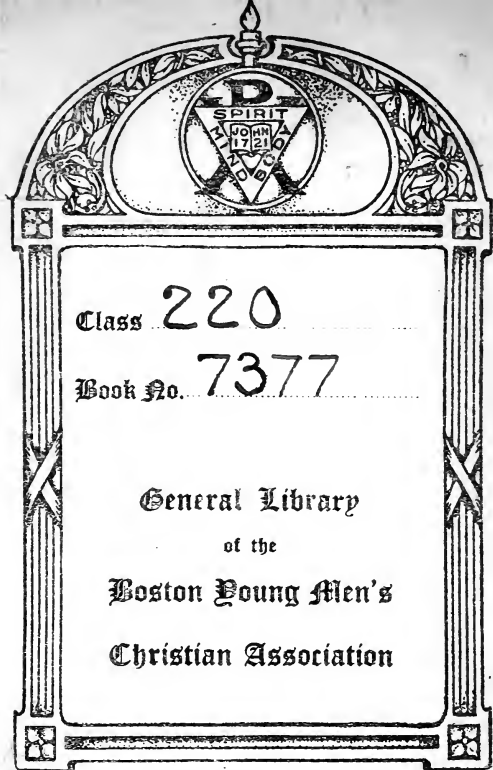


THE DEVOTIONAL USE
of the HOLY SCRIPTURES

John Monro Gibson



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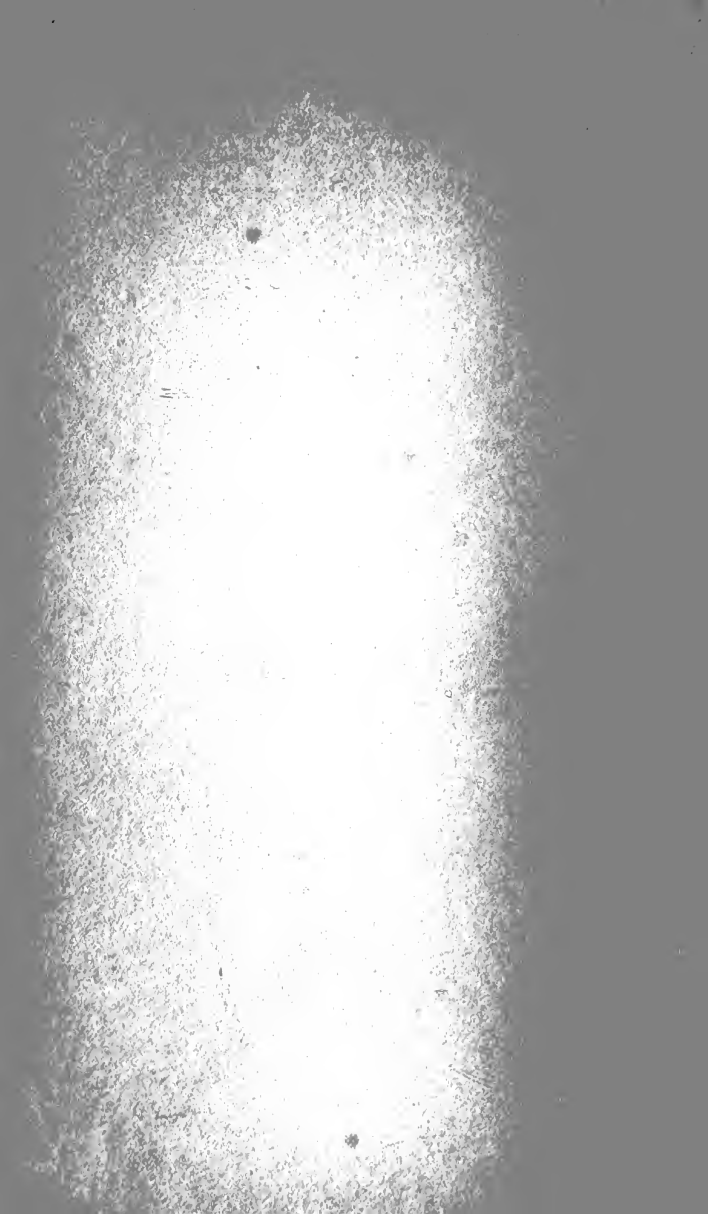
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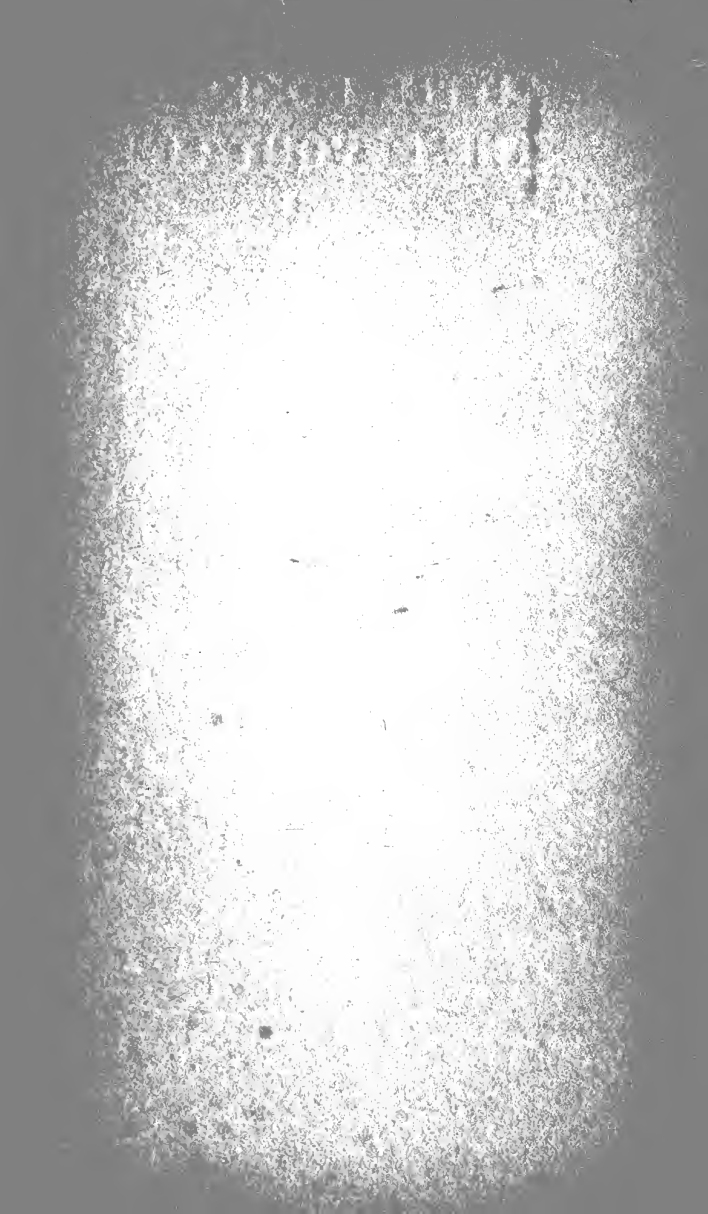
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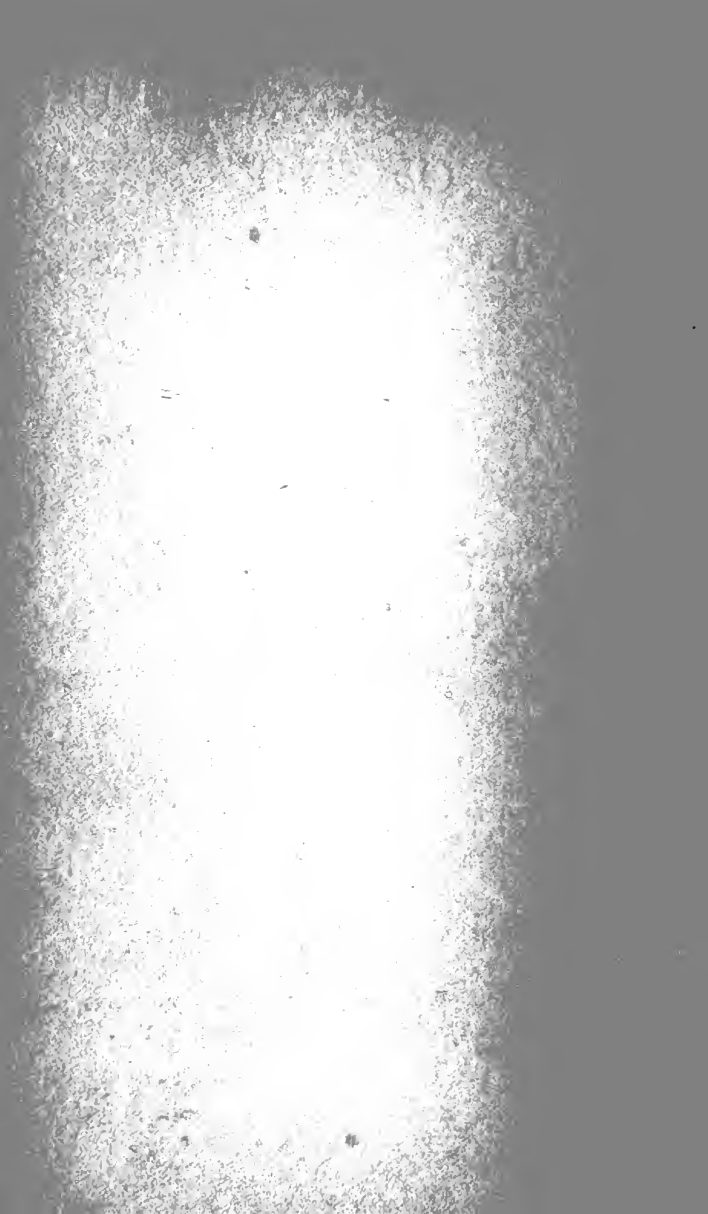
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LITTLE BOOKS ON THE DEVOUT LIFE

IX

THE DEVOTIONAL USE OF
THE HOLY SCRIPTURES



THE DEVOTIONAL USE OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

BY

JOHN MONRO GIBSON, M.A., LL.D.

AUTHOR OF "THE UNITY AND SYMMETRY OF THE BIBLE,"
"ST. MATTHEW IN THE EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE,"
"APOCALYPTIC SKETCHES," ETC.

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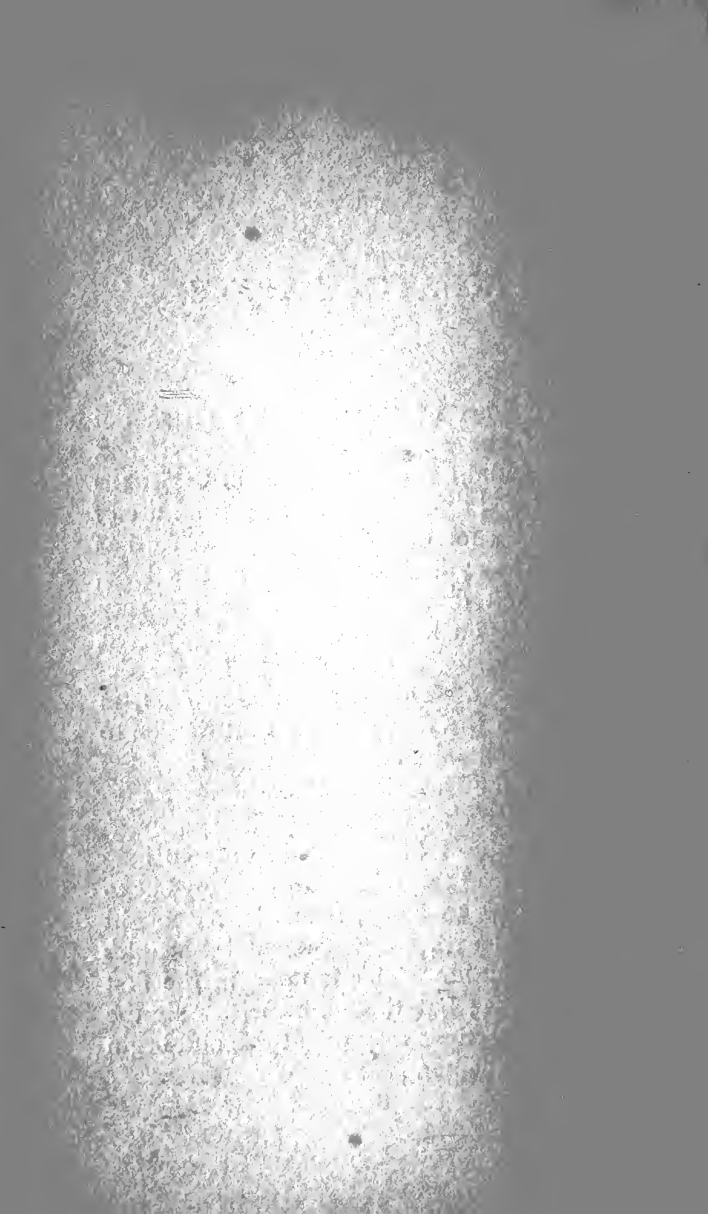
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PREFATORY NOTE



THE idea of this book has arisen out of the author's pastoral experience. Having found not a few intelligent Christians who had real difficulty in making good use of their Bibles for devotional purposes, he has been on the outlook for a book of this kind, and has not discovered it. There are very many books on how to study the Scriptures, but there seems a lack of help for the devotional hour. This is the reason that, in response to the request for a contribution to the "Little Books on the Devout Life," the subject of the Devotional Use of Holy Scripture has been chosen.

As the object has been not only to help those who read the Bible devotionally, but to induce others to begin, it has been thought well to deal with the fundamental principles of the devout life. This is done in the first four chapters; but those who wish only the practical directions may pass these and begin at the fifth chapter.



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I

*THE GREATNESS OF THE
DEVOTIONAL LIFE*

THE object of this little book is to give help in the devotional use of Holy Scripture. It is clear, however, that our interest in this will depend on our estimate of the value of the devotional life. If we think it a small and unimportant part of life as a whole, so that men and women can live very well without it, and not miss much by the lowering or loss of it, we are not likely to care much for anything that can be written on the subject. It seems necessary, then, to begin by showing how great and important the devotional life is; how necessary to our well-being here as well as hereafter, and how much it will repay the most diligent cultivation. This will, I hope, be very clear after considering what shall be set forth in this chapter.

I. *The devotional life is of the essence of human nature.* It does not depend upon a special taste or peculiar gift like music or poetry. A man may be a very good man and live a good life who does not know a note of music and scarcely ever reads a line of poetry. It is not so with the worshipful spirit. The capacity for faith which is found in human nature is there, not for optional or occasional use, but to be regnant in the life. "The just shall *live* by faith." Even daily labour may be part of the devotional life, for ordinary talents may be used or labour performed consciously in the presence and service of God.

"No holier work the priest performs
Than when in faith, to sweep the room
The Christian housemaid plies her broom."

And is not the highest use of the intellect a devotional one? Kepler says, "I have read Thy thoughts after Thee, O God"; and Hegel has said, "Thinking is worship." We certainly cannot accept the dictum that all thinking is worship, for much of it, alas! is quite the reverse; but that thinking may be worship, and on all high themes ought to be, is true. Our thoughts on such themes should always be reverent and devout; and our

studies in philosophy, science and art should always be prosecuted with the upward look of faith.

But "all men have not faith." Some have lost it through disuse. It is possible, indeed, with this endowment as with others to reduce it to impotence by neglect; but its absence in some cases from this cause is no argument against its universality. And if it is suggested that as there are imbeciles in intellect, so in the higher region of the spirit there may be persons devoid of any sentiment of reverence or any power to appreciate that which is high and pure and holy, the answer is that there is no reason to suppose the number of spiritual imbeciles to be any greater than the very small proportion who have been bereft of the kindly light of reason. It is probably safe to say that nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every thousand at least have the capacity for faith, and so are responsible for the use of it; and the saying of St. Augustine is probably appropriate on the lips of the least devout among us: "Thou, O God, hast made us for Thyself; and the heart is ever restless until it find its rest in Thee."

II. *The devotional life is life in its highest and best exercise.* We stand related

to the earth beneath us, to our fellow-men around us, and to God above us. All these relations are important; but surely we do not need to ask which is the highest. Two of these cords will be cut some day whether we will or no: the cord that binds us to our fellow-men, and that which binds us to the earth; but the cord that binds us to God need never be cut, unless we cut it ourselves. It will last on and on, and in its abiding we have the only guarantee that the other bonds which have been sundered will be re-knit in the great days to come. Therefore would we entreat our readers not to loosen, not to weaken the sacred tie which binds their spirits to God. To sever that tie will mean death for ever. It is the life of our life. To be without it even here is death in life. What will it be to be without it hereafter?

III. *The devotional life is the source of the highest and purest joy.* God has mercifully so constituted us that in the exercise of all our faculties there is delight. Sickness and pain indeed come in to interfere with this; but naturally and normally we are made so that there is joy in all activity, and the joy increases as we go up the scale of life. There is delight in the healthy action of the muscles; there is a purer and higher delight

in mental activity, and in the exercise of the affections there is something higher and better still ; but far above all is the delight of worship, often rising into ecstasy. In one of the exercises of Divine worship—that of praise—there is the opportunity of combining the whole gamut of human joy, beginning with the exercise of the vocal chords, rising with the activity of mind and heart on the spiritual themes which are the subject of the song, up into the empyrean of soul-delight in the ecstasy of communion with God.

We do not mean that there will be rapture in all our hours of devotion. Sometimes the dominant note will be penitence, sometimes supplication. Moreover, some will no doubt find the path toilsome and difficult at first. They may require not a little training in this high region of their life just as it is needed in the lower ranges ; but in no department of life will the time and effort expended be more amply repaid. And it is not too much to promise those who will seriously make the attempt, that if a fair time be allowed for getting into the habit, the devotional hour will soon establish its right to be reckoned the happiest hour of the day. There can certainly be no question that in this highest region of our life there are ready for us

delights, raptures, ecstasies, far beyond anything which can be attained on any of the lower levels.

IV. *The devotional hour will hallow, beautify and ennoble all the rest of our life.* This is the main use of it. It is not set before us as a luxury, though luxury it will by and by prove to be. It is not for the enjoyment it promises, but for the good it is sure to do, that it is commended to us. On this account alone it would be well worth while to persevere in it, even if it had to be as irksome always as it is apt to be at the beginning. In this perplexing and troubled life of ours we are in urgent need of daily light, daily guidance, daily strength, daily comfort ; and here is where all this is to be always had.

In this connection it may be well to look at the reason most frequently given for the want of cultivation of the devotional habit, namely, want of time. It is perhaps best dealt with by asking whether we can find time for other things not more necessary to our well-being. Have we time to sleep? It often seems to many of us as if we had not ; but we take it all the same, six or eight hours out of the twenty-four. But is not even six hours too much every day for an exceedingly

busy man? Suppose then he cut it down to four—does he save the two hours rescued from sleep's too exacting demand? What sort of work will he do? And how long will he be good for it? Not a whit more sensible are some of us who say that we are too busy to find time for being alone with God. This is as necessary as sleep—as necessary to the highest efficiency of our work. How it oils the wheels of life's machinery, how it floods "the trivial round, the common task," with heavenly sunshine! *Bene orasse est bene studuisse*—to have prayed well is to have studied well; and be it remembered that the Latin word "to study" has a wider range of meaning than ours; it may be used of diligence in any kind of work.

V. *The devotional link is the only one that will hold in all stress of weather.* It is not, indeed, the only link that binds us to God. There is a link of the intellect as well as of the spirit. It is very difficult, almost impossible indeed, to think of the universe as godless; hence almost every one believes in God in a general way. But that is a faith which will stand no stress of weather. Those who believe after this fashion are the people who, when serious trouble comes, fall into despair. These are the people who, when frosty

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winds of unbelief are blowing across the land, wilt and wither in the blast, and lose all the greenery and fruitage of life, becoming bare and dead as trees in winter. But let a man know God by daily communion, by that sacred touch of spirit with spirit which comes in hours of devotion, and nothing will drive him from his moorings. He has a first-hand knowledge of God, and his hope in Him is "as an anchor of the soul sure and stedfast entering into that which is within the veil." He will never make shipwreck of his faith.

II

THE TRAGEDY OF THE UNDEVOUT LIFE

WE have seen in the first chapter that there are three main relations of our life: to nature beneath us, to men around us, and to God above us; and also that the exercise of the powers which belong severally to these relations is not only useful and necessary to our well-being, but is attended with delight, a delight which rises as we ascend from the physical basis to the spiritual crown of life. If all these powers were only in full and harmonious exercise there would be life in perfection, with a complete diapason of delight. But in no case here on earth is the life either complete or in full harmony. It is in every case dwarfed and disordered. This is true to a certain extent in the two lower relations of life, but it is tragically true in the region of the spirit.

We can all sympathise with the sadness of

deprivation in the realm of the seen and temporal. Consider what it is to be cut off even partially from nature as by blindness, or from our fellow-men as by deafness. Every one has the deepest sympathy with those who suffer such deprivation; but what of those who suffer deprivation in that part of their life which has to do with things unseen and eternal? What of spiritual blindness—is it likely to be less distressing than natural blindness? What of spiritual deafness—is the silence of God less to be deplored than the silence of men? The only reason why people think it so small a thing to be blind to the things of God and deaf to the voice of God, is that they are so accustomed to it that they know not what they miss. And what if there be not only blindness and deafness, but total paralysis? What if every sense of the spirit be fast closed? The rest of the life may go on indeed, just as the physical life of a man may proceed when his intellect is gone; but what a poor, pitiful thing it is! Is the existence of an imbecile worthy to be spoken of as life? Is it not a living death? So those who know what the life with God in it means—the Apostle Paul, for example—speak of the condition of those who are without God as a state of death.

It would be a sad deprivation to have even dimness of vision and dulness of hearing in the higher region of life ; to be blind and deaf is worse still ; but to be paralysed and practically dead ("dead in trespasses and sins") is tragic in the extreme. For be it remembered that deprivation is only a part of the calamity. When life goes out of the body corruption sets in. God is the life of the soul. So when He passes out of the life, corruption sets in and works the havoc which we see around us in this world of sin. The tragedy of the undevout life has in it all the mystery of the world's sin and grief and pain.

Let us try to realise for a moment how the matter stands. Here, on the one side, is the world of men, with countless hungers never satisfied and innumerable pains unrelieved. There, on the other side, is God blessed for ever, with all power to heal, and resources infinite—infinite wealth there, immeasurable want here. If only by any means the two extremes might meet ! How unnatural it all is ! And every advance in knowledge only accentuates the unnaturalness. Think of the scientific discoveries of the last twenty years—how marvellous they have been, what extraordinary wealth of resources they have disclosed, how the conception of God's

infinity has been enlarged ! We are learning that nothing is too hard to believe in the way of possibility in this as yet unimagined universe ; and yet, though we are seeing more and more and ever more of the wealth of God, the heart hunger of His creature man, who is encouraged to think of himself not only as His creature but His child, is as keen as ever, and as far from satisfaction. If only God and man could be brought together, so that the infinite resources of the Father might be available for His needy child !

What keeps the two apart ? How is it that God who could so easily supply all man's need, and man who has so very many needs to be supplied, should be so sadly out of touch ? The only possible answer is, the sin of the world. Here, we are in a dry and thirsty land ; there, is the river of God which is full of water ; yet the river remains full and the land remains dry. Why does not the river flow down in all its wealth of benediction and life-giving power ? Because between it and us there rises a great mountain—the mountain of sin—which turns the streams aside so that they cannot reach us.

It is all the more pathetic that there is a yearning on both sides. On the side of man there is the restlessness which he may not

understand, but which at bottom is a hunger for God. On the side of God we have the best reason for believing that there is the yearning of a bereaved father's heart. In the series of books written by prophets and apostles and other holy men of old, which claim to bring a message from the heart of God, there is no deeper note than the wail of the Father over His wandered child. Listen to this, for example: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib; but My people do not know Me." Who can fail to feel the pathos of that lament? What father's heart is not moved by it to its depths? Is it not a tragic thing to think that the great God and Father of us all should have so many children in this world of ours who do not care to speak a word to Him? Is it not heart-breaking to think of?

Let us recall the immortal picture of the situation in the great parable gallery of Jesus: a father here, a son in the far country; the father yearning for his prodigal child with a yearning the depth of which is seen afterwards when on the first sign of the son's willingness

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to return, the father runs to meet him—the son in the far country, so far that he cannot see his father's face, and has no means of knowing what a wistful look of paternal tenderness there is in it, and yet with a deep yearning in his heart which finds expression in the hungry wail, "How many hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!" There is the whole tragedy of man's life in the world, set forth in a few touches of the great Artist's pencil: this world a far country, a country of sin and hunger and weariness, so far from God that it seems as if He had forgotten us, and remained unmoved even by our most piteous cries. There are familiar lines of Matthew Arnold, in which he expresses the pathos of our isolation from each other; but we may use them with a deeper pathos as applying to what would have been—if there had been no Mediator to lay His hand upon both—the isolation of the race from God.

"Yes, in the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild
We mortal millions live alone."

How the echoing straits have been bridged we shall see in the next chapter.

III

THE MEDIATOR OF THE DEVOUT LIFE

WE have seen the tragedy of the life without God ; it will be a relief to turn now to a theme which will show how God and man have been brought together, the wail changed into a hallelujah. God has not left us in this island world alone. The distance between His holiness and our sin seemed impassable ; but by His mercy and in His infinite wisdom it has been bridged. The Son of God has come from heaven to earth to redeem the tragedy of human life, to show how, dark though its course may be, its end may be purity, peace and joy. ¹ This He has done, first by bring-

¹ The author has been tempted to give as the title of this chapter, "The Divina Commedia," as the antithesis to the title of that preceding it ; and to its use there need have been no serious objection if the

ing God to us, and next by bringing us to God.

I. *His incarnation is His bringing God to us.* What was that name with which He was greeted as soon as He arrived? "They shall call His name Immanuel, which is, being interpreted, God with us." Earth is a far country no longer. The Lord is here. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. And we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father." We can now see the wistful look upon the face, we can hear the tone of loving welcome in the voice, we can see the tears in the eyes, we can feel the very throbbing of the heart of God. So now we know that God is not a hard tyrant nor an indifferent spectator of our troubles and perplexities, but a loving Father.

word *Commedia* could have been understood in the high and noble sense in which Dante used it, as indicating that not horror as in the tragedy, but gladness as in the epic of the other sort was the denouement; but as even the difference of spelling does not altogether hinder its association with the modern word "Comedy," it has been set aside as unsuitable.

We were agnostics ; for when He remained in His high heaven, quite out of sight and reach, how could we see? What could we know? But now that He has condescended to our weakness, now that He has come into the conditions of our earthly life so that He can look at us and we at Him with human eyes, now that He can speak to men and men to Him in human language, now that He has entered into the trials and temptations and sufferings and deprivations of our earthly life, we need be agnostics no longer : we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Thus He has brought God to us.

II. But there is more to be done. He has brought God to us, but *He must also bring us to God*, a much harder task. The task is a double one ; for first the way must be opened before men can be brought to God ; and next, men must be persuaded to take the road which has been opened, and travel on it back to God. This also, in both its departments of labour, the Son of God has come to earth to do.

(1) He must remove the barrier and open the way. What was that other name which was given to Him on His arrival on the shores of this wandered island world in the universe of God? "Thou shalt call His

name Jesus; for He shall save His people from their sins." And what is the first witness which is borne to Him by the last of the Hebrew prophets? "Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world"!

What an undertaking! What a mountain to be removed and cast into the sea! Recall the two occasions on which Jesus used this apparently extravagant metaphor. The first was at the beginning of the sorrowful journey from the Mount of Transfiguration to Jerusalem, immediately after His first announcement to His disciples of His approaching sacrifice. The second time was on His way to the temple to take the stand which was to bring about His death. On the first occasion the mass of mighty Hermon was before Him; on the second the rocky hill of Zion was under His feet; but when we look into His heart and remember that on it lay the awful burden of the task He had undertaken, and that with special vividness His mind anticipated His approaching sacrifice, we can see that the mountain He was really thinking of was the mountain of the world's sin, more rocky than Zion, more massive than Hermon. The figure, strong as it is, is not too strong. It was indeed a Titanic undertaking to take

away the sin of the world. Had it not been built mountains high like the fable of Pelion and Ossa on snowy Olympus?

It taxed to the utmost even "the strong Son of God." See His agony in the Garden. See Him struggling under the weight of the cross. Hear Him cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" It took the very last atom of His human strength. Not till His latest breath was the victory gained. But gained it was. "It is finished"! hear Him cry. "Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world"! The mountain is cast into the sea. And now the way is opened: "Christ hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God."

(2) But His work is not yet ended. The mountain has been removed, the way has been opened, but will men come? Will they arise and go to their Father? Alas! indeed, the most of them seem not at all inclined. They have become accustomed to the separation. They know not what they are missing. They do not realise that separation from God is at the root of all their unsatisfied hunger and unrelieved distress. Some of them have actually come to think that it is happier to live in sin without God

than in righteousness with Him. Others have become so engrossed with the interests of the world that to let God into their life seems an intrusion, a positive annoyance. And even those who try to get into touch with Him find it irksome and difficult. How is this remaining difficulty to be met?

By the gift of the Spirit of Christ. He who has earned the right to say, "I am the truth," by revealing the Father; and "I am the way," by removing the mountain barrier and opening up the path to God, must be able to add yet this, "I am the life." This He does in the power of His resurrection. "I am the resurrection and the life," He says, "He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." Even those whose spiritual powers are paralysed in spiritual death can be quickened into life, through the grace and by the power of the Holy Spirit of Jesus. This coming of the Holy Ghost may be regarded as the Father's running to meet His prodigal child. When we looked at the Word of God incarnate, we saw the smile on the Father's face and the wistful look in His eyes; but in the coming of the Holy Ghost we see Him running to accomplish the glad reunion which has been made possible through the

mediating life and atoning death of His holy Son. When we last looked at the prodigal in the far country we heard him lamenting, "How many hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger." Now we hear him saying, "I will arise and go to my father." Whence the new impulse? From the Spirit of God striving with him. And as soon as he yields to it and begins to move homewards, there is the father running to meet him, and falling on his neck and kissing him, calling for the best robe to put on him, and taxing all the resources of the home for the princeliness of his welcome.

Now in Christ Jesus we that were once afar off are made nigh. The broken bonds are reknit, and the privilege of fellowship with God is fully restored. We may now without hindrance cultivate the devotional life which has in it so much of peace and power now, and of glorious promise for the great future, when the time of our minority shall be over, and we shall, as children of the Almighty Father, "inherit all things."

IV

THE TEXT-BOOK OF THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE

“ I N CHRIST Jesus ye . . . are made nigh”
(Eph. ii. 13). So it is said ; but what of the centuries which lie between us and the far away time of His appearing on the earth? That face may have been full of the light of God ; but no one has looked on it for nearly two thousand years. For all these centuries that human voice has been silent. He has gone, we are told, to the right hand of God—is not that a “ far country ” ?

It is true He said, “ Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world ” ; but it is only as Spirit that He is present with us, and how can we get into touch with a purely spiritual being? The answer is quite simple: Through the testimony of those who were with Him on earth, and have put on record all that is needed for us to reclothe Him, so

to speak, in the very flesh He wore. So St. John puts it in the beginning of his first epistle, written fifty years after the Man Christ Jesus had vanished from his sight. "That which we have seen and heard" (of the Word of Life) he writes, "declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us : and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." After fifty years the memory of what he had seen and heard of the human face and voice was quite sufficient to make the fellowship of his old age with the Spirit of Jesus as real as had been the fellowship of his youth with Jesus on earth ; and by what he had lately set down or was in the course of setting down in his Gospel, and what his fellow evangelists had already set down in theirs, they were all able so to place the human life of the Lord Jesus before the people who had never seen Him as to put them in possession of the very same privilege which they themselves had enjoyed in the early days.

It was even better than that. The human life of Jesus is closer to the readers of the Gospels than it was to the writers of them when they were "eye-witnesses of His majesty." Then they had only occasional glimpses of what He really was. For the

most part their eyes were holden that they did not see Him as they saw Him later on, in the golden light of memory. How many things there were which they understood not till after the Son of Man was risen from the dead. They were at best only picking up crumbs, gathering fragments, which afterwards, under the guidance of the Spirit, were to arrange themselves into a complete whole, the wonderful story which we can now so comprehensively survey from Bethlehem to Calvary and Olivet.

What sort of a Gospel could Matthew have written if he had taken it in hand before his Master had gone? He might have recalled a number of incidents and set them down, but they would only have been fragmentary notices. There could not have been that living portrait which, under the Spirit's guidance, he was able in later years to set upon the canvas. There is deep significance in this connection in the familiar words: "It is expedient for you that I go away." The disciples were to be in a better position than ever, after He was gone. The human body in which He ascended would diminish to a speck and then vanish from sight; but the great life, the life which revealed the Father, instead of diminishing

as it withdrew into the distance kept enlarging, enlarging,¹ till it took the magnificent form we find in the fourfold portraiture of the Evangelists.

In the best biographies of great men we may get to know them about as well as their biographers did, to enter into their personality in so far as they had succeeded in entering into it while their acquaintance continued. But in the Gospels we are allowed to penetrate much further than they were able to do in the most intimate years of their fellowship on earth. What a revelation of a man it would be if his spirit, after he was gone, could take up his abode in the biographer's soul and stay there all the time he was writing! What an inspired volume would be the result! It would be not a biography only, but in the deepest sense an autobiography. It would have all the advantages of both without the disadvantages of either. Well, this we have four times over in the pages of the Evangelists. In each of the four we have all the realism and vividness of the story of eye-witnesses ; in each of

¹ "That one face, far from vanish, rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows!"
BROWNING, *Epilogue to Dramatis Personæ*.

the four we have all the light which comes from the interpenetration of the spirit of the disciple with the Spirit of the Master. It is as if He lived and moved before us clothed in flesh, and yet invested all the while with the glory of the transfiguration.

The result of all is that we can get closer to the human life of the Lord Jesus than to any other life that was ever lived upon this earth. We may know Him far better than it is possible to know any of the best known men of the first century, or even of the nineteenth century ; and when we take into account the promise of the Spirit to take of the things of Christ and show them unto us, we see that it is possible for us to know Him better than we can know our most intimate friend. We can lay our lives close up to His, so that His Spirit will touch us with a closer and more intimate touch than ever happens between friend and friend or even between husband and wife. It was experience like this which led the Apostle John, so many years after his Master's departure, to exclaim, " Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ " !

Be it remembered also that we come into touch with Christ not only in the pages of

the Gospel, where His human life is set before us so vividly, but also in all the writings of those holy men of old who spake as they were moved by His Spirit: the prophets who testified beforehand of His coming, and the apostles who were divinely commissioned to guide the early Church into the fulness of the truth as it is in Jesus. It is clear at a glance that the whole Scriptures of the New Testament—Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypse, as well as Gospels—bear witness to Christ; and though this is not so apparent in the Old Testament, we can by careful study verify what our Lord said of these earlier records of Divine revelation, “They are they which testify of Me.”

Thus it has come to pass that the revelation of God in Christ, from the first hint of His coming to the last word of the last of those who saw Him in the flesh, is preserved for us in the sacred Scriptures, enshrined there to make the life of devotion natural and easy to us. So, just as the Son of God has by His incarnation brought God to us, and by His atoning death brought us to God, through the Scriptures which come to us by the inspiration of His Spirit He enables us to get into touch and keep in touch with God as revealed in His humanity. There, in

these sacred Scriptures, we see God clearly revealed as our Father, Friend and Saviour ; there we have His messages of love ; there we have His precepts and His promises ; there we see the principles on which He deals with men on earth, and the prospects set before them in the life to come. Thus it is that these holy Scriptures are the text-book of the devotional life.

When we bear in mind that the great use of the Scriptures is to testify of Christ and so bring us to God, we see that many of the difficulties so freely raised in our time are quite irrelevant. Cannot Moses testify of Christ without being as learned in the learning of the "Encyclopædia Britannica" as he was in that of the Egyptians? Cannot David testify of Christ, though, instead of doing it alone as he was once supposed to do, he be surrounded with a whole company of witnesses to share the honour with him, to change the solo into the grandest chorus the world ever heard? Cannot Isaiah testify of Christ, though the same man may not have written the whole book which bears the name? If his witness is not single and solitary as we used to think, but the witness of two, both of them marvellously gifted, and

bearing their testimony with such wonderful harmony that every one till lately believed it was the voice of one—if the solo be changed into a duet, or even, as some suggest, into a trio or quartet, what are we the worse? In the same way it will be found that by far the greater number of the objections to the sacred Scriptures which are so freely advanced in our day are totally irrelevant, because they do not touch the great object for which the Scriptures are given—to testify of Christ and so bring us to God.

And when we remember that it is only by stages that man has been brought to God, many difficulties of another kind will find their natural solution. “In the beginning was the Word.” God has never been without a witness. The heavens declared the glory of God, and earth uttered His praise; all His works spoke of Him, not articulately indeed, but most impressively. And the Word from time to time became articulate in human speech: “At sundry times and in divers manners God spake to the fathers by the prophets,” thus making Himself known by degrees to the sons of men as they were able to receive the Word. In the Old Testament we have the record of that progressive revelation, in which we see how the light of God

gradually broke in upon the darkness of men. The record, of course, has its dark side, which is sometimes very dark ; but is that darkness, and the faithfulness with which it is depicted, any argument against the light which was struggling through it? We should surely, in judging of the men who lived in these early ages, always make allowance for the time ; and if the light of God has to pass through a very murky medium, let the medium, not the light, bear the blame of the murkiness. It was not till God, who in sundry times and in divers manners has spoken to the fathers by the prophets, had in the last days of the progressive revelation spoken to us in His Son, that that revelation was complete and perfect.

As the last days have been reached, it is important to bear in mind that the revelation of God is complete and therefore sufficient. True, the dispensation of the Spirit is an advance on that which went before it, but the advance is not in the substance of the truth but only in the manner of its application. "He shall not speak of Himself," Christ said, but "He shall take of Mine and show it unto you." And, as if to guard against the possibility of church, or priest, or

popes, or mystics, claiming to add anything to the truth which had been revealed in Christ and fully recorded in the closed canon of Scripture, He adds: "All things that the Father hath are Mine; therefore, said I, that He shall take of Mine and shall show it unto you." It is because this declaration of our Lord has been set aside, that the Church of Rome and the High Anglicans who follow her bad example have so far departed from the simplicity and purity of the Gospel of Christ; and it is for the same reason that many of the mystics, of the middle ages especially, have been led into such wild extravagances as almost to discredit the devotional life of which the majority of the mystics were conspicuous examples. Against all such error and extravagance the written Word is the sufficient safeguard. The Spirit's weapon is the Word of God as revealed in Christ. It is still true that He only is the way, and the truth, and the life; it is still true that no man cometh unto the Father but by Him. Our devotional life therefore, though inspired by the ever present Spirit, must have for its daily food the truth as it is in Jesus, which has been enshrined for us in the pages of these sacred Scriptures.

The Bible is not, indeed, the only book of

devotion ; there are many others which may be found more or less helpful ; but their helpfulness will depend on the degree in which they set forth the truth contained in the Scriptures, and are suffused with the Spirit which breathes throughout these sacred pages. Whatever there is of value in the "Imitation of Christ" by Thomas à Kempis, for example, or the "Pilgrim's Progress," or the Lives of the Saints, or the prayer-book of a church or a society, is due to the fountain whence their inspiration was drawn. Such books all have their limitations, and there is always liability to error, so that it is not safe to use them without keeping up from day to day our familiarity with the standard by which their errors may be corrected and their defects remedied. There are many useful and valuable books of devotion ; but the devotional life has only one text-book.

While the great use of the Scriptures is to bring us to Christ and so to God, there are other respects in which the Bible is of surpassing value. In historical interest it excels all other books of ancient history. Yet it must not be forgotten that in reading its records we must not judge it as if the teaching of history were its object. That again

would open the door to quite irrelevant criticism. Its object is to bring us through history to God, just as the object of its references to nature is not to teach us natural science but to lead us through nature to God.

The Bible appeals also to the literary interest by the variety and superlative excellence of its style. In this connection one thinks of the influence of the English Bible on English literature, and still more of the formative influence of the German Bible on the German language; and it is scarcely necessary to point out what the Bible has done for the style of our best writers and speakers, as instances of which we may appeal to the "Pilgrim's Progress," the speeches of Mr. John Bright, and the sermons of Mr. Spurgeon. Yet not one of the sacred writers is a stylist. It is, indeed, the very absence of effort after style which is a chief charm of the inspired writers. It is the purity and elevation of their thought which secures the high excellence of their style. Here again, however, it would be quite beside the mark to judge the Bible by any canons of literary criticism, as is done by those who are troubled when they are told that the Greek of the Apocalypse is quite unclassical, and not

even free from grammatical error. If the treasure is in an earthen vessel, is not the excellency of the power the more evidently of God and not of man? Where else in all literature than in that same Apocalypse have we a more wonderful illustration of the effect of noble and elevated thought in raising a man by no means grammatically educated to the very empyrean of style, a style so lofty that passage after passage from this marvellous book can be set to music by the greatest composers and sung on and on, in strains that never weary through all the centuries?

We might speak in the same way of the ethical interest, the psychological interest, the theological interest ; and show that, valuable as the Bible is in all these different ways, it is not to be judged by its success in dealing with these different subjects or in settling the problems which arise in connection with them, but simply by the way in which it accomplishes the great object always in view, the salvation of man by bringing him to God.

The Bible is the Book of books in many senses, unparalleled in the height and depth and length and breadth of its range, and in the manifoldness of its interest. But that which stands out above all other things is

that it is the Word of God, the book in which God is brought within our hearing and our sight ; the book in which we see marked out the way by which the sinner may arise and go to his Father ; the Word by which we enter into fellowship with One who is greater than the sons of men, better than the best of them all, mightier than the mightiest, tenderer than the tenderest, more loving than the most affectionate—perfect man ; and in that perfection of His humanity bringing those who come to Him into closest touch with God, the true God, whose name is not Force but Love, and whose banner is Salvation.

V

HOW TO USE THE BOOK DEVOTIONALLY

WE come now to the more strictly practical part of our subject. We shall suppose ourselves impressed with the value and importance of the devotional life, acquainted with the way opened up by the Lord Jesus for our use and enjoyment of it, and in possession of the text-book which is to be the medium of communication between the Spirit of God and our spirits. Our hearts are towards God, our eyes are on the Son of Man, and in our hands is the Book which testifies of Him and so brings us into touch with God. Now, how shall we proceed? How shall we best use our Bibles for devotional purposes, that is, for devout meditation, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, and adoration?

I. THE ORDER.

The Bible is a very large book : where shall we begin? What order shall we follow?

(1) What seems the simplest method is that which we usually follow in our reading of books, namely, to begin at the beginning and read through to the end. This method is quite appropriate *for study*. Mere promiscuous reading, such as too many indulge in, will do very little indeed to give that comprehensive grasp of Scripture which is needed for the man who would be thoroughly furnished unto good works. We ought by all means to be consecutive in our study; and it would tend very much to an intelligent acquaintance with Scripture, if instead of breaking up our reading into fragments, as suggested by the division into chapters and verses, we would read straight on till we come to an appropriate stopping place, not hesitating on occasion to take a book at a sitting, so as to be able to grasp it as a whole.

But when we use the Bible *for devotional purposes*, it is not well either to read large portions at a time, or to go on chapter by chapter from Genesis to Revelation. We do

not doubt that a mature Christian may be able to get much good in this way. There are those who tell us that they can extract excellent nourishment from lists of names, and from the most minute details of the Mosaic ordinances. We have no occasion to call the claim in question; but that is no reason why the average Christian, or the young beginner, should risk a failure in the devotional use of Scripture, by breaking his teeth over the hard nuts or trying to get nourishment out of the bare wood of the tree of life. This little book is not written for mature Christians or for geniuses; it is for those who find it hard to get the food their spirits need even in the Bible. The only way in which those of us who belong to this class can make good use devotionally of the Genesis-to-Revelation method is by having by us some aid to devotion on the passage, such as Chalmers' "Daily Bible Readings," or Bishop Hall's "Contemplations," or Matthew Henry's "Commentary." But the use of such peptonised preparations is better dispensed with, if possible. Better find our own nourishment in one of the easier parts of Scripture than be spoon-fed from extracts made by some one else from the more difficult parts.

(2) What we propose therefore to advocate here is a judicious method of selection from among the books of the Bible, by which those who have difficulty in finding the nourishment they need for their spiritual life, may begin with the easier parts and proceed by degrees to the more difficult. In this way they may hope in course of time to reach the happy position of the students of the Word spoken of in the Epistle to the Hebrews, "who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil," and are therefore ready to "leave the first principles of the doctrine of Christ and go on unto perfection."

It must be borne in mind that while "all Scripture given by inspiration of God is profitable," it is not all equally profitable. There is none of it which is not helpful towards bringing us to God, but it is by no means all alike helpful. There is a Divine as well as a human element in every part, but the Divine element is not equally apparent everywhere. We could have conceived of a uniform level of Scripture, every part as full of heavenly light as every other, so that it did not matter in the least where you opened the Bible, you would be equally certain of a message from heaven shining with heaven's own lustre.

We all know it is not so. Therein lies the justification of favourite passages and of selected portions, whether for preaching from and writing on, or for private meditation. Suppose we could make a collection of the texts on which the most orthodox and evangelical preachers had preached from the beginning until now, how unequally would these be distributed. What mountains there would be on the Psalms and the Gospels, and what a thin and sparse layer on the Books of Judges and Esther. What does this mean? It means that the Divine element is very prominent in the Psalms and the Gospels, and the human element more prominent in Judges and Esther. This certainly does not mean that there is no Divine element in Judges and Esther. It means only what is said, and what is certainly obvious to the meanest capacity, that it is less prominent, and therefore less easily recognised. Why not then begin with those passages in which the Divine element shines out so clearly that no one with any eyesight at all can fail to discern it?

This apparently obvious principle is of importance in its application not only to the tyro in devotion but to the tyro in faith; and as faith and devotion are so closely related,

it may be well to look at the matter in this light also. How cruel it is to send a beginner in faith to those parts of the Scripture where the Divine is less prominent, pin him down to these and say, "The whole or none—every word from Genesis to Revelation, or not a word." Nothing could be more unwise or unreasonable. Why not say, "We admit that the Divine element in the Bible is not obvious everywhere; in some parts it is difficult to see; but do not trouble yourself about these passages in the meantime; look at those which glow with the Divine fire, where the heavenly light shines out with lustre unmistakable, where you are lifted up clear above the common level. Lift up your eyes to the hills." Does that mean that the plains and valleys are surrendered? Not at all. It is only a question of order. When the Divine is recognised on the heights, it is but a question of time when recognition will follow everywhere.

An illustration of our point may be taken from the geology of Canada, a country of very special interest to the geologist, from the fact that the Laurentian Hills which form its backbone are the lowest of the great formations. If we wish to see with our eyes the foundations on which this world is built, we may go to these Canadian hills, which, skirting

the St. Laurence River as they do, have given their name to the series of strata which lie at the base of all the rest. Well, now, suppose a geological student, say in Montreal, when told of this great granite floor on which his country is laid, is sceptical about it. He cannot see it either in the city, or in the country round. Instead of a solid granite foundation, he finds everywhere a loose and crumbling earth, and even when he gets to the rock, it is not granite but limestone. You tell him that if he could only dig deep enough there, he would reach the granite. He says, "I cannot dig deep enough; and as I do not see it for myself, you must not expect me to take it on trust." How can you convince him? Take him away to the hills. There he will see the great rock masses, with a little of the modern even there indeed, some loose earth and recent trees and plants growing in it; but without any trouble he can see the great granite floor, which at this point has by some mighty force been lifted up into sight. And, as you take him down the mountain side, you can show him how the limestone is laid down on the top of the granite, and the loose covering of earth on the top of that; and then he sees that the granite of which the mountain is composed,

is but an outcrop of the great mass which constitutes the floor of Canada, and not of Canada alone but of all the world.

Or take another illustration which will be still closer to the point. "There is a spirit in man; and the inspiration of the Almighty hath given him understanding." But this, too, has been doubted in this sceptical age. Suppose, then, we have to deal with one who doubts it, and who, to justify his scepticism, has brought you a tuft of hair or the paring of a finger-nail, with the question, "Do you mean to tell me that these things have intelligence, that it can be said of the being of which these are specimens that the inspiration of the Almighty has given him understanding?" How do you answer him? Do you say, "The whole or none—if you cannot see the evidence of the Divine inbreathing in the finger-nail, you must give it all up?" Would that be reasonable? Would you not rather say to him something like this: "My friend, you have taken the very worst thing you could find to judge by. There is, indeed, some life even in hair and nails; but it is at its lowest point there. Do not look at these now; lift up your eyes; look at the face. Take the best part first. You will then have no difficulty in discovering the tokens of the

Divine inbreathing; and, after you have recognised the spirit in the face, your conviction will not stop there, for by and by you will discover that somehow the life recognised in the face is diffused all over the body, reaching in a certain sense, though not a very recognisable one, even to the finger-tips."

(3) Assuming, then, that it is well to begin with those portions of Scripture which most readily lend themselves to devotional use, we have very little difficulty in forming our plan. There are certain parts of Scripture which are purely devotional, where we have little else to do than to adopt the language written down for us and use it as the expression of our own emotions and desires. To this class belong the Book of *Psalms*, and the prayers and thanksgivings and doxologies of the inspired writers, specially those of the New Testament. But we ought, even at the very beginning, to make use also of some of those portions of Scripture which, though not purely devotional, readily furnish materials for devotion. Chief of these is *the fourfold Gospel*, which brings us into closest contact with the life of our Lord; and next the *Epistles*, so rich and full of gospel truth, which can be so readily turned into prayer and praise and devout meditation. Not

much more difficult for devotional use will be the *biographies* of which we have such a rich variety throughout the Bible; and though the *history* in which these biographies are embedded may not appear at first sight to yield so much material for devotion, it will be found that the one will help the other in such a way that we can, with a little practice, use large, continuous portions of the Old Testament as well as the *Book of Acts* in the New. *The Prophets* present greater difficulty, chiefly because so much study is necessary to understand their point of view; but when we have reached it, we shall find that in reading these great oracles of God we are in a position to rise into very pure and serene heights of worship. After having proceeded so far on our way we shall probably have had such practice as to enable us to find good food even in the more indigestible parts of Scripture, such as the Book of Leviticus or Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, or the central parts of the Apocalypse in the New.

Our plan in what remains of this volume will be to take up the separate parts of Holy Scripture as above indicated, and show how to use them in the cultivation and expression of the devotional life.

II. THE MANNER.

Before we enter upon the consideration of the different portions of Holy Scripture, it may be well to make a few suggestions as to the manner of reading, which will be equally applicable to all the divisions. Our success or failure will depend very largely on the way in which we address ourselves to the duty. We call it a duty, as certainly it is; but we are confident that if only the recommendations we are about to give are carefully followed, it will be but for a very short time that any one will think of it as duty to be done; rather will it be looked forward to as a privilege to be enjoyed.

(1) Be quite alone, if practicable. It is possible to have seclusion in the deepest sense in a crowded train, or in a room where people are coming and going; but it is not easy. It will be remembered that on the occasion when Moses had that vision of God which satisfied the longing of his heart as nothing else had done, he had been commanded to meet with God alone upon the top of the mount—no one to be in sight, not even a living creature, for the very flocks and herds were to be kept at a distance; nothing to break the silence but the voice of God

(Exod. xxxiv. 2-8). There may be times in our life, as in a summer holiday, when we can enjoy such specially favourable conditions, and may expect crowning visions and revelations of God ; but though this is, as a rule, more than we can secure, we ought to get as near to it as our circumstances will allow. It is indeed delightful when husband and wife or very intimate friends can have fellowship with one another in private devotion ; but even then it will be found necessary that each should also secure time for solitary communion with God, who, be it remembered, is "closer than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

(2) Begin by an act of faith, realising the presence of God. It is to be hoped and expected that the recognition of the Divine presence will become habitual ; but even in that case there will be a difference in the vividness with which we realise it ; and the devotional hour is the time for drawing specially near. "He that cometh to God must believe that He is."

Along with the special effort to realise the Divine presence there will be the lifting up of the heart in prayer. And to make sure that the prayer is real, we ought to approach God each time with large expectations.

This is, of course, another way of saying that we must come in faith, but perhaps it is a more simply practical way of putting it. Expect great things of God. Expect vision and revelation: vision of God and revelation—that is, unveiling—of truth; for “God has always more light to break forth from His holy word.” Even the truths with which we are familiar often have a veil over them which may in a moment be withdrawn, so that there is a fresh revelation to the soul. It was with such expectation that the Psalmist made use of his comparatively small Bible when, in opening it up before him, he prayed: “Open Thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law.” It was with similar expectation that old Eli taught young Samuel to wait upon God when he told him to say, “Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.”

(3) After lifting up the heart to God, we address ourselves to the page which lies before us; and our first duty is to endeavour to see as clearly as possible what is the mind of the Spirit as expressed in it. It is at this point that the difficulty of the more obscure passages of Scripture comes in; and there are some who do not think it of much consequence to know exactly what the

meaning is, if only they may put some meaning of their own into it which seems pious and edifying. But surely this is not respectful to the Divine Word; and most certainly it misses all the advantage which it possesses over other books of devotion. Devout meditation is in itself good; but what we should expect from the Word of God is something more than a stimulus to devout meditation of our own, even a message from God, expressing His mind, and bearing His authority. The only way to make sure of this is to find out the real meaning of what we are reading.

From this it follows that the passage ought not to be one which takes all the time we have to spare to learn the meaning of it; it should either be so simple as to be intelligible at once, or a passage which has already been mastered, and which therefore is now simple enough for us without any loss of the precious time to proceed to the devotional use of it.

(4) Now comes the exercise which should take up the greater part of the time—the consideration of the question, What does God say to me? What does He expect of me? And what should I answer when I am reproved?

At this point it may be well to have

certain questions always ready, such as these :—

(i.) Lord, what wouldst Thou have me to see ?

(ii.) Lord, what wouldst Thou have me to do? or to avoid ?

(iii.) What sin should I confess that I may have it forgiven ; or what grace should I ask that I may be enabled to do what is asked of me ?

Or our questions might be based on such a comprehensive passage as 2 Timothy iii. 16, as thus :—

(i.) Doctrine : what may I learn of God? Of myself? Of the way of life ?

(ii.) Reproof : is there any sin of which I stand convicted by the word before me which I must confess and forsake, and for which I must ask forgiveness ?

(iii.) Correction : is there any wrong path I have been following, so that now I must change my course ?

(iv.) Instruction in righteousness : what grace am I neglecting ; and may I not be able now to add something to my life which will make it more harmonious and complete ?

It is clear that in following such a course as this there will be continuous prayer ; but

it is important to remember that such prayer is not a one-sided act. God is not a mere listener while His people pray. He answers then and there. The full answer may be postponed, but some answer there is always to every true prayer. While they are yet speaking He answers. No voice is heard ; but the answer is felt. There is the touch of spirit with spirit : the Spirit of God inspiring the prayer ; and not only so, but responding in such a way as to convey, as it were, the touch of a gracious hand,—a feeling which we can fancy to be somewhat like that which the Saviour expressed when He said, “Somebody hath touched Me, for I perceive that virtue has gone out of Me,” only in this case the virtue has come in instead of going out. Yes ; somebody did touch you then. God touched you. And so touches He the heart of every one that truly calls on Him.

(5) Intercession may have found its place among the prayers directly suggested by the reading ; but if not, it would naturally find here a place of its own. In either case, this part of our devotions will gain in definiteness and variety by being associated each day with different portions of the Word and the desires awakened by meditation upon them.

(6) The whole exercise may well conclude

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with thanksgiving and adoration, for which perhaps we may fitly use some of the beautiful doxologies of Holy Scripture, either in the very words of the Bible or in some of those metrical forms which are to be found in all our hymn books, and which have been sanctioned by long use in the sanctuary.

VI

THE PURELY DEVOTIONAL PORTIONS OF SCRIPTURE, ESPECIALLY THE PSALMS

AS our plan is to begin with the simplest portions of Scripture, we must look first at those which are purely devotional, where we have little or nothing else to do than to take the words before us and make them our own.

I. *The Lord's Prayer* as set forth in Matt. vi. 9-13 and Luke xi. 2-4. This is the only form of devotion set down for the very purpose, and even it is not prescribed as a liturgy. It is not, "Ye shall say," but, "After this manner pray ye." But though not expressly given for the sake of repetition, it suits that purpose so admirably that we may use it day by day for a long lifetime and never find it trite or stale. It is independent of time or place or circumstance. There is

no place on earth, there are no circumstances of life in which it cannot be used exactly as it stands. At the same time we require even in the use of this great prayer to watch against the tendency to repeat it as a mere form of words. It has such depth and range of meaning that none of us is able to exhaust it, so there is no excuse for repeating it even for the ten - thousandth time without that stirring of soul, that pouring forth of desire, which will be the result of our entering into even a part of its meaning; and if we are living right we ought to be able to find more and more meaning in it, and to recognise better and better its many-sided application to the varied experiences of life. Few men have sounded the depths of the Lord's Prayer as Richard Baxter did in his prayerful life; yet on his death-bed he could spend a sleepless night in meditating on it, and ever, as he mused, find new wealth and wonder in it. Perhaps there is no better index of our Christian life than the degree in which we can put heart and soul into the words of the Lord's Prayer in our daily devotion.

II. *The prayers of the saints.* These we shall find scattered through the Bible; and it will be an excellent exercise in the study of the Scriptures to make ourselves familiar

with the places where they occur and the circumstances in which they were offered.

These prayers differ from the Lord's Prayer in that they all arise out of particular circumstances, so that none of them serve exactly the same purpose as the model prayer. Yet they are invaluable as models in their own way, that is to say, as illustrations of the manner in which we should lift up our hearts to God in circumstances at all similar. But even those which are most closely associated with the particular events out of which they arose will supply us with forms of expression which will easily become part of our own language of devotion. For example, the circumstances of Abraham's intercession for Sodom are never likely to be so repeated as that we could take his prayer and make it our own throughout; but we, too, have our intercessions for those who awaken anxiety similar to that which the impending fate of Sodom stirred in the patriarch's soul; and we may not only take encouragement from reading his experience, but we may feel it appropriate to use some of his very language, as when he says, "Behold now, I have taken it upon me to speak unto the Lord, who am but dust and ashes!" Or again, we may find a considerable part of a prayer offered up in

quite special circumstances so general in its terms that we can use it as our own at almost any time. As an example of this we may refer to the great prayer of David on the occasion of the presentation of the gifts of the people for the building of the house of the Lord (1 Chron. xxix. 10-19), in which verses 11-13 are so general that they could never be out of place or out of time. There are also many prayers offered up in the first instance in the presence of enemies such as we are never likely to meet, which are quite as appropriate as against our spiritual foes, with whom we are contending every day. Such a prayer, for example, as that of Asa in 2 Chronicles xiv. 11, 12, may give expression to the emotions of a similarly tempted Christian. The confession of Daniel in chap. ix. 4-19, though full of local references, is yet expressed in such a way that by far the greater part of it can be used by any patriot when it seems that the Lord is rebuking us for national sin; and a considerable portion of it might be used as a general confession at any time.

We shall find a rich mine of devotion in the prayers of the Apostles as recorded in the Epistles. These are indeed specific prayers for the Churches, but they are so purely spiritual

that they are almost as independent of time and circumstances as the Lord's Prayer itself. They also are so well after the manner of the Lord's Prayer that they are marvels of condensation, so that we can dwell on them clause by clause, and use them both as personal petitions and as intercessions for those for whom it is our privilege to pray. Take, as a single example, the great prayer in Ephesians iii. 14-21. To set this passage before us and try to put heart and soul into every phrase of it, will be found an education and inspiration in the life of devotion.

III. *The Book of Psalms.* The Psalms, almost all the hundred and fifty, might have been included among the prayers of the saints, but, as they have been collected into a book of devotion, they occupy a quite unique place, and ought, therefore, to be dealt with separately.

(1) Let me begin by calling attention to the unparalleled excellence and value of this book of devotion. Even as literature its position is the very highest. Poetry is the noblest form of literature ; and this is a book, which, take it all in all, is the greatest book of poetry in all the world. There is majesty in it beyond anything in Homer, beauty excelling the sweetest strains of Virgil, elevation of

thought equal to that of Dante in his noblest flights, organ tones which suffer nothing in comparison with Milton's noblest passages, pathos quite as deep and human interest as keen as are stirred by the many-stringed harp of Shakespeare. There is, moreover, another excellence which the Book of Psalms shares with Homer perhaps, and to a less extent with Shakespeare, but in which it cannot be compared with any other of the great poets, I mean the spontaneousness of its utterances. The writers do not think of themselves as poets at all. They take no heed as to the form; they seem quite unaware of any possible audience, except the ear of God; or if there is any sign of this, it is not an audience they want for themselves, but for God, as, for example, in Psalm lxvi. 16, "Come and hear all ye that fear God, and I will declare what He hath done for my soul." Each one might say, "I do but sing because I must, And pipe but as the linnets sing"; but no one has self-consciousness enough to say even as much as this. It is all pure, simple communion with God. The rod of God smites the rock, and the waters flow.

It is probable that the superlative excellence of the Book of Psalms from a literary

point of view would have been more universally recognised, had its theme been other than it is. Moreover, as a book of the Bible, one of many, it is less noticed than it would have been if it had stood alone. Like Mont Blanc, it suffers from the greatness of its environment.

Yet there is a special interest in observing the place it holds in the centre of the sacred Word. In the firmament of God's revelation we may not give it a place of equal importance to the fourfold Gospel in which the earthly life of our Lord is set before us ; but if it be not Orion, it is certainly the Pleiades, a star cluster of surpassing beauty and glory in the midst of the heavens.

Or, if we think of the Old Testament as a great mountain range of Divine revelation, while we may find peaks quite as high in other parts—in the prophecies of Isaiah, for example—there is no part where there is the same sustained elevation. And yet, on the other hand, there is no part more intensely human. This is the Bible's throbbing heart, where the heart of God and the heart of man are heard beating together. It has been beautifully said of the Bible as a whole, that "it is not a Divine monologue; it is an amazing dialogue of the ages,

between earth and heaven. The gospel which it reveals is not a mere melody of 'Peace on earth' sung by angel voices; it is the strains of a mighty orchestra rather. Notes from the stricken chords of the heart of God lead the strain, and notes from all the stricken chords of the human soul answer back in responsive chorus." This witness is true; and in the Book of Psalms we hear every chord vibrating, from the loudest hallelujah to the most thrilling tones of pathos and sorrow. It is the divinest, and, at the same time, the humanest book in all the world.

Or again, we may completely change our illustration and think of the Book of Psalms as a lake in the midst of the mountains of revelation, in which all the rest of the scenery finds its reflection, with the added beauty of the exquisite medium in which it is seen. Have you admired the grandeur of the story of Creation in the beginning? See its reflection in Psalm civ. Have you stood in awe before Mount Sinai at the giving of the law? How lovingly it is mirrored in a psalm like the 19th, which brings creation and the law into such noble relation.¹ Have you

¹ It is worthy of note that we have here an anticipation of that great thought of the philosopher Kant, who said that there were two things which never

followed with interest the history of the chosen people? Turn to the historical psalms and see the outlines of the history suffused with poetry and worship. Have you been exercised in soul as you have entered into the wrestling of Job with the problem of human suffering? See it all reflected and epitomised in such a psalm as the 73rd. Has the difficult Book of Ecclesiastes been your study? See its lessons put in briefest form in Psalm xl. Have you climbed the hill of prophecy and gained wonderful glimpses of the coming kingdom and the coming King? These, too, are reflected in a marvellous way in the Messianic psalms, where we see the great events of the Gospel casting their shadows before; for we find a psalm of the Advent (xl.), a psalm of the Bridegroom (xlv.), a psalm of the Cross (xxii.), a psalm of the Grave and the Resurrection (xvi.), a psalm of the Ascension (lxviii.), a psalm of the Coronation (ii.), a psalm of the heavenly Priesthood (cx.), a psalm of the glory of the Kingdom (lxxii.), psalms of the Second Coming (xcvi.-xcviii.), while even the "great voices in heaven" in the Book of Revelation

ceased to call forth his wonder and awestruck admiration, the starry sky and the moral law.

are in a manner anticipated in the grand finale of the book—the Hallelujah Chorus of the Hallelujah Psalms (cxlvi.–cl.).

Once more, we may apply to the book its own illustration of “a river the streams of which make glad the city of God”; and we are set thinking of the blessed influence of these psalms, as the living waters have flowed from the mirror lake in the holy mountains, down through the generations and the centuries, a perennial source of inspiration to all that has been purest, noblest, and most heroic in human life. “What a wonderful story they could tell,” writes Dr. Ker, “if we could gather it all from lonely chambers, from suffering sick-beds, from the brink of the valley of the shadow of death, from scaffolds and fiery piles witnessing in sunlight, from moors and mountains beneath the stars, and in the high places of the field turning to flight the armies of the aliens.” They can never be all gathered, nor more than the merest fraction of them. Dr. Ker gathered a goodly number himself before he passed away; and now we have a much larger collection admirably set forth in the monumental work¹ of Mr. Prothero, in which he has, with

¹ “The Psalms in Human Life” (John Murray).

great success, fulfilled the task he set before him of furnishing "some of the countless instances in which the Psalms have guided, controlled, and sustained the lives of men and women in all ages of human history and at all crises of their fate."

(2) Much more might be written on this great theme; but perhaps we have had enough to give us some fresh conception of the incomparable treasure we possess in this little old book which we can carry with us wherever we go. And now shall we venture to give some suggestions as to the use of it in our devotions?

(i.) Many of the psalms can be used as we use the Lord's Prayer, namely, by taking the words of them and making them our own. We might make up for ourselves a *catena* or chain of such psalms—those which come most home to us in the different phases of devotion. We might begin with the 51st, the *Miserere* as it is called, with its penitential sorrow and its cry for forgiveness and cleansing; and pass to the 32nd, with its noble expression of the rapture of reconciliation and the joy of the new heart and life. Then might follow such a psalm of thanksgiving as the 116th, a psalm of trust like the 23rd, and so on through the principal phases of Christian experience.

By making up for ourselves some such chain of psalms we should naturally select our special favourites, the psalms to which we turn again and again for the expression of the deepest feelings of our souls. But we ought not to limit ourselves to these. The list of our favourites should be always enlarging. There may be some Christians who are equally familiar with the whole book, but such cases are probably quite exceptional. For the greater number the best advice seems to be, that they should make themselves absolutely familiar with a certain number of psalms they have found specially helpful, committing them to memory if possible, but at all events fixing their number firmly in the mind, so as to be able to turn to them at a moment's notice. If any one wishes a simple test as to his real possession of the psalms, let him shut his eyes and number over those which have been so written in his soul that he can not only turn to them without a moment's hesitation, but go over in his mind all that is in them. How many can you call distinctly up before you in answer to such a question? As many as twenty? Or could you not muster more than ten? Then you have scarcely begun to possess yourselves of the treasures there are for you here. Re-

member the psalm is not yours when you have read it ; it must be set singing in your soul.

(ii.) Besides this strictly personal use of particular psalms, there will be a general use of the Psalter which is likely to be most helpful in the daily devotion. For this purpose we recommend a classification of the psalms according to their themes. This may be done in many different ways ; has been done many times ; but it is far better to do it for yourselves than to take over some arrangement which has been made by another. The question is not what is the most logical arrangement or the most comprehensive ; but what is that which most interests and helps me. Let us indicate the lines along which it might be done.

If we have made for ourselves such a chain of psalms as has been already suggested, we might, to begin with, take each of these as a specimen and find others to place beside it. Thus beside Psalm li. we should naturally place the 130th, that cry from the depths ; and the 143rd, a cry from still greater depths, and so on till we had under that class the well-known seven penitential psalms.

Another division might be psalms of thanksgiving, beginning probably with the

103rd; another, psalms of trust, of the same tone as the 23rd, and so on.

Again, we might wish to have a list of psalms which take us very directly into the presence of God, to meditate on His greatness and glory, His character and attributes, His works and ways. Such a list might begin with Psalm cxxxix. and include in it such psalms as the 90th and 46th.

Psalms of delight in worship might form another class, beginning with the 84th, and including such psalms as the 132nd and the 42nd.

Then there are the Nature psalms, beginning with the 104th and the 8th, which are directly connected with the story of creation, and taking in those great psalms which either throughout or in parts show nature in its varying moods. Of the former class we may give as a specimen Psalm xxix., in which the magnificence of a thunderstorm crashing among the hills is used with such marvellous power to show forth the glory of God, and to bring out by contrast the loveliness of His peace which follows His storm. Of the latter class we may give as specimens Psalm xviii., which, though a psalm of salvation, has in the first part of it perhaps the most magnificent description of a storm at sea that has ever

been penned, or Psalm lxxv., which, starting with the forgiveness of sin, ends in an exquisite harvest hymn.

Besides these lists, which we shall best prepare by having a series of headings of our own, and filling the Psalms in by degrees as we proceed in our devotional use of the book, there are groups which are practically made for us, such as the historical psalms, scattered indeed among the others, but so obvious in their character as to clearly form a group by themselves; the psalms of degrees (or "songs of ascent,") the Messianic psalms, and the Hallelujah psalms.

We can use the historical psalms in two ways: either by putting ourselves into sympathy with the writer and dwelling on the very same events which he recites; or by transferring them, as it were, into our own times, and worshipping God as the God of our nation, as the Maker of all its history, the Controller of its destinies, its Saviour in all times of trouble.

There is one small class of psalms which seems quite unsuitable for devotional use—those in which the wrath of God is invoked against enemies. It is quite clear that to use these psalms by adopting their language as against our own enemies would be to dis-

honour and disobey Him Who said : " 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." The only way in which we can make devotional use of such passages is by applying them to our spiritual foes, especially to the sins which do most easily beset us. Let us not forget, however, as we read these psalms, that allowance must be made for the times. Our Saviour said, in prefacing His great illuminating word on the subject : " Ye have heard that it has been said by them of old time, thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy." It was in that old time that the psalms in question were written. Further, we should take into account the feeling of indignation against sin which lay behind what seems to us personal denunciation. We find, indeed, one of the psalmists expressly disclaiming personal animosity in the hatred of his enemies : " Do not I hate them O Lord that hate Thee? And am not I grieved with those that rise up against Thee? I hate them with perfect hatred ; I count them mine enemies." And, in fact, when we consider all the circumstances, the troublous times, the spirit of the age, the limitation of the light, our wonder might be,

not that there are some imprecatory psalms, but that their number should be so small.

(iii.) Only one thing more. How are we to find Christ in the Psalms? Is it only in those which are called Messianic? In these there is, as we have seen, a marvellous foreshadowing of the days of Christ: His advent, His life, His sufferings, His death, His burial, His resurrection, His ascension, His intercession, His Kingdom, His return; but if we are to limit His presence to these predictive psalms, as we may call them, it would after all be only here and there that we should find Him in the Psalter. But when we take a large view of the subject we shall find Him almost everywhere.

We must not forget that the Word Who was in the beginning with God, was in the world as Spirit before He became flesh. It was He Who inspired these holy men of old who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. We may not distinguish between the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ in the Old Testament. The Apostle Peter tells us distinctly, in speaking of the salvation concerning which the prophets sought and searched diligently, that it was "the Spirit of Christ Who was in them" from Whom they received their guidance.

We should bear in mind then that the voice of the Spirit of Christ is heard, not only in these great predictions or foreshadowings of things to come, but in every utterance of faith. Not in the utterances of doubt ; these were strictly human ; but in the utterances of faith. It will be remembered that after the long list in Hebrews of the heroes of faith in the Old Testament, Christ is spoken of as "the Author and the Finisher of faith"—the Author as well as the Finisher—for He is the Root as well as the Offspring of David. There is here, as in every other part of Scripture, a mingling of the human and Divine ; and, as we have seen, the human element is very prominent throughout the Psalms. There is a great deal of truly human darkness, and groping, and crying, and stumbling, and falling ; but the Saviour is never far away ; and so it comes to pass that even in those psalms that rise out of an abyss of despair, there will presently be a shining of the light, a breaking of the day, and ere the strain is finished there will be a shout of joy.

Whence came the light? how came the joy? It was the Spirit of Christ which was in them. Many of the psalms are radiant all through with the joy of God's salvation ; they are like a cloudless summer day ; but there is even

still greater beauty in those psalms which lead us through storm and tempest to a sunset in which the clouds have become radiant with a glory not their own but borrowed from the sun, which has been ever shining in the sky. It is Christ, the Sun of our soul, Who is the sunlight of the Psalms. So we can find Him all the way through.

VII

HOW TO USE THE GOSPELS

NEXT in simplicity to the Psalms, and above them in importance for devotional use, are the Gospels. It is necessary then that we should carefully consider how we may best use them. We shall deal with the subject first in general and then in detail.

I. The great object of the Four Gospels is to bring us into close contact with Christ Himself. We have already seen (chap. IV.) that it is possible for us in the reading of the Gospels to get nearer to our Lord than even those could who saw Him in the flesh. If we ponder well what He said of the coming of the Spirit and the superior advantages of the new dispensation, we shall find that we have something better than there was even for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus when they received Him into their Bethany home. For it is not only that Matthew, Mark, Luke and

John understood their Lord far better when they wrote their Gospels than when they saw Him on earth, but that Christ Himself is actually present with the reader as He had been with the writer, present in a sense quite as real, and, as we have seen, more helpful. It is difficult to realise it, but there is no question whatever that this is what our Lord has taught us to expect. Let us then try to exercise our faith sufficiently to make it a reality to us. "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world," is the final assurance of the Gospel. This distinguishes these Gospels from all other histories or biographies. These years were not spent "as a tale that is told." They are not spent at all. They are with us still. The Lord Jesus Himself is with us as we read, so that those whose faith looks up to Him may, as it were, catch the light of His eye, feel the touch of His hand, hear the tones of His voice.

Recall the experience of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. There was One with them Whom they did not recognise, Who made the story of their Master a new and living thing to them. Looking back on it after He had vanished from their sight, they say: "Did not our hearts burn within us, while He talked with us by the way, and

while He opened to us the Scriptures?" Remember that these experiences of the forty days were given to prepare the way for the new spiritual presence. It was a transition time. Do you not think then that this opening of the Scriptures by a stranger whom they did not recognise, but whom they afterwards discovered to be the Lord Himself, was a fitting preparation for the time when it would be the unseen Lord Who would open the Scriptures and make hearts burn within them? It is a picture of what we should always expect. The first thing in the reading of the Gospels is to recognise our Lord, present with us in Spirit to unlock the treasures of the sacred page.

There will be inspiration in the companionship, even apart from any definite lessons to be learned; but it may be well to mention the two main things for which we ought to be on the watch, corresponding to the twofold nature of our Lord as Son of God and as Son of Man. In the former capacity He is the revelation of God to us; in the latter He is the ideal of humanity. We learn from His life on the one hand what God is, how He feels to us and how He deals with us; on the other what man ought to be. These are the two greatest things for us to know, and

we ought to be always eager to know them better—to know God better and so love Him more, and at the same time to know better what we ought to be, to become familiar with the features of the ideal human life as set before us in the story of Him Who is our perfect example. A word on each of these points.

(I) As to the first, it is important to remember that the only way in which we can become in any proper sense *acquainted* with God is by familiarity with the life of Christ. God has uttered Himself in Creation ; just as an artist utters himself in his works. He has expressed Himself in the whole history of the world. He has spoken to the fathers by the prophets. These are all utterances of God, but they are scattered and fragmentary, and give us a very vague and partial and, as it were, far-off knowledge of Him. Let us try to illustrate this in a very familiar way. A visit to a carpenter's shop may give us some knowledge of the carpenter as a carpenter. We may judge of his skill ; we may be able, by careful examination of the specimens of his handicraft we see, to tell something about his hand and a little about his head ; but we cannot in this way learn to know him. Or, if we enter an artist's studio in his absence, and

look at his works as they are dispersed about the room, we may be able to pronounce some opinion about the artist, but we cannot say that in this way we know the man. It is only a little way that the sight of a person's works will carry us in giving a knowledge of him. Will it do to show us what he has written? This will certainly carry us somewhat farther. But even words, however much of disclosure there may be in them, are not the ultimate revelation of a person. We want to see his doings, his conduct day by day. That we may know him thoroughly he must live before us, we must see how he bears himself amid the vicissitudes of life, in its trials and temptations, its joys and sorrows.

Now apply all this to acquaintance with God. We may not undervalue the revelation of God in creation and in the world's history. We may not forget that He has spoken to the fathers by the prophets at sundry times and in divers manners. But the question still comes, Is there no possibility of getting nearer to Himself? Is there no personal revelation? Has no one looked upon a face with the very light of God upon it? Has no one listened to a voice which thrilled with the love of God Himself? Is there no way of pressing in through the

outer circle of His works, which are but the hem of His garment, and from the words which are the utterances of His mind, to His very life and soul and heart? Yes, there is: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." "God hath spoken to us in His Son."

He has given us the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Let us never forget then as we follow the Gospel story that as Jesus lived and moved among the men of His time, so is God with us. As he spoke to them, so does God speak to us. As He dealt with them, so does God deal with us. What a solemn and tender interest does this give to everything He said and did and suffered! Not that we are to apply His words and deeds indiscriminately. We must not apply to the earnest soul what is spoken to the indifferent or rebellious; nor to the sinner what is spoken to the saint. We must consider well not only what He said, but to whom and in what circumstances the words were spoken. This may sometimes occasion difficulty, but there is always the promised guidance of the Spirit to "take of the things of Christ and show them unto us." Thus we shall in the reading of the Gospels under the guidance of the Spirit see God as revealed in Christ in

differing attitudes to people of endlessly differing characters, but always with some useful application to ourselves.

(2) As to the second lesson, which shows us what we ought to be, we have, of course, our Lord's sayings and discourses, in which we are directly told our duty. These will be dealt with later on. At present we are thinking, not of His words, but of His life as our example. And here it is of great importance to bear in mind His true and proper humanity. While He never ceased to be the Son of God, He was, not in appearance merely, but in reality, a true Son of Man, "compassed about with infirmity," tempted in all points like as we are. We are apt to think He had a great advantage over us in the battle of life because He was God as well as Man, but we forget that He gave up entirely all such advantage. He was not divested of His attributes, but He voluntarily laid them aside, and that so completely, that He never felt Himself at liberty at any time to use any of them for personal ends. All the miracles He wrought were in the saving of others, not one of them for His own comfort or relief. There was a difference between Him and us, in that the restriction was one He put upon Himself.

His limitations were voluntarily imposed, while ours are compulsory. But did that make it any easier for Him? The more we think of it, the more we must see that it made His life struggle far harder.

Recall the temptation in the wilderness. On the one hand His hunger was as keen as yours or mine would have been. The difference was that He could command the stones to be made bread, while we could not have done it. Did that make it easier for Him to stand His ground? Was it easier for Tantalus to bear his hunger that there were always bunches of fruit hanging tantalisingly in front of him? Is it not clear that the Saviour's latent power to satisfy His wants in an extraordinary way was the hardest thing He had to contend against? He had not only to bear the hunger, as you and I would have to do, but to resist what must have been an almost overpowering impulse to gratify His appetite in a way which was very easy for Him, but which He saw to be not right.

When the commander of an invading army wishes to make heroism easier for his soldiers, he burns the bridges behind him. He makes retreat impossible, so as to leave the sole alternative: Do or die.

But the Saviour's retreat was never cut off. The bridges were never burned behind Him. The way *from* the Cross was always there and always easy, which made the way *of* the Cross all the harder for Him. "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He shall presently give Me more than twelve legions of angels?" Did the constant consciousness of that reserve power make it easier for Him to endure the Cross, despising the shame? Speaking of the shame, what a terrible temptation it must have been to hear that mocking cry, "He saved others, Himself He cannot save." "If He be the Son of God let Him come down from the Cross." Yet He did not come down—not because He could not, which would have been our case, but because He would not, which was His far harder case; for it meant the renewal every moment of the same heroism which led Him to accept the Cross at the first.

He "walked by faith, not by sight." Some people seem to think that He saw all the way before Him, and knew exactly what was coming; but this would not have been genuine human nature. He had to live by prayer, and by the reading of the Word, and to find out the Will of God just as we have. Why did He sometimes spend whole

nights in prayer? It was not a form; it must have been because He felt the need of it; and if we observe the times when He did so, we shall find that they were times of special difficulty and perplexity. It is startling to discover that He had even to go through the hard experience of apparently unanswered prayer. Three times with strong crying and tears He prayed, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me"; yet the cup did not pass. And notice in passing that the use of the words "if it be possible," show that, at the moment, He did not clearly see it to be impossible. There came, indeed, an angel from heaven strengthening Him; and so will it be with you and me if the strong crying and tears for the passing of some cup must be refused. For "are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister," not to the Son of Man alone, but "to those who shall be heirs of salvation"?

So all through His earthly life we must think of Him as a man among men, with the same difficulties to contend with as we have to meet, with true human feelings, not only love and hope and joy, but at times doubt and perplexity and fear. It is often quite necessary to bear this in mind in order

to understand some of His strong sayings, as when He says to Peter, "Get thee behind Me, Satan," a terribly strong word which He never could have used to His dear disciple had not his suggestion set up in the Master's soul a life-and-death struggle. It betrays the deep emotion of a soul tempted almost beyond endurance by the remonstrance of His foremost disciple added to the uprising of His own soul at the critical moment when He had to set His face to go up to Jerusalem to die.

As a special illustration, let me mention a difficulty which has been more than once addressed to me by thoughtful readers of the Gospels—our Lord's use of the word "hate" in cases where it startles us. For example, "He that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal." Must I then hate my life? Some people say, "Of course you must; does not the Master plainly say so?" And they think it an end of all controversy to say, "There it is in black and white"; but they forget that there are a great many things which will not go into black and white; and if nothing else is possible, as on the printed page, there must be some soul in the person reading to put in the colour from the suggestions of it which it is possible to give in words, very

much as a skilful etcher can give marvellous suggestions of colour with only black and white to do it with. Now the words "love" and "hate" in passages of this kind are touches of colour. To see the value of them we must look at the surroundings. We must first look at the whole utterance of which they form part; then we must put ourselves as much as possible in the position of the speaker, that we may look at it from his point of view. We must, in fact, deal with the words, not as consisting of so many black marks on a piece of white paper, but as the warm utterance of an agitated soul.

Now observe that the words in question were spoken by our Lord when He was passing through what may be called a Gethsemane experience; for it was when He heard of the Greeks seeking Him, a circumstance which powerfully suggested to His mind that the hour had come when He must be "lifted up," so as to "draw all men unto Him." The thought was agony for the moment: "Father, save me from this hour"! The shadow of the Cross has often fallen on His pathway, but it is no shadow now—there it is in black, concrete reality, straight before Him. It proved to be one of His sorest conflicts. All that was human

in Him, His whole life as it were, rose up in arms and barred the way of the Cross. We can readily see, therefore, that the temptation to turn out of the consecrated path was too strong, the moment was too critical, to admit of any half measures or of balanced words. He must not parley with such an antagonist. He must treat him as His bitterest foe, and hew a pathway through him to the Cross. The moment had come when He had to hate His life in this world in order to keep it unto the life eternal of His followers; for all would have been lost if He had yielded now.

Now it is easy to see the colouring in the words "love" and "hate," as used at such a time. The Saviour had in His mind's eye times of sharpest crisis, when a man is brought face to face with his life in this world rising against him as an adversary to bar his way, to close against him the path of duty and devotion—what then? If he love his life he is lost; the only hope for him is to hate it, to treat it as his bitterest enemy—to run his sword through and through it, and utterly slay and quench it. "He that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal." When we take all this into account we can see that

the way our Saviour puts it is not at all too strong.

We have drawn out this illustration at considerable length in order to make it clear how much it helps us often in the most difficult passages to enter into the human soul of our Lord Jesus, and realise the effect upon His words of the strong emotions which were surging through it. Here again we do not say that to use the Gospels in this way is very easy; it cannot be done if we have only three or five minutes for the reading of our passage; but once more let us remember Him Who takes of the things of Christ and shows them unto us. By His grace we may always get some high impulse from the events in the life of Christ, in the vision of God as revealed in Him, and in the ideal of human life as set forth in His great example. May all of us enter more and more every day into this fellowship with our Lord!

II. Looking at the subject now more in detail we may find it useful to consider separately the Words of Christ, His Works, His Sufferings, and His Resurrection Life.

(1) *The Words.* Taking single verses and short passages first, there are precepts, promises, warnings, instructions, consolations.

The use of all these will be very simple indeed. Do I obey this precept? Lord, help me so to do. Have I made this promise my own? Do I need this warning; and if so, do I lay it to heart? And so on. Very much profit may be derived from little exercises of this kind.

Then there are the separate parables. Here the great thing is to get the main lesson and have it strongly impressed. This is much more useful than trying to spiritualise the details. Suppose, for example, you are reading the parable of the Prodigal. The great thing to be impressed with is the Father's love and forgiveness, and the royal welcome He gives to His wandering son. If we take that to our heart, and dwell on it till the fire of love to God burns, the time is far better spent than in speculating as to whether there is any special meaning in the ring and the shoes. It is the large general impression which is to be mainly sought for.

Finally, there are the longer discourses, notably in Matthew and in John. In the first Gospel there is the well-known Sermon on the Mount in the beginning, and the great Prophecy on the Mount (Matt. xxiv.-xxv.) in the end. The Sermon on the Mount is so

familiar that we need not dwell on it. The Prophecy on the Mount (of Olives) was delivered in the midst of the Passion Week. The strictly prophetic part of it is full of difficulty, but the grand and solemn parables and pictures of Judgment: the Servant set over the household, the Virgins, the Talents, and the Final Separation, especially when read slowly one after the other to the close, all produce the profoundest impression. Mid-way between, in chap. xiii., is another series of parables, a group of seven, arranged in pairs: The Sower and the Tares, the Mustard Seed and the Leaven, the Hid Treasure and the Pearl, and, finally, the Draw Net. These are all parables of the Kingdom, showing it in its origin (1st and 2nd), its growth (3rd and 4th), its excellence (5th and 6th), and its consummation (7th). There are valuable lessons in each separate parable, but after we have had these it is well to allow the mind to dwell on the grand harmonious whole.

The discourses in John are long, and many of them somewhat difficult. They are for the most part sermons of which the text is some incident which has just happened; for example, the visit of Nicodemus, the conversation with the woman at the well,

the healing of the impotent man, and the restoring of sight to the man born blind. But the great delight of the Fourth Gospel is the discourse in the Upper Room. It has been called the Holy of Holies of the Gospel. There especially, we can hear the throbbing of the Saviour's heart, and feel the uplift of His Holy Spirit.

(2) *The Works.* We generally call these the miracles, but they are never so spoken of in the Gospels. They are often called "works," sometimes "mighty works," more frequently "signs," signs of the kingdom of heaven. This gives us the key to their use. They signify or show how God acts in the kingdom of heaven, how He acts to all that come to Him. They are, as it were, acted parables. They are little stories of the olden time, but they are far more, they are revelations of God to us now and here. For example, you are reading the story of the leper, but it is not really the poor man who has been dead now so many hundred years that interests you. He is a sign—of what? Of the sinner. And the interest of the story is that it means that Jesus, Who is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever, is waiting to heal my leprosy of sin. The best way for us to do in such a case is to take the man's

cry and make it our own, "Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make *me* clean." After this little prayer, look up to your ever-present Lord, and listen for His gracious word, for He will say to you, "I will: be thou clean."

In the same way, when we are reading about the storm on the lake, though it is interesting to hear that some sailors long ago were saved from drowning, that is not the great interest for us. That stormy lake is a sign of our sea of troubles, and it teaches us that if we only look calmly across it we shall see the familiar form, and hear the welcome voice, "It is I, be not afraid."

Or if it be the raising of Lazarus we are reading, think what a sign it is of the Saviour's power and at the same time of His tenderness! There we find the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept"; but in these two little words what depths of consolation for all bereaved ones! In the anguish of separation we are apt to think that the face of God is stern; but the story in John xi. takes away the veil, and shows the tears upon it.

As with the parables, so here there are sometimes groups of signs, as in Matthew viii.—ix. 35. There are here ten

miracles, but the variety is such that each has its own special and peculiar value: the leper, the centurion's servant, the fever patient, the storm stilled, the demons cast out, palsy healed as the sign of sins forgiven, the healing of the chronic invalid by the way, the raising of the dead damsel, and the restoration of sight to the blind and speech to the dumb—all different, all most precious, all needed to bring out some aspect of the truth concerning Jesus as the Saviour of Mankind, all together giving us a most comprehensive presentation of the signs of the kingdom of heaven.

There is a principle stated in John of very great importance to the understanding of the signs of the kingdom. "The Son can do nothing of Himself but what He seeth the Father do: for whatsoever things He doeth, these the Son also doeth in like manner." Thus we may regard the works of Christ as representations in miniature of the works of God. In the feeding of the multitudes, for example, we see not only Christ's lordship over nature, but a representation in miniature of what the God of nature is doing every year, when, by agencies as far beyond our ken as those by which His Son multiplied the loaves, He transmutes the handfuls of

seed corn into the rich harvests of grain which feed the multitudes of men.

This principle is so important and interesting that it will bear development. The problem is to show the Divine working. Now there are three great difficulties in understanding the works of God: the great space in which He works, most of it far beyond our reach; the vast time in which He works, only the smallest fraction of which we can examine; and the endless number of intermediate agencies which He uses as instruments for carrying out His vast designs. Infinite space, infinite time, infinite complexity. Hence the need of illustrations—pictures on a small scale—to enable us to see what God is really doing in this vast universe and in this great eternity which stretch in all directions round us. Let us now consider how through these miracle signs the Son of God brings some of the ways of God down to the level of human powers.

When you wish to teach the geography of this island you do not take your scholar up in a balloon and try to show it to him. Small as the British Islands are, they are too extensive for that. A map drawn to a small scale is what you use. So, in order to teach the shape and contour of the earth,

you do not propose a journey round it, which would give the scholar no idea of its shape, but you show him a good globe. Now it is on this wise principle that our Lord proceeds in showing us the Father's working. He does not take us out on a voyage of discovery through the wide universe, nor set intricate problems which would need a thousand years to work out. No ; He simply did on a small scale and in a short time some of the works of the Father, that men might learn to believe in Him, to recognise His hand and His heart in His otherwise incomprehensible doings in the wide field of nature and the unmeasured expanse of eternity.

As an example, look at this lovely miniature. Christ Jesus, the revealer of the Father, steps up to a lame man, and says to him, "Wilt thou be made whole?" following at once with the summons, "Rise, take up thy bed and walk." And immediately the man was made whole. It all happened in a few minutes. Are we to infer from this that it is God's will and way to cure in a few minutes all who wish to be made whole? Certainly not. We must allow for the scale. When we look at a map of England, however good and true it be, we cannot measure the

distance from London to Liverpool with an inch rule, and then say the two places are only a few inches apart. We must allow for the scale. So in these works of Christ. We cannot measure the interval between the application and the cure, and say, "It will take only a few minutes." We must allow for the scale. And what it means is that God's way of dealing with His suffering creatures is to come to them with the question, "Wilt thou be made whole?" and if they are willing, then to heal them, not necessarily in three minutes, nor in three years, perhaps not in thirty years, but in due time, and in a time quite as brief according to the measure of our immortal life as these minutes were according to the measure of our little life on earth.

(3) *The Sufferings of our Lord.* When these are mentioned we are apt to think specially of the Passion Week; but we must not forget that not the last week of His life alone, but the whole of it, was a Passion Life. He was "a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief." He was not without a holy joy in all His toils, and the delight of doing His Father's will was always with Him. It must have brought a peculiar thrill to His heart to be able to give relief to so many sufferers

and bring gladness to so many sore hearts ; but do we realise what a pang it must have been to pass by those whom on account of their attitude towards God He could not relieve, what pain and disappointment lie behind such a brief notice as this : " He could not there do many mighty works because of their unbelief " ? Looking at His life as a whole, it is most pathetic to observe that there was not one stage of it which could be called successful in the ordinary accepted sense of the word.

When He came into the world He was an unwelcome child of Israel. " Herod the king was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him," at the news of His birth. And the only way to save the young life was to seek sanctuary in heathen Egypt.

How was it in that long period of His life of which we have only the scantiest notices—the thirty years at Nazareth ? Was it a time of quiet peace ? Perhaps in early childhood it well might be ; but as He grew up, what must it have been to find that no one understood Him or sympathised with what was deepest in His soul ? For none of His brethren believed in Him, and even His loving mother, as we know later on, sometimes took part with them rather than with

Him. He Himself has nothing to say of this ; and, guided by His Spirit, the evangelists maintain a very becoming reticence. But do we not get a glimpse into the Saviour's heart in the famous utterance at Nazareth : " A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and among his own kindred, and in his own home " ? What a sad light is thus thrown back on His whole Nazareth experience ! Surely no one can fail to feel how He comes closer and closer to the quick in the narrowing circle—from country to kindred and from kindred to His own home. Without honour even there ! So the prophet was right in the foreshadowing of these Nazareth days : " He shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground ; He hath no form nor comeliness ; and when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him ; He is despised and rejected of men."

As we read the story of our Lord's ministry we should watch for the indications of the deep emotions of His heart. He is for the most part silent in His sufferings, makes no complaint ; so if we wish to know how He felt we must try to put the tone into some of His sayings, the effect of which would otherwise escape us. In His Judean ministry,

for example, during which He laboured for nine months, apparently without making a single convert either from Jerusalem or from Judea, there is no lament or wail of disappointment; but can we fail to observe the tone in which, later on, He said to the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem: "Ye search the Scriptures . . . and ye will not come unto Me," to Whom they testify, and Who bring you the very thing you are supposed to be seeking in these Scriptures, eternal life?

Sometimes there will be a sorrowful pathos even in His joy. Think of the success at the Well of Sychar, which so filled Him with ecstasy that, though He had been famished with hunger, He could not eat for gladness! Is it not pathetic to think that the salvation of one poor woman should make ecstatic the heart of the Saviour of the world? There is much to think of here on which there is not time to dwell.

As an illustration of the effect of reproducing the tone of what at first may seem a simple and unemotional utterance, think of the parable of the Sower. It is spoken on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, in the neighbourhood of Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum, over which He had a short time before pronounced His sorrowful lament. He saw

around Him the fields where, with busy hand, throbbing heart, and eager spirit, He had been sowing the precious seed. Why is this good seed I am scattering so disappointingly unfruitful? The answer He gives is the parable of the Sower. It was spoken in the first place to encourage His own heart. As we read it we see how faith came to His relief, suggesting that while so much of the seed fell on the trodden ground, on the shallow ground, on the thorny ground, that which fell in good ground was so fruitful that, notwithstanding the loss of the greater part of the seed and the sowing of the tares by the evil one, it would in the end grow to a mighty tree, and by its inner working leaven the whole of society. There always seems to me to be a deep wail of sorrow as well as a grand note of faith in that parable of the Sower.

As another illustration of the brief glimpses we may have into the heart of the Man of Sorrows, let me refer to the close of His Capernaum ministry, when the multitudes who had rallied around Him, and even those who had thought and called themselves His disciples, went back and walked no more with Him. Think what that must have meant after the hopefulness of the time, and try to enter into the heart-break of the

sorrow-stricken appeal to the eleven, "Will ye also go away?"

Take as still another illustration of pathos, which might remain unnoticed, the extraordinary effect of the news that a few Greeks wanted to see Him. The coming of these few Greeks meant so much to the "despised and rejected of men"—so much of hope for the future of His mission, and at the same time the clear perception that after all the disappointment of His life there was only one way by which ultimate success could be gained: "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me."

And that same passage is one of many which show how terrible was the prospect of the Cross. All the way from the scene of the Transfiguration in the north, whence He set His face steadfastly to go up to Jerusalem to die, there are indications that, though there was a joy set before Him, it was set before His faith, not before His eye. He was steadily advancing all the time to a horror of great darkness, beyond which He could not see. Then comes the Passion Week, concerning which it is, perhaps, not necessary to make any further suggestion than that we should throughout keep in mind that our Saviour was true man, and that therefore

He must have had upon Him a nervous strain which so reduced His strength of body and of mind that He had to face the last agonies in a physical and mental condition in which it was hardest of all to bear up under them. Who can tell the depth of meaning in that apostolic word, "crucified in weakness"!

What a story of suffering it all is! Unwelcome at His birth, misunderstood at home, neglected in Judea, rejected in Nazareth, abandoned in Galilee, crucified in Jerusalem!

"Oh, dearly, dearly has He loved ;
And we must love Him too,
And trust in His redeeming blood,
And try His work to do."

(4) *Our Lord's Resurrection and the Forty Days.* In reading the story of the resurrection for devotional purposes it is not well to try to make a harmony of the four evangelists. It is better to take each of them separately and leave our minds open to the simplicity, beauty, and transparency of the words. This will win our confidence and render it impossible to suppose that there could be any guile in these truthful lips or any fanatical excitement in these calm eyes.

We ought by all means to endeavour to

put ourselves in the position of the disciples before the great discovery is made. Take for illustration the account in Mark, by many thought the earliest, and therefore the most obviously authentic. Observe how distant from the minds of the women who came at dawn to the sepulchre is any thought that they will see their Lord again—their bringing of spices for His anointing, and their discussing on the road the question, "Who shall roll us away the stone?" If, as some would suggest, they really went in a wild, excited state of mind, fully expecting to see their Lord again, how is it possible to account for these naïve touches? Had they had such faith as is attributed to them they would have gloried in it, for certainly they would be under no temptation to represent themselves as doubters. And the same impression is produced in all the other narratives. The bewilderment of Peter and John; the conduct of Mary at the grave; the conversation of the two on their way to Emmaus, all indicate the absence of faith and hope from the minds of the disciples, both men and women—nothing left but love.

It will be found an excellent plan to take one disciple at a time and try to enter as deeply as possible into his feelings, so as to

learn the special lessons from each separate case. Take as an illustration of this the lovely story of Mary at the Saviour's tomb. Follow the alternations of her emotion from blank despair to radiant joy, and realise that that which was her deepest wish when she came to the tomb would have been really the worst thing that could have happened, and that what filled her with dismay—the absence of her Lord's body—proved to be the very best thing she could have imagined. Here is a little poem entitled, "What if you had your wish?" which puts the lesson in a memorable way:—

"Oh, the anguish of Mary!
The depth of despair!
When she came to the tomb
And the Lord was not there;
As she desolate stood
With her balm and her myrrh,
And His winding sheet only
Was waiting for her.

Oh, the blackness of death!
Oh, life's utter despair!
Had she come to the tomb
And the Lord had been there;
Lying wrapped in a sheet
With the balm and the myrrh,
And no risen Redeemer
Was waiting for her."

In regard to the repeated appearances during the forty days and the strange manner of them, the chief thing to remember is that these forty days were a time of transition—a bridge between the manifestation in the flesh and the manifestation by the Spirit. It was a sort of blending of the material and the spiritual, only so much left of the material as to enable the disciples to be weaned from the old methods of communion and introduced gradually to the new and strange contact of spirit with spirit. This is no doubt the explanation of the *Noli me tangere*—“Touch me not.” If the risen Saviour had allowed the old manner of affectionate intercourse to return it would have been very pleasant, no doubt, for the forty days; but what would have been the consequence after? There would have been no preparation for the spiritual familiarity in the years that were to come. And in this lies the reason He gives why she should not touch Him: “Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended to My Father.” When I am ascended, then you will be able to embrace Me in the arms of your faith; and it is to strengthen these arms of your faith now that I ask you to disuse the arms which have clasped Me before. Oh, how true to the old Scripture:

“As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings, so the Lord did lead His people.” The just-developed and still all too unused wings were the wings of their faith. And just as the young bird that has been stirred out of the nest, all unaccustomed yet to the thin, ethereal air, is fain to rest herself on her mother’s wings, so with the disciples now for the first time learning the lesson of faith in the unseen Lord. Had the Lord disappeared at once, it would have been as if the mother eagle had stirred up her nest and then let the fledglings, all unaccustomed to the change, fall helplessly to the ground. Or, had He, on the other hand, allowed them to cling to Him as before, as Mary was about to do, it would have been as if the mother bird, instead of training them to use their wings, had allowed them to make another nest of her body, and when the time had come that she must shake them off they would be as helpless as before. But she does neither the one nor the other. She will not let them cling to her, but she will let them now and again alight, until at last they are strong enough to pierce the azure for themselves. Thus we find that though

Mary is not allowed to return to the old nest, the old presence is not entirely withdrawn from sight or touch until the muscles of the new faith can do their work and the disciples are prepared for following their risen Lord, up, up, up, as He goes out of their sight to His Father and their Father, to His God and their God!

May the Lord Himself teach us how to read these sacred Gospels, to read them so as to learn to keep His words, to make His promises our own, to lay to heart His warnings, to take home His consolations, to understand the deep significance of all His weighty words and mighty works, to enter into the fellowship of His sufferings, and to rise in faith with Him from the empty tomb to the throne of God.

VIII

HOW TO USE THE OTHER BOOKS

WE have spent so much time on the Psalms and the Gospels—the one the most important book in the Old Testament, the other the most important in the New—that we cannot deal with other books on the same scale, but must restrict ourselves to some general suggestions as to the devotional use of the rest of the Bible. For this purpose we may find it convenient to classify as follows: I. History and Biography; II. The Epistles; III. The Prophetical Books; and IV. The Poetical Books of the Old Testament, excluding the Psalms as already dealt with.

I. HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY. This is the prevailing type of the sacred Scriptures, the reason for which is obvious when we consider what is the great object of the Bible—namely, to reveal God as a merciful, loving

Saviour. The Bible certainly echoes what nature tells us of God's power and wisdom; it makes much clearer than nature does His goodness and righteousness; but no one can look intelligently over the whole Bible without seeing that the revelation of Divine love is its outstanding feature. Now, love is proved above all by deeds, and accordingly we have in the sacred Scriptures a long history of God's gracious doings from the first promise, given immediately after the story of the entrance of sin into the world, on to the culmination of all in the life and work, the sufferings and death, the resurrection and intercession of Christ our Lord.

It follows from this that in the devotional use of Bible history the first and most important thing is to observe how mercifully and patiently and lovingly God deals with nations and with men. There are some parts of the history very dark, as was to be expected, especially in the early ages of the world; but let us never forget that what is darkest and rudest and most horrible to read in the history of sinful men and nations only brings into stronger relief the patience of God, and excites the more our admiration to see how out of beginnings so rude and unpromising He prepared the way for the coming of the

Prince of Peace and Saviour of mankind, and the establishment of His kingdom of righteousness and peace and joy. On the other hand, the terrible things which harrow up our souls are part of the great lesson which we all so much need, especially in these easy-going days, of the horrible nature of sin and the unspeakable value of the work of Him who has come to take it away by the sacrifice of Himself.

The greater part of the Old Testament history is occupied with the story of God's dealings with His chosen people. It is important here to remember that Israel was chosen from among the nations, not as a matter of favouritism, not for the sake of one nation as distinguished from every other, but for the sake of the world at large, as is evident from the covenant made with Abraham, that in him and in his seed should all the nations of the earth be blessed. It is important, therefore, to remember as we read, that God is England's God as really and as fully as He was the God of Israel. The difference between the history of Israel and the history of England (or of any other country) is not that God had more interest in the one than in the other, more to do with Israel than He has with Britain. "There is

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no difference between the Jew and the Greek, for the same Lord is Lord over all, and is rich unto all that call upon Him." The great advantage of the history of Israel in the Old Testament and of the Church in the New is that each is set before us, as it were, in a transparency, so that we can see through it to the other side, and recognise at every turn the hand of God, which from the ordinary observer is hid; and, seeing the Divine working there, we are prepared for believing it in the necessarily opaque history of other nations, in the case of which we have not the hand of inspiration to remove the veil.

As we have said of the life of Jesus on the earth, so may we say of the history of Israel in the Old Testament and of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles, neither the one nor the other is a mere tale that is told, each is a revelation of God. The history of Israel is a revelation of the principles on which God deals with the nations of the earth; and the records of the early Church, brief and scanty as they are, are nevertheless sufficient to exhibit the principles on which God will deal with His Church right on to the end of time. It is of the greatest importance, then, that we should not fail to make application of what we read to our own

times, remembering what the Apostle says in looking back over the records of the past: "All these things happened unto them as ensamples, and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."

A great part of Bible history is made up of *biography*. This biographical method is perhaps the best for the impressive teaching of the history; but, besides this, the biographies of Scripture are of the greatest value for devotional and practical use. The main lessons of all the biographies fall into two great divisions, the good we ought to follow, and the evil we ought to shun—example on the one hand, warning on the other.

(1) *Example*. In this department the life of Christ stands alone as our perfect example, the ideal which we ought always to set before us as the goal of all our aspirations and endeavours. This we have already had before us when dealing with the Gospels. But it is of great advantage that we should have also before us the examples of men who are like ourselves, not only in being tempted, but also in not being always able to resist temptation. The life of Christ shows us what we ought to

be, what we should aim at, and what we expect to be after we have been made perfect ; but it does not show us what we may be now ; and if we had no inferior example before us, we should find it sorely discouraging. Hence the great importance to us of the lives of the saints, which show us not only what the grace of God did for them, but what it can do for us ; for “ God is no respecter of persons.” We are not at all entitled to expect that we can be as great as Abraham or Paul, but there is no reason why we should not be as good. “ By the grace of God I am what I am,” says the great Apostle ; and “ this grace abounded,” he says to Timothy, “ that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to them who should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting.” Whatever, then, of virtue or of grace we see in the lives even of the best of the saints, is possible for us. In this sense we ‘ can do all things through Christ strengthening us.’

With what eagerness and high hope, therefore, may we read of the noble deeds of those great ones of old, such deeds as are signalised by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in that great chapter in which he sets before us the trials and triumphs of the notable

heroes of faith. In order to gain the inspiration which comes from these great examples it is necessary to think out the whole situation, to realise as vividly as possible the circumstances and surroundings. Take, as an illustration of this, the choice of Moses. It is very briefly stated, scarcely more than suggested in the history, and the reference to it in the Epistle, though most striking, needs not a little thought to bring out the grandeur of the choice. There are two mothers claiming him, one a rich princess, the other a poor slave ; two homes, one a palace, the other a hovel ; two peoples, one the greatest nation in all the world, and not only so, but the greatest nation the world had ever seen, and in some respects greater than the world would ever see again, and on the other hand, a people that were no people, despised, down-trodden, enslaved ; two careers, one the very noblest and greatest the world could offer, that of a great man in a great country, in the highest offices of state, with chariots and horses and slaves, and unbounded luxury and pleasure, with people shouting after him as he drove along the streets, with possessions beyond the dreams of avarice, everything that heart could desire at his command, the other to enter on a work

which seemed hopeless, which brought him not to honour but to disgrace, which did not even secure him the esteem and affection of his own people, and which at every step was beset with difficulty and danger and trial and suffering. We must go through some such process of thinking as this before we can realise what a marvellous choice it was, what an inspiring example of faith in God, of seeing the invisible, of living by the powers of the unseen and eternal. Let this serve as a single illustration of how to catch the lofty inspiration which comes from some of the great examples.

(2) *Warning.* In this region we have lessons which we cannot get from the life of Christ. He is most faithful, indeed, in His *words* of warning, but there are no deeds of warning, no mistakes made, no sins committed. But in all the other biographies of Scripture we have the advantage of profiting by others' mistakes, and learning by their sins. And here we may, perhaps, profitably distinguish (*a*) between the faults and sins of the good, and (*b*) the wickedness of the bad.

(*a*) As to the former, it is important to remember that the very best are not perfect. It will not do to make the rough and most inaccurate division into sinners and saints,

expecting to find no good in the one and no evil in the other. We must not forget that even the greatest of the saints were men of like passions with ourselves, and had their alternations of mood and mind, their times of lapse, and sometimes even of grievous sin. We must not set them up as in a picture gallery, stiff and starched, with aureoles round their heads; we must re-clothe them in flesh and blood, and always bear in mind that, however different the circumstances of their life might be, their hopes and fears, their loves and hates, their joys and sorrows, their trials and triumphs were essentially the same as ours. Thus we shall get the full advantage of the chief distinction of our sacred biography, that it is strictly honest through and through, holding the mirror up to human nature, showing Mr. Hyde as well as Dr. Jekyll, and thus teaching the important lesson which so impresses the great Apostle in this connection: "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." On the other hand, how encouraging it is to many of us to find how much our God can make of unpromising people like Jacob, how thoroughly he will redeem a transgressor like David, and reinstate a fallen apostle like Peter. There is no biography to compare with it anywhere,

nowhere else such a revelation of the hidden things of the heart.

(*b*) As to the latter, the wickedness of the bad, the great lesson is the same as that suggested by the darker parts of the history, namely, the exceeding evil of sin, and its terrible consequences. Yet here, too, there is reason given why even the very worst need not despair, but may expect, on turning from sin unto God even at the eleventh hour, to be pardoned, welcomed, and restored, as was the thrice wicked king Manasseh.

II. THE EPISTLES. These are so closely connected with history and biography that we cannot get the full advantage of the one without taking the other in connection. The history is the key to the Epistles, and the Epistles throw light on the history.

It is quite possible, indeed, to make good devotional use of the Epistles in the same simple way that we have suggested in dealing with the Gospels, namely, to take precepts, promises, warnings, and so forth, and raise such questions as these: Am I keeping this commandment? Am I making this promise my own? Am I giving heed to this warning? and then pouring out our hearts in prayer that our lives may be brought more

thoroughly into harmony with the holy Word. Then there are the prayers and the thanksgivings and aspirations, which we ought by all means to take and make our own.

Or again, almost all the Epistles are divisible into the more doctrinal and more practical portions. When reading the doctrinal statements, the great questions will be such as these: Do I clearly comprehend this truth? Do I sufficiently realise it? Is it of the same interest and importance to me as it was to the Apostle? And if we have reason to fear that such questions cannot be satisfactorily answered, then is the time to pray for the illumination and guidance of the Spirit, and for the renewed impression of the truth upon the heart and life. In reading the more practical portion, the suggestions already given under the head of precepts, promises, and warnings, will readily apply.

As among the Psalms, so in the Epistles, we should have our favourite passages with which we are absolutely familiar, committing them to memory if possible. The reason why this is specially valuable in the use of the Epistles is that there, more than anywhere else in the Bible, have we that compression of thought and style which makes even a short passage of untold value for guiding our

meditations, especially in times of sickness, when we cannot read, but must fall back on what we can remember. As examples of such pemmican passages, let me refer to 1 Peter i. 3-9, and ii. 2-8; 1 John iii. 1-3; Jude 20, 21, 24, 25; Romans v. 1-11, and viii. 31-39; and so on through the other epistles of Paul. To have passages like these stored up in the memory is of unspeakable value as against those times which sooner or later are likely to come to us, when we are left for hours at a stretch to our own reflections, and in the use of which we shall be able to say, "In the multitude of my thoughts within me Thy comforts delight my soul."

But the most important suggestion we have to make as to the use of the Epistles is that we should endeavour, so far as possible, to enter into the soul of the writer, to consider not only what he says, but why he says it, and how he says it, to put the tone into his words and share the emotion with which he writes. This is especially important in reading the letters of Paul, that man of mighty soul. We should never forget that they are letters, not theological treatises; and that it is impossible to appreciate them, or even clearly to understand them, if we treat them as the utterances of a severe logician (as has been too often

done), and forget that they are the outpourings of a soul deeply moved by the great thoughts surging within it. This applies not only to the more personal letters like the first Epistle to the Thessalonians, with its fountains of tenderness, or the second to the Corinthians, with its unspeakable pathos, but even to the treatise-like Epistle to the Romans, the sounding of whose depths makes greater demands on the heart than on the head.

We must put the life into the letters if we would make the noblest and best use of this important division of Holy Scripture. As one illustration of this, let us glance at the first Epistle of Peter. It would have been of priceless value if it had been anonymous, but think how much it gains when we can put the soul of the man into it. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (i. 3),—a glorious utterance in itself, but how deeply it stirs the soul when read in the light of Peter's experience before and after the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. "Begotten again!" What a memory of new life from the dead lies behind these words! As an illustration from the second chapter, we may take that

great reference to Christ as the Rock on which the Church was built, in the light of what must have been his vivid recollection of the strong words spoken to him by his Lord at Cesarea Philippi. If only our Roman Catholic friends would learn of Peter himself, who surely must be the best authority on the subject, they would know that not on Peter, great man though he was, but on Peter's Lord, the Church is built (ii. 4-8). Passing to the third and fourth chapters, what a marvellous contrast from the old days when he came to his Master with the question, "Lord, we have forsaken all and followed Thee, what shall we have therefore?" There is not a shred or shadow of the mercenary spirit now. "If ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled, but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts" (iii. 14, 15); and again, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings. . . . If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part He is evil spoken of, but on your part He is glorified" (iv.

12-14). Ah, Peter, you are begotten again, or you could not write like that! One more illustration, from the fifth chapter: "All of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" (v. 5). What additional force is given to such a summons by the knowledge of the old, forward, proud, self-confident spirit of the man; and the same may be said of the solemn warning which immediately follows: "Be sober, be vigilant: because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour: whom resist, stedfast in the faith" (v. 8). He does not tell again the old story of his fall; but it is there. And when we remember what happened on the shore of the lake, when the Chief Shepherd called him to feed His lambs, when the Bishop of his soul gave him the charge of other souls, we can catch a deeper pathos in the words: "We were as sheep going astray; but are now returned to the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls" (ii. 25).

What a book of life this Bible of ours is, of throbbing, pulsating life! Let us only lay our lives alongside the life that is always there, and we shall fully understand what another great Apostle,—the Apostle of thunder and

lightning in the early days, the Apostle of love now,—means when he tells us in his first epistle of the Life that was manifested to him and his fellow apostles, shared by them, and by them passed on to be shared by us (1 John i. 1-3); or in the briefer form in which he puts it in his Gospel: "In Him was life; and the life was the light of men."

III. THE PROPHETS. There has been so much light thrown on the writings of the prophets by recent investigation that we are in a much better position than ever before for understanding and appreciating their stirring messages. The reading of the Old Testament prophets has too often been, even for intelligent Christians, like a journey through the desert—with many an oasis, indeed, by the way: Elims with their shady trees and wells of water, where the travellers have been refreshed and comforted—yet, on the whole, a barren land; but now that Scripture has been compared with Scripture with so much care, and the full light of history and biography has been cast upon the prophetic word, it is possible for us to see the meaning of almost every line; and while the majesty of the whole of it is recognised as never before, the beauty of the old

familiar passages is still more exquisite now that we see not only the diamond, but its setting.¹ All we can do, however, in our limited space is to set forth some general considerations which ought always to be kept in mind in our devotional and practical use of the prophetic word.

(1) Prophecy is not so much foretelling as forth-telling. The early references to the prophetic office have no relation to future events. We are told (Exodus vii. 1) that Aaron was appointed to be to Moses as a prophet to God, and what that meant is expressly stated: "He shall be thy spokesman unto the people; and it shall come to pass that he shall be to thee a mouth, and thou shalt be to him as God." And this is really the etymological meaning of the word "prophet." It comes from two Greek words signifying to *speak before*; but the "before" does not mean in time, but in place. In the

¹ See as examples of this the tender close of the Book of Hosea after such terrible denunciations of Israel's iniquity; and the majesty and beauty of the hymn of Habakkuk, which comes singing out of the midst of the horrors of the Chaldean invasion, closing with, perhaps, one of the noblest expressions of glad trust in God that has ever been found in human language.

case of Aaron, for example, it is clear that it was not his function to predict future events, but simply to stand before Moses—that is, in front of him—to deliver his message to the people. So a prophet of the Lord is one who stands before the Lord, speaking to men in His name as His interpreter or mouth. What he says will, of course, be something of importance, for God would not employ a prophet to make known a trivial matter ; but it is just as likely to be of the past or of the present as of the future. The greatest of the prophets of the Old Testament was Moses (Deut. xxxiv. 10), and the greatest of all the prophets was our Lord Jesus ; but in both cases the prediction of future events was but a fractional part of their prophesying. The prophets were sent with messages from God, and, even when these messages concerned the future, the essence of the prophecy did not lie in the simple futurity of the thing prophesied, but in its value as a message from God.

(2) The messages of the prophets were, in the first instance, addressed to the people of the time—but only in the first instance. Their application was not confined to the people of the time. In the first place history repeats itself, and the message given to a nation at

one period may be equally suitable to other nations at corresponding periods. In the next place, and more particularly, "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy," as we are expressly told in the Apocalypse; and the Apostle Peter represents the prophets as "searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow." Thus it is that all the prophecies bear more or less closely on the revelation of Christ. They differ endlessly in form, but the spirit of them all is the same. From different quarters these lines of prophecy come, and in different directions they move, but to the same centre they all converge; and however varied in colour and complexion they may seem to be apart, yet when viewed in their relation to each other, and in their combinations, they are found to meet in the pure white light of the testimony of Jesus.

But while all this is true and most important, yet it must not be forgotten that in the first instance the prophecies were addressed to the people of the time. Hence, in order to understand them aright and apply them aright, it is necessary that, so far as possible, we put ourselves in the position of the pro-

phet who speaks and of the people he is addressing. There may have been much in the Divine message which they could not fully understand, much which the future only could make quite clear; but we must not allow ourselves to suppose that any message sent by God to the people meant nothing to them. It would have been mockery to send them messages from which it was utterly impossible for them to extract any meaning. The first and most important thing for us to do, therefore, is to find out the meaning the prophet intended to convey to his audience. It is the neglect of this simple and obvious principle which has led to most of the wild extravagances which have disgraced the history of prophetic and apocalyptic interpretation. By assuming that the message meant nothing to the people of the time, we can make it mean anything we please to the people of later times. But when we feel constrained to keep before us the writer and his readers, though we are kept within bounds, they are the bounds of truth and soberness. And when we find the unveiling of the future arising naturally out of the message for the time, it is much more impressive than if we think of it as a formal prediction of future events. As an illustration of this we may

refer to those wonderful prophecies of the coming Christ as suggested by the position of Joshua, the high priest, in the time of Zechariah (iii., and vi. 9-15); and an interesting attempt to work out the psychology of prophetic inspiration will be found in Browning's "Saul," especially that passage which culminates in the impressive climax, "See the Christ stand!"

(3) The great object of the prophecies is the same as that of all the other Scriptures: they are given "for doctrine, and reproof, and correction, and instruction in righteousness." The ethical and evangelical motive, supreme here as everywhere else, has too often been lost sight of by readers of this portion of God's holy Word, as we shall presently see.

(a) There are those who imagine that the main use of the prophecies is to convince unbelievers of the truth of the Scriptures. The consequence is a feeling of disappointment, which probably increases the longer and the more closely the prophecies are studied. For one cannot but feel how easily they might have been made much more suitable to secure that end. If they had just been a little more precise in facts and dates and more circumstantial in detail! If, for example, some prophet had only specified

the Russo-Japanese war and mentioned what would be the issue of it, how convincing it would have been! It would take us too much out of our sphere to attempt to calculate what effect this might have had on the Stock Exchange, and on sundry other affairs of human speculation and administration; it is enough simply to remark that there is in the prophetic word just as little attempt to gratify those who wish to know beforehand what is going to happen, as there is in the Bible history of the past to anticipate the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is not on isolated events that the prophecies fix our attention, but on great principles of the Divine government. When details are referred to, it is not as a rule for their own sake, but simply as illustrations of, or accessories to, the great thought which constitutes the soul of the prophecy. The prophecies are like great pictures with a grand meaning written large on the face of them; and it too often happens with the one as with the other, that some little bit of detail which was intended only to contribute to the general result will be injudiciously and inartistically separated from the rest and brought into a prominence which entirely misrepresents the mind of the author

of the work. Thus it is that the work of a great painter may be reduced to what all men of soul regard as mere trifling ; and by a similar process a magnificent prophecy, full of soul, full of "the testimony of Jesus" which is "the spirit of prophecy," may be reduced to a pitiful patchwork of divination. In this way grievous injustice is often done to the prophetic word, and in some cases probably, unbelievers are even confirmed in their unbelief by finding the prophecies so very different from what they would naturally expect them to be on the supposition that the main use of them is to furnish evidence of the truth of the book which contains them.

(*b*) While we remember that it is not by any means the chief object of prophecy, but a mere incidental one, to prove the truth of Scripture, we must also bear in mind that it is not its object *at all* to gratify a prying curiosity. If we come to the prophecies for edification—for doctrine, and reproof, and correction, and instruction in righteousness—we shall not be disappointed ; but if our object is to discover when the world is coming to an end, or what is likely or unlikely to happen in the next ten or twenty years, we shall spend our strength in vain. "It is not for us to know the times and the

seasons, which the Father hath placed in His own power." And it is just because the great use of the prophecies is the edification of believers that these things are concealed. Suppose that some one could tell us now that the world would come to an end in 1910, with the same assurance and with more truth than those who told us it would come to an end in 1866, or any other of the numerous dates that have been confidently published for this interesting event, would it tend to our edification? Does any one suppose we should be better Christians if we were told, by one who could tell us, the exact date when our Lord shall come the second time without sin unto salvation? Is it not far better for us to know the certainty of His coming, with uncertainty as to time; to know simply that "the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night," and that in view of its so coming it is our duty and privilege to watch and wait and look for Him?

(4) The fulfilment of predictive prophecy is for the most part not absolute but conditional. Prophecy has its two sides: its side of promise, and its side of threatening. In this respect it resembles the Gospel. And as it is in the Gospel at large so is it here: the threatening is addressed to all who come

within the scope of it ; the promise is for those, and those only, who come within *its* scope, that is, those who yield themselves to God in loyal devotion.

It follows that a promise made to people that lived long ago may be fulfilled to people living now, for the simple reason that God is unchangeable, and therefore is always consistent with Himself in His dealings with men. It is never a case of mere favouritism or the reverse. There is always a large principle involved. Hence it is that the promise to Abraham holds good for all his spiritual descendants. As the Apostle puts it : "If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." On the other hand, a threatening unfulfilled is no breach of the prophetic word, if in the meantime there have been that change on the part of those against whom the threatening is addressed which justifies its withdrawal. The case of Nineveh is a familiar one. Jonah was commanded to go and proclaim : "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed." Meantime, however, the people repented, and Nineveh was not destroyed. This principle is in fact laid down in so many words by the Prophet Jeremiah (xviii. 7-10).

All this is quite in keeping with what we

have so earnestly contended for, that the prophecies were given not for the sake of letting people know beforehand what was going to happen, but for the sake of doing them good. Suppose the people of Nineveh had not repented, and the great city had been destroyed in forty days, it would have been quite legitimate to appeal to the fact as an incidental confirmation of the prophetic word ; but even in that case the object of the prophecy would have been the same, namely, to warn the Ninevites and give them the opportunity of repenting. There are prophecies, indeed, which are absolute from the nature of the case, such as the great prophecy of the coming of Christ, both of His first coming and of His second coming ; but very many are, like the Gospel itself—with which, in fact, they are in substance identical—conditioned on character, and therefore addressed to faith. They who are of faith are heirs of the promises ; while the unbelieving and disobedient are heirs of the threatenings of the prophetic word.

It is clear from all that has been said that we cannot get the full devotional use of the prophets without a good deal of study ; but any labour we may expend on it will be well

repaid. We shall enjoy the old, familiar passages more than ever, and we shall be inspired with the lofty patriotism, the passion for righteousness, and the zeal for God which thrill in pages where formerly, by reason of historical and local allusions then unintelligible, we were quite unable to find our way.

IV. THE POETICAL BOOKS, with the exception of the Book of Psalms, which has been already considered as *par excellence* the book of devotion. The greater part of the prophecies are in poetry also, but the pentateuch in the centre of the Bible, consisting of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, may be conveniently classed under the heading we have given; though, as applied to the Book of Proverbs, it is the form rather than the substance which claims the title.

While one book of this central pentateuch, the Book of Psalms, is pre-eminently useful for devotional purposes, the other four lend themselves to this purpose less than any other books of the sacred Scriptures. Still those who have learned to use the simpler parts will find here valuable material, especially for certain moods of mind.

The Book of *Proverbs* consists almost wholly of plain, practical maxims for the general guidance of life, and may therefore be dealt with in the devotional hour much in the same way as the precepts of Christ and His apostles, only we must not put them exactly on the same level. At times there is the very highest standard lifted up, but as a rule they represent the sanctified common sense of the Hebrew sage, who has been moved of the Spirit to give us these wise sayings.

The Book of *Job* is concerned with the subject of human suffering, from the point of view of the man of God bewildered with the mystery of pain. It abounds in noble passages of which high use can be made in our devotional hours; but we need to bear in mind the limitations of the speakers. It will not do to take everything said by the friends of Job, or even by Job himself, as direct messages from God to us. They are all groping more or less in the dark—the very thing which makes the book valuable to us who have our times of groping and perplexity, when we need just such help as comes to us from the experience of those tried in like manner. And when we have passed through the drifting fogs of the body of the book, we are

prepared for welcoming with special delight the clear sunshine in the end, when from out the whirlwind of conflicting thought the voice of God is heard.

The Book of *Ecclesiastes* sets before us an entirely different phase of thought and feeling. The mystery of the world's evil is still with us, but we are following, not now the gropings of the suffering saint, but the wild wanderings of the ungodly man, who has sought his satisfaction in all directions in which the world seems to offer it, and finds only vanity and vexation of spirit. It is the sceptic's book, and its value lies in its marvellous representation of the phases of thought and feeling through which a man will pass who turns his back on God, and shuts his eyes to the things which are unseen and eternal. Here, then, above all we must beware of taking the teaching of the different parts of the book as the word of God to us. It has come to us by inspiration of God as other Scriptures have, but not for the purpose of teaching the truth of God, but rather of showing into what depths of pessimism and despair a man will fall who sets his heart upon the world and the things of it. Here again, after the dark tunnel through which we pass, we emerge into daylight in the end,

and find the secret of true life in the fear of God and the keeping of His commandments.

The *Song of Solomon* has been a favourite book of devotion with many advanced Christians. It may have been in its original intention a marriage song, for certainly it is not at all beneath the dignity of Scripture to celebrate the love between a true man and a true woman ; but in view of the repeated use of the marriage tie to symbolise the bond between Christ and His Church, it cannot be said that those are wrong who make use of appropriate passages in this book to express the love between the Lord Jesus, the heavenly bridegroom, and His earthly bride, the Church. Nevertheless, we think that as a book of devotion it is suitable only for the advanced Christian ; and that, therefore, it is in its right place here among the books which are the more difficult to use in the best way, and so to be adopted as a book of devotion only after we have made large and full use of those Scriptures where we have a surer footing.

And now, as we conclude our rapid survey of the books of the Bible, we must surely be impressed afresh with the wonderful variety which is provided for our daily food and

refreshment. Almost infinitely varied as are our moods and needs, there is a corresponding boundlessness in the supply; and we can see how by the use of these Scriptures not only may the sinner become "wise unto salvation," but the man of God may become "complete, furnished completely unto every good work."

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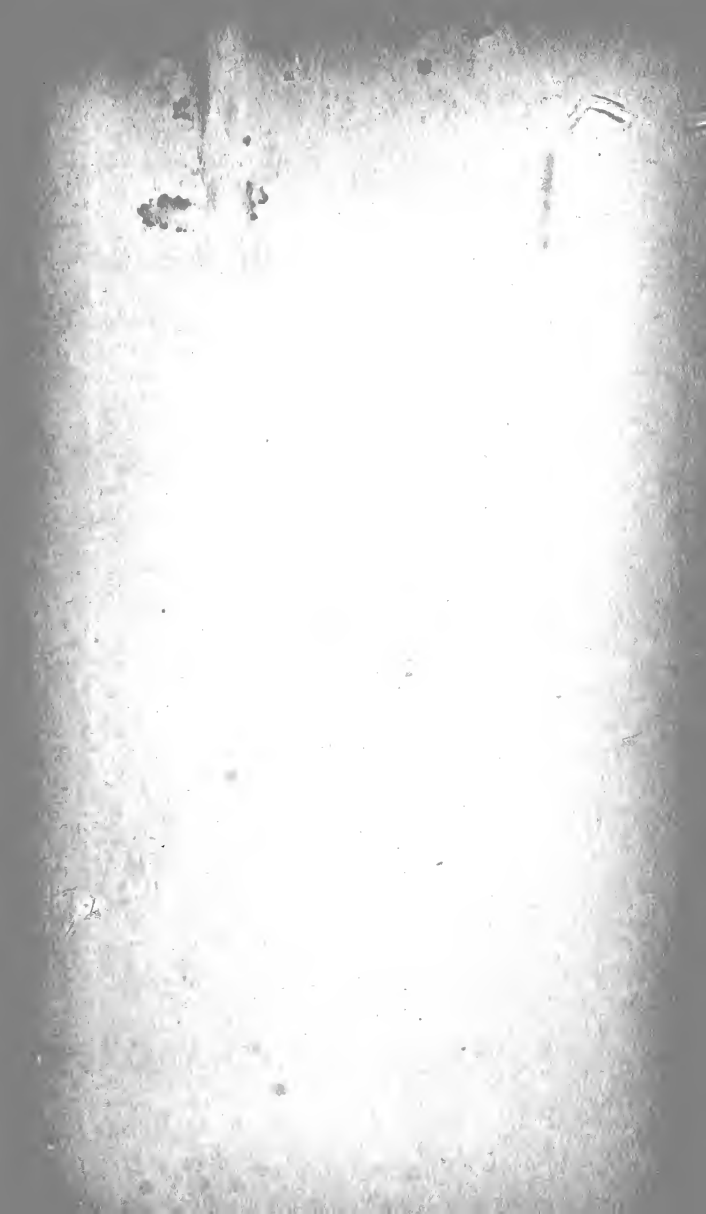
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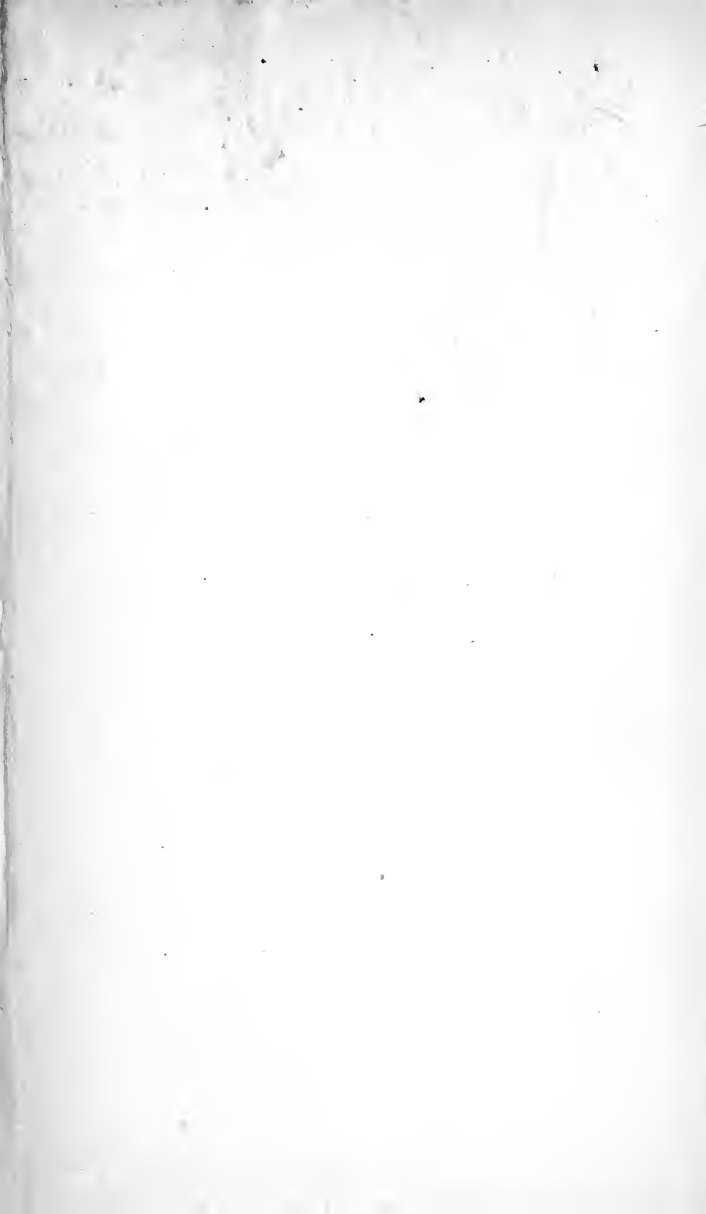
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