for ever!

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN EXHORTATION TO CULTIVATE EARLY PIETY.

“Truly the light *is* sweet, and a pleasant *thing it is* for the eyes to behold the sun : but if a man live many years, *and* rejoice in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness ; for they shall be many. All that cometh *is* vanity.

“Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes : but know thou, that for all these *things* God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh : for childhood and youth *are* vanity.

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them ; while the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain : in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease, because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened ; and the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low ; and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird ; and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low : also *when* they shall be afraid of *that which is* high, and fears *shall be* in the way, and the almond-tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail ; because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets : or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern : then shall the dust return to the earth as it was ; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher ; all *is* vanity.”—ECCLES. XI. 7-10 ; XII. 1-8.

THOUGH commentators have much differed on the point, there does seem to be no reasonable ground for doubting that a new passage or paragraph opens with these words—“Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun.” The preceding verses we found to contain an earnest exhortation, to make a prompt, generous, faithful, and diligent use of the means and opportunities of doing good, in this present world, which God may have given us. In those verses it was obviously Solomon’s aim to stir men up to work while it is day ; to redeem the time ; to live under the powers of the

world to come ; to look, not every man on his own things merely, but every man also on the things of others ; to consider none of the things that we have as our own, but, as being stewards of God's bounty, to lay all out for His glory. By cultivating this unselfish, loving, and liberal spirit—by following this course of active usefulness—by thus living, in a word, under a constant sense of our personal responsibility to Him to whom we owe life, and breath, and all things—we shall make the most that can be made of worldly things—shall extract all the happiness out of them, which they are capable of communicating—and shall, at the same time, be in the best case both for meeting whatever may be awaiting us in the vicissitudes of this life, and for giving in our account in that great and notable day, that is to try every man's work of what sort it is. Such is the counsel of that heavenly wisdom which Solomon had been inspired to teach.

But Solomon well knew there were many, to whom the dictates of that divine wisdom were altogether distasteful. He knew there were multitudes, who had no relish for a life of self-denial—who were bent on their own present indulgence—on their own ease and pleasure—on having their own way. Speaking now, therefore, to such men, he would have them to look before them, and to consider the consequences of such a career. He quite understood their state of mind. He could enter without any difficulty into their view of things. The days of his own folly, when he too had sought his happiness in the possessions and pleasures of this present world, enabled him perfectly to realize the feelings and expectations by which they were animated. They must not mistake him, therefore, as if he were some gloomy ascetic, who never had any acquaintance or sympathy, with what they found to be so enticing and delightful. His tastes had once been identical with theirs. The days had been, when the things of sense and time exercised as powerful an influence over him, as they now did over them. A life of mere earthly enjoyment was a life, whose fascinations had long held him bound, as with the spell of an enchantment.

Accordingly, when he turns round to men of this class and character, and addresses them in these words of the 7th verse—"Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun"—it is as if he said—I know your thoughts upon this subject; and I do not in the very least dispute the fact, that there is something intensely gratifying to human nature, in those outward and material things on which your hearts are set. In the season of early youth especially, when all is fresh and new, there is a zest in these worldly pleasures of a most attractive kind. Mere existence is a happiness. Everything looks bright and joyous. In the light-hearted buoyancy and gaiety of such a state of feeling, life seems as if it were destined to be a scene of perpetual sunshine. Ah! yes. I know it, says Solomon. I understand it all. It is like the glorious dawn of a long summer's day. There is not a cloud upon the sky, and the earth beneath it, is all strewn with flowers. Be it so; but bear in mind that that long day will come to an end at last—that that bright sun will go down—that the shadows of night will at length fall over this fair scene—and that all will be deep, unbroken darkness.

Solomon does not, by any means, intend to admit that the worldly man's glowing anticipations, about this present life, are to be actually realized. That sun of worldly prosperity and enjoyment, whose light is now so sweet, so pleasant to the eyes to behold, may go down at noon. Thick clouds of sorrow, storms and tempests of sore calamity, may ere long arise to blacken the heavens and blot out the sun; and that future that now seems so brilliant may be speedily overcast with the gloomiest shade. But even if it were to be otherwise—"if a man"—such a man as thou—a man who art looking to this world, as thy portion and thy home, and who hast no aim and no hope beyond it—"if such a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many." In a word, Solomon concedes, for the moment, all that the worldly man can either ask, or expect, as to his earthly career. He grants to him the very utmost that he can venture to affirm, or

to anticipate, as to the enjoyment to be derived from a life of pleasure and self-indulgence. Not that he agrees with him on that subject; but he will not raise a dispute on points to which the worldly man, in his present mood of mind, is not in the least likely to do justice. Solomon can afford to let those points alone; and he contents himself with another, and far greater, question that remains behind. Let the worldly man make of this world what he pleases, what is he to make of the next world? Threescore years and ten, or at the most, fourscore years, will suffice to bring him to the boundaries of time. How is it to fare with him in that never-ending eternity, into which he is then to pass? What though all should have gone merrily on till that eventful hour, if beyond it there be nothing in store, but the blackness of darkness for ever! This is the momentous consideration, on which Solomon would fix his thoughts. Sit down, he virtually says to the worldly man, and count the cost of the choice you are making. Are you prepared, he asks him, to gain the world at the expense of losing your immortal soul? Is not this a worse folly than that of Esau, who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage? Are you contented thus to sow to the flesh, at the expense of reaping corruption?—to sow the wind, at the expense of reaping the whirlwind? Solomon will make no concessions here. He has left the worldly man to assume what he pleases, about the life that now is; but he will not suffer him to make any such loose or false assumptions, about the life to come. On this subject he is plain and peremptory. He tells him, broadly and unhesitatingly, that such a life as the worldly man is leading—a life spent without God—can be followed by nothing but “days of darkness”—days that “shall be many”—days the number of which no arithmetic can sum up—days countless and ceaseless—days of everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power. Surely it is literally true, of a life that leads inevitably to such endless and unutterable woe, to say—“All that cometh [of such a life] is vanity!”

To deepen the impression which this mode of dealing with the subject is fitted to make, he summons up before him the sort of man he has had in view. He calls him into his presence as a representative of the class—a class in all ages deplorably numerous—against whom his argument is pointed. And just in order that there may be no room, and no ground, left for taking exception to his argument,—as if it did not do full justice to the case he is handling,—he is at pains to single out such a representative, of those who are setting their affections on the things that are beneath, as they themselves must admit to be the most favourable, for their side of the question, that could have been chosen. In order to expose the vanity of a life devoted to this world, he does not select some wasted and worn-out debauchee who has become sated and sickened, and perhaps even soured, with the world. No. He takes a young man—one just entering into life, and full of all the ardour and enthusiasm which usually belong to the youthful mind. In the joyousness of his sanguine spirit such a young man will not believe, that worldly things are so incapable of conferring happiness, as heavenly wisdom represents them to be. As yet, at least, he finds it to be quite otherwise. They afford him intense enjoyment. His heart bounds within him, at the very prospect of drinking again of their intoxicating pleasures. He longs to be in the midst of them; and in the song and the dance, the mirth and revelry, the wit and wine of the gay society in which he delights to mingle, to laugh away the cares, and fears, and solemn thoughts which such counsellors as Solomon would call up before him, by reasoning of righteousness, and temperance, and judgment to come. No, replies the self-willed, whole-hearted, worldly-minded, pleasure-loving youth—I am no believer in that dismal doctrine of yours, “that all is vanity.” I find the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life very agreeable. The tree, against whose fruit you so earnestly warn me, is good for food and pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise. I like it, and am resolved to eat of it. Is it so! answers

Solomon. Very well; take your own way. "Rejoice, O young man in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes; but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment."

This pointed address, to the youthful lover of this world, makes it plain that, from the 7th verse onwards to the end of the chapter, Solomon is dealing with those who will not listen to the views, which the immediately preceding context contains. He had laid before them, in that context, a "more excellent way" of spending their time and their wordly means, than that of using them to serve "divers lusts and pleasures." He had shown them that a life of piety and purity—a life governed by the fear of God, and devoted to the doing of His good and holy will—a life of self-restraint, as regarded their own indulgence and ease, and of disinterested beneficence as regarded the wants and the welfare of others—he had shown them that such a life was the true and only way to happiness and honour, whether here or hereafter. But if they were determined to reject his counsel and to follow their own, let them do so—only let them not shut their eyes to the obvious and unquestionable fact, that there was a day coming, when they should have to answer for all this. They must not think, that they were free to live as they listed. They must not forget, that they were subject to a divine law and government. They must not suppose, that they could be allowed, with impunity, to disregard and despise the will of the supreme Ruler. He has appointed a day, in the which He shall judge the world in righteousness. In that day, every man's life shall be brought to the test of a law which says—"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself." That law is holy; that commandment is holy, and just, and good. Even your own reason and conscience will tell you, that you ought to obey it. Surely there is no one who has such claims on your heart's

affection as the Author of your being—the all-wise, all-holy, and infinitely gracious God, who is the source and fountain of all your mercies, and who, in His love and in His pity, has sent His Son to seek and to save your guilty and perishing souls. If, then, you are loving and serving the creature more than the Creator—if you are lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God—what can you look for, in the end, but the portion of transgressors? He will by no means clear the guilty. To do so would be to dethrone Himself, and to surrender the control of the moral universe to Satan and to sin. It is therefore no mere idle threat to tell you that, “for all these things God will bring you into judgment.” It cannot be otherwise. The thing is as certain and inevitable, as the laws of nature themselves; and hence the affectionate urgency with which, after pointing to those awful consequences that must overtake every man who “walks in the ways of his heart, and in the sight of his eyes,”—who lives, that is, according to his own will and pleasure,—Solomon again turns to the young man, and says—“Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity.”

Remove sorrow from my heart! the young man may perhaps, in a tone of surprise, reply. There is no sorrow in my heart. My heart is full of animation, and hope, and joy; and to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant! But that is not Solomon's meaning. He is pointing at something deeper than the young man's present feelings. There is a cause of sorrow in his heart, though as yet he is hardly conscious of it. His way of life is planting thorns in his bosom, that shall one day pierce him to the quick. By that vain, worldly, selfish course he is pursuing, he is writing “bitter things against himself” in the books of God's remembrance; and he is laying up, in his own bosom, materials for future remorse and misery. “There is no peace, saith the Lord, to the wicked” (Isaiah xlviii. 22). Every sin is the seed of a special sorrow. It may not spring up all at once. Like other seeds, it may lie some-

times for a long season unquickened in the soil that has received it; but it will vegetate some day, and bear its poisoned fruits. David's sin, in the matter of Uria, seems for a time to have given him no trouble; but when conscience awoke, under the searching rebuke of Nathan, it became sufficiently manifest how agonizing a sorrow that sin had been laying up in his heart. Such cries of distress, as are uttered in the 51st Psalm, may help us to understand how dark and deep is the sorrow which sin engenders.

This call, therefore, to the young man to remove "sorrow from his heart," is simply an emphatic way of bidding him remove *sin* from his heart. "Great peace have they which love God's law" (Psalm cxix. 165). "Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart" (Psalm xcvi. 11). A good conscience towards God, is the true source and secret of happiness.

When to the exhortation, "Put away sorrow from thy heart," Solomon adds, "and put away evil from thy flesh," he means evidently to refer to those consequences of sin which show themselves, oftentimes, in the form of bodily infirmities, and diseases, and pains. What horrible and loathsome evils are every day entailed upon their flesh, by the glutton and the drunkard, by the loose-living and licentious profligate! As lust, when it hath conceived, bringeth forth sin; so sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. Godliness is profitable unto all things. It hath promise not only of the life that is to come, but even of the life that now is. It is conducive to the health, both of body and soul. It is promotive of our truest welfare, both in time and eternity. Christ's yoke is easy and his burden is light. The ways of wisdom are pleasantness, and her paths are peace; but the way of transgressors is hard. Satan's yoke is alike heavy and degrading. It may be so lined and cushioned at the first, that the young sinner scarcely feels its pressure; but, by and by, the iron will enter into his very soul; and, tormented with anxious forebodings and guilty fears, he will begin at

length to realize the terrible significancy of the saying, "that the end of these things is death."

Let, therefore, the youthful worldling pause. Let him not suffer his fond hopes, and dazzling visions of the future, to deceive him, "for childhood and youth are vanity." The promises they make to the thoughtless, carnal mind, are false. The halo which they throw around the world, is a deceitful glare. The joyous anticipations in which they indulge, are continually liable to disappointment; and every day, every hour, events may arrive that will sweep them utterly away, or bury them in darkness and death.

How natural and how beautiful is the turn which, at this point, Solomon gives by inspiration to his divine discourse, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say I have no pleasure in them." Yes; this is the true wisdom. Leave, O young man! O young woman! thy vain search for happiness among the pursuits, and possessions, and pleasures of this world. Cease to spend thy money for that which is not bread, and thy labour for that which satisfieth not. Acquaint thyself with God, and be at peace. Never and nowhere can you obtain what you are seeking for, till you return to Him. His favour is life, and His loving-kindness is better than life!

There are very few, perhaps, who will be found to meet the call to seek the Lord, with a naked and direct refusal. Even the most irreligious and unspiritual shrink from assuming an attitude, of such open and avowed hostility to divine things. But they put off and procrastinate. They will remember their Creator by and bye, but they cannot make up their minds to do it "in the days of their youth." They must have a little dallying with pleasure first. They must have, at least, a few years' trial of walking according to the course of this world, before they place themselves under the restraints of a religious life. When they grow older they will settle—they say, and perhaps believe—into a more circumspect and serious way of life.

Let the young especially be warned against this most sinful, and most perilous way, of dealing with God's clear and explicit command. He does not say, Remember thy Creator in old age, or when you have reached the maturity of years, but remember Him "in the days of thy youth." "I love them," He says, "that love me, and those that seek me *early* shall find me" (Prov. viii. 17). Again, for a warning to any who might be daring to hinder such a movement, the Lord Jesus said, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. xix. 14). In nothing is delay more dangerous, than in the things that belong to the peace of the soul. Let the young, therefore, beware of beginning, like them of old, to make excuse. He that puts off compliance with the gospel call to-day, is thereby cultivating and strengthening that antipathy of the carnal mind to the things of God, which is sure to dispose and enable him, with still greater ease and promptitude, to do the same thing to-morrow.

But why should even the youngest put off? Why not come now, this very day, to Christ? He is not an hard master, of whose character or commands you have any cause to be afraid. You know how He loves you; for you know He laid down His own precious life upon the cross to save you from hell. He suffered, the just for the unjust, that He might reconcile you unto God. You know that His commandments are not grievous; that they involve no hardship or oppression; that, on the contrary, there is in the keeping of them a great reward. He bids you abstain from nothing, but what would be hurtful to you. He asks you to do nothing, but what is for your good. He himself, in His own life on earth, has left you an example that ye should follow His steps. From His earliest years He loved and served His Heavenly Father. The simple and touching record of His childhood and early youth, is summed up in these pregnant words—that He increased in wisdom, and in stature, and in favour with God and man. Wist ye not, said He to Joseph and Mary, when as yet He was but twelve

years old—wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business? It surely cannot be otherwise than right, and safe, and good, for you to seek, through grace, to be like Him!

Say not then, in answer to the call of Solomon, that you will remember your Creator at some future time. It is not merely ungrateful and wicked so to speak, but it is unspeakably dangerous. The future time you speak of may find you, when it comes, numbered with the dead, and the door of mercy shut against you for ever. Nothing is so uncertain as human life. As the Bible tells us, we are like the grass which to-day is in the field, and to-morrow is cut down.

But even were it otherwise, and that you were sure of yet seeing many days and years, the danger of delay would be no whit the less. Wilfully to reject Christ to-day, is to pave the way for again rejecting Him to-morrow. It is, moreover, to treat the blood of the covenant as an unholy thing, and to do despite unto the Spirit of grace. Such a course, obstinately persisted in, may at the last quench the Spirit; so that He may cease to strive with you, and may give you over to a reprobate mind.

And besides all this, consider what a miserable thing it must needs be, to come to old age utterly unprovided with the hopes and consolations of a better life to come! Let the youngest and strongest bear in mind, that if they are to live long, there are evil days coming, and years drawing nigh, when they shall say, We have no pleasure in them. Time and experience will strip the world of its gay colours: losses and disappointments, anxieties and cares, difficulties and distresses, accumulating around you as years roll on, will present this life in a far less attractive form than it wears now. Well will it be, therefore, if "while the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain"—well will it be, in other words, if before that joyless season arrive, when your way of life shall have fallen into "the sere and yellow leaf,"—you shall have chosen that good part that shall not be taken away. For what can be a more pitiable state than old age des-

titute of that soothing, sustaining, cheering, elevating influence which religion supplies? "Though I walk through the dark valley of the shadow of death," said the Psalmist, calmly anticipating the close of his mortal career, "I shall fear no evil; for thou art with me: thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." (Psalm xxiii. 4). How unlike, how opposite, to this must be the condition of the man, who finds himself approaching that final stage of life's eventful journey, without an interest in Christ! Here he cannot stay. The earthly house of this tabernacle must be dissolved: and never, perhaps, was the process of decay more affectingly or more beautifully described, than in the concluding verses of the passage before us. It is a picture, not more full of poetry, than it is full of truth. Under the figure of a noble and stately edifice falling into ruin, the body which has well been called "the palace of the soul," is here set forth as sinking gradually into the grave.

When old age, with its ever-increasing feebleness, draws on, "the keepers of the house"—the once powerful arms, that shielded the body from every hostile assault, that triumphantly defended it even in the shock of battle,—“shall tremble.” Their force is gone: they can no longer grasp a weapon or strike a blow. The "strong men," too, that were like the pillars of the building—the firm and well-jointed limbs that bore the body up, unconscious of its weight,—“shall bow themselves,” and sink down helpless beneath the load. "And the grinders shall cease because they are few"—the toothless jaws shall at length refuse their office—the very mechanism by which the waste of nature's energies was wont to be repaired, losing its power to act, and thereby accelerating the progress of decay. "And those that look out of the windows"—the sentinels that kept watch in the lofty towers, and whose function it was to descry and announce the approach of danger—those bright and beaming eyes that, erewhile, looked forth far and wide on surrounding things, shall "be darkened;" their range of vision will become contracted, and blind Isaac shall not know his younger from his elder son!

“And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low”—the mouth that was the door-way by which the soul sent out its winged words, like swift messengers going forth into the streets to communicate its mind and will, shall no longer be able to give them articulate utterance. “And he shall rise up at the voice of the bird”—the long, sound, refreshing sleep of youth, shall give place to that state of wakeful unrest, which the slightest noise will disturb. “And all the daughters of music shall be brought low.” “Can I hear any more,” said the aged Barzillai, “the voice of singing men and singing women?” (2 Sam. xix. 35). The dull ear will be as impotent to catch the sweet strains of music, as the throat’s feeble and quavering pipe will be powerless to utter them.

“Also they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond-tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail.” In these latter descriptive emblems, the original figure which likened the decaying body to a falling house is laid aside; and it is rather the old man himself that stands before us, covered all over with the impressive marks and evidences of failing strength. The firm foot, that once climbed with ease the loftiest mountain-side, can now hardly raise him from his seat, or lift him to his couch. Hindrances and difficulties, which once he would have laughed to scorn, now shake his courage, and turn him back in conscious helplessness. His hair, thin and hoary, like the white flowers appearing upon the almond-tree, even afar off proclaim his age. The very chirp of the grasshopper oppresses him; and amid the deadening of his powers, and the languor and apathy that are creeping incessantly over him, he is no longer able either to rejoice with them that rejoice, or to weep with them that weep. His mind has become almost a blank. He vegetates rather than lives. At length the heart ceases to pulsate, and the blood to flow. The wondrous mechanism of the exhausted frame stands still, and life has passed away, and the man “goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets.”

Nor even yet, when he has poured out this accumulation of impressive and most felicitous imagery, to describe the decay of nature and the inevitable approach of death, is Solomon done with this theme. By another figure still, he again sets it vividly before the young, whom he is here so earnestly and persuasively entreating to make no tarrying; but to give themselves at once, and from the beginning of their days, unto the Lord. In those magnificent gardens and orchards which, in this very book, Solomon tells us he had made, there were, no doubt, wells and fountains, and cisterns, fitted up with all the appliances necessary for obtaining access to their waters; and these of a kind, in keeping with the taste and the wealth, for which this great king was so eminently distinguished. The well, or fountain was the source of the garden's life, and fruitfulness, and beauty; as well as of refreshment to its visitors. Let the fountain fall into disrepair,—let the golden bowl, which hung at its side, ready for use, be broken; and the silver cord, by which it was kept in its place, be loosed,—let the pitcher, in which the waters were borne away, be shattered into fragments,—let the wheel, that raised from the deep cistern the little sparkling stream, which, gushing forth into the runnels prepared to receive it, meandered among the beds of flowers, and moistened the soil, and quickened into fresh life everything that grew in the garden,—let these graceful contrivances fall into the hands of some ruthless destroyer, and what a picture of desolation and death would the once smiling garden soon exhibit! The last enemy is such a destroyer; and all that exquisite apparatus, “so fearfully and wonderfully made,” by which the current of life is kept flowing through every member of the human frame, shall one day perish beneath his fatal stroke. And “then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” With such a humbling prospect before him, can the worldly man—the man who is seeking his portion among the things of sense and time—hesitate to say with the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities; all

is vanity!" Oh, how poor a portion is it that is to end in this at last; that the pampered body so gaily clothed, so delicately fed, so luxuriously housed, should become the prey of worms; and that the miserable, neglected soul, laden with all its errors and sins—impenitent, unrenewed, unforgiven—should fall into the hands of the living God, to be, by His righteous judgment, consigned to the blackness of darkness for ever! With what emphasis, with what pathos, in the view of such events, do these words of the royal Preacher return—"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CONCLUSION OF THE WHOLE MATTER.

“And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, *and* set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words; and *that which was written was* upright, *even* words of truth. The words of the wise *are* as goads, and as nails fastened *by* the masters of assemblies, *which* are given from one shepherd. And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books *there is* no end; and much study *is* a weariness of the flesh.

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this *is* the whole *duty* of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether *it be* good, or whether *it be* evil.”—ECCLES. XII. 9-14.

IN now concluding this inspired discourse, Solomon has something to say of himself. He would have his readers to understand how thoroughly he is in earnest, in this work of instruction. It was, with him, no mere occasional and passing employment, taken up to occupy a vacant hour. It was no mere exercise of dialectic skill; no mere display of literary genius; no mere exhibition of his personal acquirements, or of the variety and versatility of his intellectual powers. It was what he now regarded as the great work and business of his life—the one grand aim of which, was to bring others to the same conclusion at which he himself had arrived, as to the chief end of man. King though he was—and one of the most illustrious of that order that had ever appeared in any land—he esteemed it a higher honour to be the teacher, than to be the ruler of his people. He was more concerned about their recognizing God’s authority over them, than about their recognizing his own. And what an example, in this respect, has Solomon set to those who are high in place and power! The time was—

and it is not long gone by, even in this Christian country—when it was thought beneath men of rank and station to concern themselves, as to either the intellectual or spiritual condition, of the masses of the people. The idea of our princes or nobles, condescending to interest themselves personally in the elevation, whether mental or moral, of the humbler orders of society, would have been regarded, not many years ago, as a simple extravagance. It is, happily, otherwise now. A change has come over the mind of those, whom Providence has placed, in the more exalted and influential spheres of life. The true dignity that belongs to the office of a public instructor begins, at least, to be appreciated and acknowledged; and many, accordingly, of those who once stood haughtily aloof from the multitude, have been showing themselves most willing to contribute their share, and to take their part in the spread of knowledge, and even of virtue and piety. If those—however distinguished, whether for social position or scientific culture—who have been lending themselves to such labours of love, should ever be at a loss for an example to sustain them, let them look to Solomon.

It is true that Solomon had a place and function, in this noble work of teaching the people, altogether peculiar; and immensely elevated above those that are given to ordinary men. He had the divine gift of inspiration, and spake, on some occasions at least, as one of the oracles of God. There is no reason to suppose, however, that it was in this sacred character alone he devoted himself, to the task of communicating instruction. In the exercise of his simply human, though sanctified, learning and powers of mind, he seems evidently to have spent much of his time, in illustrating the works and ways of God. As the inspired historian of his reign tells us, “he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five. And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon, even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes. And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all

kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom" (1 Kings iv. 32-34).

Apart, therefore, from that more exclusive distinction that belonged to him, as one of those to whom the Word came not, in old time, by the will of men, but who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, he was beyond all question a most assiduous teacher of the people. Just "because he was wise," because "his wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt," the more did he feel himself bound to use it, for the benefit of his fellowmen. God had given "Solomon wisdom exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea-shore;" and this very circumstance he recognized, as having laid upon him an imperative obligation to improve the gift—to lay out this great talent at usury—that so it might bring in the largest possible return of good to men and of glory to God. How forcibly is this fact expressed in the opening verse of the passage before us—"Moreover, because the Preacher was wise," or as it is in the margin of our English Bible—"the more wise the Preacher was," that is, "the more he grew in wisdom"—the more "still he taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs." Instead of hiding in his own breast those treasures of knowledge and wisdom he had acquired—instead of treating them as a mere intellectual luxury, or of selfishly hoarding them up for his own behoof—he was at pains to turn them to account, in the way of promoting the great interests of morality and religion. To this important duty he gave himself, with his whole heart and soul. He knew and felt that it was no light thing, to undertake a work of this kind. To deal with men about their relation to God was, in his view, a deeply solemn and most responsible task. This was not a subject on which to speak at random. It demanded something better than hasty and superficial thoughts. He laid himself out, accordingly, to discover, by profound meditation, by practical and persevering study, the best and most appropriate things that could

be said; and to condense and adjust them, into those terse and pointed sentences, which are usually designated by the name of proverbs. In this laborious exercise there were two objects at which he especially aimed—the one, to set down only that which was upright, even words of truth; the other, to find acceptable words, in which to convey his thoughts. He knew how often even the most weighty and precious lessons were rendered utterly distasteful, and even offensive, by the unsuitable language in which they were expressed. Some men think that if the counsel they offer be right and good, it matters nothing in what terms they utter it. Solomon was of quite a different mind. He understood human nature. He knew that many may be led, who will not be driven;—that it is often very possible to conciliate, where it would be hopeless to attempt to coerce;—that rudeness seldom fails to aggravate and embitter the enmity and opposition, which gentleness would soothe and sweeten;—nay, that even so apparently small a matter as mere style—the propriety, the elegance, the felicity of the form of speech in which a truth is delivered—will, with many minds, gain for it a place and power which, in their case at least, it would never otherwise have acquired.

The combination, indeed, of the two properties now specified, is what goes to constitute the true excellence of all discourse, that is meant to enlighten the minds and to reform the hearts of men. It might seem, at first sight, that in thus describing the mental processes by which his wise sayings were elaborated and matured, Solomon must have been intending to speak only of those productions of his pen that were uninspired—that flowed from no higher a source, and possessed no greater authority than that of his own large and sanctified mind. There is nothing, however, in the language, employed in the 9th and 10th verses, to warrant this conclusion. Inspiration was not a gift that entirely superseded the exercise of the mind's own powers. It brought the mind under an infallible guidance. It secured its possessor against the possibility of error, whether in

recording the facts, or in proclaiming the truths, which he had been thus divinely commissioned to make known. But it left full scope, all the while, for the conscious and intelligent action of his own faculties; so that at the very moment that he was giving utterance, in heaven-directed words, to the mind of God, his own memory and judgment, nay, his own literary taste or poetic genius, might be all the while in constant and busy play.

But, while this is undeniably true, it seems to be at least not improbable, that, in the 9th and 10th verses, Solomon is speaking of his compositions generally; and not alone of those to which there belonged the high and sacred character of inspiration. Viewed in this light, what these verses record is well worthy of being carefully considered, by all to whom the function has been assigned of teaching the people knowledge; and, especially, of teaching them the knowledge that maketh wise unto salvation. This studious searching for right thoughts, and this careful selection of winning and appropriate language in which to clothe them, present an example which ministers of the Word, and young ministers in particular, cannot be at too much pains to imitate. Nor can it be doubted, that to convey this much-needed and most salutary lesson, was included in the design for which the verses in question were written.

What Solomon says in the 11th verse has respect, evidently and exclusively, to the teachings of inspiration. "The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd." Over the right construction of this verse, and over the exact meaning of some of the expressions used in it, there hangs considerable obscurity. At the same time, the connection which it obviously implies, as existing between "the words of the wise," and the "one shepherd," leaves no room for doubt on this point, that the words of the wise here in question are the words which, through whatever channels communicated, have proceeded from one and the same source; even from Him who is the Shepherd

of Israel, and who leadeth Joseph like a flock. By the wise, therefore, in this verse, we are to understand those holy men of God, by whom, at sundry times, and in divers manners, He has spoken to the world. Their words are "as goads." The expression is substantially of the same import with that which occurs in the epistle to the Hebrews (iv. 12), where it is said that "the Word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart." Divine truth has a penetrating force which nothing can resist, when it is carried home, not in word only, but in power, and in the Holy Ghost. It is like the arrows of the king, which are sharp in the hearts of His enemies. It can reach and rouse the most blunted conscience; it can strike with terror the most hardened mind; it can flash home convictions of guilt into the darkest and most impenitent heart. And not only is it thus "mighty through God" in the hour of the soul's conversion; but as often as the believer is forgetting his first love, and falling away from his former attainments, and ceasing to follow on to know the Lord, the Word, like the sharp point of the iron goad, is made suddenly, like Nathan's "Thou art the man," to enter his inmost soul, and to sting him into the painful and humbling consciousness of his shortcomings and his sins. Nay, even apart from the efficacious influence of the Holy Spirit, there is something in the divine Word that so commends itself to both the reason and the conscience of men, that sinners cannot choose but tremble when they hear it; even though, as in the case of the Roman governor, it should be issuing from the lips of a poor helpless prisoner.

Nor is this power of the "words of the wise" of a kind that soon passes away. When applied by the Spirit of God, they are like "nails deeply fastened," driven home as with a hammer. The expression reminds us of that significant utterance in the 38th Psalm, "Thine arrows stick fast in me." How often has it thus been found that some single sentence of Scripture—

heard, perhaps, in some sermon, or read in some book, of which nothing else whatever is remembered—has been so fixed, in a moment, in the sinner's mind that he could not get rid of it! He tried to forget it; he wanderèd, it may be, all over the world, in the hope and with the desire of being able to free himself from the disquietude it created; but the nail could not be drawn out. Ever and anon he awoke to the painful feeling of its presence. There it was, that stinging truth, reproaching him with some secret sin, which he had succeeded in hiding from all but the Searcher of hearts; or remonstrating with him, for his wilful and obstinate neglect of God and of his own soul; or terrifying him with the appalling prospect of the judgment-day, and of the wrath that cometh upon the children of disobedience. It adhered to him, in spite of every effort to wrench it from its place; and never and nowhere could he escape from the uneasiness and the anxiety it created, till, like the Psalmist, he learned to say, "O Lord, I beseech thee deliver my soul."

In our English version of the passage, these nails are spoken of, as being fastened by the masters of assemblies. The word 'by,' however, is not in the original; and it is doubtful whether there ought not to be a break, in the verse, after the word 'fastened;' so as to leave the whole of what follows to form a distinct and separate clause of the verse, to be translated thus—"The masters of collections"—*i. e.*, the wise, who have gathered together these powerful words—who have stored them up in the sacred books—"are given or appointed by one shepherd." They are many men, but they have one mind; they are all engaged in the same work, and all under the guidance and authority of the same Lord and Leader of the flock of God. So far back as in the book of Genesis, in the prophetic blessing Jacob pronounced upon his sons, the Messiah, there typified by Joseph, is spoken of as "the Shepherd of Israel." In the book of Psalms, once and again, the same significant title is employed:—"The Lord is my shepherd" (xxiii.); "Give ear to the shepherd of Israel" (lxxx.) "Behold," said Isaiah, prophesying of the

same divine Redeemer, "the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd" (xl. 10, 11). To the same purpose we find it written, in the book of Ezekiel (xxxiv. 23), "And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David [the spiritual David]; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd." Again, in the New Testament, to remove every possible uncertainty and ambiguity as to the shepherd that was all along intended, we have such explicit words as these—"Our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb. xiii. 20). Nay more, we have Christ Himself, in the most direct terms, assuming this distinctive appellation, and saying, "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. . . . And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd" (John x. 14, 16). This heavenly Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ, is "the Word;" He is "the Truth." No man knoweth the Father but the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him. All those, therefore, who preceded Him, in the way of revealing the mind and will of God, were "given from this one shepherd." They spake as they were moved by His Spirit; and, therefore, on this view of the verse before us, this latter clause of the 11th verse is to be viewed as tantamount to that declaration of the apostle Paul to Timothy, that "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. iii. 16).

It must, at least, be admitted that this view well accords with what immediately follows—"And further, by these, my son, be admonished." Let these "words of the wise"—words of such divine authority, which I have written—settle conclusively, in your mind, the whole question of which this book treats. It does not appear that by the expression "my son" is meant Rehoboam, the heir of Solomon's kingdom and crown. It seems much more natural, and much more in accordance with his

office and function as a public and inspired teacher, to assume that "my son" means simply, 'my reader, my pupil, my disciple.' It breathes both the paternal affection, and the paternal authority, of a father. It reminds us that, in listening to the words of the wise—words dictated by that divine Teacher who is Himself the Wisdom of God—our fitting attitude is that of scholars or little children, to whom it belongs humbly and submissively to receive "the engrafted Word which is able to save our souls." For "who-soever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein" (Mark x. 15).

If in answer to this exhortation of Solomon, to accept as decisive what he has here set forth, on the momentous subject of man's chief good, any reader should object that he had not yet heard enough—that his mind was not yet satisfied—that he would fain indulge in some new speculations on the question,—he is reminded that "of making many books there is no end." It were an easy thing for Solomon to accumulate treatises on so fertile a theme. But what purpose would it serve to multiply such writings? "Much study is a weariness of the flesh." The minds of most men would only be bewildered and exhausted, by such endless discussions on a point, concerning which, the mind of God had been already and unequivocally declared. In this discourse, which he was now bringing to a close, the inspired Preacher had said all that was needful to instruct and convince every mind, that would submit itself to "the words of the wise,"—that would consent to be taught of God.

If such an answer was conclusive and complete in the days of Solomon, how much more in ours! That whole body of truth which God has thought fit to reveal, has long since been made up. It now contains a full and perfect record, of all that we ought to believe concerning God, and of the whole duty which God requires of man. There is not one particular, belonging to either faith or manners, concerning which we have been left in the dark. To any one, therefore, who should pretend to desiderate more light still, with peculiar emphasis

might it be said, "By these, my son, be admonished." There is enough here in this blessed volume, which the masters of collections given by the one Shepherd, have brought together, to guide you to the only true decision on every question, whether of moral obligation or religious truth. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah viii. 20).

It is not improbable, indeed, that, in using the expression, "by these be admonished," Solomon intended, more immediately, to refer to the sayings of this particular book of Ecclesiastes. In the course of it he has already, again and again, turned to his reader, and pointedly addressed him as to the view he ought to take, and the course he ought to follow, in regard to the many solemn questions which this book has set before him; and now, when he has brought his argument to a close, he will speak to him once more. Before they part, Solomon would fain press home upon him the great truth which this book establishes—the practical result to which it leads. "Let us hear," he says, "the conclusion of the whole matter." I have been discoursing on man's chief good. I have been pointing out the many errors which are current in the world, on this all-important theme. I have been showing how utterly those have gone astray, who have sought to find happiness in the mere possessions, and pursuits, and pleasures of the world. I have been confessing my own grievously foolish and sinful aberrations from the right path, and bringing forward the painfully acquired lessons of my own experience and observation, to illustrate and confirm the only right view of the case. I have been at the utmost pains to find out "acceptable words" by which to expound and commend to every man's conscience, in the sight of God, the various facts and considerations which the subject involves. What I have written is "upright, even words of truth;" for it has been written under the immediate guidance and inspiration of that one Shepherd of Israel, to whom it belongs to feed His people with knowledge and with

understanding. And what, then, is the sum of it all? It is this—"Fear God and keep His commandments." This, and this alone, is man's chief good: this, and this alone, is man's true happiness; for "this is the whole duty of man."

To fear God is to have a heart and mind rightly affected towards Him. It is to have scriptural and realizing views of His being and perfections—of His holy law and government—of His redeeming grace and mercy. It is to know, to reverence, and to love Him, as He is in Christ. Hence it is said that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. cxi. 10). To be destitute of it, whatever be the natural gifts and endowments a man may possess, is to be in reality a fool. The fear here in question is not the "fear which hath torment"—the slavish terror resulting from conscious guilt—the dark and disquieting apprehension of coming wrath, that haunts the soul laden with unconfessed, unrepented, and therefore unpardoned sin. No; it is a sentiment wide as the poles asunder, from that spirit of bondage. This fear of God of which Solomon speaks, is the very spirit of adoption. It is the spirit with which the affectionate and dutiful child regards a father—a father whose wisdom he reveres—whose authority he owns—whose goodness has won his heart—whose favour is his chiefest joy—and whose displeasure fills him with grief and shame. Obviously, therefore, to be animated by this fear, is to be a child of God—is to have been brought into fellowship with Him as a reconciled God and Father. And hence the inseparable connection of these two things—fearing God and keeping His commandments. Love is the fulfilling of the law. It is itself the very essence of all true obedience; and wherever it is really shed abroad in the heart, it will, and must, tend to active personal devotedness to God's holy service. To fear God in the sense here intended, and yet to be living in allowed sin—in wilful, practical, habitual opposition to God's commandments—is a contradiction in terms. It is, in truth, a moral impossibility. "For the love of Christ constraineth us," says the apostle Paul, referring to the neces-

sary and inseparable connection between a right state of feeling towards God, and a right course of acting—"the love of Christ constraineth us ; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead : and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again" (2 Cor. v. 14, 15). Now, thus to fear God and to keep His commandments, must be man's chief good, because it "is the whole duty of man ;" or, still more emphatically, as it stands in the original—"it is the whole of man : " it is the sum-total of his being—the very end and object for which he exists. To suppose, therefore, that man should be able to find true happiness, or to make for himself a satisfying portion, any other way than this, is substantially the same thing as to suppose that sin is better than holiness—that evil is better than good. "The Lord hath made all things for himself" (Prov. xvi. 4). In harmony with this universal law, which pervades the whole created universe, it is man's chief end to glorify and enjoy God. While he pursues that end, and in proportion as he pursues it, he is happy ; while he disregards that end, and in proportion as he disregards it, he is, and must be, involving himself in misery and ruin.

It needs not to tell how that, by the fall—by the fatal apostasy of our first parents—the whole human race came into this condition of alienation from God. Hence we find it written, that the carnal mind—that is, the mind of man in its natural, unregenerate state—is enmity against God, and is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be ; and hence, also, it has come to pass that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin. What we have sown, that have we also reaped. Suffering and sorrow have tracked every step of our departure from God ; and the end of that career, to all who persist in it, will, and must be everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power!

Blessed be God, there is a way of escape. The promise that

the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head—a promise given to the first transgressors—has been wonderfully and gloriously fulfilled. Through death,—His own death upon the cross,—Christ hath destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and hath thereby, at the same time, delivered them who, through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject to bondage. In other words, He hath redeemed us from the curse of a broken law, by bearing it for us—by suffering, the just for the unjust. To every believer, therefore, in the Lord Jesus it belongs, with the apostle Paul, fearlessly to say—“Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is He that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us” (Rom. viii. 33, 34). He is, of God, made to all who put their trust in Him, wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption. While He has made reconciliation for our iniquity by His atoning sacrifice, and while, by His perfect obedience, He hath wrought out, in behalf of His people, a justifying righteousness, He, at the same time, by the power of His holy Spirit, quickened into spiritual life the soul that was dead in trespasses and sins; so that it holds literally true, that if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. “To fear God and keep His commandments,” has again become, through grace, the believer's desire and his aim. He has found out the truth of that saying—“Acquaint thyself with God, and be at peace.” God is now the portion of his soul. He counts all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ. At last he has found the pearl of great price—the one thing needful; and therein he has come into the possession of a source of happiness which the world cannot give, and which it cannot take away. In this world He has a joy with which no stranger can intermeddle—a peace that passeth understanding—a hope that is full of immortality. In the world to come, he has an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.

This great salvation is free to all ; for that gracious God who sent His son into the world to save sinners, even the chief, will eth not that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. Turn ye, turn ye—in His love and in His pity, He beseechingly cries to those who are rushing upon their ruin—for why will ye die? Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved! But this day of grace, this acceptable year of the Lord, during which alone the sinner can obtain mercy, is fast fleeting away ; and there is a day drawing on when “God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or bad.” O ! who shall abide that day of the Lord’s coming? Is there one solitary individual who could venture, in his own strength, and on the footing of his own merits, to face such a trial? If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquity, who shall stand? Our own hearts condemn us, and God is greater than our hearts, and knoweth all things. We cannot justify ourselves, even to our own conscience ; how much less to Him who is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and who cannot look upon sin! Let, then, the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return to the Lord, who will have mercy upon him, and to our God, who will abundantly pardon !

THE END.



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