Practical Exposition of the Book of Ecclesiastes

T. Campbell Finlayson

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES.


VITA · SINE · LITERIS · MORS · EST

THE MEDITATIONS AND MAXIMS

OF

KOHELETH

A PRACTICAL EXPOSITION

OF

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

BY

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PREFACE

THE following pages contain the substance of a series of lectures delivered in 1883–4 to my own congregation. They are an attempt to expound, in the light of modern scholarship and criticism, and yet in a popular and practical manner, one of the most difficult books of the Bible. I cannot lay claim to any personal scholarship enabling me to make an independent study of the book. Mine is the humbler task of endeavouring to popularize the scholarship of others, to acquaint the ordinary reader of Ecclesiastes with the results which have been arrived at by some recent critics and interpreters, and at the same time to bring home to the heart and conscience the practical teaching of the book, as confirmed, modified, and supplemented by the later and fuller teaching of the Christian revelation.

The Commentaries to which I have been chiefly indebted are those of Ginsburg, Zöckler, Delitzsch, Dean Plumptre, and Dr. C. H. H. Wright. Where such scholars agree in their interpretation of the original, I have felt myself on safe ground. When they differ as to the meaning of obscure passages,

I have been compelled to choose, after careful thought, those interpretations which, on the whole, commended themselves to my own mind. I have not cared, however, except in one or two special instances, to trouble the reader with the grounds of such choice, or even with the various interpretations from amongst which my choice has been made.

In the preparation of my lectures for the press, I have availed myself of the Revised Version, which has appeared since they were delivered: and I have now to thank the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge for permission to cite that Version as the basis of my exposition. I am glad and somewhat relieved to find that, after having followed the method above described, I am able, as a rule, to adhere closely to the renderings given by the Revisers, either in their text or in their margin.

It is with some regret that I have found myself unable to accept Dr. Ginsburg's view as to the plan and method of Ecclesiastes. He regards the book as a systematic discussion of the *summum bonum*, or "chief good" of human life; and, in his masterly and exhaustive commentary, he endeavours to trace the course of the argument along which, as he supposes, the writer advances by definite steps towards the final solution of the problem. This theory of the book has been adopted by Dr. Samuel Cox, who, in his "Quest of the Chief Good," has throughout followed Ginsburg's views closely, and has presented them with his accustomed literary skill and

power of illustration. The theory is at first sight fascinating; but I do not think that any special learning is required in order to justify its rejection. Doubtless the idea of the "chief good" was an idea virtually familiar to the mind of Ecclesiastes; but, after careful study, I find myself unable to regard the book as a treatise on any one subject; and it is only by a process more ingenious than successful that it can be made even to assume the form of a systematic argument.

Dean Plumptre's most interesting and suggestive commentary, to which I am under special obligation, is admirably fitted to give fresh zest to the study of Ecclesiastes. It may be the case that, in his "ideal biography" of the author, he has (as Dr. Wright complains) allowed his imagination to play somewhat too freely around very slender materials. Nevertheless I have ventured to adopt his main supposition, that the book has in it an autobiographical element; for many of its utterances are marked by an intensity which seems to indicate that they are the record of a personal experience.

I have also had the benefit of reading Dean Bradley's "Lectures on Ecclesiastes," more recently published. I am glad to see that he discards the idea of the Solomonic authorship, and that he refuses to regard the book as being either a systematic treatise or a dialogue between "two voices." I also admire the faithfulness with which he resists what he calls the "clerical" temptation to make Ecclesiastes

speak as a Christian, for purposes of edification; but I cannot help thinking that his extreme caution in this respect has led him to take a somewhat too sombre view of the character and contents of the book.

Professor Cheyne, in his "Job and Solomon," just published, has also presented what I hope is an unnecessarily dark view of Ecclesiastes. Not only does he regard those passages which speak of a future life and a future judgment as being probably interpolations by a later hand, but he also (as it seems to me) depreciates the significance of that reverent recognition of God which pervades the book, and which sometimes stands in close and striking connection with the writer's commendation of cheerful enjoyment. If Professor Cheyne's view of Ecclesiastes were accepted, I think we should find it very difficult to justify the retention of the book in the Canon of Scripture.

I have only to add that, in the following pages, I have not been too anxious to avoid repetitions of thought and expression. The frequent recurrence of certain ideas, and even phrases, is a characteristic feature of the original book; and perhaps it is as desirable as it is natural that this feature should be reflected, to some extent, in a consecutive exposition.

T. C. F.

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I.

INTRODUCTION.

CHAP. I. 1 (*Revised Version*) :—

"*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*"

THE Book of Ecclesiastes is a book which at once repels and attracts the ordinary Christian reader. Its utterances often appear to be inconsistent with each other; and some of them seem to be the utterances of a sceptic, rather than of a believer in God—the maxims of a worldling, rather than the aspirations of a saint. We have perhaps wondered how such a book can have any fitting place in the Holy Scriptures. Those scholars, moreover, who have carefully studied the book have interpreted many of its passages so differently, and have even arrived at such diverse conclusions as to its main drift and purpose, that an ordinary reader might almost be excused in regarding it as an insoluble enigma. On the other hand, it will scarcely be denied that the book—partly on account of its very discords and mazes of thought—is fitted to exercise a peculiar fascination over the mind. Many of its utterances appeal to the most unlearned reader, and justify themselves to his reason and conscience as being wise, true, and good. Other utterances appeal to us as stating certain problems of life and destiny which have taxed the minds of the world's greatest thinkers, and which occasion more or less perplexity to every

man who thinks seriously at all. Whilst other utterances, again, strike us as being echoes of darker moods—moods, perhaps, not altogether unfamiliar to ourselves—transient moods, it may be, in which doubt has threatened to eclipse faith, whilst sorrow, disappointment, or sin has created a temporary gloom within the soul. Then, too, the conclusion of the book, "Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man," seems to furnish us, after all, with such a clear and simple clue to the main purpose of the writer, as to justify the belief that, whatever difficulties of interpretation the book may present, its ultimate aim is to foster the life of godliness and virtue. On these grounds—as well as on the ground that some light has been thrown on the book by recent interpreters—I venture to hope that a careful study of its contents, in the light of modern scholarship and criticism, may be both interesting and profitable.

The title of the book, as it stands in our version, is "Ecclesiastes, or The Preacher." "Ecclesiastes" is a Greek word, and is the title which the book bears in the Septuagint—the Greek version of the Old Testament. This Greek word "Ecclesiastes" was chosen as an equivalent for "Koheleth," the Hebrew title of the book. "Koheleth" is the name by which, throughout the book, the writer designates himself. The word is uniformly translated "Preacher" in our version; but whether it can possibly bear this meaning seems to be doubtful. The Hebrew word

occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament, and seems to have been coined by the writer himself. Some scholars, looking at its derivation, maintain that it must mean either "one who gathers an assembly," or "one who is a member of an assembly." If the latter be the meaning, then the word "Ecclesiastes" is an exact equivalent; for it appears that this Greek word was not commonly used in the sense of one who calls an assembly together, or of one who preaches to an assembly, but rather of one who was simply a member of an assembly and took part in its deliberations and debates. Indeed, it has been suggested that "Debater," rather than "Preacher," would be the true English equivalent of the Greek "Ecclesiastes" and the Hebrew "Koheleth." And it has been suggested also that the reason why the writer deliberately coined the Hebrew word was just that he might present himself, not as a preacher or prophet who was prepared to give definite or authoritative deliverances on the problems of life and destiny, but rather as one member of an assembly, whose personal experience qualified him, in a special manner, for discussing such subjects, and who had often debated them both with himself and with others. It must, I think, be acknowledged that this interpretation of the title of the book agrees well with the character of its contents. But, inasmuch as the meaning of the word "Koheleth" seems to be still doubtful, I prefer simply to use it—or rather its more familiar Greek equivalent—as a kind of proper name,

or *nom de plume*. I will therefore constantly speak of the author of the book as "Ecclesiastes."

The superscription of the book represents it as containing the words of Solomon, "the son of David, king in Jerusalem." It does not, however, follow either that the book was written by Solomon, or that the writer, in putting his utterances into the mouth of Solomon, was guilty of a literary forgery or fraud. Many, indeed, have taken the representation of the book literally, and have supposed that we have here actually the "Confessions" of King Solomon, in his later days, when looking back with penitence on the sensualities and follies of his life. But there are several difficulties in the way of this supposition. We read in the First Book of Kings that it was when Solomon was "old" that he was led astray through the influence of his wives; but we do not read of any subsequent repentance. Then, again, this book of Ecclesiastes makes no reference whatsoever to the sin of idolatry, which it would probably have done if it had contained the veritable confessions of the penitent king. Then, too, Solomon himself would scarcely have written—"I, Ecclesiastes, was king over Israel," seeing that, during his lifetime, he never ceased to be king; nor is it likely that, in mentioning the various works which he had done, he would have omitted all reference to the magnificent temple which he had erected. Further, those scholars who have studied the original language of the book tell us that it contains many

words or forms of words which are found only in the later Hebrew literature. On these and several other grounds it is now the general opinion of competent critics that Solomon was not the author of the book, and that it cannot well have been written before the time when the Jews were under the dominion of the Persian monarchy. Some scholars place its composition at even a later date than this. They say that it contains clear indications of the influences both of the Stoic and the Epicurean philosophies; they affirm that it is "saturated with Greek thought and language;" and they think, therefore, that it was probably written about two hundred years before the Christian era.

But it may be asked: If this book was written during either the Persian or the Greek period, how can we regard with any respect an unknown author putting his utterances into the lips of Solomon, who had lived hundreds of years before him? How can we regard such a man as in any sense inspired? or how can we justify the retention of his book in the canon of sacred Scripture?

Now, here it is to be noted that there is an essential difference in literature between a dramatic personation and a fraudulent forgery. There is no evidence that the author of this book wished his contemporaries to believe that it was an ancient document written by Solomon. On the contrary, we cannot doubt that if he had wished this, he would have taken pains to choose forms of language

belonging to the Solomonic period, and to avoid words of later date. He would doubtless also, in this case, have introduced allusions to well-known events of Solomon's reign. But there is every reason to believe that the contemporaries of Ecclesiastes would know well enough that his introduction of the name of Solomon into his book was a mere matter of literary form. In all ages, men have chosen this species of literature as a vehicle for the expression of their own thoughts, or of their conceptions of what other men may have thought or felt or said. The Book of Job, for example, is not a reporter's record of dialogues which actually took place; the dramatic form is simply the literary setting in which the writer puts the truth he has to teach. The dialogues of Plato are specimens of a similar kind of writing. A popular specimen in our own language is the "Breakfast-Table" series of Oliver Wendell Holmes. And, as we have dramatic dialogue, so we may have dramatic monologue or autobiography. Some of our modern works of fiction have been written in this form. The object is not to deceive, but simply to portray characters or events more vividly, or to convey ideas more impressively. The device is a common one in poetry. Tennyson's "Maud" and "St. Simeon Stylites" are specimens of this dramatic monologue. It is also a favourite mode of writing with Robert Browning: he places himself by imagination in the position of this or that character, and represents him as speaking in this or that fashion.

Those, again, who have read a recent work of fiction, entitled "Onesimus," will recognize what a striking use may be made of imaginary autobiography in the way of conveying to a reader the author's own ideas and conjectures. And in like manner, doubtless, Ecclesiastes, in putting his utterances into the mouth of Solomon, meant simply to say to his readers: "This is how I conceive that Solomon himself *might* have spoken, if he had left behind him the records of his personal experience. He was a great and wise king; his knowledge was most extensive and varied; he had such a reputation for human wisdom that he might almost be regarded as Wisdom personified. His position gave him exceptional opportunities for the study of human life. He possessed many things which other men spend their lifetime in coveting; his material resources furnished him with an adequate practical laboratory in which to carry on his experiments in human happiness. His inner experiences, too, were diversified; he had at different times looked out upon the world with the eye of the saint, of the philosopher, and of the sensualist. And this is how I conceive he might have spoken if, as a wise and thoughtful man, he had given us the result of his study, observation, and experience of human life." Now, we may perhaps wonder at the boldness of this literary device on the part of Ecclesiastes; but we have no right to accuse him of forgery or deception; and we can easily see how he might seek to give greater weight and impressiveness to his own

utterances by putting them, in this dramatic way, into the mouth of that king whose very name was almost regarded as a synonym for wisdom, but of whom it was nevertheless well known that he had been guilty of practical folly in the conduct of his life. And if the Bible teaches and helps us by means of history, and biography, and lyric, and proverb, and prophecy, and dramatic dialogue, and epistle, and allegory, why should it not also teach and help us by means of dramatic monologue?

Perhaps, however, the desire to give to his own utterances greater weight and impressiveness was not the only reason which led Ecclesiastes to choose this literary form of dramatic personation. Another and perhaps the chief reason may have been that he wished, under this thin disguise, to present the substance of his own personal experience. We can scarcely read the book without feeling that the author, whoever he was, is giving us the fruits of his own experiments in human conduct and happiness. The book is not so much a work of imagination, as a fragment of autobiography. Now, a writer sometimes feels that he can record with greater freedom his own experiences—his sins and follies, his doubts, speculations, and conclusions—when he can put them into the lips of some other person. Thomas Carlyle's "Sartor Resartus," for example, is a case in point. It is now well known that in that book, Carlyle, under the literary veil of giving us some account of the life and opinions of an imaginary

German Professor, actually puts on record some of the details of his own experience. The fictitious autobiography of the Professor is largely founded on certain circumstances and incidents of Carlyle's own earlier life; whilst the account which is given of the Professor's inner experience is really an account of Carlyle's own mental and spiritual struggles at a certain crisis in his history. There are also, I think, other points of resemblance between "Sartor Resartus" and "Ecclesiastes;" as, for example, their enigmatical aspect, their strange paradoxes, their outspoken confessions of doubt and perplexity, and their attempt to find some practical mode of satisfactory living, even in front of and amid the unsolved problems of the world. But what I wish specially to point out is that Carlyle evidently records his own experiences and conclusions with much more freedom and power under the peculiar literary form which he has chosen, than if he had attempted to write a veritable autobiography. And we can easily believe that the same may have been the case with the author of "Ecclesiastes." We are not to think of him as merely sitting down to conceive, by an effort of the imagination, how Solomon, with his wisdom and experience, might have philosophized on human life. No; Ecclesiastes had doubtless a desire to put on record the results of *his own* observations, meditations, and experiences. In all probability he was himself a wealthy man, and had been able to indulge without stint in

luxury and pleasure. Possibly he had at times given himself up to sensual excesses. Probably also he had himself been a seeker after "wisdom;" and perhaps he had tried to weigh in the balance the claims of rival schools of philosophy. He had attempted to grapple with the problems of life and destiny; he had meditated much on the strange anomalies of human history; he had tried in vain to frame a satisfactory theory as to the Divine government of the world. He had been tossed to and fro between one opinion and another; many a time had he "communed with himself" as to what was really the "chief good" for man; he had made his own personal experiments on this subject; he had tried to find out what kind of life brings to a man the greatest amount of substantial "profit"; he had exhausted the sources of what many men regard as happiness, and had found them unsatisfying; and at last, as the fruit of his life-long experience, he had been led to a "conclusion" which he was prepared to commend to others, as a practical key to the wisest mode of living. But he felt that he could speak with greater freedom concerning his own experiments and experiences—his own doubts and self-debatings and conclusions—if he presented them under the literary veil of the confessions, meditations, and maxims of Solomon the wise.

Now, if this be anything like an accurate conception of the authorship, the character, and the pur-

pose of this book of Ecclesiastes, it is obvious that we need not regard it as a systematic treatise, or try to discover in it any closely-reasoned argument. The chief value of the book lies in the record which it gives of a human experience—the experience of a man who had exceptional opportunities of testing the worth of human life in its various aspects and pursuits, and of debating the great question as to what is the "chief good" for man. In studying the book we must constantly bear in mind two things: first, that it was probably written at least two thousand years ago—written before the gospel of Christ had shed on the world the light of a higher revelation; and secondly, that the utterances of the writer, even in his better moods, are largely tinged by his own personal history—by the kind of life which he had chosen to live. But, if we bear in remembrance these two things, we may perhaps even find that this book has some special lessons for our own times. There is an "Agnosticism" now abroad, the motto of which is "Who knows?"—who knows whether there is a personal God?—who knows whether there is a future life? Men who shut out of view the Christian revelation are asking themselves, "Is life worth living?" Some are drifting into Pessimism, taking the darkest views of human nature and human life. Others protest vigorously against this Pessimism; like M. Rénan, who has recently told us that he has found life to be "a charming promenade," and that he considers this

age to be one of the "most amusing" which the world has ever seen! Some preach the gospel of work; others preach the gospel of art and culture. Some lean to the Stoic, and others to the Epicurean philosophy. Some tell us to give up thinking of "happiness," and to keep our eye fixed on "duty"; others tell us that our duty consists in doing those actions which tend to promote "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." Amid these conflicting voices of our own day, it may do us some good to study the self-debatings and maxims of this ancient Jewish thinker on the ever-recurring problems of human life; and perhaps we may find that the ultimate "conclusion" to which his thinkings tended is, substantially, the most satisfactory practical conclusion to which we ourselves can come, provided only it be supplemented and ennobled by that higher light which he had not yet received—"the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

II.

THE VANITY AND MONOTONY OF LIFE.

CHAP. I. 2–11 (*Revised Version*) :—

"*Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What profit hath man of all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun? One generation goeth, and another generation cometh; and the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he ariseth. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it turneth about continually in its course, and the wind returneth again to its circuits. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place whither the rivers go, thither they go again. All things are full of weariness; man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. That which hath been is that which shall be; and that which hath been done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there a thing whereof men say, See, this is new? it hath been already, in the ages which were before us. There is no remembrance of the former generations; neither shall there be any remembrance of the latter generations that are to come, among those that shall come after.*"

THE book opens with the exclamation "Vanity of vanities! vanity of vanities! all is vanity!" This same exclamation recurs at the close of the book; and the word "vanity," which the writer uses nearly forty times, must be regarded as one of the keynotes of his utterance. The Hebrew word means literally "breath" or "vapour," a very natural and striking emblem of that which is transitory and unsubstantial. We have the same figure employed in the New Testament, with reference to the fleeting character of our earthly existence. "What is your life?" asks St. James. "It is even a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." The manner in which vapour, visible for a time, seems to melt into the surrounding air, suggests the idea of what is unsubstantial and perishable. Sometimes, too, vapour assumes the form of that which it is not, of that which is more solid than itself.

> "Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish:
> A vapour, sometime, like a bear or lion,
> A tower'd citadel, a pendant rock,
> A forked mountain, or blue promontory
> With trees upon 't, that nod unto the world,
> And mock our eyes with air. . . .

> That which is now a horse, even with a thought
> The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct
> As water is in water."

And when Ecclesiastes exclaims, "Vanity of vanities!" or "Vapour of vapours!" he means, I suppose, to say that all human life and all things "under the sun"—or, as we say, all things sublunary—present, in a superlative degree, the characteristics of the shadowy, the transient, the unsatisfying.

Ecclesiastes goes on to ask the question, "What profit hath man of all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun?" The Hebrew word for "profit" here is a word which, it seems, is used in none of the other books of the Old Testament. It is used, however, several times by Ecclesiastes. It was probably a commercial word which had come into use during the later period of Jewish history. Ecclesiastes wishes, as it were, to "strike the balance" of human life. On the one side he would set all the toil, sorrow, and anxiety of man; on the other he would set all that man gets and gains in and through earthly things; and, striking the balance, he would ask, What is the profit? What is the net result to the man at last? Are the wages a sufficient reward for the toil? Is the gain worth the expenditure of thought and energy and suffering? The question is much the same as that which some have recently started in our own day, "Is life worth living?"

The tone of weariness in which Ecclesiastes

puts this question prolongs itself into the following verses, in which he seems to speak of the oppressive monotony of human experience. "One generation goeth, and another generation cometh; and the earth abideth for ever." The surroundings of man remain the same throughout the ages. New faces come upon the scene; but the scene itself abides much as before. The sun rises, and sets, and rises again; he runs always the same unvarying round. The wind may seem to be more variable, but it is only a question of a little more or a little less "turning about." Now it is in the north, and again it is in the south: but it simply rings the same changes over and over again, though there may be a little variation in the order: North, East, South, West,—or East, North, West, South; what does it matter? "All the rivers, too, run into the sea," and have run into the sea for ages; "yet the sea is not full;" there is no actual permanent difference made in the volume of its waters: "unto the place whither the rivers go, thither they go again;" they are constantly running into the sea in the same monotonous manner. "All things are full of weariness: man cannot utter it:" the world both of Nature and of human nature is, as it were, on a treadmill; "the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing." There is indeed plenty to see, and plenty to hear; but the eye and the ear are wearied rather than satisfied; for it is the same thing over and over and over again; human words cannot

utter the inexpressible weariness of the everlasting monotony! "That which hath been, is that which shall be, and that which hath been done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun." Just as the sun and the wind and the rivers have, from the beginning of the world, been constantly repeating their movements, so human history repeats itself, and human experience, in its great cardinal features, remains the same through the ages. "Is there a thing whereof men say, See, this is new?" Are men disposed to fancy sometimes that they have at last discovered a novelty? Why, their "novelty" has doubtless existed in some former ages, the memory or the records of which have passed into oblivion. For "there is no remembrance of the former generations, neither shall there be any remembrance of the latter generations that are to come, among those that shall come after." Thus the oblivion and the monotony of human life alike give to it the aspect of "vanity," and make it difficult to see how man can find any substantial "profit" of all his "labour."

Such, then, is the dreary, melancholy opening of this remarkable book. Those who place its composition as late as the Greek period find in this prologue traces of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies. However this may be, it certainly needs no familiarity with Greek philosophy to make a man feel, in certain moods, as if all human life were simply a circle of wearisome and profitless monotony. The

writer, at any rate, seems to think that this might well be the feeling of Solomon, towards the close of his career, when, after his wide and varied experience, he meditated on human life. And probably we may venture to infer that it was largely the feeling of Ecclesiastes himself, after his own experiments in human conduct and happiness.

But now, how are *we* to regard this utterance as to the "vanity" of all things, the "profitless" character of human labour, the wearisome monotony of the world? Must we indorse it, because we find it here in the Bible? Or, must we, on the other hand, condemn it and denounce it, as if it contained no truth whatever?

I submit that we need do neither. We may believe that Ecclesiastes had been taught by his own experience some valuable lessons as to the practical conduct of life, and that he was able to give some very wise counsel to those younger than himself; and yet we may also believe that this wisdom was dearly bought, and that his outlook on the world, when he became "a sadder and a wiser man," was largely coloured by his own past conduct. A man who outgrows his sins and follies may not always outgrow, in this world, all their consequences. A penitent profligate may be able to give us very sound advice; but it does not follow that his estimate of human affairs is altogether accurate and healthful. If it be the case that Ecclesiastes, like Solomon, had wandered from the God of his fathers, and had for

many years lived a life of worldliness and even of sensuality, we must not be surprised if, when he recovered himself and returned to God, he did not become altogether what he might otherwise have been. When he arrived at the "conclusion of the whole matter," and resolved to "fear God and keep His commandments," he was perhaps an old man; and we cannot wonder that he was sad and weary at heart when he thought what a different thing his life might have been if this "conclusion" had been with him the beginning and the middle, as well as the end. If, all along, he had lived a godly life, his outlook also on the world, even in old age, might have been very different. From this point of view, there is something as instructive as pathetic in the melancholy tone which pervades this book. As the young listen to the old man saying, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth," they may profit, not only by his counsel, but also by the sad weariness with which he utters it. We are not bound to indorse the view which regards all things "under the sun" as simply presenting the aspect of a vain and wearisome monotony; but we may learn wisdom from the fact that even the outlook of a religious man may be coloured by a long course of previous irreligion and worldliness.

Whilst, however, we are not bound to indorse this melancholy estimate of Ecclesiastes, and whilst we may regard it as coloured and exaggerated by the weariness begotten of his former life, we need not

denounce or condemn it as if it were simply the utterance of a morose pessimism or a sated worldliness. There is an element of profound truth in this estimate of the things "seen and temporal." It is not merely to the pessimist or to the worldling in his old age, that earthly things seem perishable and unsatisfying. A Christian apostle tells us that "the creature was made subject to *vanity*," and to "the bondage of corruption." Another Christian apostle reminds us that "the world passeth away and the lust thereof"—"the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." Thomas à Kempis, in his "Imitation of Christ," tells us that "all is vanity, except to love God and to serve Him only." One of our own novelists, in his "Vanity Fair," has torn aside the mask which hides from view the hollowness of that glitter and show which are so apt to fascinate the inexperienced. We can scarcely, indeed, expect the young to have much feeling of the monotony of life, or much sympathy with the exclamation "Vanity of vanities." They are but recent comers on the scene; and, as yet, life naturally presents itself to them in its aspects of novelty, freshness, and variety. They are looking forward to experiences as yet untasted; and a cup which has not yet come to the lips is a very different thing from the same cup drained to the dregs. But few thoughtful men reach even middle life—not to speak of old age—without being at times oppressed by the thought of life's sameness, or without being at

times impressed with a sense of the unsubstantial and unsatisfying nature of earthly things. Human life may vary from age to age in some of its details; but, in its great broad features, it is unchanging. These are determined by the constitution of human nature, and its earthly surroundings. The railway and the telegraph may be, in a sense, "new things under the sun;" but, after all, such novelties as these leave untouched the great cardinal features of human experience. Birth, death, work, rest, health, sickness, pain, pleasure, hope, fear, loss, gain, friendship, love, marriage, parenthood, bereavement, virtue, vice, temptation, remorse—these things were all familiar to the generations that have gone before us; they are familiar to us; they will be familiar to those who are coming after us. And, as to the transient, uncertain, perishable, and unsatisfying nature of mere earthly happiness—of happiness due to mere earthly pleasures, pursuits, and considerations—this has been the trite theme of all the ages. Looking at human life apart from God and immortality—looking at the things "seen and temporal" apart from the things "unseen and eternal"—we perceive that there is a profound element of truth in the utterance, "All is vanity."

Lastly here, we must not forget that this book was written at least two thousand years ago. Since Ecclesiastes meditated on the problems of human life, one really "new thing" has been seen. The "Sun of Righteousness" has risen upon the world "with

healing in His wings." The Word of God took flesh, and dwelt among men. The Only-begotten Son has revealed the Eternal Father, and has "brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." This new manifestation of God—this new and fuller revelation of His redeeming purpose for mankind—has entered as a modifying factor into human experience. The cardinal features of life remain as before; but they take on a new aspect when they are seen in the light of our Father's love, and of that glorious immortality for which He is seeking to train us. What may be as "vanity," when it is considered as an end, may be anything but "vain" when it is considered as a means. A scaffolding may be a poor affair; but what if a beautiful and substantial temple is being reared within it? A schoolroom, with its appropriate furniture, might not be a satisfying home; nevertheless it may well fulfil the purposes of education and discipline. The perishable may minister to the everlasting. The unprofitable may lead to higher gains. The unsatisfying may awaken a craving for that which will truly fill the soul. From this point of view the essential sameness of life through the ages bears its testimony to the persistent purpose of God and the constant needs of humanity. Why should not the schoolroom remain the same, if it has been adapted by Infinite Wisdom for the training and discipline of immortal souls? Human life, viewed in itself, as a brief span of existence bounded by death, may be

as "vanity;" but human life, viewed in the light of Christ and immortality, is an arena of education by probation—a sphere for the formation of spiritual and enduring character, and for the service of a living and loving Father.

III.

EXPERIMENTS IN LIVING.

CHAP. I. 12—II. 11 (*Revised Version*):—

"*I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven: it is a sore travail that God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and* [1]*a striving after wind. That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered. I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I have gotten me great wisdom above all that were before me in Jerusalem; yea, my heart hath great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also was a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.*

I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I searched in mine heart how to cheer my flesh with wine, mine heart yet guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what it was good for the sons of men that they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and parks, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit: I made me pools of water, to water therefrom the forest where trees were reared: I bought menservants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of herds and flocks, above all that were before me in Jerusalem: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I got me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, concubines very many. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them: I withheld not my heart from any joy, for my heart rejoiced because of all my labour; and this was my portion from all my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun."

[1] Or, "a feeding on wind" (Margin).

ECCLESIASTES now proceeds to justify and illustrate from his own experience that estimate of earthly things which he has just expressed. He writes as a man who has had wide experience of human life; and his book was perhaps written more especially for young men. Now, he knew very well that to the young his statement regarding the unsatisfying character of earthly things would appear not only exaggerated but even untrue. To the young, human life has naturally an aspect of novelty; they are struck more with the variety than the monotony of the world; they find it difficult to believe that they can ever grow weary of the pleasures which they now enjoy, or the pursuits which they now follow so keenly; and, at any rate, they are looking forward to new sensations—pleasures hitherto untasted, roads heretofore untravelled. Often, indeed, the young are dissatisfied and discontented; but this is rather because they have not more of the things which they enjoy; they have an idea that, if only they had enough of these things, they would be quite happy. And so Ecclesiastes, in order to put his case as strongly as possible, pictures Solomon, the king of Israel, as giving the results of his personal experience,

Now, Solomon had pre-eminently a reputation for wisdom. And it might naturally be thought that he would derive the greatest possible satisfaction from the stores of knowledge which he had amassed. First of all, therefore, he is represented as giving his experience in this matter. He had devoted himself, heart and soul, to the search after wisdom. With the special opportunities of observation and of research which his royal position afforded him, he had made a study of "all that is done under heaven." He had tried to penetrate to the roots of things—to become thoroughly acquainted with human nature, human pursuits, and human surroundings. And, in point of fact, he gathered great stores of knowledge. "I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I have gotten me great wisdom above all that were before me in Jerusalem; yea, my heart hath had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." And what was the result? He found it to be "vanity and a striving after wind," or "a feeding on wind." He found all his knowledge and philosophy to be unsatisfying. The attempt to satisfy the cravings of his nature with this earthly wisdom was like an attempt to "feed on wind" instead of bread. Yea, instead of bringing him happiness, his wisdom rather brought him pain and discontent. For his knowledge brought him face to face with "crooked things" which it seemed utterly impossible to "straighten," and deficiencies which it seemed utterly impossible to fill up. And so his verdict is: "In much wisdom

is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow."

It is to be observed, however, that Ecclesiastes is not here speaking of heavenly wisdom—of that wisdom concerning which it is elsewhere written that the "fear of the Lord" is its "beginning." He seems to be speaking simply of that knowledge of earthly things and human affairs which a man may acquire by intellectual study and observation. Nor does he deny that this knowledge has some advantages over ignorance and folly: for these advantages are frequently referred to in the course of this very book. But what he seems to say here is that the amassing of mere earthly knowledge, as if this were the chief good, is a delusion—that such knowledge is full of disappointments and sorrows, and cannot really satisfy the soul of man. Now, it is indeed true that our minds have been so constituted that the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge, simply as knowledge, is naturally accompanied with pleasure. And to a young and eager student rejoicing in the wider views and the fresh discoveries which his increase of knowledge brings, it may sometimes seem as if a life spent in study and research would give him the fullest satisfaction. But he is apt to forget that a wider view of things is not always a more pleasant view. Knowledge often destroys illusions. Knowledge often makes us more sensible of our ignorance, and more conscious of the limits of our powers. Knowledge often confronts us with problems

which cause us perplexing and painful thought, and which had not previously come within the range of our vision. The most learned philosopher or the most brilliant student of natural science often finds that all his knowledge is utterly unavailing in the presence of some practical difficulty—something "crooked" which he cannot straighten, something "wanting" which he cannot supply. How often the very knowledge of a skilful physician gives him a sadder because deeper insight into the malady which he knows to be incurable! And how often we can see a tinge of melancholy in some of the world's greatest thinkers! This is indeed no argument for indorsing the words of the poet, "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise;" for even the knowledge which brings sorrow may have some advantages over the ignorance which preserves happiness. But it is an argument for the conclusion of Ecclesiastes, that the mere possession of earthly wisdom is not the supreme good of human life, and that the attempt to satisfy one's soul with such knowledge is a "feeding on wind!"

Then, secondly here, Solomon is represented as making another and very different experiment in order to discover the "chief good" for man. Having tried knowledge and found it unsatisfying, he betakes himself to pleasure and luxury. Like the Faust of the modern drama, and like many another student weary of brain-work and perplexing thought, he gave himself up, for a time, to the gratification of the

senses. He tried mirth, laughter, and revelry. He tried to "cheer his flesh with wine," whilst "yet his heart guided him with wisdom": a difficult experiment truly! The idea is that he indulged largely in feasting and banqueting, meanwhile watching himself so as not to overdo his indulgence. It was not that he was anxious to avoid sinning against God: God was "not in all his thoughts." He simply wished to get all the possible good there was in wine, and in other pleasures of the table, without passing over into those excesses which might inflict pain and injury on himself. He gave himself up to a life of luxury, and surrounded himself with all those objects which could minister to sensuous gratification. He became a connoisseur in the arts of pleasure. He threw an element of refinement and taste into his enjoyments. He "built houses," and "planted vineyards," and laid out beautiful gardens, with all kinds of fruit-trees: he surrounded himself with the manifest tokens of wealth and state; he gathered silver and gold and such precious things as are to be found only in kings' palaces; he got men-singers and women-singers, to delight his ear with the sweetest music; and, after the manner of Oriental monarchs, he had also a harem full of wives. "So,' he says, "I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem; and, whatsoever mine eyes desired, I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy." He secured whatever promised a new sensation of delight. "Also," he

adds, "my wisdom remained with me." He means, I suppose, that his knowledge enabled him to choose objects of gratification, and skilfully to adapt means to the end he had in view; and that his wisdom kept him from allowing his appetites to run riot in mere drunkenness and debauchery. And now, what was the result of all this? "I said of laughter, It is mad, and of mirth, What doeth it?" "Behold, all was vanity and feeding upon wind!" For a time, indeed, he had "joy" in his pleasure, and in the "labour" which he took in order to secure it. But, after a time, it palled upon his taste; and when he came to "look on" all that he had done, he found that this magnificence and luxury and beauty and banqueting were as unsatisfying as his pursuit of knowledge had been. There was "no profit under the sun."

Now, I have already said that, probably under this literary veil of the Confessions of Solomon, the writer of this book is giving, substantially, his own experience. We may well believe that Ecclesiastes, like Solomon, had been a seeker after wisdom, and, like Solomon, had also given himself to pleasure. Probably he was a wealthy man, and had been able to surround himself with many kinds of luxury. But, in order to make the record of his experience still more impressive, he thus puts it into the lips of royalty. There are many young people who imagine that, if they were only able to obtain all that they desire in the shape of earthly good, they would soon

make for themselves a paradise of perfect satisfaction and enjoyment. But, in point of fact, the experiment has often been tried, and tried, too, even on a large scale. Here was a king, whose great wealth and knowledge enabled him to carry out to the full his practical researches into the value of sensuous pleasure. And he failed to find the satisfaction of which he was in quest.

It is to be observed that Ecclesiastes does not condemn pleasure as such. He elsewhere says that there is "a time to laugh," and "a time to dance." He is no enemy to moderate and innocent enjoyment, in its own time and place. But what he says is that mere sensuous pleasure is not the "chief good" of life, and that, if pleasure be made the one object of existence, it ceases even to give the gratification which it might otherwise afford. There are many people who find it difficult to believe this. They derive so much enjoyment from the occasional pleasures of life, that they fancy perpetual pleasure would mean perpetual enjoyment. They make precisely the same mistake as the little child who finds sweetmeats so delicious, that he fancies he would like to spend his existence in a confectioner's shop! They overlook the possibility—nay, the certainty—of surfeit. The fact is that all sensuous pleasures lose their keenness, in proportion as they are indulged in to excess. And all pleasure is excess, when it becomes the supreme object of pursuit; for pleasure has no right to usurp such a position in human life.

Worldliness, therefore, tends to spoil the very world for a man; and sensuality avenges itself on the very senses themselves. Tennyson, in his "Vision of Sin," shows us how the youth who quenches the nobler aspirations of his nature, and gives himself up to sensual indulgence, may become the "gray and gap-toothed man," who mocks, in his brutal cynicism, at the very idea of goodness. Nor is it only the coarser forms of sensuality that lead to disgust and disappointment. Tennyson has also pictured for us, in his "Palace of Art," a soul that surrounds itself with all kinds of beauty, and shuts itself up to a solitary indulgence in refined luxury; and he shows how on this soul there "falls" at last "deep dread and loathing of her solitude," and how her palace of beauty becomes haunted with all manner of spectral shapes. Man's nature, as constituted by his Maker, is far too wide and deep to be satisfied with sensuous gratification. Man has not only eye, ear, and appetite: he has reason, conscience, and heart, and a spirit that links him to the Eternal; and if we try to feed ourselves on mere pleasure, there is no wonder that the nature thu soutraged should take its revenge. A voluptuary may think himself wise, because he is careful, in his pleasures, not to injure his body; but, if all the while, through his excessive devotion to pleasure, he is starving and degrading the nobler side of his being, is he not foolish still? "For what," said Christ, "shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

IV.

KNOWLEDGE AND RICHES.

CHAP. II. 12–23 (*Revised Version*):—

"*And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness and folly: for what can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done. Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head, and the fool walketh in darkness: and yet I perceived that one event happeneth to them all. Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so will it happen even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also was vanity. For of the wise man, even as of the fool, there is no remembrance for ever; seeing that in the days to come all will have been already forgotten. And how doth the wise man die even as the fool! So I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun was grievous unto me: for all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

And I hated all my labour wherein I laboured under the sun: seeing that I must leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. Therefore I turned about to cause my heart to despair concerning all the labour wherein I had laboured under the sun. For there is a man whose labour is with wisdom, and with knowledge, and with skilfulness; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what hath a man of all his labour, and of the striving of his heart, wherein he laboureth under the sun? For all his days are but sorrows, and his travail is grief; yea, even in the night his heart taketh no rest. This also is vanity."

SOLOMON is here represented as comparing the two kinds of life which he had been living: "I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness and folly." He had been a wisdom-seeker; and he had also been a pleasure-hunter and treasure-collector. He had tried pleasure even in the form of mirth and folly. He had found out how much—or rather how little—all this kind of sensuous excitement and gratification could do for him. And so, he felt that he was in a peculiarly favourable position for judging as to the relative value of wisdom and folly. "For what can the man do that cometh after the king?" Who is more able to give a verdict on this point than Solomon the wise? Or, who is likely to try such contrasted experiments in living, under more advantageous conditions? And now, comparing wisdom and folly, what is his verdict? He has already said that, if either of them be pursued as the chief end of human existence, it must be pronounced "vanity." But, for all that, as he looked at wisdom and folly, and as he weighed them both in the balances of his own experience, he could not fail to see that "wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness." There is a "profit" or advantage in wisdom which

there is not in folly. "The wise man's eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness." Light may often reveal disagreeable objects; but who would therefore prefer to be blind? All knowledge, so far as it goes, is as vision to a man. It is often a help to him in the practical guidance of his life. Even the sorrow born of wisdom is better than the mere mirth of the fool who "walketh in darkness." Thus, if we compare the knowledge-seeker and the pleasure-seeker, we feel that the one is living a higher life than the other. They may both fail of the supreme good. They may both be dissatisfied with the result of their endeavours; nevertheless it is a nobler thing to be bent on the acquisition of knowledge than to be bent on the mere gratification of the appetites and senses. Solomon (or Ecclesiastes, speaking in the name of Solomon) felt this to be true in his own experience.

But—and there are many such "buts" in this book—he saw also clearly that there are some respects in which the wise man and the fool stand on the same level. "One event"—or one chance—"happeneth to them all." "The wise man's eyes," it is true, "are in his head:" but even the wisest man cannot see everything; and the widest and clearest vision is often unavailing. Knowledge does give an advantage in the journey of life: but the advantage is a variable quantity. There are contingencies which no amount of knowledge can foresee: and there is one certainty—death—which no amount

of knowledge can prevent. Here, then, the wise man and the fool stand, so far, on the same level: they are both liable to what we call "the accidental" element in human life; and they must both succumb to the final certainty. "As it happeneth to the fool, so will it happen even to me: and why was I then more wise?" What is the use of all this boasted knowledge, if, after all, it gives me no permanent advantage over the most foolish man on earth? Alas! "how doth the wise man die even as the fool!" And then both pass into oblivion: in the ages that are to come there will be no "remembrance" of either of them. This thought was as wormwood and gall to Ecclesiastes. It made him, for the time, a pessimist. "I hated life, because the work that is wrought under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and feeding on wind."

Now, these facts of human life which confronted Ecclesiastes, when he thus compared wisdom and folly, confront us still. Looking simply at knowledge as such, and looking merely at the brief span of our existence "under the sun," we must confess that the wise man is sometimes as powerless as the fool. Two men take their seats in a railway train. The one man is an accomplished scholar, or mathematician, or philosopher. He has disciplined his mental powers, and has amassed large stores of knowledge. He has even acquired, it may be, a certain reputation as a man of learning, or as a leader of the thoughts of others. The man who is sitting beside him cares

nothing for intellectual culture. Animal enjoyment is his ideal. Give him a good dinner, and you may keep your books to yourself! He could never see any good in racking his brains over hard problems. There sit these two men in the railway carriage, side by side: the one, perhaps, reading the latest book of science; the other, perhaps, glancing through some "Sporting Gazette." Suddenly, in a moment, there comes the collision which it was utterly impossible for either of them to foresee: the train is a wreck; and these two lie together, crushed, mangled, and dead! "One event, one chance, has happened to them both!" Now, shut out the thought of God, and the thought of immortality, and what "advantage" has the one man over the other? The student has had his intellectual enjoyments: the votary of pleasure has had his enjoyments also. The scholar, along with his enjoyment, has had much fatiguing toil, and, it may be, painful thought; the pleasure-seeker also has doubtless, on his part experienced some of the penalties of self-indulgence. The lover of knowledge has, indeed, had this advantage, that his "eyes" have been "in his head:" he has had a wider and clearer vision; and he has lived a higher kind of life. But to what purpose? Where is the permanent advantage? These two men have lived their short span: and here has come Death, as the great leveller! For a few years, perhaps, the scholar may be spoken of; his name may even get into some "biographical dictionary:"

but, unless he is one of a very select few, it will be little more than a name, and, in the ages to come, he will be altogether forgotten. To what purpose, then, has he "scorned delights, and lived laborious days?" Can he be said to have made the best use of human life, if he has simply spent it in acquiring a "wisdom" which leaves him, in the end, indistinguishable from the fool? Thus, then, we seem to be driven to the same conclusion as Ecclesiastes. Whatever advantages earthly wisdom has, it cannot be regarded as the chief good for man. The amassing of knowledge as the one supreme object of human existence is a vain delusion: it is a "feeding on wind:" it fails to satisfy the deepest cravings of the human soul.

Akin to this fact that death seems to level the wise man and the fool, there was another fact which, at this stage of his experience, plunged Ecclesiastes into a kind of despair. He saw that, however industriously and wisely a man might plan and labour, he would have to leave behind him to another all the material treasure he amassed: and that other might be a fool! Thus a man had not even the satisfaction of knowing that what he had wisely gathered would be wisely guarded, or wisely spent. Even if his son should become his heir, that son might give way to folly. But how could he be sure that his son would succeed him? He might survive his son. His estate might even pass into the hands of some one who had never taken any trouble or interest

therein, and who might forthwith proceed to dissipate it in his folly. This thought almost maddened Ecclesiastes, as he looked on the treasures which he had gathered together. He "hated all his labour." His heart was filled with a kind of sickening "despair" as he looked on his wealth, and wondered who would get it, or what would become of it, after he was gone. Thus he saw that the amassing of riches as the chief end of life was also "vanity." For what is the result to a man who toils incessantly with this end in view? What good does he get out of all his labour? "His days are sorrows;" his occupation is full of trouble; "yea, even in the night his heart taketh no rest:" he cannot even get the sleep he needs, through the anxious cares which worry and oppress him. And, after all this toil and anxiety, after all his fatiguing days and sleepless nights, the very riches which he has gathered together with so much patience and skill may pass into the hands of some fool who will scatter to the winds all the fruits of his labour. What satisfaction can there be to a human soul in a life like this?

Now, these facts of life, which thus burdened and educated Ecclesiastes in the school of experience, confront us still. And, perhaps it is even more needful to insist on the vanity of amassing wealth than on the vanity of amassing knowledge. In a commercial community, where not a few men have made fortunes by skilful and patient industry, great wealth, as such, is apt to be regarded with

mingled worship and envy. It is not the rich only who burn incense in the temple of Mammon. There are those also that are thirsting to be rich, and "hasting" to be rich, who keep "cutting themselves," as it were, "with knives and lancets," crying, "O Mammon, hear us! O Mammon, hear us!" They will inflict almost any injury upon themselves, if only they may get wealth. They will overtax their powers; they will rob themselves of needful food and sleep; they will engage in hazardous speculations; they will try even the risks of commercial gambling, if only they may become rich. In a community like ours, for one young man who needs to be told that his nature can never be satisfied by mere intellectual culture, there are multitudes who need to be told that the chief good of life is not to be found in the pursuit or possession of wealth. There are hosts of young men who have the idea that, if they were only rich, they would be happy. Their one idea of "getting on" in life is getting rich. Nor are the young men themselves chiefly to blame for this. Very likely they have got the idea at their father's knee: some of them, alas! may be said to have almost "drunk it in with their mother's milk!" The whole atmosphere they breathe is saturated with this accursed notion that the only success in life, worth calling "success," is the acquisition of riches. But indeed, to do our young men justice, it is not wealth, simply as wealth, that is usually the object of their desire. A young miser is a spectacle as rare

as contemptible. The young, as a rule, desire wealth chiefly as a means of securing pleasure, or even of enabling them to be generous to others. It is our middle-aged and older men who are more likely to be the victims of avarice. A man begins, perhaps, by simply seeking money for the supply of his personal needs, and for the formation of a home of his own. By and bye, perhaps, he has to labour for wife and children, as well as for himself; and he desires to get money, that he may increase their comforts, or make some provision for them, which, in the event of his death, may lessen for them the strain and struggle of life. All this is natural and right enough. In this case, the pursuit of money by honest means is ennobled by the sanctions of duty and affection. But, if the man does not watch himself, if he begins to exaggerate the value of material comfort and luxury, if he forgets that money is by no means the best legacy he can bequeath to his children, and if he does not cultivate the habit of giving as well as of getting, then by and bye the lust of mere accumulation grows upon him. Beginning with the desire to benefit those whom he loves, his eager pursuit of money begets, in course of time, an artificial craving, until at last his avarice, growing into an independent passion, may almost dry up the very springs of his affections. And so the strange, sad spectacle is sometimes seen, of a man who, even although adequate provision has been made for his family, or even after he has survived those who are

nearest to him, still goes on accumulating wealth for no definite purpose that he could well explain. He gets very little enjoyment out of his own wealth. Its pursuit and possession give him a great deal of labour and anxiety. He knows that he must leave it all behind him before long; and yet he dare not spend it freely now. Beneficence is no luxury to him. He has no hunger for well-doing. The spirit of generosity in him is well-nigh suppressed. His question is not, "How much can I afford to give away?" but "How little dare I with any decency give away?" Nor can he be certain who his heirs are to be: and sometimes, perhaps, he shudders inwardly, as he asks himself what will yet become of all this treasure which it has cost him so much toil and care to scrape together!

Was there ever such a will-o'-the-wisp as this? To explode this monstrous delusion that the mere accumulation of wealth is the chief good for man, was one of the objects for which this book was written. Ecclesiastes recurs to it again and again. It seems as if the lesson he had learnt on this point had been burnt into his very soul by bitter experience. We need not, indeed, despise money. As Ecclesiastes himself says, "Money is a defence." Money, so far as it goes, is a valuable means; and, as a means, it may be used for high ends. But wealth, as the mere possession of abundance which a man never uses, never enjoys, never consecrates, never distributes for any noble object—this is a delusion

and a mockery. The man dies, and leaves it all behind him for ever: and then, in the eternal world, is he rich, or is he poor? The very thought is enough to show that wealth can never be the supreme good for man. But indeed, even apart from the thought of God and of immortality, the mere accumulator of wealth is not the man who makes the most or best of the present life. The richest are not necessarily the happiest. Man's nature is a large, wide, deep thing: it has many capabilities of gratification and enjoyment; and so, even if we look at this world only, we can feel the profound truth of the saying of Christ, that "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

V.

THE SIMPLE JOYS OF GODLY INDUSTRY.

CHAP. II. 24-26 (*Revised Version*) :—

"*There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment,*[1] *more than I? For to the man that pleaseth him God giveth wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that pleaseth God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.*"

[1] According to some ancient authorities, "apart from him" (Margin).

WE have already seen how Ecclesiastes, speaking out of his own experience, although in the name of Solomon, pronounces the pursuit of knowledge, of pleasure, or of wealth, as the chief end of life, to be "vanity." He tells us how he had been plunged into a kind of despair when he thought that all the treasure, which he had so industriously and anxiously gathered together, might pass into the hands of a comparative stranger, or perchance even of a fool, who, in his folly, might scatter it all to the winds.

The passage which is now before us springs directly out of this contemplation of the vanity of mere riches; and perhaps it has reference also to the vanity of mere luxury and pleasure-seeking. "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labour." We are not to regard these words as at all akin to the utterance of the baser Epicureanism, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die!" We are not to suppose that the Jewish philosopher, looking around him, and finding all to be "vanity and feeding on wind," concludes that the best thing a man can do, under the circumstances, is to give himself up to a life of sensuous enjoyment. This cannot possibly be his

meaning here; for he has already shown the emptiness of a life of sensuous gratification, and he has also recorded it as his conviction that "wisdom is better than folly." Moreover, the words themselves do not point to mere idle self-indulgence; for they speak of a man's "enjoying good in his *labour*." Ecclesiastes seems to have before his mind a life in which hearty and honest toil is blended with a contented enjoyment of the fruits of toil. In the maxim, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die," eating and drinking stand for all kinds of sensuous gratification, and even of sensual excess. But here, to "eat and drink" seems to stand rather for the simpler forms of living, as contrasted with luxurious and excessive self-indulgence. Thus also the prophet Jeremiah, when denouncing King Jehoiakim for building himself a magnificent palace at the cost of oppressing his people, points him to the life of his godly father Josiah: "Did not thy father *eat and drink*, and do judgment and justice? Then it was well with him." The prophet is contrasting the covetousness of the son, bent on grandeur and luxury, and careless of the sufferings of his people, with the true kingly dignity of the father, who had been bent on doing judgment and justice, and had contented himself with simple habits of life. And, in like manner, in the passage now before us, the life of pleasure-hunting, which greedily seeks all manner of luxury and self-gratification, and also the life of avarice, which will not let a man enjoy the fruits

of his own labour, are contrasted with a life that finds pleasure in honest toil and in the cheerful enjoyment of simple and ordinary blessings. "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labour."

That this is the meaning of Ecclesiastes here is further evident from the manner in which he goes on to speak of the conditions of this contented and cheerful enjoyment of life. "This also I saw, that it is from *the hand of God*." This capability of taking pleasure in work and in the simple blessings of life is a gift of God. "For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment more than I?" or—according to another reading—"Who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, apart from Him?" that is, *apart from God*. This introduction of the thought of God is itself sufficient to show that Ecclesiastes is not here speaking as a sensualist, or as a mere pleasure-seeker. The intrusion of the thought of God would mar the pleasure in which the sensualist indulges. But the kind of enjoyment which is here in view is an enjoyment which God gives to the virtuous and godly. "For to the man that pleaseth Him God giveth wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner He giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that He may give to him that pleaseth God." Amidst the many anomalies of life, Ecclesiastes clings to the assurance that there is a moral government of God in this world. There are indeed perplexing problems in relation to this moral government, which he felt he could not

solve, and which led him to look forward to a world beyond death where the dealings of God with men would be completed and vindicated. But still, looking at the broad facts of human life, and excluding cases apparently exceptional and perplexing, he saw that God does make a distinction, even here and now, between the "sinner" and the "man who pleaseth Him." The virtuous and godly man has an advantage, even in this world, over the wicked. He receives from God a "wisdom and knowledge" which are associated with "joy." He finds a pleasure in his work, and is contented to eat the simple fruits of his toil. He may be a poor man, labouring for daily bread; and yet he may receive from God this gift of thankful enjoyment. Whereas, on the other hand, Ecclesiastes saw that the "sinner"—the man who has no thought of God's commandments—may "gather together" and "heap up" riches, and yet have no heart to enjoy his own wealth. His labour, instead of giving him happiness, may be only a harassing and discontented struggle after that which, when he gets it, he is too avaricious to use. Surely this is "vanity and feeding on wind"! And then, when the man dies, he leaves all his wealth behind him; and God, in His providence, may give it to some man who "pleaseth Him," and who will be able to make a better use of it. We find this latter thought elsewhere in the Old Testament. Thus, in the Book of Proverbs, it is written: "He that by usury and unjust gain increaseth his substance, he

shall gather it for him that will pity the poor;" and again, in the Book of Job: "Though he heap up silver as the dust, and prepare raiment as the clay, he may prepare it, but the just shall put it on, and the innocent shall divide the silver." Ecclesiastes, of course, could not mean to say that the heir of the wealthy sinner was always a good man; for he has already said that the man who spends his life in heaping up riches cannot be sure whether his heir will be "a wise man or a fool." But Ecclesiastes sees an indication of the moral government of God in that irony of Providence according to which the riches, and perhaps even the ill-gotten gains, of the sinner often pass over into the hands of better men. So far as the enjoyment of the avaricious and ungodly man is concerned, his labour is fruitless; its results are "vanity and feeding on wind"; but the labour is not altogether wasted when its gains pass into the hands of some godly and virtuous man who can heartily enjoy them and rightly use them.

Such, then, seems to be the meaning and spirit of this passage. Looking simply at the matter of happiness in this present world, Ecclesiastes, after all his experiments and his experience, comes to the conclusion that the happiest type of man is not the man who makes the mere obtaining of knowledge or of pleasure or of riches the great end of his being, but the man of godly and virtuous character who enjoys his work, and enjoys also the moderate and cheerful use of the simple, ordinary

blessings of life. The idea is one to which Ecclesiastes recurs again and again; and it forms one important element in his conclusions regarding the "chief good" for man.

Those who place the composition of this book in the Greek and not the Persian period—who think that it was written about two hundred years before Christ—regard this passage and other similar passages as containing traces of Greek thought. Dean Plumptre imagines that Ecclesiastes may have lived for some time in the city of Alexandria, and may have there become familiar with both the Epicurean and Stoic philosophies. And he thinks that in the utterance before us there is an echo, to some extent, of Epicurean teaching. Now, I have already pointed out the grounds on which it is impossible to identify this utterance with that degenerate form of Epicureanism which says, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die." But, on the other hand, it is quite true that the original and higher form of Epicureanism, whilst making pleasure the chief end of life, was careful to guard its doctrines against the appearance of leading to sensuality. Epicurus himself seems to have been a man of decorous and virtuous life; and he seems to have inculcated the rule of temperance. In the interests of pleasure itself, he preferred moderation to luxury. He maintained also that the pleasures of the body, although not to be despised, were inferior to the pleasures of the soul; and he seems to have held that the virtuous life was the

life of true pleasure. It would certainly, therefore, be quite possible to quote passages from the literature of the higher Epicureanism, bearing some affinity to the utterance now before us, and praising the quiet, unambitious life of cheerful labour, simple habits, and moderate enjoyment. But, even if we place the book in the Greek period—even if we suppose that Ecclesiastes, in his quest after wisdom, had been influenced, to some extent, by the higher Epicurean philosophy—we must surely confess that in this special utterance we have something added to that philosophy. The introduction of the name of God—to which I have already referred—betokens the mind that has been educated in the school of Hebrew piety. To Epicurus the very thought of God, or of the gods, as working in Nature or in human affairs, was a thought likely to disturb that "serenity of mind" at which he aimed. It was pleasanter to him to think of nature as simply a "concourse of atoms," which had somehow gathered themselves together into those forms out of which a man, by the wise exercise of his own reason, might extract the greatest possible amount of true pleasure. But to the mind of Ecclesiastes the power of enjoying with cheerfulness and contentment the ordinary blessings of life is a gift bestowed by God on the man who "pleaseth Him." Even the higher Epicureanism becomes a still higher thing when it is thus steeped in the spirit of piety, and associated with a recognition of the Divine Providence.

On the other hand, those scholars may be right who regard this book as having been written in the earlier period—the period of the Persian dominion. At any rate, it does not seem necessary to suppose that Ecclesiastes received any teaching in the schools of Greek philosophy. Such proverbs as "The rest of the labouring man is sweet," and "The abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep," are based on facts which must have been well known long before the time of Epicurus. In all ages, indeed, thoughtful observers of human life have noticed how human happiness is very far from being dependent on learning or wealth or luxury, how virtue brings a satisfaction denied to vice, and contentment gives a serenity denied to selfish ambition and restless avarice. Let us listen, for example, to the ploughman-poet of Scotland :

"It's no in titles nor in rank ;
It's no in wealth like Lon'on bank,
To purchase peace and rest ;
It's no in making muckle mair :
It's no in books, it's no in lear,
To make us truly blest :
If happiness hae not her seat
And centre in the breast,
We may be wise, or rich, or great,
But never can be blest :
Nae treasures, nor pleasures,
Could make us happy lang ;
The heart aye's the part aye,
That makes us right or wrang."

The great majority of the human race are, after all, comparatively poor and unlearned; and if human life, as a whole, is capable of affording any true enjoyment, this enjoyment must be compatible with very homely circumstances. It is also a palpable fact that high position and wealth and luxury often make it more difficult for a man to find real enjoyment in his life. Even in the simple matter of eating and drinking, how true it is that the appetite is often keener where healthy work is followed by homely fare than where anxious avarice, restless ambition, lofty rank, or luxurious idleness betakes itself to the delicacies of the table!

> "The shepherd's homely curds,
> His cold, thin drink out of his leather bottle,
> His wonted sleep under a fresh tree's shade,
> All which secure and sweetly he enjoys,
> Is far beyond a prince's delicates,
> His viands sparkling in a golden cup,
> His body couched in a curious bed,
> When care, mistrust, and treason wait on him."

Dean Plumptre reminds us that Shakespeare puts these words—even as Ecclesiastes puts his—into the lips of a king; and doubtless many a king besides the Hebrew Solomon and the English Henry has sometimes been disposed to envy the happiness of the lowly.

Now, the lesson which Ecclesiastes here sets before us is one of which we all need to be continually reminded. Patent as the fact may be to us

that the higher happiness of life is far more closely associated with unanxious labour, simple habits, and cheerful contentment, than with wealth or luxury, we are all more or less apt to live in forgetfulness of it. The social atmosphere which we breathe is too feverish and restless. We are apt to lose the blessings of to-day through over-anxiety about the morrow. We are apt to miss the enjoyment which God has put for us into the simple, common blessings of life, through our eager pursuit of something more which may not really be anything better. It might be a desirable thing for some men who are spoiling their lives through selfish ambition or sordid Mammonism, to sit for a little while even at the feet of Epicurus! But far better for all of us to sit at the feet of Christ. All that was really true and valuable in the higher Epicureanism is to be found, in a more exalted form, in Christianity. The somewhat unheroic serenity which was the ideal of Epicurus gives place, in the teachings of Christ, to a serenity compatible with heroism, and grounded on trust in the Heavenly Father. "Be not anxious for the morrow." "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." And the teachings of the New Testament generally are in radical harmony with the teaching of Ecclesiastes here. Ecclesiastes, however dark a view he might take of the "vanity" of earthly things considered in themselves, did not

think that the sorrows and perplexities of life ought to lead us into a morose despising or rejecting of the gifts of God. And the New Testament, although it counsels a wise and watchful self-discipline, says also that "every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving." On the other hand, Ecclesiastes was opposed both to a sordid avarice and a luxurious self-indulgence. To his mind the man most likely to make "the best of this world" was the man who "pleases God," and on whom God bestows the gift of a contented enjoyment of ordinary blessings. Now, the New Testament also tells us that "godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life which now is." It tells us that "godliness with contentment is great gain." It reminds us that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil," and that they who are bent on being rich "fall into many foolish and hurtful lusts, such as drown men in destruction and perdition." It seeks to fix our attention on far higher things than material good, and bids us "follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness." Thus Christianity has also the pious and heroic element of the higher Stoicism, without its pride and its violation of human instincts. It does not bid us proudly trample on either pleasure or pain; but it bids us cultivate an inner peace and strength which shall prevent us from becoming the mere victims and slaves of circumstance. Without despising any "creature of God," it nevertheless

teaches us to estimate things according to their relative importance. And is it not indeed one of the secrets of life, to keep things in their proper place—to put health above wealth, and bread above dainties, and the Bread of Heaven above the bread that perisheth? Is it not one of the secrets of life, to receive material blessings with thankfulness, and enjoy them in moderation, without expecting to receive from them a kind or degree of satisfaction which they are utterly unable to impart? But verily "the secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him." May we not well say with Ecclesiastes, "This is from the hand of God"? And if only our hearts were set more steadfastly on higher things, if only we were more bent on "pleasing God," we would be the better able to "eat and drink and enjoy good in our labour"—to enjoy with a more serene and contented spirit the simple, ordinary blessings which are common to humanity.

VI.

TIMES AND SEASONS.

CHAP. III. 1–15 (*Revised Version*):—

"*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth? I have seen the travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. He hath made everything beautiful in its time: also he hath set* [1] *the world in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them, than to rejoice, and to do good so long as they live. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy good in all his labour, is the gift of God. I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God hath done it, that men should fear before Him. That which is hath been already; and that which is to be hath already been; and God seeketh again that which is passed away.*"

[1] Or, "eternity" (Margin).

THE catalogue of "times and seasons" with which Ecclesiastes opens this chapter seems intended to point the question which he again asks, "What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?" We have already seen how, at the very commencement of his book, he puts this same question. Deeply impressed as he was with a sense of the "vanity" of earthly things, he utters his conviction that man cannot, by the most strenuous toil, acquire from these things a happiness which will really satisfy his nature. He records the experiments which he himself had made in his search after the chief good of life. He had tried the acquisition of knowledge; he had tried the pursuit of pleasure and luxury; he had tried the amassing of wealth; and he had found each in turn to be "vanity and a feeding on wind." His much knowledge brought him much grief; his pleasure brought satiety and weariness; his wealth brought anxiety and apprehension. None of these things could, of themselves, bring him the satisfaction and enjoyment which he craved.

And now, in this catalogue of "times and seasons," Ecclesiastes adduces another consideration, which

shows how greatly man is restricted in his most strenuous endeavours to make himself happy. These various kinds of "times" all indicate that human actions and their issues are subject to the controlling influence of a Divine Order which runs through human life. Sometimes this order manifests itself in events which are simply inevitable, and before which the will of man is utterly powerless. Thus circumstances over which he himself has not the slightest control may bring him to his "time to weep," or his "time to die." Sometimes, again, the Divine Order manifests itself in certain arrangements which man cannot alter, but which he may easily recognize, and of which he may avail himself to his own advantage. There is a "time to plant," and a time to pluck up and gather the fruits of the earth; but, if a man attempts to get his harvest at seed-time, he will fail. And then, again, there is an Order, not so easily discernible, according to which the issues of human action vary in proportion to the opportuneness of such action. A man may be "breaking down," at the time when he ought to be "building up;" he may be "keeping," when he ought to be "casting away;" he may be "silent," when he ought to be "speaking." If, either through ignorance or through self-will, he thus violates the law of opportuneness or seasonableness, he may utterly fail to accomplish his ends. As our own proverb says, "Time and tide wait for no man." Or, as Shakespeare puts it:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries."

Thus man lives under a certain law of "times and seasons"—a certain Order of Nature and of Providence: and this may reveal and assert itself, either by compelling him to submit to the inevitable, or by prescribing the limits within which he must act, or by visiting him with certain disabilities if he is not wise or fortunate enough to do the right thing at the right time.

Now, we need not suppose that, in thus emphasizing the fact of a Divine Order which restricts human action and controls its issues, Ecclesiastes is preaching the doctrine of mere Fatalism. It is true, indeed, that with regard to certain events of human life, this Order does take the aspect of an inexorable necessity. There are certain laws of Nature by which human life is absolutely bound. Man has his own divinely-ordained environment; and within this environment he must live and work. By the exercise of his wisdom and his will he may modify some of his immediate and temporary surroundings; but there are surroundings which he cannot alter, and which remain the same throughout the ages. It is, perhaps, to this perpetual environment that Ecclesiastes refers, when he says: "I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever; nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it; and God hath

done it, that men should fear before Him. That which is hath been already; and that which is to be hath already been; and God seeketh again that which is passed away." We have already seen how Ecclesiastes dwells on this idea of the recurring phenomena of nature and the recurring events of human experience. It is doubtless possible that he had an exaggerated conception of the way in which the past thus recurs in human life. But we must all admit that his words point to a great truth. Our own proverb, "History repeats itself," expresses substantially the same fact. The very constitution of human nature, and the very relation in which human nature stands to the universe and to God, imply certain abiding conditions of life, to which man cannot add, and from which he cannot take away. And God has decreed these conditions of life, in order that "men may fear before Him." This is one way in which He manifests His existence and His supremacy, and seeks to beget that spirit of humility and reverence with which it becomes the human creature to bow before the great Creator.

But, whilst Ecclesiastes thus recognizes certain conditions of human life and decrees of Divine Providence which man's will is absolutely powerless to alter, it does not follow that he teaches a mere Fatalism. Elsewhere in this book he says: "God made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions." The distinctive action of God does not render impossible a distinctive action on the part

of man. It does not follow that, because we are absolutely bound in some directions, we are free in none. It might as well be said that, because we cannot travel to the moon, we cannot travel to China or Japan. It does not follow that, because we cannot transgress certain limits, we are not free within these limits. There are decrees of God in Nature and in Providence to which we are compelled to submit; but man is not an automaton because there are certain experiences which he finds to be inevitable. The Divine Order sometimes asserts itself by compulsion, but, at other times, it simply asserts itself by inflicting some disadvantage on the man who will not recognize or obey it. There is "a time to be born, and a time to die;" there is also "a time to speak, and a time to be silent:" but a man's speech and silence are not as much beyond his own control as a man's birth and death. The great law of mortality cannot be finally resisted; but the law of opportune speech may be daily violated. And if a man is silent when he ought to speak, or if he speaks when he ought to be silent, he must simply bear the consequences of his unseasonable conduct.

And now I think we may see how these considerations give point to the question which is here repeated: "What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?" What Ecclesiastes means seems to be this, that man has no absolute power to shape or to control his own circumstances;

and that, therefore, even if happiness could be found in circumstances, his most strenuous exertions might fail to secure it. He must work under the great law of times and seasons. He may imagine that, if only he had this or that, he would be happy; he may plan for it; he may labour to obtain it; but he cannot be sure of getting it. The times may be against him; or he may fail to discern the times. Events may occur which oppose an insurmountable barrier to his efforts; or he may not be wise enough to take advantage of the favourable opportunity when it comes to him. Thus the ambition of the student may be balked, and he may fail to grasp the prize, just because a "time" of ill-health comes to him; or the merchant may be on the high road to fortune, when there comes a "time of war," which becomes for him a "time to lose;" and he cannot help himself. Or again, a season comes when a man would do well to "cast away" in bold venture; but, instead of doing this, he thinks it is "a time to keep," and so he misses his opportunity. By and bye, looking back, he says to himself: "Ah! if I had only made a venture just then, at the nick of time; but it is too late now!" Thus man is limited both by his powerlessness and his short-sightedness, in the presence of that Order which restricts his action or modifies its issues. And the uncertainties and disappointments of life which flow from this limitation often make human labour a source of anxiety and pain, instead of joy and profit. Man is indeed a free agent—free

enough to be morally responsible; he is not the mere creature of circumstance, or victim of fate. This is true. And it is further true that men sometimes imagine that they are hemmed in by barriers, when they ought to be surmounting them, and that they are restricted by their circumstances, when they might be altering them. But, on the other hand, it is just as true that man's choice is practically limited in a thousand ways—that all his work must be carried on under certain conditions which he himself has not fixed, and that, although he need not be the mere creature of circumstances, he cannot always be their creator. He can only live and labour within his environment—God in Nature, and God in Providence. "Man proposes, but God disposes." And one reason why God, whilst endowing men with freedom, exercises His power to limit and overrule their choice and their action, is that "men may fear before Him"—may recognize with humble reverence their utter dependence upon Him. What "profit," then, is there in a man's "labouring" to find his chief good in mere outward circumstances, when his labour must be conducted under so many restrictions, and his most strenuous exertions may fail to mould his circumstances in accordance with his own desires?

But now, whilst Ecclesiastes thus recognizes the fact that man is restricted by times and seasons—by laws of necessity and laws of opportuneness—he also rises to the conviction that this Order by which man

is limited is a right and beautiful thing. God "hath made everything beautiful in its time." The new-born babe has a beauty of its own; and there is often a strange beauty of quiet restfulness on the face of the dead. The happy dance of seasonable mirth and the merry peal of innocent laughter are beautiful, as well as the tears of sorrowful affection that are shed over the grave of the departed. Even events which to us have a harsh and unlovely look may nevertheless have their own fitting place in the economy of God. "God hath also set eternity in the heart" of man; God hath put into the human soul a sense of the Infinite and the Everlasting; and this sense is deepened by the very fact that "man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end." Man is hemmed in by times and seasons; yet his thoughts transcend these narrower bounds. He sees a Divine order working in the universe; he has the sense of a Divine plan running through the ages; but it is only a fragment of this plan that he beholds. As he looks back in thought to the "beginning," and as he looks forward in thought to the "end," his mind is often utterly baffled by the dealings of Providence; but the very mysteries of life increase his sense of the Infinite. His thoughts are carried upward to a Being who understands all, and forward to a goal which will explain all. No wonder that he cannot be satisfied with the mere things of time and sense, when God has thus "set eternity in his heart." And yet, just

because he has this sense of the Infinite and Eternal, he is able to rise to the belief that even those events which thwart his own will and those mysteries which baffle his own comprehension have their appropriate and beautiful place in a Divine order, and in the perfect working of the all-wise Ruler.

And so Ecclesiastes is led by these considerations to the same conclusion which he had already announced. "I know that there is nothing better for men than to rejoice, and to do good so long as they live. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy good in all his labour, is the gift of God." Here again the very introduction of the name of "God," and of the idea of "doing good" in one's life, is enough to show that Ecclesiastes is not commending mere sensual gratification. What he says is that the happiest man is he who works on cheerfully at his appointed labour, acting honestly and kindly, and receiving from God the gift of a thankful and contented spirit which enables him to enjoy the simple, ordinary blessings of daily life.

Now, although we possess the higher and fuller revelation of the gospel of Christ, and in that revelation have a measure of light which Ecclesiastes had not, yet I think that his words here point to abiding facts of human experience, and carry with them lessons which we shall do well to ponder. We are in quest of some "good." What is that "good"? Have we got it? Are we ever likely to get it? Are we setting our hearts on a happiness which we think

is to be found in circumstances, and are we therefore setting ourselves with might and main to shape our circumstances in accordance with our own desires? But God has "set eternity in our heart;" He has given us a sense of the Infinite and the Everlasting; and mere earthly things can never of themselves fill and satisfy our souls. Nay, more; even if true happiness could be found in mere circumstance, we can never be sure of being able to shape our surroundings in accordance with our own will. We have to face the fact that another will besides our own is at work in our history—the will of God. He is restricting and limiting us by times and seasons. Circumstances which we did not create, which we could not foresee, which we cannot alter, and which we cannot explain, may occur to cross our wishes and to thwart our plans. Is this a reason for folding our hands in idleness? No. But it is a reason for remembering that our lot is not entirely in our own hands. It is a reason for bending with reverence before the will of the Supreme. It is a reason for not trying to find our chief good in material things. It is a reason for cherishing some large and inclusive purpose which shall not be balked by the uncertainties and disappointments of this changeful life. It is a reason for seeking to be good and to do good in our life, and to receive from God that gift of pious contentment which shall make the inner world of the spirit less dependent on the outer world of circumstance.

VII.

MAN AND BEAST.

CHAP. III. 16–22 (*Revised Version*) :—

"*And moreover I saw under the sun, in the place of judgement, that wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, that wickedness was there. I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work. I said in mine heart, It is because of the sons of men, that God may prove them, and that they may see that they themselves are but as beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; and man hath no prëeminence above the beasts: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man* [1] *whether it goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast* [1] *whether it goeth downward to the earth? Wherefore I saw that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him back to see what shall be after him?*"

[1] Or, "that goeth" (Margin).

I HAVE already said that this book may be regarded as largely autobiographical. And not only does the writer record his experiences in his search after the "chief good," but he seems also to record his speculations and debatings on some of the perplexing problems of human life. He wished his readers to profit by his experience; and therefore, doubtless, he wished them to feel that his maxims and counsels were not mere hasty or groundless utterances, but were the outcome of much practical acquaintance with men and things, and of much brooding over many problems. This is perhaps the reason why we find the present conclusions and exhortations of the writer blended with the record of his past experiments in living, and his past attitude towards some of the riddles of the world. And it is this blending of the past and the present, and the difficulty sometimes of determining to what extent Ecclesiastes indorses the moods and thoughts which he records, that make his book less easy of interpretation.

Here, in the passage which now lies before us, he is evidently recording some of his past thoughts. His words are: "I saw under the sun;" "I said in mine heart." He has already mentioned some

of the reasons which led him to entertain such a pro[illegible]und conviction as to the "vanity" of earthly [illegible]s. He has described his own experience of the [illegible]sfying nature of earthly wisdom, pleasure, and [illegible]th; and he has shown also how man, living and w[illegible]rking as he must within his divinely-ordained environment, can never be sure of shaping his circumstances in accordance with his own will. But now, there was another thing which, to the eye of Ecclesiastes, added to the vanity and unsatisfactoriness of life. "I saw under the sun, in the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, that wickedness was there." In all ages it has been more or less a perplexing problem to reconcile the outward lot of the righteous and of the wicked in this world with the moral government of a righteous and almighty God. And there were probably special characteristics of the times in which Ecclesiastes lived, that made this problem then specially prominent, difficult, and painful. Not only were the just often injured by the unjust, but it was also often impossible for the injured to obtain legal redress, and injustice was often perpetrated even in the name of law. The very judges themselves were corrupt. The very "place of judgment" was often the place of iniquity. All this rendered human happiness much more unstable, and gave to human life a greater aspect of "vanity." It perplexed Ecclesiastes, as it has perplexed many both before and since his time, that

such injustice as this should be permitted on the earth under the overruling power of God. But he clung to the assurance that God would sooner or later manifest His righteousness, and vindicate the cause of the injured and the oppressed. "I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked; for there is a time *there* for every purpose and for every work." The word "there" seems to be emphatic, and appears to point to a future life. Ecclesiastes looked away from human tribunals to the Divine tribunal; from the corrupt judges of earth to the Righteous Judge in the heavens. In presence of the anomalies which perplexed him, he found some relief in the thought that a time was coming when present wrongs would be redressed, and God would judge between the righteous and the wicked. And this thought, which he here records as a thought of the past, he afterwards indorses more than once in the course of his book. Indeed, his conviction as to the righteous judgment of God becomes a prominent feature in his ultimate deliverance on the problem of life, and the best way of using life. The closing words of the book are: "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil."

Here, however, in the passage now before us, Ecclesiastes goes on to record another thing which he had said in his heart. "I said in mine heart, It is because of the sons of men, that God may prove them, and that they may see that they themselves

are but as beasts." And then follows the strange and striking comparison between man and beast; in which the resemblance of men to the lower animals, especially in their common liability to accident and their common subjection to a death which to all outward appearance is the same, is cited as another element in the "vanity" of human affairs. It is difficult to determine the exact object of Ecclesiastes in instituting this comparison: partly because the Hebrew text of the passage is capable, in one or two places, of different translations; and partly because it is possible to take very different views of the connection between the two things which Ecclesiastes had "said in his heart."

One view which may be taken of this connection is, that the second thought here mentioned is *supplemental* to the first. According to this view, Ecclesiastes, having recorded his conviction that the righteous God will yet judge between the righteous and the wicked, goes on to record how he had speculated as to the reason why God does not always execute this judgment here and now. It had occurred to him that the reason of this might be to "prove" or "test" men, and to show them that, in and of "themselves," they were liable to degenerate into a mere animal life. There is for man both probation and self-revelation in the fact that God does not visit all wickedness with immediate and manifest punishment. If a man thrusts his hand into the fire it is at once burnt: the suffering follows

immediately on the action, and the man is not likely to do the same thing again. Now, if all violations of the moral law were followed likewise by such immediate and manifest consequences, there might be a test of human prudence, but there would scarcely be any test of human virtue. If, for example, every man who should commit an act of dishonesty were —at once and without fail—to be stricken with paralysis, there would be no more virtue in honesty than there is now in keeping one's hand out of the fire. But the fact that God often postpones the manifest punishment of iniquity, and allows wicked men sometimes even to trample upon the righteous with apparent impunity, affords a test of moral character, and leaves room for the exercise of virtues which are the result, not of mere prudence, but of an actual allegiance to God and righteousness. And this kind of probation, to which men are subjected, becomes an instrument of self-revelation. Men see how much of the animal there is in their nature. They see how like to animals they can become, when they are left to themselves and allowed to follow their own inclinations and desires. Just because it is often possible for them to commit sin with apparent impunity, and sometimes even with apparent advantage, how often is it the case that the strong tyrannize over the weak, and the cunning trick the unwary, like so many beasts of prey! Men find, too, that they are subject to accidents and to death, even as the animals are;

they die and return to the dust just as the animals do. The spirit of man, indeed, "goeth upward"[1] at death; and the spirit of the beast "goeth downward to the earth": but "who knoweth" the exact difference between the two? The difference of destination does not make itself manifest to the senses. To all outward appearance the dissolution of the man and of the beast is exactly the same kind of thing; the human being does not appear to have any pre-eminence in this respect over the mere animal. Now, all these circumstances and appearances put men to the proof; they test men as to whether they will allow themselves to sink down into a mere animal, selfish life, or whether they will follow those divine inspirations which link them to God, beckon them to righteousness, and point them to immortality. The very fact that men, in many respects, outwardly resemble the lower animals, and the very fact that God does not always visit men outwardly according to their deeds, are facts which serve to test moral and spiritual character, and to make the distinction between the righteous and the wicked more manifest at last. Such, then, is one view which may be taken of this passage, as recording a speculation which had come into the mind of Ecclesiastes regarding what might be called the philosophy of the Divine moral government.

But there is another and very different view which may be taken of the passage. According to this

[1] See Authorised Version and margin of Revised Version.

view, the second thing which Ecclesiastes "said in his heart" is to be regarded not as supplemental, but as *antagonistic* to the first. When he looked at the way in which men often injured one another, when he saw how God permitted even judges to act unjustly, the first thought which arose in his heart was that, for some reason or other, God was simply postponing His judgment—that God would yet certainly judge the righteous and the wicked, if not here in this world, then "there," in a future life. And this thought brought some consolation to him. But he could not at that time rest in this consolation: for on the back of this thought there came another into his heart, antagonistic to it and threatening to override it. It was the dark, sceptical thought that, after all, God is dealing with men as He does, just to show them that they are really animals and nothing more! God lets the beasts act towards one another as they will; He lets them bite and devour each other; they are liable to accident; they are subject to death; they return to dust: men are also liable to accident; men also die, and return to dust; there seems to be the same kind of "breath" in them as in the animals; and if God lets men injure and oppress and trick one another, may it not be because, with all their higher wisdom and sagacity, they too are simply animals that perish when they die? According to this view, Ecclesiastes is here recording a mood of materialistic scepticism through which he had passed. The two things which he had "said in

his heart" were like the "two voices" of Tennyson's poem—voices conflicting with one another for the mastery, and plunging the soul for a time into doubt and perplexity.

Now, this view of the passage certainly seems to accord better with the rendering which many Hebrew scholars give to the twenty-first verse, and which we find in the text of the Revised Version. "Who knoweth the spirit of man whether it goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast whether it goeth downward to the earth?" This, obviously, is a sceptical question, and suggests a doubt as to whether, after all, there is any difference between the destiny of man and the destiny of the brute creation. And evidently it is just such a question as a man might put, when tempted to accept a materialistic philosophy.

Then, again, I must say that this second view of the passage also accords better with the closing verse of the chapter: "Wherefore I said that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his works; for that is his portion; for who shall bring him back to see what shall be after him?" It is difficult to connect these words with the idea that Ecclesiastes has just been recording a philosophical explanation of the Divine moral government. But if, on the other hand, he has just been recording a mood of scepticism through which he had formerly passed, then these words seem to follow naturally enough, as recording also the conclusion at which,

even then, he had arrived as to the best use of life. He has already registered this conclusion twice before, as the fruit of his own experience: and now he tells how this same conclusion forced itself upon him, even at a time when he was plunged into uncertainty as to the future judgement of God, and the higher destiny of man.

Supposing this, then, to be the real drift of the passage before us, we surely need not be surprised that Ecclesiastes, in presence of the problems of life, should have passed through some such mood of materialistic scepticism. When some of the ablest scientific men of our own day are telling us that man is simply a highly organized animal—a living automaton developed out of lower forms, and that there is every reason to believe that thought and feeling and conscience all perish at death; and when others, taking up the "agnostic" position, are simply saying, with reference to immortality, "Who knows?" can we wonder that a Jew who lived more than two thousand years ago was tempted at times to ask the same question? But it would seem that Ecclesiastes did not remain permanently in this sceptical attitude. We may regard him as here telling his readers what he *had* "said in his heart" about man and beast: he is not necessarily indorsing it at the time when he writes this book. On the contrary, it would appear from other passages that he was now clinging to the assurance that God would yet judge between righteous and wicked men, and that the spirit of

man does not perish at death. At the close of his book his words seem to be clear and decisive: "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return to God who gave it." Thus, however dark may have been the mood of scepticism through which he had formerly passed, his final attitude, when he wrote this book, was that of faith in immortality.

Now, if Ecclesiastes could thus, with the light *he* had, arrive at the final conviction that the human spirit survives the dissolution of the body, surely *we*, in the fuller light of the Christian revelation, may well overcome the chilling doubts which may sometimes creep in upon our souls. How different is the language of the New Testament, even as compared with that of the Old, on the subject of a future life! "Christ hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." The Son of God, by His revelation of the Father, and by His own death and resurrection, has inspired His disciples with "the hope of glory." Events, indeed, sometimes occur in the providence of God, which utterly baffle our understanding, and which seem almost to deal with men as if they were mere animals. Catastrophes happen, in which men seem to be taken as if they were "fishes of the sea." The most brilliant thinker suddenly meets with a blow on the head which robs him, for a time, of all power of thought. Such things as these may stagger us. But we recover faith when we look to Jesus Christ as the Light of

the world, and the Revealer of the Father. He who gave His Son to die for us, and who has led us to trust in His own fatherly love, will not let us go down into nothingness. He who "died for us and rose again" has shown Himself to be the conqueror of death; and, "because He lives, we shall live also." Glorying in His character and cross, and receiving into our hearts somewhat of His own spirit, we become conscious of thoughts, motives, and aspirations which raise us above our mere animal nature and contain within themselves the earnest of immortality. The unbeliever points us to the palsied limbs, the enfeebled brain, the failing memory, and the dying struggle; and he asks, "Are these your immortals?" Well, it is all very humbling; we are indeed animals. But we are also more than animals; we are men; we are *spirits*, for whom Christ died; and we look up to Him "who can change the body of our humiliation, that it may be fashioned like unto the body of His glory." "Who knows?" says the Agnostic: "there may be a future life, or there may not: who knows?" Let the Christian apostle answer him: "*We know* that, if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." To Paul the future life was no mere peradventure or probability. It was an absolute certainty. He walked, indeed, "by faith and not by sight;" nevertheless he "looked" at "the things which are unseen." As through the bodily eye he received

knowledge of the "temporal," so through the spiritual eye he received knowledge of the "eternal." The finite cannot comprehend the Infinite; but man can know God as a little child knows a father. "This is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." And if we "know" God through Jesus Christ, we may venture to say, in the assurance of our faith and hope, that we "know" also the fact of immortality.

VIII.

MEMORIES OF PESSIMISTIC MOODS.

CHAP. IV. 1–3 (*Revised Version*):—

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

WE have already seen that there are several reasons for believing that the author of this book was not Solomon himself, but a writer of later date, who by a legitimate literary device put into the mouth of Solomon his own observations and maxims concerning human life. The passage now before us presents one of the reasons for this belief. It is not likely that Solomon would have bewailed in this pathetic manner a system of oppression for which he himself, as king, would have been largely responsible. The same remark is true of the reference in the preceding chapter to the iniquities which were perpetrated even "in the place of judgment;" for it would have been the duty of Solomon to depose and punish the corrupt judges of the land. The language of the book, here and elsewhere, concerning the social and civil condition of the people seems to point to a much later date, when the Jews were groaning under a foreign yoke. Whether we place this date towards the close of the Persian dominion, or still later, in the time of Grecian ascendency, there was quite enough in the condition of the Jews during either of these periods to justify the language of the book concerning corrupt government and political oppression. We can well

believe that, during both of these periods, there were times so dark that many a Jew would be tempted to ask the question, "Is life worth living?" and to sink down into a state of scepticism, melancholy, and despair. We can easily believe that, in such dark times, many would look back in imagination through the centuries to the bright and prosperous reign of Solomon, and might wish that they had been born in those "former days" which were so much "better" than these. And this may perhaps have been one reason why Ecclesiastes, in giving to his countrymen some maxims and counsels suited to the times, sought to lend greater emphasis to his words by putting them into the mouth of that wise and prosperous king whose reign was supposed to have been Israel's "golden age."

Ecclesiastes himself had evidently caught the contagion of that melancholy which now depressed his countrymen: and perhaps the kind of life which he himself had lived had not tended to give him a brighter outlook on the world. However this may be, he seems to have often exercised his mind on the problem as to what was the best way in which a Jew could spend his life under the unsatisfying and disadvantageous circumstances of the times. In pondering this problem, he appears to have reached the conclusion that the unsatisfying character of human conditions in this or that age, was simply a question of degree, that there was a radical element of "vanity" in all earthly things. Looking at the constitution of

human nature and its relation to its surroundings, he had become convinced that it is impossible for man, with all his striving, to obtain for himself a satisfying happiness out of any mere shaping or collocation of circumstances. Circumstances, indeed, might be more or less favourable to happiness in this or that age; but there were certain fundamental characteristics of human life which remain the same through all the ages, and which render man constantly liable to disappointment. Man is restricted in many ways; by laws of Nature and events of Providence—by the constantly recurring phenomena of the world—by "times and seasons" which fetter his action. He must face the fact that another power besides his own is at work in his history, and not unfrequently crosses his own desires and designs. This power, which some men might call fate or destiny, Ecclesiastes recognized as the power of God. And he believed that God had restricted men within these permanent conditions of life, "in order that men might fear before Him." Here, then, was one element in the "vanity" of earthly things: man is never sure of being able to shape his circumstances in accordance with his own wishes; his most strenuous endeavours in this direction may often end in disappointment. But Ecclesiastes had also perceived another and deeper element in the "vanity" of earthly things. He had seen that, even under the most favourable and prosperous circumstances, man cannot extract from these alone a happiness that will

satisfy his nature. God "hath set eternity" in the "heart" of man; and man cannot find his chief good in things "seen and temporal." Man discovers that the attempt to satisfy the hunger of his soul with these things ends, sooner or later, in disappointment.

Now, we may well believe that Ecclesiastes, having, as the result of his own experience, arrived at these convictions, felt that he had a message for his countrymen amid the specially depressing circumstances in which they lived. He felt that something would be gained if he could help them to see that the disadvantageous conditions of their own times were simply an exacerbation of those restrictions under which man must always live. Their subjection to the Persian or Grecian dominion brought with it special sorrows and hardships, which largely prevented them from gratifying their desires and accomplishing their objects; but in all ages men have had their burdens and troubles, and have had their wishes crossed and their ends thwarted by circumstances over which they had no control. Sorrow and disappointment were no "new things under the sun." Ecclesiastes felt that something would be gained if he could show his countrymen that the impossibility which they experienced of carving for themselves a satisfying happiness out of their material surroundings was not an impossibility peculiar to their own times, but was the chronic impossibility of human life. They were perhaps looking back to the reign of Solomon, as to the "golden age" of Israel's history.

They were perhaps wishing that they had lived then, instead of now. They were perhaps fancying that then they would have been satisfied with life, and with the good things around them. But what if this "golden age" of the past were an illusion? What if it had been much more of an iron or leaden age than they imagined? Human life had its troubles then, as really as now. There was weeping then, as well as laughing. There was death then, as well as birth. There was hatred then, as well as love. Human souls were unsatisfied then, as really as now. Let them take even the case of Solomon himself, in all his glory, and with all his wisdom. Solomon had advantages such as few men possessed of carrying on his researches after the "chief good" of life. And Ecclesiastes does not hesitate to follow him in thought into that royal laboratory in which he had sought to produce the elixir of a satisfying happiness. Ecclesiastes ventures even to personate the king, and to describe the result of his experiments. And so, in this book, Solomon comes before us, telling us how he had tried, first the amassing of knowledge, and then the indulgence in mirth, pleasure, and all manner of luxury, and then the gathering of riches and all kinds of treasure, and how he had found each in turn to be "vanity and feeding on wind." So much for the "golden age" of Israel, as seen through the telescope of Ecclesiastes. The most prosperous of Hebrew monarchs, amid all his luxury and magnificence, may even have envied at times the lot of

some simple peasant who could sleep sweetly after a day of unanxious labour. And Ecclesiastes represents the king who was so renowned for his wisdom as arriving at the conclusion that the happiest kind of life possible on earth is the life of a man "pleasing God" and striving "to do good," working cheerfully at his appointed tasks, and receiving from God the gift of a thankful and contented heart, which enables him to enjoy the most simple and ordinary blessings.

It was in such considerations as these that Ecclesiastes found some antidote to the poison of that gloomy melancholy which was so characteristic of the times. He wrote, of course, primarily for the men of his own day ; and he felt that he might do something to help them amid the special troubles of the period, if he could only get them to see that the chief good of man can never be extracted out of mere material circumstance—that those who are outwardly the most prosperous are not necessarily the most happy, and that the present disadvantageous conditions of their own lot were not altogether incompatible with that kind of happiness which, in all ages of the world, had been the best and most satisfying. Such seems to be the main object of the teachings and counsels of this book. Ecclesiastes, however, wished his readers to feel that his maxims were not the mere hasty utterances of a "happy-go-lucky" moralist, but the counsels of one who had felt the pressure of the great problems of life. I have already suggested that this is perhaps one reason why his

book contains not only his conclusions and counsels *at the time when he wrote it*, but also the record of perplexities and speculations and phases of thought and feeling *through which he had formerly passed*. Thus, we have seen that, in the preceding chapter, he probably records a mood of materialistic scepticism which had formerly crept over his soul in presence of some of the anomalies of Providence. We have reason, indeed, to believe that this sceptical mood was not his final attitude of mind: but we are none the less likely to profit by the words of a man who shows us that he has felt the difficulties which perplex ourselves. There were many Englishmen of the last generation who were all the more deeply influenced by the teaching of Carlyle because he had described, under the guise of the imaginary autobiography of a German Professor, his own passage through "the everlasting No" to "the everlasting Yea." The power of Tennyson's "In Memoriam" is all the greater because the poet therein gives us a glimpse of the manner in which his faith in God and immortality had been assailed by doubts and fears. And many of the earliest readers of Ecclesiastes, who had themselves been plunged into a scepticism occasioned by the corruptions and disorders of the age, would not be the less likely to listen to the teachings of this book because the writer had himself known what it was to be staggered by the resemblance between man and beast.

Now, here again, in the opening words of this fourth chapter, Ecclesiastes makes another confession, and records how he had been plunged into the darkest views of life by the thought of the unrelieved wretchedness which was sometimes caused by tyranny. And so intense is his feeling here that he seems to forget his personation of Solomon: nor indeed can it be said that he takes any pains to keep up the dramatic use of this literary device after the second chapter of his book. "I returned and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold, the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter. Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive." So keen had been his sense of the misery sometimes endured by the victims of tyranny, and so deep was his pity for the oppressed, that he had pronounced it better to die than to live, and better still never to have been born at all, and so to have escaped even the sight of "the evil work that is done under the sun." It does not follow that, when he now wrote, he was indorsing this pessimistic mood. It was enough that he had experienced it. He was no stranger to the melancholy which was characteristic of the times. "The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely," had increased his sense of the "vanity" of earthly things; and there had been times in his experience when he felt

that "not to be" was better than "to be." The counsels which he was giving to his countrymen were not the counsels of a man on whom the troubles of the times were sitting lightly. On the contrary, they were the maxims of a man who could sympathize with his countrymen in their deep depression, who was keenly alive to the evils of an unjust and despotic government, and who had himself been tempted to sink down into moroseness and despair. When, therefore, he urged his readers to make the best even of their disadvantageous conditions, and to seek after that kind of happiness which in all ages had been the most satisfying, they were surely more likely to listen to such maxims as coming from one who had felt in his own soul the burden of human life.

Now, if Ecclesiastes was thus enabled to rise out of his darkest moods at any rate, through faith in God and in the righteous judgement of God—if, in spite of the melancholy of the times and the melancholy which assailed himself, he was able to counsel his countrymen to a godly and thankful enjoyment of such blessings as remained to them—surely we, with the fuller and clearer light which we now possess, may well be proof against the spirit of pessimism. The modern pessimistic school of Germany is essentially atheistic: it has no faith in a living, personal, righteous God; and it has no hope of a glorious immortality. But we who believe in God as revealed in His Son Jesus Christ can never, whilst we retain our faith, adopt the dark and dismal view that human

existence is a curse rather than a blessing. We cannot, indeed, deny the facts of moral and physical evil: sin and pain are realities which are not to be explained away: and there are also many mysteries of Providence which utterly baffle our understanding. But the love of God revealed in Christ—the Fatherhood of God proclaimed in the gospel—the redeeming purpose of God manifested in the death of Christ for all mankind—forbid us to dishonour Him with the thought that life is not "worth living." The Christian, it is true, is not bound to be an optimist, in the sense of asserting that this is "the best of all possible worlds." But we may remember that the absolutely best may not be now the relatively best. Health is better than medicine; but it may be best to give medicine, so long as the patient remains out of health. Easy chairs may be pleasant; but easy chairs are not the chief furniture of a gymnasium! God is seeking to bless His children by training and preparing them for higher blessedness. We cannot understand all His ways: but we can trust His love as revealed in Jesus. We cannot see the end from the beginning; but we can wait in hope. Our grand defence against pessimism is the Fatherhood of God and the Cross of Christ. There are many dark things in our human life: but "God is Light, and in *Him* is no darkness at all."

IX.

RIVALRY, AVARICE, AND POPULARITY.

CHAP. IV. 4-16 (*Revised Version*) :—

"*Then I saw all labour and every skilful work, that* [1] *for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh. Better is an handful with quietness, than two handfuls with labour and striving after wind.*

Then I returned and saw vanity under the sun. There is one that is alone, and he hath not a second; yea, he hath neither son nor brother; yet is there no end of all his labour, neither are his eyes satisfied with riches. For whom then, saith he, do I labour, and deprive my soul of good? This also is vanity, yea, it is a sore travail. Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, and hath not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have warmth: but how can one be warm alone? And if a man prevail against him that is alone, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king, who knoweth not how to receive admonition any more. For out of prison he came forth to be king; [2] *yea, even in his kingdom he was born poor. I saw all the living which walk under the sun, that they were with the youth, the second, that stood up in his stead. There was no end of all the people, even of all them over whom he was: yet they that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.*"

[1] Or, "it cometh of a man's rivalry with his neighbour" (Margin).

[2] According to some ancient versions, "whereas the other, though born in his kingdom, became poor" (Margin).

IN this passage Ecclesiastes goes forward to adduce some further illustrations of that element of "vanity" which runs through human life. "Then I saw all labour and every skilful work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour." Men may toil hard at their distinctive tasks, and they may acquire a certain prominent success by their industry and superiority: but this only causes them to be envied by many who grudge them the position which they have thus obtained. There is, however, another rendering of the words, which is given in the margin of the Revised Version: "I saw all labour and every skilful work, that it cometh of a man's rivalry with his neighbour." If this be the correct translation, then the words point, not to a consequence, but to a cause of superior work and successful industry. These spring, in many cases, from the spirit of jealous rivalry—from the desire on the part of men to outshine one another, to obtain a higher position or achieve a more splendid success. Ecclesiastes looked out on the busy world, with its over-anxious and often excessive labour; and he saw that all this eager toil was largely due to mere selfish ambition. He saw that men, instead of rejoicing in their neighbours'

successes, often envy them on account of their prosperity, and then strive with might and main to make themselves, in turn, the objects of their neighbours' envy. All this was "vanity and feeding on wind." How can a man find satisfying happiness in toiling and moiling from no other motive than the selfish desire to outrun or outshine his fellows? Ecclesiastes, indeed, saw that it was possible for a man to blunder also by adopting the opposite extreme. "The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh." A man, through the selfish love of ease, may resolve to keep out of the whirl and bustle of life, and may "fold his hands" in indolence. Such a man is a "fool"; his policy is suicidal. He "eats his own flesh." Idleness cannot give real happiness, and it may even lead to ruin. It wrecks a man's character, and it may wreck his fortunes also. "Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: so shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man!" But surely there is a wise "mean," somewhere or other, between these two "extremes" of feverish ambition and foolish idleness. So, at least, Ecclesiastes seems to have thought; for he adds, "Better is a handful with quietness, than two handfuls with labour and feeding on wind." The "quietness" here spoken of is not the inactivity of sloth, but that restfulness of spirit which an industrious man may enjoy when his industry is pervaded by a cheerful contentment. Now, here is one of those maxims with which

Ecclesiastes sought to comfort the hearts and to direct the conduct of his countrymen. Many of them might be disposed to murmur because the times were adverse to their acquisition of wealth. But he wishes them to remember that, even if the times had been more prosperous, they themselves would not necessarily have been more happy. He directs their attention away from *quantity* to *quality* of possession. One man may get more real satisfaction out of a little than another man gets out of much. Two handfuls are not necessarily better than one. It depends on what is in the hands. One handful of grain is better than two handfuls of chaff. It depends also on what kind of man has the handful or handfuls. Happiness, in its degree and quality, varies with the man who enjoys, as well as with the means of enjoyment. Yea, and even the same man may possibly get more satisfaction out of one handful than out of two handfuls of the same thing. It depends on whether the additional handful does not bring with it something else as well. In human life it often happens that a *plus* involves a *minus;* a gain in one direction means a loss in another. This, indeed, is no argument for "folding the hands" in sloth or indifference; for there is no weariness like the weariness of idleness, and there is no more prolific source of cares than carelessness. But it is an argument against that spirit of envious rivalry and selfish, restless ambition, which lessens the capacity, in the very act of increasing the means, of enjoyment. This

maxim of Ecclesiastes is well worth pondering. It is pitched in the same key as the maxim of the apostle Paul: "Godliness with contentment is great gain:" and it reminds us of the still more inclusive maxim of our Lord Himself: "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

Ecclesiastes proceeds to give us another illustration of the "vanity" of human life. With a few rapid touches he sketches a vivid picture of the lonely miser. "There is one that is alone, and he hath not a second; yea, he hath neither son nor brother; yet is there no end of all his labour; neither are his eyes satisfied with riches. For whom, then, saith he, do I labour, and deprive my soul of good?" This picture presents us, so to speak, with the *reductio ad absurdum* of avarice. There is many a man who is full of covetousness, whose leading motive, indeed, is the lust of gold, but whose avarice is so far veiled by his social relations: he has a wife and children to provide for; he has friends and companions with whom, to some extent, he shares the fruits of his toil; he has a position in society which he wishes to maintain. But if we would see how the spirit of avarice can turn human life into an utter absurdity, we must look at it as embodied in some such extreme case as that which is here presented. Here we have a man who has no "second" along with him, no partner in business, no wife, no son, no brother, no companions or friends to whom he is

specially attached. He cares nothing for human society, except as a sphere in which he can make money. Nevertheless this man toils on with the utmost eagerness, as if his very life depended on his toil. His own wants have long ago been amply provided for: there is no relative or friend whom he cares to enrich: and yet there is "no end of all his labour." He "deprives" his own soul of "good:" he sacrifices rest and comfort: but he can give no rational answer to the question, For whom or what am I toiling thus? It does not seem that he is even actuated by any envious rivalry of his neighbours: he does not appear to be aiming at any special position in society: he is simply following an insatiable craving: his "eyes are not satisfied with his riches," and he longs for more: and so he goes on toiling and scraping and hoarding as if he were propelled by some blind and uncontrollable instinct. Is not this indeed "vanity under the sun"? Can any way of spending life be conceived of, that is more idiotic than this?

And now the thought of this selfish, lonely miser leads Ecclesiastes to speak of the blessings and benefits of companionship. "Two are better than one." God has made us for mutual trust, sympathy, and help: and friendship is a great sweetener of human life. Even from a self-regarding point of view, the lonely miser makes a great mistake. He will have no partner or companion, because he wishes to have the more for himself. But "two are better than one,

because they have a good reward for their labour." Even partnership in business often means an increase of profits. Co-operation may bring more gain than competition. And, in the journey of life, fellow-travellers may often be of great help to one another. "If they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, and hath not another to help him up." If a man, journeying by himself through a lonely district, should stumble and sprain his ankle, his plight might be a sad one. The mountain-climber has sometimes come to grief, because he would persist in climbing alone. Then, again, not only do the two fellow-travellers cheer and help one another during the daytime; but also, when they lie down at night to sleep, especially if they sleep, as was the custom of the Orientals, on a floor-mat and simply in their outer garments, they keep each other warm; whereas each of them, if alone, might have shivered in the cold. And then, once more, if a robber were to assault a solitary traveller, he might prevail; but the two travelling together are able to withstand any one assailant. Such are the benefits of companionship on a journey. And similar are the benefits of true friendship on the journey of life. Friends cheer and help and protect one another. "Union is strength." This is true even of two. And it is truer still of more than two. "A threefold cord is not quickly broken." But the covetous man is apt to rob himself of such benefits as these. His very selfishness outwits itself.

For all avarice tends to isolate a man from his fellows, to shut him up within his own narrow interests, to repel the sympathies of his neighbours, and to dry up the springs of his own affections.

In the closing verses of the chapter, Ecclesiastes seems to be adducing another illustration of the "vanity" of earthly things; and, this time, from the highest of all earthly positions—the position of monarch. He points to the instability of sovereignty, and the fluctuation which may take place in the most exalted popularity. "Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who knoweth not how to receive admonition any more. For out of prison he (this young man) came forth to be king; whereas he (the old king), though born in his kingdom (born heir to his kingdom), became poor. I saw all the living which walk under the sun, that they were with the youth, the second, that stood up in his stead (the young successor, just mentioned, who takes the old king's place). There was no end of all the people, even of all them over whom he was: yet they that come after shall not rejoice in him." It has been thought that Ecclesiastes must here be referring to some well-known event of his own times: but, if this be the case, the event has not yet been identified. Perhaps he is simply presenting an imaginary but possible case, for which there had been quite sufficient basis in many a political revolution. In those old kingdoms and empires it was always possible that even a beggar or prisoner might rise to

the throne, whilst the monarch who had been born to the crown might, in his old age, perhaps through his own folly, become a poor man in his own kingdom. Such was the instability of the most exalted of earthly positions. And Ecclesiastes sketches the picture of the young upstart—a usurper wise and skilful enough to make himself the leader of a successful revolution, and to place himself in the stead of the old monarch. So great is the popularity of this usurper that he becomes the idol of the hour: millions flock around his standard, and place him on the throne. But even this popularity is, in turn, an evanescent thing; "those who come after him" (the people of a younger generation) "shall not rejoice in him." He, too, has only his day. It may be that, even during his lifetime, he loses the popular favour: and, at the best, he soon passes away in death, and is speedily forgotten. Thus the glory and fame even of monarchy itself is also "vanity and feeding on wind."

It would not be difficult to find many a "historical parallel" to this picture. One of the most striking has occurred within the memory of some of us. When Louis Philippe, the aged King of France, who would not be admonished by the signs of the times, had at length to flee from his own kingdom in 1848, Louis Napoleon, who, not long before, had been for five years a prisoner in the fortress of Ham, appeared in Paris, and, throwing himself into the midst of political affairs, gradually became more and

more popular, until in due time he became President of the Republic, and ultimately Emperor of France. We know how he was worshipped by the masses of the French people, how there was "no end of all the people" who flocked around him in their enthusiasm. And we know how, after many years of royal splendour, the collapse came suddenly at last, and how, after the defeat at Sedan, the nation, almost as one man, turned round and kicked the idol they had worshipped. Even one of our own poets had hailed him as "Emperor evermore!" But where is all his "glory" now? Surely "vanity of vanities" might well be inscribed on the tomb of Napoleon the Third. And, indeed, the career of many a man who has been borne along into high position on the wave of popular enthusiasm furnishes a most salutary lesson as to the real value of mere earthly fame and greatness.

It is not, then, in the labour of envious rivalry, nor in the selfish amassing of wealth, nor in high position or popular fame, that substantial and satisfying happiness is to be found. We cannot reach the "chief good" of life by the road of envy, or of avarice, or of worldly ambition. The deepest satisfaction possible to man can only be obtained by his living the highest possible life. That life is the very life of God in the soul. Of that life *Duty* and *Love* are the two grand watchwords. Duty and Love are, as it were, the two "foci" of the soul's true orbit: duty and love, in their widest sense; duty to God,

and duty to man; love to God, and love to man. In proportion as any soul is inspired by these two simple yet grand motives does it taste the "chief good" of existence. The peace and joy which spring from Duty and Love give a blessedness which a little child may know; and the highest archangel cannot drink of a sweeter bliss, although he may drink it in larger draughts from a fuller and deeper cup.

X.

REVERENCE TOWARDS GOD.

CHAP. V. 1–9 (*Revised Version*):—

"*Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God; for to draw nigh to hear is better than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they know not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God; for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few. For a dream cometh with a multitude of business; and a fool's voice with a multitude of words. When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou vowest. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?* [1] *For thus it cometh to pass through the multitude of dreams and vanities and many words: but fear thou God.*

If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and the violent taking away of judgement and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for one higher than the high regardeth; and there be higher than they. Moreover the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field."

[1] Or, "For in the multitude of dreams there are vanities, and in many words" (Margin).

IT is part of the teaching of this Book that the highest good possible to man, amid the limitations and fluctuations of the present life, can only be attained in connection with that reverence of the Most High which lies at the root of all true religion. The phrase "to fear God" is one which occurs several times in the course of the book: and there are other passages in which the thing is implied.

I do not think, therefore, that Ecclesiastes would have included a genuine religion among the "all" things which he regarded as "vanity." Rather did he view such religion as doing something to redeem human life from its unsatisfactoriness. But, at the same time, he saw that many of his countrymen were turning religion itself into a "vain" thing, by making it a mere matter of forms and words. Even in his day there seems to have been at work that spirit of formalism which ultimately developed into the Pharisaism of our Lord's time; and this formalism seems to have been associated with a thoughtlessness and irreverence altogether incompatible with true religion. In reading the utterances of the prophets Haggai and Malachi, we see how the Jews, after their return from the exile, were guilty of gross

carelessness, and even profanity, in relation to the worship and service of Jehovah. Haggai had to remonstrate with them for allowing the temple of the Lord to lie waste, whilst their own dwelling-houses were beautifully decorated. Malachi had to denounce them for offering in the temple of God blemished sacrifices which they would not have dared to present to any human governor, and for "robbing God" by withholding the tithes which they ought to have brought into the sanctuary. And here Ecclesiastes, probably at a still later date, seeks to direct his countrymen to the satisfactions of a genuine piety, by warning them against the irreverence, formalism, insincerity, and superstition which were turning religion itself into "vanity."

"Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God; for to draw nigh to hear is better than to give the sacrifice of fools; for they know not that they do evil." By the "house of God" here is meant either the temple or the synagogue: and the exhortation "keep thy foot" refers, I suppose, to that reverent demeanour and spirit which ought to characterize those who are about to worship the Most High. To "keep the foot" is to walk in the right way: but to rush thoughtlessly into the Divine presence was not the right way of approaching the sanctuary. There were "fools" who imagined that the only thing which religion required of them was to offer the customary sacrifices in the temple. Their hearts and lives were ungodly; but, in their careless indifference,

they "knew not that they were doing evil." They did not realize their own sinfulness in the sight of God; and the sacrifices which they offered were not accompanied by any real contrition of heart. They simply went up to the temple according to use and wont, and brought the offerings prescribed by the law as a mere matter of mechanical observance. Such offerings, devoid altogether of the spirit of worship, Ecclesiastes characterizes as the "sacrifices of fools." To "hear" with thoughtful reverence the sacred Scriptures, as read in the temple-service, or to listen earnestly to the teaching given in the synagogues, was far better than to offer such formal sacrifices as these.

Ecclesiastes, having thus spoken of the reverence with which the worshipper ought even to approach the house of God, goes on to speak of the reverence with which he ought to pray within the sanctuary. "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God; for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few." The same irreverence which led thoughtless men to offer sacrifice in mere mechanical routine, led them also, in their devotions, to pour out a multitude of words without meditation or earnestness, just as if God could be pleased with the mere volubility or quantity of their prayers. Ecclesiastes utters his warning against this foolish notion and practice. The great distance between the Creator and the creature demands humility, awe, and

thoughtfulness in worship. The mere gabbling of words of prayer is an insult to the Majesty of Heaven. "For a dream cometh with a multitude of business, and a fool's voice with a multitude of words." It is possible that there may be here an intentional depreciation of dreams, as against the superstition which was disposed to attach an undue importance to them. Dreaming comes when the mind is harassed or excited by many things. But the main object of the writer seems to be to draw a parallel between the condition of the sleeper in whose dream a great multitude of things get jumbled together in the strangest confusion, and the condition of the foolish man who reveals his folly by a multitude of words poured out hastily without adequate thought. The voluble speaker is not, as a rule, the most accurate or earnest thinker. The wise man who thinks and feels deeply is more likely to utter himself in fewer words, but words that are better ordered and more sincere.

Ecclesiastes passes naturally from prayers to vows. "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools; pay that which thou vowest. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than thou shouldest vow and not pay." Thoughtlessness is a sign of folly: and the writer is still speaking of the folly of irreverence. The same irreverence which leads a man to go up lightly to the house of God, and which leads him, when there, to pour out a great many words of prayer without much

thought or feeling, leads him also to make vows without due deliberation, and then, with careless profanity, to back out of these very vows which he has made. Ecclesiastes sees in this habit of playing fast and loose with vows a spirit which strikes at the root of religion by making light of God Himself. All lawful promises, made even to our fellow-men, ought to be regarded as sacred: but a lawful promise made to God ought to be regarded as specially binding. Hence Ecclesiastes, with a wisdom which all human experience confirms, utters his warning against hasty vows. Such vows are often a snare to the conscience. It may be a burden to keep them, and yet a burden to break them. Or, if it is not a burden to break them, this may only show that the conscience has been hardened by want of reverence for God and truth. "Suffer not thy mouth" (by such hasty vowing) "to cause thy flesh to sin" (by breaking thy vow): "neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error." The prophet Malachi speaks of the priest as the "angel," or "messenger," of God; and it is probably in this sense that the word is used here. The man who has made his vow without sufficient deliberation becomes anxious afterwards to be released from it, and so betakes himself to the officiating priest, and says that his vow was made in ignorance or mistake, thus perhaps still further violating his conscience by a dishonest pretext. Ecclesiastes felt that all such conduct as this was dangerous in the extreme, and might bring down deserved punishment

from Heaven. "Wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thy hands?"

I have already hinted at the possibility that some of the Jews of this period may have fallen into a superstitious regard for dreams. There was a custom amongst the Greeks of offering up sacrifice in order to avert the evils that were supposed to be threatened by bad dreams. There is also, it appears, a saying in the Jewish Talmud, to the effect that "fasting is serviceable to make evil dreams harmless." It is quite conceivable, therefore, that some of the Jews of this period, when under the incubus of a bad dream, may have sought to avert imaginary danger by the hasty utterance of some vow which afterwards they wished to cancel. It almost seems as if Ecclesiastes is referring to some such superstition, when he says: "For in the multitude of dreams there are vanities, and in many words: but fear thou God!" The very same habit of mind which attached importance to the mere quantity of words uttered in prayer, was not unlikely to attach a superstitious significance to dreams. But all this foolish formalism and superstition was turning religion itself into "vanity." And the one remedy was a true and deep reverence for God Himself. This reverence would lead a man to go up thoughtfully to the house of God, to offer his sacrifice with real feeling, to hear attentively the word of truth, to utter his prayers with a devout and sincere heart, to refrain from rash vows, to perform the lawful vows which he deliberately made, and to

rise above the foolish dread of unpleasant dreams. "Fear thou God!"

Then, again, this same reverent recognition of the Most High brings also a certain consolation amid the injustice and tyranny of wicked men. "If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and the violent taking away of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter; for one higher than the high regardeth: and there be higher than they." Ecclesiastes has already recorded how the sufferings and tears of the oppressed had sometimes plunged his own soul into despair, and darkened the whole world for him. Here he seems to be exhorting his readers not to let themselves be overwhelmed by the spectacle of such oppression, but to lift up their eyes to that Supreme and Mighty One who is above all human governors and potentates. This thought had doubtless delivered his own soul from dismay and despair—the thought that none of these things could happen without the Divine knowledge and permission, and that God would yet judge between the righteous and the wicked. The next verse, however, is more obscure: "Moreover, the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field." Various translations and interpretations of this verse have been proposed. One interpretation—which is perhaps as good as any—is that Ecclesiastes is here adding another consolatory thought in presence of oppression. Not only is the Most High watching the deeds of men, but there is even a natural limit to the tyranny

of earthly rulers. The very king himself, however despotic and absolute, is, after all, dependent on the field; the prosperity of the palace depends, in the long run, on the prosperity of the people. The self-interest of the monarch thus puts a natural check on oppression: if he crushes his subjects, he injures himself. The policy of cruelty or injustice on the part of a king or his representatives always tends to become a suicidal policy: and rulers are not unlikely to perceive that, in drying up the springs of industry in a country, and depressing the spirit of the people, they are drying up the sources of their own revenues, and sapping the foundations of their own strength. It is thus a "profit" or advantage to all in the land that the king on the throne cannot afford to despise or trample on the peasants that till the "field."

The chief lesson, however, now before us is the grand lesson of reverence towards the Most High. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Reverence lies at the root of all true religion. "God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth." Worship, without heartfelt reverence for the name and the will of God, degenerates into mere formalism: and formalism may develop into hypocrisy, and even into profanity. We know how Christ denounced the formalism of the Pharisees. We know how He warned His disciples against the heathen notion that their prayers were more likely to be heard for their "much speaking." "Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of,

before ye ask Him." We remember Christ's picture of the publican going up to the temple and simply saying, with deep reverence and penitence, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" We know how Christ condemned the Pharisees for those subterfuges by which they helped men to make light of certain oaths, and to make use of religious vows in order to shirk their plainest duties. "Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor. Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that hath sanctified the gold?" And again: "Ye say, If a man shall say to his father or his mother, That wherewith thou mightest have been profited by me is Corban, that is to say, Given to God; ye no longer suffer him to do aught for his father or his mother." We know, too, how Christ made a scourge of small cords, and drove forth the hucksters from the temple when they were desecrating it by their avarice and worldliness. "Make not My Father's house a house of merchandise." The exhortations of Ecclesiastes have thus been confirmed by Christ Himself. And the danger of formalism, carelessness, and irreverence in religion is a danger which is constantly recurring. It is a danger which is present amid the intoning of prayers in the most beautiful cathedral, as well as amid the extravagances of a "Salvation Army." It is a danger which is present amid the silence of a Friends' meeting-house, and

the simplicities of a Congregational chapel. "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God." We shall all do well to listen to this injunction. How much more stimulus we might receive from the services of the sanctuary if we would always come up to our religious worship and meditation, prepared to pray with sincere devoutness, and to hear with thoughtful attention! Take reverence, thoughtfulness, and sincerity out of religion, and it also becomes "vanity and feeding on wind." But let religion be the true, devout, trustful communion of our inmost soul with our Maker and Father in heaven; and we shall find that it affords us a real and satisfying "good."

XI.

ANTIDOTES TO COVETOUSNESS.

"*He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this also is vanity. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what advantage is there to the owner thereof, saving the beholding of them with his eyes? The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the fulness of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.*

There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept by the owner thereof to his hurt: and those riches perish by evil adventure; and if he hath begotten a son, there is nothing in his hand. As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he go again as he came, and shall take nothing for his labour, which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a grievous evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that he laboureth for the wind? All his days he eateth in darkness, and he is sore vexed and hath sickness and wrath.

Behold, that which I have seen to be good and to be comely is for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy good in all his labour, wherein he laboureth under the sun, all the days of his life which God hath given him: for this is his portion. Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God. For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him in the joy of his heart.

There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is heavy upon men: a man to whom God giveth riches, wealth, and honour, so that he lacketh nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it; this is vanity, and it is an evil disease. If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, but his soul be not filled with good, and moreover he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he: for it cometh in vanity, and departeth in darkness, and the name thereof is covered with darkness; moreover it hath not seen the sun nor known it; this hath rest rather than the other: yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, and yet enjoy no good: do not all go to one place? All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled. For what advantage hath the wise more than the fool? or what hath the poor man, that knoweth to walk before the living? Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

[1] *Whatsoever hath been, the name thereof was given long ago, and it is known that it is man: neither can he contend with him that is mightier than he. Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better? For who knoweth what is good for man in his life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?*"

[1] Or, "Whatsoever he be, his name was given him long ago, and it is known that he is man" (Margin).

THROUGHOUT the whole of this passage Ecclesiastes is dealing with the subject of riches. He has already touched on this subject more than once; but here he treats of it more fully. It seems to have been again suggested to his mind by what he had just been saying about "the oppression of the poor." Probably the Jews of that period were at times the victims of oppressive taxation; and, at other times, they may have suffered from private extortion or fraud for which it was difficult to obtain legal redress. Perhaps Ecclesiastes saw that some of his countrymen were disposed to envy their avaricious oppressors who thus enriched themselves at their expense. Perhaps also he saw that others of his countrymen were themselves eagerly engaged in the pursuit of wealth, as if its possession were the highest possible good. We know how, in still later times, the Jews, when they have been despised by their neighbours and been denied the rights of citizenship, have often turned to money-making as their chief solace amid the evils of their lot. It may therefore have been the case that a covetous envy and a sordid avarice were both characteristic of Jewish society in the days of Ecclesiastes. Both of these vices spring

from the same source—an exaggerated estimate of the value of wealth in its relation to human life and happiness.

Now Ecclesiastes, having a message for his countrymen amid the disadvantageous and depressing circumstances of the times, may well have desired, amongst other things, to strike a blow at these two vices of envy and avarice. And so he recurs again and again to the fact that riches, as such, do not contain a satisfying "good." In riches, as in all other earthly things, there is an element of "vanity." The experience and observation of Ecclesiastes had led him to see that wealth has its drawbacks, as well as its advantages—that even "sore evils" are often attendant on its possession; and some of these disadvantages he here proceeds to specify.

The first fact to which he draws attention is that covetousness is, in its very nature, an insatiable hunger. "He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this also is vanity." The lover of money, as he gets more, only longs for still more and more. Acquisition whets instead of appeasing his appetite. Thus riches must fail to satisfy, in proportion to the very eagerness with which they are pursued. The next fact adduced by Ecclesiastes is that "when goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what advantage is there to the owner thereof, save the beholding of them with his eyes?" As a

rule, when a man becomes more wealthy, he enlarges his establishment; he goes into a larger house, and surrounds himself with more servants and dependants; his whole expenditure is on a greater scale. He therefore simply makes a bigger show in the world; and his "eyes" are so far gratified by this show: and that is all. Then further, another drawback to wealth is that it frequently increases the anxiety of its possessor. "The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much; but the fulness of the rich will not suffer him to sleep." One might imagine beforehand that the poor man would be the more likely to be harassed by feverish care, and to be robbed of his sleep by thoughts of what might possibly happen on the morrow; whilst the rich man would be able to rest quietly, in the consciousness of ease and security. But practically it is found that the reverse is not unfrequently the case. The rich landowner often lies tossing on his bed, whilst the farm-labourers on his estates are locked in peaceful slumber. The artizan is often freer from care than his wealthy employer. His simple occupation, manual labour, homely food, and plainer habits of life tend to give him the boon of refreshing sleep. Whereas the rich man, through his very abundance, through the multiplicity of interests which engage his thoughts—the larger establishment which he has to manage, the greater expenditure which he must control, the more fastidious tastes which he naturally acquires, the number

and magnitude of the investments or enterprises on the safety or success of which his position depends —is subject to the incursions of annoyance and anxiety from many sides. Many a man sets himself eagerly to acquire and hoard money, in order to secure greater ease of mind: but, after he has obtained his wealth, he may discover that the one thing which his money cannot buy is a quiet and restful spirit.

Ecclesiastes proceeds to mention another "evil" which he has observed in connection with the hoarding of riches. He has seen a covetous man toiling hard to accumulate wealth merely to his own "hurt," by entailing upon himself the deeper misery when that wealth vanishes. Through some unfortunate circumstance his "riches perish": and he who had hoped, perhaps, to found a wealthy family has "nothing in his hand" to leave to the son whom he has "begotten." Stripped of all his possessions, he leaves the world as "naked" as he entered it. Yea, says Ecclesiastes, in any case this is a "grievous evil" to the covetous man, that, even if he retains his wealth to the end of his days, he must at last "go" away as bare as he "came." "What profit, then, hath he that he laboureth for the wind?" If, all along, this covetous man has been "eating" his bread "in darkness," if his sordid avarice has been taking the light out of his life, if his cares and disappointments and fears have been filling him with vexation and "sickness" of heart, and if, sooner or

later, he must submit to be stripped of the wealth to which he clings so tenaciously, what is the net "profit" of all his toil?

And so Ecclesiastes is again led back to the same conclusion which he has already announced more than once, and which, indeed, is one of the *refrains* of this book: "Behold that which I have seen to be good and to be comely is for one to eat, and to drink, and to enjoy good in all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun all the days of his life which God hath given him; for this is his portion." I have already shown that by such words as these Ecclesiastes does not mean to encourage or justify any sensual excesses, or to place mere animal indulgence in the forefront of human enjoyment. From his point of view, the life which we are living is a "life which God hath given," and which ought therefore to be spent as in His sight. But Ecclesiastes was certainly no ascetic. He saw, indeed, that God had made man for work; but he believed that God had also made man for enjoyment, and that He intended man to enjoy his work, and to enjoy the fruits of his work. God, in His goodness, gives many blessings to men; and it is not a "comely" thing to despise His gifts. Especially should we beware of that gloomy asceticism of discontent, which refuses to enjoy what we have, through vexation at the absence of what we have not. Ecclesiastes wished his readers to feel that much true enjoyment of life was altogether independent of

riches, and indeed that riches, instead of increasing this enjoyment, often diminished it. They would find it to be a real good, even amid the trials of their lot, to receive with a thankful and contented spirit those ordinary blessings and bounties of daily life which God might bestow upon them. Thus the phrase "to eat, and drink, and enjoy good in one's labour," stands contrasted with that eager, scraping, hoarding avarice which over-estimates the value of riches, and takes out of the soul the very capacity of enjoyment. Not, however, that Ecclesiastes denied the possibility of a rich man's attaining to the chief good of life. But, if he does so, it will not be merely because of his wealth: it will be because of the "gift of God." "Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour: this is the gift of God." Even the rich man may be delivered from the bonds of avarice: he may be enabled to look at his wealth in the light of the Giver of all good: and thus he may have the power given him to make a right use of it, and to enjoy it with a thankful and pious heart. Such a man "will not much remember the days of his life;" he will not be over-anxious about them, nor brood over their transitoriness; "because God answereth him in the joy of his heart;" his moderate and tranquil enjoyment of the blessings of life carries with it the testimony of a good conscience, corresponds with the

Divine purpose, and is associated with the consciousness of the Divine approval.

In the sixth chapter Ecclesiastes still pursues this same theme. He has just been speaking of the wealthy man to whom God gives power to enjoy his wealth. He passes on now to sketch the opposite picture. "There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is heavy upon men: a man to whom God giveth riches, wealth, and honour, so that he lacketh nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it: this is vanity, and it is an evil disease." "Power to eat" is here synonymous with power to enjoy; and the picture presented is that of a rich man who has in abundance everything that he can desire, but who, somehow or other, has not the capacity of enjoying his own possessions. He is none the happier for all his wealth. He is morose and fretful. He is also, perhaps, childless; and, when he dies, a "stranger" comes into the enjoyment of that from which he himself had obtained no happiness. But, even "if he should beget a hundred," even if he should have a hundred children and grandchildren, and even if he should "live many years," yet, "if his soul be not filled with good, and moreover if he have no burial"—or, as it has been translated, "even if the grave did not wait for him"—"I say that an untimely birth is better than he." The still-born child "cometh in vanity, and departeth in darkness, and the name thereof is covered with

darkness." It "hath not seen the sun, nor known it," and so it hath more "rest" than the unhappy rich man who has just been described. It has "rest," at any rate, from toil and suffering, instead of spending a restless, joyless existence in the very midst of plenty. Yea, and let us suppose the life of this rich man to be indefinitely prolonged; let him live "a thousand years twice told;" yet what would be the value of this existence, if it brought him no "good"? "Do not all go to one place?" The life of this unhappy rich man is itself a kind of abortion: it, too, is a meaningless failure; and it also ends in the grave at last: but the still-born child has this advantage, that it escapes the intermediate misery between birth and the grave. Now, surely such a rich man—even with his long life and his many children—is, in his gilded misery, a man to be pitied, rather than to be envied.

Ecclesiastes proceeds to notice the insatiableness of human desire in general. "All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite (literally, the soul) is not filled." All human toil is intended to meet the various cravings of human nature; and yet, somehow or other, human nature refuses to be satisfied. And the "wise" man has no advantage in this respect over "the fool," nor the "poor" man over the rich. All men have desires which cannot be really filled with the things of this world. It would often be "better" for men if they would simply enjoy what comes within "the sight of the eyes"—

those blessings of the present which God is giving them—instead of losing the present by allowing their "desire" to "wander" after an imaginary happiness which they think they might obtain through some possible combination of circumstances. It is the insatiable craving of human nature that leads to these experiments which end in "vanity and feeding on wind." There are certain permanent conditions of human existence which have been ordained by the Almighty, and which man cannot alter. What man is has been settled long ago, when he was "named" at his creation: "it is known" that he is simply "Adam"—a creature of the dust: and this frail creature "cannot contend" with the Mighty One. Man is a being of boundless desire, but limited power. Nor does it necessarily follow that even when he succeeds in getting this or that thing which he desires, he is really "the better" for it. "There be many things" that only "increase" the "vanity" of life. "Who knoweth what is good for man" during the days "which he spendeth as a shadow"? The very things after which his desire "wanders," and which he thinks will make him happy, may contain no real "good" for him. "Or who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?" It is impossible for him to foresee the future. His shrewdest calculations may be overthrown. He may seek to amass a fortune for his children, but he cannot tell that his children will enjoy it: he cannot tell what will become of the fruits of his toil.

Such, then, are some of the considerations which Ecclesiastes presents as antidotes to covetousness. We cannot deny that he brings us face to face with facts which are well worth pondering. There is a glitter about wealth which is apt to dazzle us and lead us astray. Christ speaks of the "deceitfulness of riches." And this "deceitfulness" may cheat the poor man, as well as the rich, by filling him with discontent, and giving him unreal visions of a happiness from which he fancies himself excluded. Let us, then, guard ourselves against the kindred vices of envy and avarice, by refusing to think too highly of wealth. We need not affect to despise material comforts, nor to scorn those circumstances which, when rightly used, may minister to human happiness. But it is of the utmost importance that we should open our eyes to the simple fact that wealth has its drawbacks as well as its advantages—its burdens as well as its privileges—and that it is often a curse to its possessor, instead of a blessing. It is of the utmost importance to remember that covetousness—the lust of gold—is one of the most dangerous of all the vices, in its power to harden the heart, and to rob life of its sweetest and noblest elements. And, leaving out of consideration the exceptional hardships and temptations of extreme poverty, we may venture to affirm that, amid the ordinary blessings and homely circumstances of life, it is possible for a man to live as honourably and as happily as amid circumstances of wealth and luxury. If a man becomes a

money-worshipper, it is not merely the teaching of Ecclesiastes that he despises; he turns away from the spirit of Christ. Yea, and he insults his own manhood. As a *man*, he ought to be ashamed to say or to think that wealth is the thing that is chiefly worth getting in human life. "It is shameful," said Seneca the Stoic, "to depend for a happy life on silver and gold." The old pagan Stoicism, indeed, had in it an inhuman element; it was not true to the simple facts of human nature; and therein lay its weakness. But, underneath its inhuman and self-centred pride, there was, after all, a true, heroic element, rooted and grounded in the self-respect of manhood. And this higher and purer element of the old Stoicism finds a congenial home in Christianity. Christ inspires men with power to govern their desires, and rule their appetites. Man, with all his frailty, is, after all, greater than any of his material surroundings: and the self-respect which the gospel inspires makes him, to a certain extent, independent of circumstances. He cannot, indeed, "contend with God;" but he can live as a child of God. He may legitimately seek to better his position in life; but he is not to set his heart on this as if it were "the one thing needful," to be obtained at all costs and hazards. He needs, it is true, food and raiment; but he does not need riches and luxury. And if his body be in health and be provisioned with the ordinary necessaries and simple comforts of life, and if his soul be garrisoned by the forces of love and duty, he

may well resist the assaults of envy and avarice. Hence Paul, the Christian apostle, could say, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content:" "self-sufficing" is the word he uses; the very word a Stoic would have penned. "I know how to be abased, and I know also how to abound; in everything and in all things have I learned the secret both to be filled and to be hungry, both to abound and to be in want." We might almost fancy that we were listening to one of the old Stoics, until we hear his further word: "I can do all things in Him that strengtheneth me." "In Him that strengtheneth me;" *there* is the thought that prevents a noble self-respect and a manly independence from passing into an unnatural asceticism and an inhuman pride.

XII.

MAXIMS FOR ADVERSITY.

CHAP. VII. 1–14 (*Revised Version*) :—

"*A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made* [1] *glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity. Surely extortion maketh a wise man foolish; and a gift destroyeth the understanding. Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools. Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this. Wisdom is as good as an inheritance: yea, more excellent is it for them that see the sun. For wisdom is a defence, even as money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom preserveth the life of him that hath it. Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight which he hath made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God hath even made the one side by side with the other, to the end that man should not find out any thing that shall be after him.*"

[1] Or, "better" (Margin).

I HAVE already said that this book of Ecclesiastes cannot be regarded as, in any sense, a formal treatise. It is a book, rather, of confessions, meditations, and maxims. Nevertheless, in the first half of the book, which we have already considered, there has been manifest a certain unity of subject. The utterances of the writer have been largely variations on the one theme of the "vanity" of earthly things. In the second half of the book, on which we now enter, there is less unity of subject, and less continuity of thought. The main ideas of the writer, indeed, still keep recurring: from beginning to end he never loses sight of the "vanity" of earthly things, and the importance of making the best of human life through a pious and cheerful enjoyment of those blessings which God bestows. But his utterances in this second portion of the book are of a more miscellaneous character: they are less closely connected with each other, and are more epigrammatic and proverbial in form. They contain or suggest such reflections and counsels as he thought might prove helpful to his countrymen amid the adverse circumstances of the times in which their lot was cast.

"A good name is better than precious ointment."

There is here in the Hebrew a play upon words, which cannot well be rendered into English. "A good name is better than good nard" has been suggested as an approximation. Much importance was attached in the East to the use of perfumed ointments; and to the Oriental mind this luxury might stand as a type of sensuous enjoyment. But a "good name," says Ecclesiastes, is more satisfying than any such pleasures. A good name has a fragrance of its own, sweeter than any perfume that merely gratifies the senses. And this satisfaction of a good name was something that lay within the reach even of those who were shut out from the material luxuries of life. They might not be able to entertain each other with banquets and perfumes: but, at any rate, they could live lives of honesty and virtue: they could keep a good character and a good conscience. Here, then, was one element of satisfaction that was possible to them, even amid their disadvantageous circumstances. They could live so as to compel their neighbours to feel that they were men of integrity and honour. Yes, there is many a man who is living in circumstances of ease and luxury, but whose character is rotten, and whose very wealth, it may be, is tainted with more than the suspicion of dishonesty. Even amid the flatteries of his sycophants, such a man carries within him the elements of unrest and discontent. Whereas, on the other hand, there is many a poor man who is battling with hardship and difficulty, but who, in the consciousness of moral integrity,

carries within him a spring of satisfaction and peace. The village blacksmith who can "look the whole world in the face, for he owes not any man," would make but a poor bargain, if he were to exchange his simple happiness for the dainty luxuries of some successful swindler. "A good name is better than precious perfumes."

When Ecclesiastes proceeds to say that "the day of death is better than the day of one's birth," our first feeling, perhaps, is that we have here an expression of one of those pessimistic moods to which, as he himself confesses, he had been no stranger. But I do not think that we are compelled to take this view of his utterance. Many a proverb is necessarily one-sided: it simply exhibits one aspect of the truth. And this proverb, I think, may be explained apart from a morbid outlook on the present life, or an exaggerated estimate of its miseries. Not, indeed, that we can credit Ecclesiastes with any such bright prospect of the life beyond death as enabled the apostle Paul to say that he had a "desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better." Ecclesiastes is not contrasting the future life with the present life. He is not here saying that heaven is better than earth: he had scarcely a clear enough vision of the future to enable him to say that. But far less is he saying that non-existence is better than existence: for he believed that, at death, "the spirit returns unto God who gave it." Strictly speaking, he is not here contrasting death and life: he is contrasting *death* and

birth. He is contrasting "the day of death," as the end of a definite Past, with the "day of birth," as the beginning of an uncertain Future. And perhaps, too, we ought to connect this contrast with what he has just been saying about "a good name." Probably enough, when he is speaking thus of death, he has especially in view the death of the man who by a virtuous life has earned for himself a "good name." Solon is recorded to have said to Crœsus that "no man is to be counted happy until he has closed his life happily." It was a saying also with some of the Jewish sages: "Do not trust thyself till the day of thy death." Life is so full of uncertainties and temptations, that even a prosperous and honourable career is sometimes clouded at last by disaster and shame. The ship is sometimes wrecked, as it were, within sight of the harbour. It was perhaps this thought that was now specially present to the mind of Ecclesiastes. The day of birth is the beginning of an uncertain future. The new-born babe comes into a world of perplexing anomalies, manifold changes, bitter sorrows, and testing temptations. What its career will be, who can foretell? Other babes have lived to take part in tragedies of crime, or to go down into the very depths of anguish. God, indeed, is righteous and loving; and therefore we cling to the faith that human life is, in itself, a boon. But this faith cannot blind us to facts. And the simple fact is that the day of birth is the beginning of—one knows not what! Whereas the day of death is the

end of a definite past. And if a man has lived a virtuous life, if he has earned a "good name," death, in closing his earthly career, puts that good name beyond the reach of reversal and disgrace.

The thought of the "day of death" leads Ecclesiastes to speak of the "house of mourning" which death has visited. "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart." Ecclesiastes does not say that a man should never go to the house of feasting: he simply says that lessons of wisdom may be learnt at the funeral, which cannot be learnt at the festival. In the "house of mourning" we are reminded of our own mortality; our pride is checked; the spirit of sympathy within us is deepened; and all this tends to make us wiser and better men. "Sorrow is better than laughter, for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better." Ecclesiastes, indeed, had already said that there is "a time to laugh;" and doubtless he recognized the fact that innocent laughter has its own uses in the economy of human life; but he felt that, so far as the highest objects of life are concerned, a man is more likely to be benefited and blessed by sorrow than by laughter. Mirth is a thing that plays on the surface of our nature: sorrow goes down into the depths of the soul, and, by the deeper thoughts and feelings which it awakens, tends to sober the mind and purify the heart. And therefore "the heart of the wise is in the house of

mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." The wise man does not shun the sorrow which naturally comes in his path; nor does he shirk the duties which sympathy entails; he knows that he may derive a blessing even from painful experiences. The foolish, shallow man, on the other hand, is always on the outlook for mirthful pleasure; he would fain shut himself away from all sights and sounds of sorrow: song and dance and wine and jest are the things he chiefly cares for; and, in his absorbing love of mere sensuous enjoyment, he makes himself still more foolish and shallow. If he only knew it, "it is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools." The one, indeed, may give pain, whilst the other may produce laughter; but the pain is capable of bringing salutary and permanent benefit, whereas "the laughter of the fool is like the crackling of thorns under a pot"—or, as it has been translated, "like the crackling of *nettles* under *kettles*;" for, here again, in the original, there is a play upon words. The laughter of mere folly is like the flame of blazing thorns: there is plenty of noise and abundance of short-lived sparks; but the flame dies quickly down, and leaves behind it no steady glow of heat. Thus, then, does Ecclesiastes seek to comfort his readers by pointing them to the benefits which may be found in trouble. The theme has been a favourite one with moralists in all ages. The exiled duke in the Forest of Arden consoles himself with the thought that

"Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in its head."

The influence of sorrow in maturing and purifying human character is, indeed, too obvious to escape the notice of any thoughtful man. Christianity teaches us to regard the troubles of life as the discipline of a Father who is seeking our highest good. "Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted." "No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." And, in like manner here, Ecclesiastes would console his countrymen with the thought that sorrow has its own compensations, that adversity is a school in which they might learn the very best kind of wisdom.

Then, too, with regard more especially to the oppression and injustice under which they were suffering, Ecclesiastes counsels them to bear it with a wise patience, and not to indulge in foolish anger or useless repining. They need not envy the oppressor or the unjust judge; for "extortion"—the practising of extortion—"maketh even a wise man foolish;" and a gift—a bribe—"destroyeth the understanding." The tyrant is really in a worse condition than his victim. Let them therefore wait with patience for the final outcome of these troubles. "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof:" good may come out of all these evils.

And "the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit:" if they can only maintain their calmness and self-possession, they will have an advantage over their haughty oppressors. But, if they indulge in hasty anger, if they lash themselves into impotent fury, they will make their condition no better, and they will act an unwise part; "for anger resteth in the bosom of fools." Or if they indulge in useless repining over brighter times in the past, if they keep saying, "What is the cause that the former days were better than these?" they will not act wisely. It is very easy to idealize the past, and to exaggerate its advantages and its happiness. They might look back in thought to the "golden age" of Solomon, and might wish that they had lived then; but even Solomon himself had failed to secure a satisfying happiness. Besides, to fret and murmur against the providence of God was the sure way to hinder themselves from making the most of their present lot. Far better would it be for them to cultivate the calmness, the resignation, and the patience of wisdom.

For "wisdom is as good as an inheritance." Ecclesiastes would have his countrymen set their hearts less on wealth, and more on wisdom. The times might be unfavourable for their amassing riches: they might not be able, many of them, to build up a fortune: but no one could prevent them from acquiring the true wisdom; and such wisdom is a "more excellent" thing. Wisdom, considered

as an advantage to its possessor, will compare favourably with wealth. "For wisdom is a defence, even as money is a defence; but the excellency of knowledge is that wisdom preserveth the life of (or giveth life to) him that hath it." Money does afford a certain "defence" or "shelter" to a man in many ways: but the same thing is also true of wisdom. Often, indeed, the chief value of money lies in the fact that it can buy for us the kind of help which the knowledge or practical wisdom of others can afford. And a wise man, with but little money, will often find himself in safer "shelter" than a foolish man who has abundance of wealth. Besides which, wisdom has this advantage over wealth, that it "giveth life to him that hath it." Money does not enrich the essential being of the man whom it defends: whereas wisdom positively adds something to the nature which it protects. This is true of even the lower kinds of knowledge, if only it be knowledge that is worth having; for it stands in direct relation to a man's own being. It becomes part and parcel of the man himself, so that his inner life becomes a richer and fuller thing. Much more is this true of the highest knowledge—the knowledge of God—the wisdom of godliness and goodness, which "cometh down from above." The higher the knowledge, the higher is that life which it quickens or preserves.

Ecclesiastes goes on to remind his readers that it can serve no useful purpose to murmur against the decrees or providence of God. "Consider the work

of God; for who can make that straight which He hath made crooked?" It is the part of wisdom to "consider" God's ways; and if a wise man sees that this or that thing, which to him looks "crooked," is the "work of God," his wisdom will direct him to submit with resignation and patience to the unalterable. Now, this principle might indeed be applied in such a manner as to paralyze human effort and hinder human progress. It is quite possible for men to misread the ways of God. It is quite possible to ascribe to the act of God a "crookedness" which may be due rather to the act of man. Wrong things, it is true, can exist only as permitted by God; but, whilst permitting them, God may nevertheless be calling upon men to rectify them. This world is an arena of education by discipline; and a wise teacher sometimes puts difficulties in the path of his scholars, in order to develop their skill, energy, and perseverance. And if we would not substitute a fatalistic resignation for manly endeavour, we ought to remember that God may have made some things "crooked," just that we may "straighten" them. This earth is not merely a habitation which can be spoilt by its tenants: it is also a habitation which may be improved by its tenants. Man's calling is to "replenish the earth and to *subdue* it." But, whilst this is true, it is just as true that there are laws of Nature which it is beyond the power of man to alter, and events of Providence which we are utterly unable either to obviate or reverse. And it

is to this, I suppose, that Ecclesiastes is here referring. When circumstances over which we have no control are adverse to us, when they cross our own purposes or inclinations, and even when we cannot understand why God permits them, it is the part of folly to murmur against His decree, and to sink into a fretful repining because "the former days were better than these." The wise man who "considers" God's ways will rather resign himself to God's will, and strive to make the best of the circumstances which God has appointed; for no murmuring or rebelling can "make straight" that which God intends to remain "crooked."

"In the day of prosperity, be joyful: and in the day of adversity, consider; God hath even made the one side by side with the other, to the end that man should not find out anything that shall be after him." Here Ecclesiastes, who was, as we have already seen, an enemy to moroseness and discontent, counsels his readers to a glad and thankful reception of any blessings which God bestows: "In the day of good, be in good." They were not to brood over their disadvantages or troubles in such a way as practically to reject any alleviation of them. This life of ours is a mixed experience of joy and sorrow: God has purposely "made the one side by side with the other:" He has made the "day of adversity," as well as the "day of prosperity," "in order that man should not find out anything after him"—should not discover anything of what shall be hereafter. God

veils the future from our view. We cannot with any certainty forecast what is to come hereafter in our experience, even in this world. The wonderful blending and balancing of prosperity and adversity in our life makes this impossible. But our ignorance of the future is no reason why we should not thankfully enjoy any boon which God may be giving us. "In the day of prosperity, be joyful:" we ought not to rob ourselves of a present good, either through a morbid brooding over the past, or through gloomy forebodings as to the future. And, in the day of adversity, we ought to "consider" that God has a good reason for sending it, and that the day of prosperity may again come to us. In any case, it is a good thing that the future is always hidden from us: the fluctuations and uncertainties of human life help us to realize more vividly our utter and constant dependence upon God.

XIII.

THE GOLDEN MEAN.

CHAP. VII. 15–18 (*Revised Version*):—

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

ECCLESIASTES here proceeds to give a striking instance of the strange manner in which prosperity and adversity are mingled in human life. He had seen all sorts of things "in the days of his vanity"; but one thing in particular had struck him as anomalous and unsatisfactory. "There is a righteous man that perisheth in his righteousness; and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his evil-doing." One might have expected that, under the government of the righteous God, a long and prosperous life in this world would be the unvarying lot of the righteous, and that the wicked would always be visited with calamities or cut off in their iniquity. But it is not so. Not only is it often the case that the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, but it is sometimes even the case that the outward experiences of the righteous and the wicked are the very reverse of what we might naturally expect. The righteous man, even "in his righteousness"—in the midst of it and in spite of it—sometimes suffers calamity, and dies prematurely; whereas the wicked man, in the midst of and in spite of his wickedness, sometimes seems to prosper and lives on into old age. This was one of the "crooked" things which Eccle-

siastes felt that man could not make straight. It was an anomaly which perplexed psalmists and prophets. It is the problem which is discussed in the Book of Job. It is a difficulty which still puzzles the minds of thousands. In the fuller light which comes to us from Christ and His cross, we find less to stagger us in the old problem; there are many considerations which help to explain it. But still we cannot say that we have fathomed this mystery of the Divine Providence: there are some aspects of it with regard to which we must still be content to trust and wait.

"Be not righteous overmuch, neither make thyself over wise; why shouldest thou destroy thyself? Be not overmuch wicked, neither be thou foolish; why shouldest thou die before thy time? It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from that withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all." Our first impression, probably, on reading these words, is that we have here the shrewd and calculating maxims of a mere "Worldly Wiseman." It almost seems as if the writer were saying that the man who adheres constantly and closely to the laws of righteousness is sure to injure his own interests in this world, just as, on the other hand, the man who gives himself up without restraint to wickedness is also sure to injure himself; and that therefore the best course for a man is to act in the main righteously so long as he sees that righteousness will not bring him into trouble or difficulty, but not to scruple at a little wickedness

when that will better suit his purpose. And no doubt this is just such counsel as a mere "man of the world" might have given in any age—such counsel, indeed, as multitudes in the present day practically adopt and follow. They see that the laws of Nature and of society are against all extreme wickedness; but they see also that a high-toned morality has its disadvantages and drawbacks: and they think that a little unrighteousness increases a man's chances of "getting" on in the world, and adds flavour to his enjoyment of life. Now, if this were the meaning of Ecclesiastes in the passage before us, we should feel bound to condemn his counsel, not only as Christians, but even simply as moralists. The claims of righteousness are paramount; they are the claims of God. That which is morally wrong ought never to be done, however pleasant or however profitable it may appear. Questions of casuistry may, of course, arise in practical conduct; but when once any deed is known and felt to be wrong, no considerations of expediency can justify us in doing it. And the law of God claims our loyalty and our obedience, even at the cost of present suffering.

I shrink, however, from believing that Ecclesiastes meant here to recommend the worldly-wise and immoral policy of life to which I have just referred. Not that I would expect to find in his teaching the same exalted and heroic morality which we find in Christ's Sermon on the Mount. But I think that any writer has a claim to be interpreted in a manner

which shall be consistent with his own utterances. Ecclesiastes has already said that "God will judge the righteous and the wicked." In other portions of his book he insists on the reality of the Divine judgments. The book closes with the assertion that to "fear God and keep His commandments is the whole duty of man." Even in the passage before us, the "fear of God" is recommended as the grand safeguard: "he that feareth God shall come forth of them all." Is it likely that the man who writes thus would, in the same breath, counsel men to limit their obedience to God's law of righteousness, and not to scruple at a little wickedness when that will serve their own ends? Surely we are bound, if we can, to find some other reasonable interpretation of the words, which shall better accord with the spirit of a writer who lays so much stress on the "fear of God" and the "judgments" of God. Now, it is obvious that one man may be more or less righteous than another, that one man may be more or less wicked than another. Then, again, although, strictly speaking, no man can be "too righteous," yet inasmuch as there are degrees of righteousness, and inasmuch as a man, in advancing along certain lines of action, may be making progress in righteousness, it may be said of him, when he goes too far along these lines, that he is "righteous over much." This language, indeed, is not scientific, it is popular; but, of course, popular language is what we expect in proverbs and proverbial maxims. When any one, in his regard

for righteousness, or in his desire after righteousness, goes too far in the direction along which his progressive movement has hitherto carried him, then, in popular language, we say that he is "overdoing it," or that he is "too righteous." When, indeed, we come to analyze the matter, we find that, strictly speaking, the man is erring through a defect, and not through an excess. There is lack of balance, lack of perception, lack of proportion. It is not that the man is really too zealous for goodness, but that his zeal is "not according to knowledge." It is not that the man is too obedient to the will of God, for this he cannot be; but it is that he misapprehends what the will of God in the matter actually is. Still, inasmuch as the man's conduct has an outward aspect of excess, rather than of defect—inasmuch as it really results from his going, as we say, to "extremes"—we may popularly speak of him as "righteous over much."

It is, I think, in some such way that we may fairly interpret this maxim of Ecclesiastes in harmony with the general spirit of his utterances, and in harmony also with a sound morality. We need not regard him as counselling his readers to as much indulgence in wickedness as may be immediately profitable or safe. We may regard him rather as simply teaching what some of the Greek moralists also taught, that virtue lies in "the golden mean"—that the righteousness which is according to the will of God avoids the "falsehood of extremes." It may be that he perceived amongst some of his countrymen a

tendency towards that rigorous pietism, pretentious superiority, petty scrupulosity, and austere asceticism, which afterwards became so fully developed among the Pharisees and the Essenes of our Lord's time. More specially, Ecclesiastes was opposed to that morbid asceticism which refuses to enjoy the gifts of God. This comes out again and again in his book. Now, this asceticism is a striking instance of that apparent excess of virtue which is really due to a defective insight. The ascetic starts from a sound principle—the duty of governing his appetites, and holding his body in due subjection. But he carries this principle, so to speak, to an extreme: he over-governs his appetites; he tramples upon them with the cruelty of a despot. Speaking popularly, he "overdoes his duty"; he "exceeds his commission." But it is not that he is really too pious, too spiritual, or too earnest in his abhorrence of sensuality; he cannot be that. The excess of his austerity really proceeds from a defect: he fails to understand the true relation of the body to the spirit; he fails to interpret aright the Divine will; he injures himself unnecessarily in his desire to do his duty; and he even renders his body a less useful instrument for the service of God.

We may, then, believe that Ecclesiastes had here in view that extreme rigorism of conduct which results from straining after an unnatural and mistaken ideal. Some men might imagine that if only they were righteous enough, they would be sure of

an abundant and constant prosperity; and so they might devote themselves to a life of scrupulous punctilio and austere self-denial. But Ecclesiastes felt that this was a mistake. He had seen the righteous suffering even in spite of their righteousness; and he felt sure that this extreme rigorism would not necessarily obviate calamity. On the contrary, he felt that a man might unnecessarily injure himself in many ways through such mistaken ideas of duty. He might needlessly isolate himself from his fellow-men; he might develop a dangerous self-conceit and self-righteousness; he might neglect the cultivation of some sides of his nature; he might be so over-weighted, as it were, by his austerity and wisdom as to be incapable of a simple, human gladness even in "the day of prosperity." On the other hand, if any man should be disposed to think that, because the wicked sometimes live long in spite of their wickedness, he may give the reins to his own passions and inclinations, Ecclesiastes bids him beware. With that touch of satire which is so natural to the moralist, he adds: "Be not overmuch wicked, neither be thou foolish; why shouldest thou die before thy time?" As if he said, "It is quite possible for the wicked man to overshoot his mark, as well as the righteous; it is quite possible, in licentiousness, to get beyond the limit of safety; it is quite possible for a man to be too much of a fool!" But surely there is a golden mean somewhere between the two extremes of austerity and licentiousness—between a narrow

and mistaken rigorism and an immoral and godless laxity. "It is good" for a man to avoid both extremes; to "take hold" of the counsel which warns him against austerity, and "not to withdraw himself" from the counsel which warns him against licentiousness. "For he that feareth God shall come forth of them all." The man who lives in the light of God is most likely to gain an insight into God's will. If we reverence God, and especially if we add to this reverence that childlike trust and love which the gospel of Christ inspires, we shall not be so likely to cherish that kind of spiritual ambition which "strives to wind itself too high for sinful man beneath the sky." Nor shall we be so likely to fall into the morbid asceticism which despises the gifts of God and the natural and innocent enjoyment of life. And, on the other hand, we shall not dare to trifle deliberately with any of God's commandments. We shall not dare to tamper with God's law of truthfulness, or honesty, or sobriety, or purity, on the pretext that we are afraid of being too "strait-laced." If we "fear God" we shall not dare to justify ourselves in the indulgence of any wickedness, on the ground that the Bible itself tells us to "be not righteous over much."

> "Hold thou the good; define it well;
> For fear divine philosophy
> Should push beyond her mark, and be
> Procuress to the lords of Hell."

XIV.

THE STRENGTH OF WISDOM.

CHAP. VII. 19–29 (*Revised Version*) :—

"*Wisdom is a strength to the wise man more than ten rulers which are in a city. Surely there is not a righteous man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not. Also take not heed unto all words that are spoken; lest thou hear thy servant curse thee: for oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others.*

All this have I proved in wisdom: I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me. That which is is far off, and exceeding deep; who can find it out? I turned about, and my heart was set to know and to search out, and to seek wisdom and the reason of things, and to know that wickedness is folly, and that foolishness is madness: and I find a thing more bitter than death, even the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her. Behold, this have I found, saith the Preacher, laying one thing to another, to find out the account: which my soul still seeketh, but I have not found: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found. Behold, this only have I found, that God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions."

THROUGHOUT this book Ecclesiastes frequently speaks of the advantages of wisdom. He had, it is true, experienced the fact that "in much wisdom is much grief," and that "he who increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." From the standpoint of any man who was bent simply on acquiring happiness, this fact was one illustration of the "vanity" or unsatisfactoriness of earthly things. Nevertheless Ecclesiastes could not shut his eyes to the value of wisdom. He felt sure that, in spite of any sorrow which it may bring, "wisdom excelleth folly as far as light excelleth darkness." He saw that wisdom was not only a "defence" like money, but that it had also a "life-giving" power which money does not possess. And here he commends wisdom as being better than any mere material force: "Wisdom is a strength to the wise man more than ten rulers which are in the city."

It is not difficult to connect these words with those immediately preceding them. We have seen how Ecclesiastes speaks of the "fear of God" as enabling a man to avoid the "falsehood of extremes"—to steer a middle course between an austere, narrow rigorism and an immoral laxity. "He that feareth

God shall come forth of them all." Now, it was an axiom with the devout Hebrew that this "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The word "wisdom" may, indeed, be used in somewhat different senses: a man may be wise in one direction who is not wise in another; and there may be much knowledge or philosophy in which there is no religious element whatsoever. But the highest kind of wisdom—that wisdom which is of chief value in the practical guidance of life—has as its basis and inspiration the "fear of the Lord"—a true reverence for God and for His commandments. And probably it is to this kind of wisdom, more especially, that Ecclesiastes here refers, when he says, "Wisdom is a strength to the wise man more than ten rulers which are in the city."

"Surely there is not a righteous man upon earth that doeth good, and sinneth not." Even the best men have their faults: there is no man, however righteous, who is absolutely sinless. But, although a man may not hope to attain to perfection in this world of sin and temptation, he may cultivate that wisdom which has its root in the "fear of God." This wisdom will prevent him from making shipwreck of life. It will put him on his guard against his own weakness. It will enable him to learn even from his own mistakes. It will hold him back from "presumptuous sins." It will fortify him against many of the assaults of temptation. And thus, in the practical conduct and conflict of life, this wisdom

will prove to be a greater strength than any mere material resources.

There are many people who refuse to believe this. They are practically worshippers of brute force. They believe, with Napoleon Bonaparte, that "God is on the side of the heavy battalions!" They have an idea that the practical advantage in life lies, after all, with those who have abundance of material strength. Such men forget that even physical force needs wisdom to direct it, and owes much of its practical efficiency to the fact that it is wielded by knowledge. Such men, moreover, take a very narrow and short-sighted view of "practical" advantage, and have no conception of the subtle yet mighty energy that lies in moral forces. Often it happens that a man of great natural strength or of great material wealth loses much of the benefit which he might obtain thereby, simply through lack of the true wisdom. When Samson played the fool, he lost his strength. The "fear of the Lord" would have been of more "practical" use to him, as against the wiles of Delilah, than all his muscular power. Physical strength is sometimes a source of weakness to a foolish man—exposing him to temptation which he might otherwise have escaped; and wealth sometimes enervates and ruins a man who has no vigour of moral or religious principle.

Ecclesiastes goes on to specify one rule of practical conduct which a wise man will do well to follow, and which is suggested by our consciousness and obser-

vation of human imperfection. "Also take not heed unto all words that are spoken, lest thou hear thy servant curse thee; for oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others." An over-anxiety to know what others are saying of us, and a disposition to attach an exaggerated importance to what they do say, is a token of unwisdom and weakness. Men sometimes "fret themselves" and allow themselves to be cramped and hindered in their work, by paying too much heed to the censure and criticism of others. There is a great deal of light and frivolous gossip in the world; and sometimes even those who are themselves very thin-skinned and sensitive are nevertheless careless of their neighbour's reputation. "There is not a righteous man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not." Even the best of men lay themselves open to adverse criticism: even the best of men are also liable to fall into hasty criticism of others. "Thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself hast cursed others." We have sometimes condemned others hastily, and without adequate warrant; we have allowed our temper to get the better of us, and have said about our neighbour more than we intended and more than we were justified in saying; or we have repeated some scandal which has come to our ears, and which perhaps was either a falsehood or a gross exaggeration. We have caught up the attitude and the watchwords of our own party or coterie. Even in speaking of some friend we may have too hastily

dropped some disparaging word, which we would not like to be repeated to him, and which, if it were repeated, might give him an erroneous idea of the estimation in which we hold him. We know that all this we have done and are liable to do. Surely, then, it is the part of wisdom to remember that other people are liable to fall into the same mistakes and faults. If we sometimes misunderstand others, it is not strange that others should misunderstand us. As we are sometimes harsh in our remarks about the failings of others, so they will sometimes be harsh in their remarks about our failings. If we do not always mean so very seriously what we say, why should we take their words so much to heart? And if we know that our criticism of another, even when it is severe or unjust, is often compatible with an underlying feeling of real friendliness towards him, we may be sure that it is often the same with the criticism which others pass upon us. It is therefore the part of wisdom "not to take heed to all words that are spoken." To some words, indeed, a man ought to take heed: there are some slanders which a man, for the sake of his influence, will do well to refute. But a wise man will make allowance for haste, for exaggeration, for censoriousness, in his neighbours. He will not attach too much importance to gossip. And he will save himself not a little annoyance by simply not being too anxious to hear what is said about him. There is such a thing as a wise deafness.

"All this," continues Ecclesiastes, "have I proved

by wisdom." His experience, observation, and thought had given him a certain insight into the practical conduct of life. But he does not pretend to have solved all those perplexing problems which confront the thinker who meditates on things as they are. On the contrary, he confesses his ignorance. "I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and exceeding deep; who can find it out?" He had determined to acquire wisdom, to go down to the roots of things, to find some explanation of human life that would thoroughly satisfy his mind: but he acknowledges that he had to retire baffled from the search. He found the problem too hard and deep for him. But still his search after the meaning of things had not been altogether in vain. He had learnt some lessons in the school of experience. His own experiments in living had revealed to him the "madness" and "folly" of "wickedness." And there was one thing especially on which he was prepared to speak with the utmost emphasis. "I find a thing more bitter than death, even the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her." Here was one practical result of his observation and experience of life: he had discovered the "bitterness" lying behind all the allurements of sensuality; and he could warn others against the "snares" and fascinations of the abandoned woman. Her smiles are as a "net" in which the foolish are caught: her hands, soft and

gentle as they may seem, prove themselves to be as "fetters" from which the "sinner" finds it hard to escape. History and biography furnish, alas! many illustrations of this terrible truth. "The worst is the corruption of the best;" and it would almost seem that women, when they become wicked, are capable of descending into lower depths of wickedness than men. And how often has woman become as the evil genius of man! How often has she been as a devil, tempting him to his ruin! We turn the pages of history, and we find that men who have been wise in many other directions have been fools here. Statesmen, scholars, philosophers, generals, leaders of men, have been caught in the meshes of this "net." No wonder Ecclesiastes utters himself with such solemn emphasis concerning this awful danger.

But Ecclesiastes goes still further. "Behold, this have I found, laying one thing to another, to find out the account: which my soul still seeketh, but I have not found: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found." That is to say, he gives it as the result of his personal experience, that a man approaching the ideal of true manhood was rarely to be seen, but that a woman approaching the ideal of true womanhood was rarer still. Now, in considering this estimate of women, we ought to remember two things. First, it is probable that the utterance was coloured by the kind of life which Ecclesiastes himself had lived. He puts the utterance, indeed,

into the lips of Solomon; and we should scarcely, I think, be disposed to accept *him* as a reliable authority on the character of women. But I have already said that, in all probability, this book is largely autobiographical, and that Ecclesiastes himself had at one time indulged in sensual pleasures. This past experience might qualify him for uttering a more emphatic warning against licentiousness; but it was not likely to leave behind it a very high estimate of womanhood. And then, secondly, it is only fair to remember also that in all ages the custom of polygamy and the degradation of women in the Oriental harem have been fraught with the most disastrous consequences to female character. When women are treated by the custom of generations as the mere slaves or toys of men—when they are denied education, and shut up in a sort of gilded prison, and regarded with distrust and suspicion or with a kind of amiable contempt—there is no wonder that multitudes of them should become frivolous and cunning and even wicked. It would not be so very surprising to learn that among Solomon's thousand wives there was not one really good woman. But how wonderful, in this respect, is the change which has been wrought by Christianity! The law of monogamy, reaffirmed by Christ—the lifting up of woman to a spiritual equality with man—the condemnation by the New Testament of all sensuality—the glorification of the virtues of meekness and modesty, humility and love—the spirit of

magnanimity and chivalry which the gospel inspires, and which leads men to place their strength at the service of weakness—all this has revolutionized the position and the treatment of women in Christendom, and has so influenced their character that, in a country like our own, we can scarcely doubt that good women are now more numerous than good men.

Let us notice, however, that the low estimate of the women of his time, which was entertained by Ecclesiastes, was not due to any desire to glorify the male sex. It was no special compliment to the men of his time to say that he could only find one true man among a thousand! The corruption of womanhood was, in his eyes, simply one branch of the corruption of humanity. "Behold, this only have I found, that God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions." Ecclesiastes, as the result of his meditations on the problem of human life, felt sure of one thing—that neither men nor women, as a class, were what God had created them to be. He felt sure that the true solution of the problem was not to be found in tracing moral evil to the will of God. "God made man upright." Ecclesiastes felt sure that the unrighteousness, which he saw abounding everywhere, was to be traced to the rebellious and perverse wills of men. "They have sought out many inventions." The word "invention" points to the ingenuity of the human mind in devising methods of gratifying self and fighting against God. The world, alas! is still sadly too full of such per-

versions of human faculty. But we can now cherish a hope for the human race such as Ecclesiastes does not seem to have felt, because we see more clearly how the perverse ingenuity of man is being met by the redemptive wisdom of God. If man has devised sin, God has devised salvation. "Where sin hath abounded, grace doth much more abound." Christ is the "wisdom of God;" the Cross of Christ is God's method of recovering sinners to uprightness. And, in proportion as the human race comes under the influence of the Divine Redeemer, both men and women will become more and more what God made them to be, and will with holy wisdom "seek out inventions" whereby they may glorify God, and help each other to live the life of righteousness and love.

XV.

PATIENCE UNDER OPPRESSION.

CHAP. VIII. (*Revised Version*):—

"*Who is as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the hardness of his face is changed. I counsel thee, Keep the king's commandment, and that in regard of the oath of God. Be not hasty to go out of his presence; persist not in an evil thing: for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him. Because the king's word hath power; and who may say unto him, What doest thou? Whoso keepeth the commandment shall know no evil thing; and a wise man's heart discerneth time and judgement: for to every purpose there is a time and judgement; because the misery of man is great upon him: for he knoweth not that which shall be; for who can tell him how it shall be? There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power over the day of death; and there is no discharge in that war; neither shall wickedness deliver him that is given to it. All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: there is a time wherein one man hath power over another to his hurt.*

And withal I saw the wicked buried, and they came to the grave; and they that had done right went away from the holy place, and were forgotten in the city: this also is vanity. Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and prolong his days, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him; but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God. There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be righteous men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity. Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him in his labour all the days of his life which God hath given him under the sun.

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

[1] Or, "who had come and gone away from the holy place, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done" (Margin)[1]

WE have already seen how Ecclesiastes speaks in praise of "wisdom," and how much importance he attaches to its possession. He ranks it above money. "Wisdom is a defence, even as money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is that wisdom giveth life to him that hath it." He also ranks it above material force. "Wisdom is a strength to the wise man more than ten rulers which are in a city." And here, at the opening of this chapter, he once more draws attention to the value and influence of wisdom. "Who is as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the hardness of his face is changed." Wisdom transforms even a man's countenance. It brightens his aspect. It puts a new light into his eyes. Ignorance is often associated with a certain fierceness or coarseness of the face; but this passes away and is "changed" into an expression of refinement and gentleness when the mind within comes under the influence of a true wisdom. This wisdom imparts a certain dignity and serenity to the soul. And it enables a man to be calm and patient even in times of political oppression and injustice.

"I counsel thee, Keep the king's command, and that in regard of the oath of God." Some have supposed that by the "oath of God" here is meant that allegiance to the heavenly King which ought to limit the obedience due to any earthly sovereign. But more probably the reference is to some oath of allegiance imposed by the earthly monarch himself. Thus, for example, Josephus records how one of the Ptolemies carried into Egypt a number of captives from Judæa, and, knowing the Jewish reverence for oaths, imposed upon them an oath of allegiance to himself and his successors. It may be to some such oath as this that Ecclesiastes here refers. In any case, he counsels submission to the king as the part of true wisdom under present circumstances. "Be not hasty to go out of his presence; persist not in an evil thing; for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him. Because the king's word hath power; and who may say unto him, What doest thou? Whoso keepeth the commandment shall know no evil thing." These are counsels of prudence under despotic rule. The despot's sway was absolute. What could they possibly gain at the present time by trying to throw off their allegiance—by joining in political conspiracies or insurrection? They would only rob themselves of that measure of tranquillity which they might otherwise enjoy, and bring down upon themselves the wrath and power of the despot. We are reminded here of the counsels given at a later date by the apostles Paul and Peter to

the early Christians. Paul, writing even to the Romans who lived under the shadow of Cæsar's palace, counselled them to be "subject to the powers that be," and this, "not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake." He reminded them that, whatever the individual ruler may be, magistracy, as such, is an "ordinance of God." And Peter also called upon his readers to "submit themselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake," and to take patiently those sufferings which they might have to endure for well-doing. Almost any kind of government is better than anarchy. To dash one's head in mere frenzy against a wall is no true wisdom: and insurrection, when it is neither demanded by conscience nor justified by expediency, may be simply a policy of suicide.

But, whilst Ecclesiastes thus counsels his countrymen to endure with the patience of wisdom their present subjection to a foreign yoke, he would not have them give up their faith in the righteous government of God. One reason, indeed, why the wise man can bear oppression and injustice with patience is that his "heart discerneth time and judgment. For to every purpose there is a time and judgment, because the misery of man is great upon him." These latter words might perhaps rather be translated, "when the evil of a man is great or heavy upon him." The idea may be that the "evil" of the tyrant is at length so "great" that the "time" becomes ripe for "judgment." "He knoweth not

that which shall be; for who can tell him how it shall be?" The tyrant himself does not see the consequences to which his conduct is leading: he goes on his way blindly, filling up the measure of his evil. But a "time of judgment" is coming; and "the heart of the wise man discerneth" this. He can therefore bear present injustice with the greater patience, because he knows that a day of retribution is coming for the wicked. For "there is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power over the day of death; and there is no discharge in that war; neither shall wickedness deliver him that is given to it." However powerful a tyrant may be, he cannot ward off the inevitable end: he cannot battle successfully with death: nor is there any furlough in that war: and when this day of death comes to the oppressor, it will come under the aspect of a retribution from which he "cannot deliver" himself. Ecclesiastes, in his study of "what is done under the sun," had been deeply impressed with the wonderful revolution which is thus often wrought by death. He had seen some ruler, proud of his power, and using it for a time to the "hurt" of the oppressed, whilst he was half worshipped, perhaps, by his courtiers and sycophants. But the inevitable end came at last. "And withal I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone away from the holy place, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this also is vanity." Their greatness was but an "empty"

thing, after all. It perished with them in their grave. "The name of the wicked shall rot." Men are glad to forget them as soon as possible. Death, coming thus upon a selfish tyrant, robbing him of all his pomp and power, delivering his victims from his grasp, and consigning his name to deserved oblivion, carries with it an aspect of Divine retribution. And sometimes the special circumstances under which it comes make it still more manifestly a "time of judgment."

On the other hand, it is also true that there is often a considerable interval during which wickedness seems to go unpunished. The "mills of God" often "grind slowly." Retribution does not always follow close on the heels of sin. It sometimes seems as if the detectives of the Divine government were either asleep or defeated. And this is one reason why wicked men go on sinning, in spite of the appeals of their fellow-men and the remonstrances of their own conscience. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." If the violation of moral law were always followed by manifest consequences as swiftly as the violations of some physical laws are followed by their results, there would scarcely be room for moral choice or for the formation of moral character. If, whenever any man oppressed his neighbour, a thunderbolt were to fall upon the head of the oppressor, no man would deliberately play the tyrant,

any more than he would now deliberately leap over a precipice. But, as it is, sinners imagine that, because they are not at once manifestly and signally punished for their iniquities, they will perhaps escape punishment altogether. And they are emboldened to go on sinning, because the Divine "sentence" against them, which has its echo in their own conscience, is not "executed speedily."

Nevertheless Ecclesiastes expresses his conviction that there is a Divine government which blesses the righteous, and punishes the wicked. "Though a sinner do evil an hundred times and prolong his days, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him; but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God." Even the fact that wicked men are sometimes allowed to carry on their evil courses for what seems to be a very long time, does not alter the other fact that it is better, in the deepest sense and in the long run, to follow righteousness. Ecclesiastes, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, clings to this assurance. He holds fast his faith in the Divine justice. The righteous man who "fears God" is, even when suffering at the hands of the wicked, in a better position than the man who oppresses him. It may not seem so to the eye of sense: but, sooner or later, this better position will be made manifest. There is an enduring and substantial element in righteousness and godliness.

Even duration is a relative term. The wicked man may, from one point of view, appear to be having a long time of it: and yet, from another point of view, his triumph may be but a short-lived thing. The threat that he "shall not prolong his days" may be fulfilled in the spirit, even when it is not fulfilled in the letter. He may gain nothing by his long life. His days are as a "shadow" at the best, unsubstantial and unsatisfying. His seeming prosperity in evil-doing only makes the collapse more terrible, when it comes at last. In the "Wisdom of Solomon" it is written: "Honourable age is not that which standeth in length of time, nor that is measured by the number of the years. But wisdom is the gray hair unto men, and an unspotted life is old age." And a modern poet has put it thus:

"He liveth long who liveth well!
All other life is short and vain;
He liveth longest who can tell
Of living most for heavenly gain.

"Waste not thy being; back to Him,
Who freely gave it, freely give,
Else is that being but a dream,
'Tis but to be, and not to live!"

At the same time, it cannot be denied that the prolonged wickedness and outward prosperity of some evil-doers is a fact which tries the faith and patience of the righteous. It has sometimes the look of being inconsistent with the justice of God.

Ecclesiastes himself, whilst clinging to the assurance that it is really "well with them that fear God," is compelled to confess that there are anomalies in God's present government of the world which bring an unsatisfactory element into human life. "There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be righteous men unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity." Our reason and conscience cannot be satisfied so long as the wicked seem to have an advantage over the righteous. More especially do we feel that there is something radically wrong when righteous men are called to suffer as if they were wicked, and wicked men are honoured as if they were righteous. We may believe that all this disorder and confusion will one day be rectified; and yet we may wonder why it should be permitted by the righteous God. We may feel that there is "a power, not ourselves," which, on the whole, "makes for righteousness;" and yet we may be perplexed to see that, in individual cases, the advantage sometimes appears to be with the man who plays at the game of life as with loaded dice!

On the other hand, it is the part of wisdom not to allow our perplexity to lead us into despair. We cannot deny that there are anomalies in the Divine government of the world: but this is no reason why we should nurse a morbid melancholy which refuses

to receive and enjoy the good gifts of God. Ecclesiastes felt that, in the midst of all the unsatisfying elements of human life—in the midst of those problems for which he could find no adequate solution—it was wise and right to accept cheerfully and thankfully whatever joys or whatever alleviations of sorrow God may send. "Then I commended mirth, that is, cheerfulness; because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry; and that this should accompany him in his labour all the days of his life which God hath given him under the sun." Here we have once more the refrain which occurs so often in the course of this book. Ecclesiastes felt that it is the part of true wisdom to bear troubles with resignation and to receive blessings with thankfulness. The wise man seeks to bear with patience even the injustice for which he can obtain no redress; for he knows that there is a "time of judgment" for the wicked. And the wise man does not allow the perplexing anomalies of the Divine government to plunge him into morbid discontent or melancholy; for he remembers that his wisdom, such as it is, cannot be expected to fathom the ways of the infinite wisdom of God. Ecclesiastes here, at the close of this chapter, gives his own experience on this point. "When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth: (for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes:) then I beheld all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work

that is done under the sun: because however much a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea moreover, though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it." Ecclesiastes had spent sleepless hours in trying to unravel the perplexities of the Divine working. But he had at length given up the problem as insoluble by human wisdom. Man's plummet cannot sound the depths of the Divine plan. We can see enough of the reason of God's ways to justify faith and hope and patience; but there remain anomalies which we cannot understand. We must wait for God's own explanation of them. We must wait for the light which the issue will throw upon the process. Meanwhile it is the part of human wisdom to recognize its own limitations. And surely we, to whom God has given the fuller revelation of Himself and of His purposes in His Son Jesus Christ, may well strive to bear with patience those burdens which the Father lays upon us, and at the same time accept with cheerfulness and gratitude those bounties and blessings which the Father's hand bestows. And, with regard to those deeper problems of Divine Providence which baffle us, let us be content to say, with the reverent humility and childlike confidence of the apostle: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things: to whom be glory for ever! Amen."

XVI.

THE HORIZON OF DEATH.

CHAP. IX. 1–10 (*Revised Version*) :—

"*For all this I laid to my heart, even to explore all this; that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God: whether it be love or hatred, man knoweth it not; all is before them. All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun; that there is one event unto all: yea, also, the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. For to him that is joined with all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. As well their love, as their hatred and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in anything that is done under the sun.*

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God hath already accepted thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity; for that is thy portion in life, and in thy labour wherein thou labourest under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest."

AT the close of the preceding chapter Ecclesiastes recorded his conviction that it is impossible for the wisdom of man to fathom the ways of God. He himself had spent many sleepless hours in trying to solve the riddle of the world: but he had found the problem of the Divine Providence too deep for him; and he had given it up as insoluble. Looking merely at the present life—at God's dealings with men until the day of their death—he could discover no satisfactory reasons or fixed principles of the Divine working. And the realm of the dead was to his mind a region altogether too vague and dark to furnish any light on the inscrutable problem. Such are the thoughts to which Ecclesiastes gives still fuller utterance in the passage now before us.

"For all this I laid to my heart, even to explore all this; that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God: whether it be love or hatred, man knoweth it not; all is before them." By "love" and "hatred" here may perhaps be meant the things which men love, and the things which men hate. The idea, at any rate, seems to be that we can never tell what is before us in our future. The principles on which God now carries on

the government of the world, whatever these principles may be, are not such that a righteous or wise man can by any "works" make sure of obtaining what he "loves" and avoiding what he "hates." No: the "righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God." And although we cannot doubt that all God's dealings are in perfect consistency with His own righteousness, yet this righteousness is meanwhile obscured by the apparently indiscriminate manner in which the same events often happen to the righteous and to the wicked. "All things come alike to all; there is one event to the righteous and the wicked; to the good and to the clean and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath." Ecclesiastes, of course, like any other thoughtful student of life, saw clearly enough that there are some violations of the laws of Nature and the laws of society which are likely to be followed by deserved and manifest penalty. But he also saw that, within these limits, the outward circumstances of men—diverse as they are—are not mainly determined by moral and spiritual character. Human experience, in its broad features, is a mixture of joy and grief, health and sickness, prosperity and adversity: and of this mingled experience all men, speaking generally, are partakers. Then, too, when we look at the manifold variety and combination of details which we find within this common lot, we

perceive that individual experience is largely shaped by circumstances that are altogether independent of individual character. We find good men and bad men amongst the rich and amongst the poor, amongst the healthy and amongst the sick, amongst those who are living in the sunshine of prosperity, and those who are under the shadow of calamity. Even the changes which take place in the lot of the same individual do not always follow, so far as we can see, changes in his character: and, certainly, the ebb and flow of outward prosperity in his career are often out of all correspondence with the ebb and flow of his spiritual life. Then, again, there are events in the natural world and in social life which involve men of all shades of character in a common doom. The destructive forces of Nature show no moral discrimination in the selection of their victims; and there are commercial and social disasters which bring suffering on both saint and sinner. Of course, when we turn to look at the use which men make of their circumstances, and at the influence which their surroundings have upon their souls, when we look at the whole world of thought and feeling and conscience, then we see that character must be a most important element in determining the inner experience. From this point of view the "same" event may be practically a very different thing to different men. One man may use his wealth so as to make it a blessing; another man may turn his wealth into a curse. One man may be soured or hardened by mis-

fortune; another man may be purified by the same kind of trouble. But this is not the point that comes here into view. Ecclesiastes is here simply looking at the external events and circumstances of life; and he regards it as a perplexing anomaly that, under the government of a righteous God, good and bad men should often live and die alongside of each other, without any outward distinction being made between them, either in their life or in their death. "This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one event unto all; yea also, the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead." The very fact that so little outward distinction is made between the godly and the ungodly, and that all alike are travelling on to the same inevitable end, seems to embolden many men to go on in their career of sinful madness. To the mind of Ecclesiastes this was an "evil" and a painful thing. He would have liked to see the rewards of piety and virtue so manifestly and uniformly bestowed here upon the earth, as to bring a stronger pressure to bear on the minds of men, urging them into the paths of godliness and wisdom. But, as it was, he looked on, and saw the Divine Providence dealing with men, on the whole, as if there were no difference in their characters—dealing with them thus until the very end of life, and then subjecting them all alike to the same doom of death, beyond which lay mist and darkness.

For, that the realm of the dead was an altogether dark and cheerless region to the mind of Ecclesiastes, becomes obvious from his next words. "To him that is joined with all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. As well their love, as their hatred and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in anything that is done under the sun." We have already seen how, in a former part of this book, Ecclesiastes records a pessimistic mood through which he had passed, and during which he had felt that death was better than life, and that it was best never to have been born at all. But now here he gives utterance to the opposite feeling, that life is preferable to death. In life there is hope, there is consciousness, there is the capacity of enjoyment, there is the possibility of getting some reward for one's labour. But the dead give no sign of consciousness or of knowledge: so far as can be seen, they are altogether cut off from this life, with its rewards and enjoyments. From this point of view Ecclesiastes finds the proverb true that "a living dog is better than a dead lion." Even the meanest creature that breathes with any enjoyment of life has a certain advantage over the noblest creature that has gone into a state of insensibility. Now, I do not think that we can infer from these words that Ecclesiastes had no belief in

a future state of existence. We have seen how he clings to the fact that God is the righteous Judge of men, and will make a difference between the righteous and the wicked. We have seen also how he is perplexed by the fact that, in this present life, the righteous judgment of God is not obvious or complete. He must surely, then, have clung to the assurance that these two facts were capable of some reconciliation; and certainly the two facts, looked at together, point naturally to a future state of existence, where God's dealings with men will be completed and justified. In the last chapter of this book we have a distinction clearly drawn between the body and the spirit: "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return to God who gave it." And the closing words of the book are: "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil." From this it would seem that Ecclesiastes did look forward to a future life and a future judgment. Perhaps he viewed death as a state of unconsciousness from which, at some future time, men would be awakened. In any case, looking from the standpoint of the visible, he regarded the dead as absolutely cut off from everything that is "done under the sun." The present condition of the dead was therefore to his mind dark and cheerless. His words here are simply an echo of words which we find elsewhere in the Old Testament, especially in the Book of Psalms and the Book of Job. Heaven

had not yet dawned before the eyes of men as "the Father's house of many mansions." Death had not yet been manifestly vanquished through the resurrection of the "Prince of Life." Even now there are many questions relating to the future state which baffle and perplex us. Whether the spirit is altogether disembodied when it quits the earthly tabernacle, or whether, if so, it receives at once a spiritual body, or has to wait in some intermediate and perhaps unconscious state until the resurrection; whether our departed friends are near us, acquainted with our feelings and our doings, or are shut out meanwhile from all knowledge of the world they have left; what is the present condition of those who have died impenitent, and whether there is any possibility of their ultimate salvation: these are questions on which Christians differ in their opinions and speculations. The fact of immortality has been "brought to light" clearly in the gospel: but death is still surrounded by many mysteries. And, even in spite of the "hope of glory" which we cherish through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we are still prone, through that instinct in us which clings to the present life, to fall into some of the old-world ways of thinking and speaking about death. Now, if this is the case even with Christians under the fuller light of the gospel, need we wonder that Ecclesiastes, in the dim twilight of the earlier dispensation, should have taken such a dark and cheerless view of the realm of the dead?

But there was one thing of which he seems to have felt quite sure; and this was that men ought not to allow the anomalies of Divine Providence, or the certainty of death and the grave, to rob them of that natural enjoyment of life which God intends them to have. "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God hath already accepted thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in life, and in thy labour wherein thou labourest under the sun." Some, indeed, have thought that, in these words, we have simply an advice to drown melancholy in dissipation and sensuality. And doubtless, if we were to dissociate the words from all the rest of the book and simply to connect them with the dark and cheerless view of death which precedes them, we might perhaps adopt such an interpretation. But surely this would be a most unfair and uncritical way of dealing with the words. We are bound to view them in relation to the rest of the book. And we have already seen sufficient reason for believing that Ecclesiastes was no Anacreon, calling upon men to spend their fleeting days in mere sensual pleasure. But we have also seen that he was an enemy to moroseness and asceticism, and that one of the refrains of his book is the exhortation to receive with gratitude and to

enjoy with cheerfulness those ordinary blessings of life which God bestows. We may therefore, I think, regard the words before us as simply the recurrence of this same refrain. Whatever elements of unsatisfactoriness there may be in human life, however perplexing may be the riddle of Divine Providence, and however dark the mystery of death, we ought not to let these things plunge us into a sullen gloom or despair which turns away from simple pleasures and domestic joys. Life has its "vanity;" but life has also its solace: and we are not so to brood over the vanity as to rob ourselves of the solace. It is thus that I read these words. They are not like the terrible words of the worn-out sensualist in Tennyson's "Vision of Sin":

"Fill the cup, and fill the can:
Have a rouse before the morn:
Every moment dies a man,
Every moment one is born.

"Drink to Fortune, drink to Chance,
While we keep a little breath!
Drink to heavy Ignorance!
Hob-and-nob with brother Death!

"Fill the cup, and fill the can!
Mingle madness, mingle scorn!
Dregs of life, and lees of man:
Yet we will not die forlorn."

No: it seems to me that the words of Ecclesiastes here are rather in the spirit of the husband in

Tennyson's "Miller's Daughter," when he says to the wife whom he loves:

> "Yet fill my glass: give me one kiss:
> My own sweet Alice, we must die.
> There's somewhat in this world amiss
> Shall be unriddled by and by.
> There's somewhat flows to us in life,
> But more is taken quite away.
> Pray, Alice, pray, my darling wife,
> That we may die the self-same day."

That is, perhaps, not the highest kind of utterance: but it is at least human, innocent, and pure. And whatever Ecclesiastes may have meant by the clause, "for God hath accepted thy works," the very mention of the name of God in this connection surely implies that the joy which he counsels is an innocent joy—a pleasure received as the gift of God, and enjoyed according to the intention of the Divine goodness. Understood in this sense, the words here before us may be regarded as receiving a practical indorsement from Him who went with His disciples to the wedding-feast in Cana of Galilee, and turned the water into wine in token of His sympathy with the festal gladness.

Finally here, Ecclesiastes not only urges his readers to accept cheerfully the enjoyments of life, whilst it lasts: he also urges them, in prospect of death, to do earnestly any work to which they may be called. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device,

nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave whither thou goest." The word here translated "grave" is the Hebrew "Sheol," corresponding to the Greek "Hades"—the unseen realm of the dead. It would seem that to the mind of Ecclesiastes the state of the departed was, for the present at least, one of unconsciousness and inactivity. This is a view which we may not be able to indorse. Perhaps we cling to the belief that those whom we call "the dead" are all living a conscious life in the unseen world, and that some of them are even engaged in the active service of God. If so, we may well deny the universal applicability of the proverb, "A living dog is better than a dead lion." It is written, "Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord." Can we say of *them* that they "know not anything," or that their "love has perished"? There was once a lion-hearted man who said, "To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain:" and surely it is not difficult to believe that it is now "far better" with Paul in his own personal experience than with any one living on this earth. But still, this does not render unnecessary the urgent appeal of Ecclesiastes. Although there may be work in prospect for us in the unseen world, it remains true that there is work to be done in the present life, which can only be done here and now. Christ Himself recognized this when He said, "I must work the works of Him that sent Me whilst it is day; the night cometh when no man can work." Christ could not mean that, after His death, His redeeming energy

and operation would cease: He must have meant that there was a special work given Him to do during His life on the earth, and that this special work would be no longer possible when the "night" had come. And even so, the redeemed in glory may now be "serving God day and night in His temple," and yet the duties which are peculiar to the earthly sphere must be done, if done at all, by those who are on this side of death. From this point of view, the proverb remains true that "the living dog is better than the dead lion." Many of the noble souls that are gone may still be wielding, even in this world, a greater influence than we shall ever exercise: but for us, as being still in the flesh, there are, here and now, certain possibilities of service and kinds of work which not even an Isaiah or a Paul can now accomplish. There are not only enjoyments, but there are also duties, which are peculiar to the present sphere: and as we ought with all cheerfulness to accept the joy which God gives us, so we ought "with all our might" to do the work to which God calls us, before death comes to take us away.

XVII.

THE ELEMENT OF CHANCE IN LIFE.

CHAP. IX. 11–18 (*Revised Version*) :—

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

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

The words of the wise spoken in quiet are heard more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good."

ECCLESIASTES had just been exhorting his readers to give themselves with all energy and industry to the duties of life, whilst life lasts, as remembering that a time is coming when such work will be no longer possible. But now here he reminds them, on the other hand, that no amount of energy, strength, or wisdom can ensure to any man the outward success which he may desire. Whilst, therefore, a man ought to work, and to work industriously, he ought also to remember that the issues of his endeavours are not altogether within his own power. "I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill: but time and chance happeneth to them all." Now, of course, Ecclesiastes does not mean here to deny that the race is generally to the swift, and the battle generally to the strong. What he means clearly is that the race is not always or necessarily to the swift, and that the victory is not always or necessarily to the strong. No doubt if six men start on a race, and we are certain that one of them is much swifter than the others, we may reasonably expect that he will win; and, as a

general rule, he will do so. Speaking popularly we say, "The chances are greatly in his favour." But we know that the issue is not absolutely certain. There is a chance against him. The unexpected may happen. He may slip, and sprain his foot; or he may grow faint or giddy; or something else may occur, which may give the prize to one who is not so swift. In like manner, if two armies meet each other in battle, and one is stronger than the other in numbers, in weapons of war, and in military skill, the "chances," as we say, are that the stronger army will win the victory. But we cannot with certainty predict the issue. There are contingencies which may happen so as to turn the tide in favour of the weaker combatant.

Now, this is the fact to which Ecclesiastes here calls attention—that all men are liable to have their hopes disappointed, and their plans frustrated, by the unexpected and the inevitable. "Time and chance happeneth to them all." There are certain times and seasons which lie beyond a man's control. There are certain chances or accidents which may override his projects and labours. Whether "chance" is the best word that can be used to designate this special element in human life, may be open to question. But, at any rate, it is a popular word, universally intelligible; and it is used to express a fact of prime importance. Whether a man is a Christian, or a mere Theist, or an Atheist—whether he speaks of chance, or luck, or accident, or destiny, or the

inevitable, or providence, or the will of God, he confesses that the experience of each individual is shaped, in part, by causes that lie altogether outside of himself—by events which he cannot possibly foresee, or, foreseeing, cannot possibly obviate. Men are sometimes visited by calamity as by a thunderbolt out of a clear sky. Even death itself may prematurely overtake a man, with little or no immediate warning, to put an end to all his earthly projects and labours. "For man also knoweth not his time; as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare, so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them." Sometimes a man may be roaming about at his own will, as free, apparently, as a bird of the air or a fish of the sea, living with as much confidence and unconcern as if he were absolute master of his own destiny; when, all of a sudden, he finds himself caught as in some trap or net, from which, with all his struggling, he finds it impossible to escape.

Now, no thoughtful observer of human life can be blind to such facts as these. It is true, indeed, that if we take a large enough number of instances, we are justified in saying that, as a rule, vigorous faculty, persevering industry, and virtuous habits are qualities which lead to success. But, with regard to each individual case, there always comes in the element of contingency. It is here that the world of humanity differs so widely from the world of nature. In

the natural world we can reason with certainty from the general principle to the particular instance. We can say of every stone which we throw into the open air that it is sure to fall; the law of gravitation determines the issue. But in human nature and life we have the element of human freedom, coupled with the fact that men's experiences are intertwined with and dependent upon each other in the closest and most intricate manner. Even, therefore, if there were nothing else, this of itself makes it impossible to reason with certainty, in the human region, from general principles to individual cases. Thus, for example, we may lay it down as a general principle that those who are descended from healthy ancestors, and who are wisely cared for in childhood, and are themselves in adult life prudent and virtuous in their habits, will live longest in the world. But from this general principle we cannot reason with certainty to the case of any individual. Here is a man whose father and grandfather lived to be eighty years of age, who is himself full of physical vigour, and careful to obey the laws of health; and yet this man may be killed, in his prime, by the fall of a horse, the infection of a fever, or the blunder of a railway pointsman. Or again, two young men may start in business, both of them with business-faculty, energy, prudence, and industry; and yet, at the end of twenty years' toil, the one man may be rich, and the other comparatively poor. These different results may possibly not be traceable, in the slightest degree,

to difference of ability or of endeavour. Indeed, the successful man may even have less business-faculty and less persevering industry than his neighbour. It may simply be that his circumstances have been far more favourable. Perhaps he happened to choose a kind of business which has been, during this special time, exceptionally prosperous; or perhaps the death of one of his employers led to his being taken into partnership; or perhaps some relative left him a legacy which enabled him to extend his business; or perhaps when some mercantile firm came down with an unexpected crash, it happened that he had got clear a fortnight before, whilst his neighbour lost thousands of pounds. Let us think of our own schoolmates, and college-companions, and early associates; let us think where they are, and what has become of them; and let us ask whether their careers have always been such as we might have expected, or have been altogether traceable to their own character and conduct. Then let us think of our own history, and reflect how different our personal experience might have been if we had been born and brought up in different circumstances, if we had never met this man or that woman, if we had never gone to this or that town, or if some of the "accidents" of life, which have befallen others, had come upon ourselves. Clearly, there is an element altogether outside of the individual—call it "time and chance," or what you will—that enters as one factor into the shaping of every human history.

Ecclesiastes himself proceeds to give a striking illustration of his statement that the battle is not always to the strong, nor riches to men of understanding. His illustration may perhaps have been suggested by the story of the wise woman who saved the city of Abel from the hand of Joab.[1] Or perhaps it may have been drawn directly from contemporary history; but, if so, the reference has not been clearly identified. "I have also seen wisdom under the sun on this wise, and it seemed great unto me: there was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it: now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man. Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard." Now here, surely, was a case in which one might have expected that "the battle" would be to "the strong." The besieged city was little, and it had few defenders; and the besieger was a great king, whose many soldiers could build great and high mounds from which weapons of war could be darted into the city. Any one might have thought that the issue of so unequal a contest was certain: and doubtless, in nine cases out of ten, or perhaps in ninety-nine out of a hundred, such a city would have fallen before such an enemy. But, in this particular case, there happened to be in the city a wise man,

[1] 2 Samuel xx. 14–22.

who by his sagacious counsel, or by some skilful stratagem, succeeded in delivering the city. And so it chanced that, in this case, the battle was not to the strong. But now here again one might have thought that, the city being thus saved, its inhabitants would certainly reward the man by whose sagacity they had been rescued. He was, indeed, a "poor" man: he had been living among them in obscurity: but one might have expected that, in their gratitude, they would now raise him to a position of wealth and honour. And doubtless, in some cases, this would have happened. But, in this particular case, no sooner was the city out of danger than the citizens forgot the man by whose prudence and skill they had been saved. Instead of honouring him for his wisdom, they despised him for his poverty. Now that they were no longer in imminent peril, they ceased to care for his counsel, and paid deference only to men of rank and wealth, or to men who drew attention to themselves by noisy self-assertion. Thus it often happens that even wisdom brings little or no outward advantage to its possessor. "Bread" is not always to the "wise," "nor riches to men of understanding, nor favour to men of skill."

Here, then, is the unquestionable fact, that there is an element of contingency or uncertainty in human affairs. Professor Huxley, in one of his "Lay Sermons," has likened human life to "a game at chess," the "rules" of the game being "the laws of Nature," and the unseen "player on the other

side" being one whose play is "always fair, just, and patient," but who "never overlooks our mistakes," "never makes the smallest allowance for our ignorance," and, "if we play ill, checkmates us without haste, but without remorse." The metaphor is singularly inadequate. It is not true that "the life, fortune, and happiness" of each individual depend simply on his moves in the game which he is playing. It is not true that the moves of "the player on the other side" are always in accordance with certain fixed rules which we can discover. The wisest electrician and the most ignorant clown may both be exposed to the same thunderstorm; and the former may be killed by the lightning, whilst the latter escapes. If human life is to be likened to a game at all, call it rather a game of whist! Much, doubtless, depends on our own skill and care; nevertheless much also unquestionably depends on the play of our neighbours, and on the cards which we happen to hold in our hands.

But, in truth, to the deeper religious instincts of the soul such metaphors are repugnant. If we cherish faith in a personal God, we cannot regard life either as a game of skill, or as a game of mingled chance and skill; rather shall we regard it as a school of education, and an arena of discipline. We shall recognize the fact that, in order to our moral and spiritual training, God has made our individual experience dependent, partly, on contingencies outside of ourselves. We shall also recognize the fact

that, in order to our moral and spiritual training, God has made our individual experience dependent, to some extent, on our own character and conduct. The one factor in our history furnishes scope for prayer and faith towards God: the other factor furnishes a reason for the prudent, diligent, and virtuous use of all our powers. There are, indeed, some men who seem to regard life much as if it were a mere lottery. Observing that the most prudent man is liable to have all his plans nullified by some event which he could not possibly foresee—observing that the most honest and industrious man may have all his energetic activity frustrated by some unfortunate accident—they begin to live as if prudence and industry and even honesty were of little account in the world. They pass through life in the spirit of the gambler; they cultivate no habits of economy; they engage in feverish and reckless speculations; they keep hoping for good luck; they wait for something to "turn up;" and, if they are unsuccessful, they call it their "fate." Now, this worship of Chance is even more foolish than the worship of Faculty. It is true that man is not the creator of all his circumstances; but neither is man the mere creature of circumstance. We are not accountable for what we cannot help; but we are accountable for the right use and cultivation of our powers. That "the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong," does not justify a man in neglecting to cultivate swiftness and strength. That "bread is

not always to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favour to men of skill," does not justify us in despising wisdom. Wisdom is inherently a precious thing; it is worth seeking and cultivating, apart altogether from the outward advantages or rewards which it may or may not bring to its possessor. For, as Ecclesiastes says at the close of this chapter: "The words of the wise spoken in quiet are heard more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war; but one sinner destroyeth much good." Wisdom is a conservative and beneficent force: folly is destructive. The man who violates the laws of morality or prudence may "destroy much good." Folly, like dynamite, may cause a havoc altogether disproportionate to the importance of the man who wields it. But the truly wise men of any nation are the very salt of the community. They do more to defend and further the best interests of the nation than can be done by mere "weapons of war." And although the wise are often neglected and despised, yet, at certain crises, or in the long run, the words which they speak even "in quiet" may prove more serviceable to the community than the shouting of the man who is a prince of windbags and king of fools. The world's monuments, it is true, have not always been erected to its greatest heroes or its truest benefactors. The seminal minds of the human race have often been unappreciated and even rejected by the crowd of their contemporaries: but they have

been the teachers of the teachers, and thus ultimately the guides of the masses. The seeds which they have dropped have borne rich fruit in future generations: and the best monument of such men lies in the benefits which they have bestowed upon the race. Who would think of measuring the wisdom of Socrates by the standard of those who put him to death? Who would think of valuing Milton's "Paradise Lost" by the amount of money which it put into his purse? Or who would think of estimating the epistles of Paul by the amount of fame which they brought him in his lifetime? The highest rewards of wisdom do not lie in any outward honours or material wealth, but in its power to enrich the consciousness of its possessor, and to make him more useful to his fellow-men. Thus, notwithstanding all the uncertainties of life, we may well prize and cultivate wisdom.

And this is pre-eminently true of the best kind of wisdom—that heavenly yet practical wisdom which consists in reverence and love and obedience towards God. We get this wisdom in its highest form when we sit at the feet of our Saviour Christ. Taught by Him, we learn that "not a sparrow falleth to the ground without our Father." Misfortunes may come to us without any blame of our own; they may come with a capricious and even cruel aspect: but they are not sent either in caprice or in cruelty; and our Father can "make all things work together for our good." Let us, therefore, use the faculties which

He has given us, in obedience to His will; and then let us leave results with Him. He may see it best not to give us that for which we plan and labour: but our prudence and toil are not therefore wasted; they enter into the moulding of our character, and help to fit us for far higher blessings. Amid all the uncertainties of life there is one abiding certainty—the wise and righteous love of God. And there is an ultimate spiritual prosperity, which is the sure and certain portion of the soul that clings to God and Christ in loving and trustful loyalty. There is a "race" which is always to those who are "swift" to run in the way of the Divine commandments. The "battle" is always ultimately to those who are "strong" in the Lord and in the "power of His might." The "bread" of eternal life is always to those who are wise unto "salvation." The true "riches" are always to those who have "understanding" to "lay up treasure in heaven." And the best of all "favour" is sure to those who have the spiritual "skill" to profit by the discipline of that "time and chance" which are really the providence of God.

XVIII.

WISDOM AND FOLLY.

CHAP. X. (*Revised Version*) :—

"*Dead flies cause the ointment of the perfumer to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly outweigh wisdom and honour. A wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart at his left. Yea also, when the fool walketh by the way, his understanding faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool. If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding allayeth great offences. There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as it were an error which proceedeth from the ruler: folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place. I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth. He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh through a fence, a serpent shall bite him. Whoso* [1] *heweth out stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood is endangered thereby. If the iron be blunt, and one do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom is profitable to direct. If the serpent bite before it be charmed, then is there no advantage in the charmer. The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness: and the end of his talk is mischievous madness. A fool also multiplieth words: yet man knoweth not what shall be; and that which shall be after him, who can tell him? The labour of fools wearieth every one of them, for he knoweth not how to go to the city. Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning! Happy art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness! By slothfulness the roof sinketh in; and through idleness of the hands the house leaketh. A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh glad the life: and money answereth all things. Curse not the king, no, not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.*"

[1] Or, "moveth stones" (Margin).

WE have seen that, at the close of the preceding chapter, wisdom and folly were contrasted with each other: and this contrast is still pursued throughout the chapter now before us. In a series of proverbial utterances, Ecclesiastes points out the evils of folly and the advantages of wisdom.

"Dead flies cause the ointment of the perfumer to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly outweigh wisdom and honour." The fragrance of precious ointment was highly valued in the East; and Ecclesiastes has already said that "a good name is better than precious ointment." But, just as a few "dead flies," lying amongst such ointment, would turn its fragrance into a disagreeable odour, so even a little folly is sometimes sufficient to outweigh much "wisdom and honour." This is true of the individual. A single act of indiscretion, committed by a wise man, will sometimes greatly lessen the influence of his wisdom: a single element of foolish weakness in the character of a man who is otherwise strong, may rob him of much power for good. The same is true also of the community. Folly is a corrupting influence, working subtly and disastrously in society. Folly, in its antagonism to wisdom,

often exercises a power altogether disproportionate to the importance of the men who wield it. The idea is much the same as that conveyed in the closing words of the ninth chapter: "One sinner destroyeth much good." And the lesson implied, of course, is that, if even "a little folly" can be thus potent for evil, it is of the utmost importance that we should avoid it altogether, and seek to lessen its contaminating influence by cultivating in ourselves and others a healthful and beneficent wisdom. We must try to keep the flies from finding their way into the fragrant ointment.

"A wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart at his left." This may mean that a wise man's heart inclines towards his right hand—leads him in the right direction, whilst a fool's heart inclines towards his left—leads him in the wrong direction. "Yea also, when the fool walketh by the way, his understanding faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool." He cannot walk abroad without manifesting his foolishness to every one he meets: like Dogberry, he stands revealed by simply opening his lips. Or, perhaps, the meaning is that he shows his folly by his boundless self-conceit, and by his assuming an attitude towards all others as if they were the fools! It is often a mark of the supremest folly when an individual regards himself as the only wise man in a community. Humility, not self-conceit, is the token of true wisdom.

Ecclesiastes proceeds to give to his readers another

counsel of prudence in relation to their attitude towards their despotic rulers. "If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding allayeth great offences." If the ruler is angry with thee—if he loses his temper—then leave not thy post; do not hastily throw up any office which thou mayest hold; but rather show all possible calmness and patience. By meeting anger with anger they might only injure themselves needlessly, and lash the tyrant into still greater fury. For there is no limit to the follies of which a despot may be guilty, in his pride or his caprice. "There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as it were an error which proceedeth from the ruler: folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place. I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth." Probably enough there may be here an allusion to some events of contemporary history. To ride on horseback was in those days a mark of wealth or distinction; and the reference is to the strange reversals of fortune which sometimes took place under the caprice of despotic rule. A tyrant might exalt some of his favourites or minions into positions of honour and authority which they were altogether incompetent to fill; whilst, on the other hand, he might, in a fit of temper, degrade and impoverish some of the nobles who were far better qualified for the task of government. This, indeed, was no reason why a wise man should play the sycophant, or should lend himself to mere selfish

intrigue; but it was a reason why he should not needlessly irritate the ruler, but should cultivate the spirit of calmness and patience.

Ecclesiastes continues, in proverbial style, to illustrate the need of wisdom, the superiority of wisdom to mere force, and the desirableness of applying wisdom in the right way, and of using it at the right time. "He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh through a fence, a serpent shall bite him. Whoso moveth stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood is endangered thereby." One idea is common to these four statements—the idea that there is a certain risk involved in these various actions. Perhaps, too, it is implied that, in the corresponding moral region, the risk of injury is even greater than in the physical region. A man who dug a pit and then covered it over, in order to trap a wild beast, might perchance one day fall into it himself; but let a man dig a pit in order to trap his brother-man, and he is even more likely to suffer. A man who broke down an old wall might perchance be stung by a serpent lurking there; but let a man violently break through the laws of morality, let him injure his neighbour by unjustly removing that neighbour's landmark, and he was even more likely, sooner or later, to be stung. There may possibly be a reference here to those fools who had just been described as "riding on horses," and "set in great dignity." Such men may have attained to their position, and may attempt to carry out their schemes

by cunning intrigue or unjust violence; but their evil deeds often recoil upon themselves, and the ultimate result shows how deficient they are in the true wisdom. A wise man, therefore, will avoid the terrible risks which are involved in fraud and wickedness. Or if, on the other hand, he should be engaged in any necessary or legitimate enterprises which might be likened to the digging of a pit, or the breaking of an old fence, or the loosening of stones, or the cutting down of wood, he will seek to carry on such work with all possible care, so as to lessen risk and avoid danger.

The two proverbs which follow point to the importance of applying wisdom in the right way, and at the right time. The first seems to be suggested by the mention of the cleaving of wood, and the second by the mention of the serpent in the fence.

"If the iron be blunt, and one do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom is profitable to direct." The man who is engaged in cutting down trees must, if he is working with a blunt axe, increase the force with which he wields it; but it would be much better for him wisely to sharpen his axe. Wisdom is better than mere force: but even where force must be used, wisdom is profitable to direct the force. And wisdom, rightly applied, may often save a man much expenditure of energy. A fool may be industrious, vigorous, and persevering; but he may be working as with a blunt instrument. He may be trying to make vigour or violence do the

work of sagacity. Whereas a wise man will seek to engage in his tasks with fitting preparation, and will endeavour so to apply his wisdom as to make the best use of his faculties and opportunities.

The next proverb seems to be suggested by the mention of the serpent in the fence. "If the serpent bite before it be charmed, then there is no advantage in the charmer." There used to be, and still are, in the East, men who profess, by means of incantations and other methods, to charm venomous snakes, so as to render them harmless. Now such a "master of the tongue," or snake-charmer, would act foolishly if he allowed a serpent to bite him without putting forth any endeavour to charm it. And he might as well be without his power of incantation if he does not use it at the right time. In like manner, amid the difficult and dangerous tasks of life, when a man is liable to be bitten as by some serpent in an old fence, it is well for him to execute such tasks with the caution and tact which may disarm natural antagonisms, and shield himself from injury. Even wisdom may lose much of its practical value if it is not employed at the right time.

"The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself." There is a certain power in wise and gracious speech: it often wins a man favour even from his adversaries. Used at the right time and in the right way, such speech may be even as the incantations of the snake-charmer: "a soft answer may turn away" even a

tyrant's "wrath." But "the lips of a fool will swallow up himself;" his hasty, reckless words, uttered without sufficient thought, tend to his own injury. And sometimes, the longer he speaks, the greater becomes his danger: "the beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is mischievous madness." His very fluency of speech is often a token of his folly; if he were a wiser man, he would be more likely to recognize his own ignorance, and to be silent where he now speaks. "A fool also multiplieth words: yet man knoweth not what shall be; and that which shall be after him, who can tell him?" The fool ignores even this necessary ignorance: where least is known, he "multiplies words;" he "rushes in where angels fear to tread." "The labour of fools wearieth every one of them, for he knoweth not how to go to the city." The fool is ignorant of some of the commonest things; he would miss his way even on the road to the capital! His ignorance is as great as his self-conceit and his loquacity. And so his labour often becomes to him a far more fatiguing thing than it would otherwise be. His lack of wisdom necessitates greater toil; he pursues his journey by a circuitous instead of the direct road; he sometimes discovers "mares' nests" to his own ultimate disappointment; and so his work becomes a grievous burden, because he has not the knowledge or skill which would lessen his toil, direct his endeavours, and give zest to his labour. Finally here, Eccle-

siastes speaks of the national dangers of folly—the evils which result to a community when its rulers and leaders are living with childish thoughtlessness and selfish frivolity. "Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning!" Such banqueting in the early part of the day is a sign of sloth, effeminacy, and self-indulgence. "Happy art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness!" When the rulers of a land give themselves industriously to the tasks of government, when they eat to live and not merely live to eat, when they are not mere devotees of luxury, but men whose lives are guided by a manly temperance and a wise self-control, then such a country is likely to prosper. But it is otherwise with a nation, when its leaders spend their days in foolish idleness and debauchery. "By slothfulness the roof sinketh in; and through idleness of the hands the house leaketh. A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh glad the life: and money answereth all things." These effeminate rulers and princes live only for revelry and mirth; they care for nothing else, so long as their money lasts; their money enables them to gratify all their sensual lusts; and this very money, perhaps, they have in large measure extorted from an oppressed and down-trodden people. A land thus governed by foolish tyrants is, indeed, in a wretched condition: the framework of the State becomes dilapidated, and the rain begins, as it were, to drop

through the roof. And yet it was dangerous to fulminate against these foolish and slothful rulers. For such selfish tyranny was often associated with a widespread system of espionage which made silence and patience the most prudent course. "Curse not the king, no, not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bed-chamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter." Some suppose that there is here an allusion to the custom, which even then existed, of using carrier-pigeons in order to send despatches: but more probably the expression is simply a proverbial one. A man might fancy that, in certain circumstances, he was quite safe in venting his indignation against the tyrant; but he might afterwards find that his words had nevertheless, in some mysterious manner, been recorded and reported, just as if some passing bird had picked up the words and carried them to the tyrant's ear! Ecclesiastes, whilst sympathizing with his countrymen in their sufferings under a despotic government, reminds them that nothing is to be gained by mere impotent denunciation, and that they are only likely to increase their troubles by thus rousing the wrath of the oppressor. There are circumstances in which injustice is best met by silence. And a wise man may sometimes show his wisdom by enduring with patience even the misrule of foolish men.

The practical lesson, then, of this whole chapter is that we should earnestly pursue wisdom in its

various forms—as knowledge, prudence, virtue, and godliness. Let us cultivate a wisdom that will be refreshing in its fragrance, and that will increase our influence for good; a wisdom that will enable us to discharge delicate duties with tact, and dangerous tasks with prudence; a wisdom that will help us to work with fitting instruments, and to act in the right manner and at the right time; a wisdom which will save us from needless toil, and prevent our speech from degenerating into the loquacity of ignorant self-conceit; a wisdom which will keep us from foolish and sinful self-indulgence, and enable us to bear with calmness and patience those troubles and sorrows which we cannot obviate or remove. Above all, let us receive into our hearts that "wisdom which cometh down from above." Let us seek to be "wise unto salvation." Let us seek that Christ Jesus—the wisdom of God—may be "made unto us wisdom:" so that, whatever may be our ignorance in other matters, we may at least be wise enough to "know our way" to that "city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God!"

XIX.

UNCALCULATING BENEFICENCE.

CHAP. XI. 1–6 (*Revised Version*) :—

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

WHATEVER difficulty there may be in rightly interpreting the various clauses of this passage, there can be little doubt that its main object is to inculcate an unanxious and unwearying beneficence. The "casting of bread" and "the giving of a portion" point, especially, to deeds of kindness and liberality; whilst the "sowing" and "reaping" may be regarded as pointing rather to well-doing in general. And the whole passage seems to be a protest against that despondency and over-anxiety which are so apt to lower our generosity, and to relax our faithfulness to duty. Beneficence ought to look forward hopefully into the future; but it ought not to be over-calculating. Beneficence without hope loses one of the springs of its energy. Beneficence without thought may cease to be beneficence in anything but the motive, and may positively injure where it desires to bless. But thoughtfulness in well-doing is one thing: anxious calculation is another thing. Such calculation is apt to rob us of hope, and to depress our energy. It is likely also to defeat its own ends. For there are limits to our powers of thought. We cannot with certainty forecast the future, or foretell the results even of our own actions. The

ways of God are, many of them, mysterious. It is ours to sow: the harvest is with Him. No doubt we ought to sow as wisely as we can: but we ought also to remember that, with all our wisdom, the harvest may be different from what we anticipate. If we begin to calculate too much, we shall calculate badly. Let us therefore do good "as we have opportunity," dealing with present claims, rather than with future contingencies, acting with hopeful yet unselfish generosity, and with diligent and thoughtful yet unanxious beneficence. This seems to be the central lesson of the passage before us; and we may take this with us as our key to the interpretation of its various clauses.

"Cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days." Some think that the reference here is to ships of merchandise, which traverse the "waters," and, "after many days," bring back to the merchant the profits of his ventures. Others suppose that the reference is to certain methods of Egyptian husbandry, according to which the seed was sown shortly after the inundation of the Nile. And, no doubt, either of these two emblems might furnish a meaning in harmony with the central lesson which Ecclesiastes is here enforcing. Do good in faith. Be venturesome in your beneficence. You may seem to be risking much: but in this merchandise, in this husbandry, the reward is sure. I prefer, however, to take the words more literally, to regard the "casting of bread upon the waters" as a

proverbial expression for an apparently profitless sacrifice. After all, the merchant and the Egyptian husbandman would not venture goods or seed-corn unless they had a fair prospect of personal advantage. Cast seed on the soil, and you may reasonably expect a harvest. But to "cast bread upon the waters"—what good can come of that? And yet there are many acts of beneficence which seem quite as unlikely ever to bring any return to the benefactor. An old Greek writer says: "To do good to a bad man is like sowing in the sea." But we are to be kind to others, even although we can see no ground for hoping that we shall ever be recompensed by them. There are many cases in which simply the need of others ought to be our chief motive in well-doing. It is indeed quite true that mere indiscriminate almsgiving is likely to do harm, instead of good. But here, we shall suppose, is a case in which we know a man to be in real need, and we are able really and truly to help him. We are not sure that he will be even grateful to us. We cannot well conceive of our ever coming into circumstances in which we shall need his help. Well, let us "cast our bread upon the waters." Let us be generous without calculation. Let us do good to the man without any considerations of personal advantage. Let not our benevolence take the form of a mere "investment." However unprofitable to ourselves our well-doing may appear to be, still let us continue to do well. But let us comfort ourselves also with

the thought that no well-doing is really unprofitable in the end. Let not this be our motive; but let this be our consolation. "He that giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord." "Cast thy bread even upon the waters; and thou shalt find it after many days." The most uncalculating generosity is precisely that which is the most certain, in one way or other, to meet with its reward.

"Give a portion to seven, yea, even unto eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth." That is, give away a portion of thy "bread"—of thy substance. Give "to seven, and also to eight;" that is, to an indefinite number, to a number limited only by thine ability to help—not limited by any selfish calculations. As Christ says, in His Sermon on the Mount, "Give to him that asketh thee." Give to a man, not because he is this or that individual from whom you "hope to receive again," but simply because he is a brother-man whose need impels him to ask you. "For thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth." Some think that this means: "Do good whilst you have the ability: be generous whilst you have the means; for you can never tell how soon some calamity may rob you of this power of well-doing." Others suppose that the argument rather is: "Dark days may be coming upon you by and bye, when you may need the help of some of those whom you help now." Even if this latter idea be the correct one, we might still regard Ecclesiastes as, so far, pro-

testing against over-calculation: "You do not know whose help you may yourself need some day; you do not know in what form you may require sympathy or assistance: it is better, therefore, to give up all attempts to limit your beneficence by such considerations; the less calculating you now are in your benevolence, the more friends you will have when you need them." This may be the idea. But perhaps Ecclesiastes may rather be simply protesting here against those over-anxious fears about the future which tend to stifle generosity. There are many men who are so oppressed with the burden of life's uncertainties as to hoard when they ought to be spending, and who are prevented from doing a great deal of good in their day of prosperity by their anticipations of a possible day of adversity. They are asked, out of their abundance, to help others; and their thought is, "We must take care of ourselves; we know not what may happen." "Just so," says Ecclesiastes: "you do not know what will happen; and this is the very reason why you should do your duty now, without over-anxiety as to the future." "Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth." According to this reading of the clause, the emphasis is to be laid, not on the possibility of evil days coming, but on our ignorance of the future. Calamity may doubtless be expected; there is "a cross in every lot;" but "thou knowest not" what evil is coming. Thou knowest not: then, why act as if

thou didst know? It is utterly impossible for us to secure ourselves against every contingency. Things which we anticipate with fear may never happen; things which we never dream of may be the very things that will occur. It is right enough that we should look into the future: it is right enough that we should plan and prepare for the future. Ecclesiastes does not condemn a wise thrift and prudence: what is that diligent "sowing" to which he exhorts us but a thoughtful looking forward into the future? Nevertheless, he would have us base our prudence not only on our knowledge, but also on our ignorance. He bids us be prudent enough to recognize the fact that, with all our forecasting and planning, there is still left a large region of uncertainty. In other words, he would deliver our prudence from over-anxiety. It is all right enough to make wise provision for "a rainy day." But for a man who has abundance to be hoarding for a rainy day that may never come to him, and on this account refusing to brighten for others the rainy days that have actually come to them, is not a wise prudence at all, but the unwisdom of selfish and anxious calculation. We have heard of wealthy men who have been haunted by the fear of dying in the workhouse! And there is many a man who is hindered from doing the good he might do by the mere spectre of future possibility. The evil day, perhaps, comes at last in a form he never expected; and then he may find that his calamity is not one whit the less, because he was

niggardly, instead of generous, in the days of his abundance. He is poor now, all the same; but he might have done much more good whilst he was rich. His money has all gone, as we say, "to the dogs:" it would have been better, surely, if more of it had gone to the poor! And, on the other hand, there is many a man who leaves far too much money behind him. Had he only done his duty as a steward for Christ in this world of sin and suffering, he could not have heaped up so much treasure. And this would have been a better thing, both for himself and for the world; yes, and probably also for his heirs! Our duty is in simple proportion to our ability. Let us do good, then, whilst we can. The present is here: the future is uncertain. Present duties are not to be neglected through fear of future contingencies. "Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for *thou knowest not* what evil shall be upon the earth."

"If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth; and if a tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there shall it be." Some interpret these words as meaning that the rich man, in his abundance, ought to be as the clouds which, when they are full of rain, fall in showers of blessing on the earth; and that the rich man ought to do good now, because the day is coming—the day of his death—after which, like a fallen tree, he will no longer be able to bear fruit. Indeed, these latter words are often quoted in order

to prove that at death every man's destiny is irrevocably fixed. The words, moreover, are often misquoted thus: "As the tree falleth, so shall it lie;" meaning that it shall remain in the very condition in which it falls. But the words are: "Where the tree falleth, there shall it be." There is nothing said about its remaining where it falls, or as it falls: and, in point of fact, when trees do fall, they are very often soon removed by the hand and for the use of man. Even, therefore, if the words did refer to death, they could not prove the doctrine that the destiny of every human being is finally and unalterably fixed when the breath leaves the body. But, indeed, it is not probable that the words have any reference whatever to death or destiny. It is possible to interpret them in a manner which will connect them much more closely with the whole scope of the context. The "clouds that empty themselves upon the earth" are here, I should say, emblems, not of blessing, but of calamity. For Ecclesiastes, in the preceding verse, has been referring to the "evil" that may come; and, in the verse following, he says, "He that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap." Here, evidently, the wind and the clouds are objects of anxiety and fear to the farmer. And the idea obviously is that, if the farmer allows this fear to become excessive, it may paralyze his action. It is right enough that he should be prudent; but if he becomes over-anxious about the contingencies of the weather, he may lose his proper

opportunity of "sowing" or of "reaping." Ecclesiastes seems to be thinking of those heavy storms which sometimes, especially in the East, come so suddenly, and do so great damage to the crops. Sometimes these storms of wind and rain are very limited in their range, and yet, within that range, they may simply ruin the harvest. What, then, is the farmer to do? He must lay his account with these possible calamities: but is he, through fear of them, to omit doing his work? Not at all. He cannot foretell these contingencies. The storm will very likely come some day. "When the clouds are full, they will empty themselves." But can he calculate when they will be "full"? No. When the storm comes, doubtless some tree will fall, torn up by the blast, or struck by the lightning. But can he tell which tree? No. Can he tell when it will fall? No. Can he tell how it will fall? No. "In the place where the tree falleth, there shall it be." It will be decided then, but not till then. The rain will come when the "clouds are full." The tree will "be" where it "falleth." But the farmer cannot calculate beforehand the time, or the course, or the range, or the power of the storm, or what damage it is likely to do. What, then? Is he to give up his work? No; but to go on with it, and leave all these uncertainties in a higher hand. And thus is it also with all our well-doing. "Evil" is doubtless coming; for all human life has its clouds and storms: but we know not "what evil" is coming.

When or where the storm may break over our life, we cannot tell. We shall know where the tree has fallen when we see it on the ground! Let us have done, then, with over-calculation. It is ours to sow the seeds of beneficence. Let us not be too anxious about possible storms. "He that observeth the wind shall not sow." There are uncertainties in our life, and uncertainties in our well-doing; but let us, on this very account, work all the more diligently, and leave these uncertainties in the hand of God.

And this, too, is precisely the thought with which the passage concludes. We cannot fathom God's ways of working. Some of the things with which we are most familiar—the beginnings of life—the phenomena of birth and growth—involve mysteries that lie beyond our ken. "We know not the work of God who doeth all." We sow here; we sow there: we cannot foretell the results; we cannot calculate "which shall prosper," whether this seed or that, or whether "both" alike shall produce a "good" harvest. But this is not a reason for inactive anxiety; it is a reason for hopeful industry. The more ignorant we are as to the results of our endeavours to do good, the more diligent and the more varied ought our endeavours to be. We ought to take advantage of all possibilities of usefulness. "In the morning sow thy seed; and in the evening withhold not thy hand." If this attempt does not prosper, that other may. Our beneficence ought to be unwearying, as well as unanxious. If one plan of well-doing does not seem

to succeed, let us try another. But let us not lose hope even in those regions that seem most barren. "Cast thy bread upon the waters; and thou shalt find it after many days."

Here, then, amid the "vanity" of life, is one "good" which Ecclesiastes counsels his readers to pursue. And, in truth, amid so much that is unsatisfying in our earthly experience, there is one thing which we never regret—we never regret any good which we have done in the world. Too often have we reason to regret the fact that we have neglected some opportunity of well-doing. Too often is it the case that the harvest-time comes to us, and we find that we have nothing to reap because we have sown nothing. There are human beings whom we might have helped long ago, if only we had been thoughtful and sympathetic enough: but it is too late now; they have gone beyond the reach of our practical sympathy. We may, perhaps, also have reason to regret some mistakes which we have made in our endeavours to do good: we may be sorry that, through lack of wisdom, we have sometimes injured those whom we were seeking to bless. Or we may regret that, through their own fault, they have failed to benefit by our endeavours to bless them. But to have rendered any actual help to our fellow-men; to have assisted them in their struggles, to have comforted them in their sorrows, or to have lifted them up out of their sins; to have done anything for the cause of God, the kingdom of Christ, the promotion

of righteousness and love on the earth—this must ever be a source of satisfaction. The "chief good" of life can never be found in selfishness and self-seeking. We find our truest and deepest blessedness in serving God and man in the spirit of love. Let us, therefore, not be "weary in well-doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."

XX.

YOUTH AND AGE.

CHAP. XI. 7–XII. 7 (*Revised Version*) :—

"*Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun. Yea, if a man live many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity.*

Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thy heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgement. Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for youth and the prime of life are vanity. Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth, or ever the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; or ever the sun, and the light, and the moon, and the stars, be darkened, and the clouds return after the rain: in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, and the doors shall be shut in the street; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one shall rise up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low; yea, they shall be afraid of that which is high, and terrors shall be in the way; and the almond tree shall blossom, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and the caper-berry shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern; and the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit return unto God who gave it."

[1] Or, "and remember" (Margin).

WE have already seen that one of the objects which Ecclesiastes had in view was to arouse his countrymen to make the best of the unfavourable circumstances of their times. He saw that many of them were in danger of increasing instead of lessening the unsatisfactoriness of life, by brooding over their troubles and magnifying the disadvantages of the period. This gloomy despondency was the parent of many evils: it was apt to beget a sordid avarice, or a reckless sensuality, or a morose asceticism. And so, one of the refrains of this book—as we have seen—is the exhortation to a pious and cheerful enjoyment of the simple, ordinary blessings of life. Ecclesiastes recurs to this again and again: here we have it once more, at the opening of the passage which is now before us.

"Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun. Yea, if a man live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity." The many "days of darkness" probably mean the days after death—the days when a man no longer looks on the light of the sun: for it is to be observed that Ecclesiastes speaks of a

man as rejoicing in "*all* the years of his life." He seems, indeed, to have believed in a future existence: but to his mind the region beyond death was still enveloped in gloom; the transition "from sunlight to the sunless land" presented a cheerless prospect. Still, he maintains that the gloom and mystery of death was rather a reason why men should delight in the sweet sunshine, whilst God was giving it to them. "All that cometh is vanity:" the years of life that may yet lie before us, like the years which have already gone, will fail to satisfy our souls: but this is no reason why we should still further darken the present by turning away from those natural and innocent joys with which God seeks to lighten and brighten our existence. Sometimes we have seen a self-willed child, when his parents have denied him something on which his heart is set, beginning to fret and sulk, and refusing to accept any good thing which they may offer him. He has not got exactly what he wishes; and so he is determined he will not enjoy anything whatever. It is this peevish, sulky, morose spirit against which Ecclesiastes protests. That cannot be a true philosophy of life which turns away in disgust from the good things we have, merely because there are other good things which we have not. Even the mystery which surrounds the night of death ought not to darken for us the daytime of life. God has so made us that it is "a pleasant thing for the eyes to behold the sun:" and this natural pleasure, and all other innocent pleasures,

we ought thankfully to receive and cheerfully to enjoy.

Ecclesiastes now turns to address, more especially, his younger readers. "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth; and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment." Some have supposed that this exhortation to "rejoice" is here spoken ironically: "By all means, young man, be merry; take your swing; sow your wild oats; do just as you like; but know this, that the day is coming when your sins shall find you out, and you will have to gnash your teeth in bitter remorse over your present folly!" I cannot, however, take this view of the passage. It does not seem to accord with the general spirit of the whole book. In particular, it does not well accord with the words which immediately follow: "Therefore remove sorrow, or moroseness, from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh; for youth and the prime of life are vanity." Youth is naturally a season of brightness: but it, too, has its unsatisfying elements; it is a transitory thing. This very transitoriness, however, is a reason why the young should make the most and the best of their youthtime, and not darken their lives prematurely by morbid fancies or by unnatural asceticism. I therefore regard the counsel which is here given to the "young man" as uttered in all seriousness. We sometimes see young people, under a mistaken ideal

of life, contracting habits of unnatural self-repression. We sometimes see them indulging a morbid melancholy which robs them of the buoyancy and sprightliness naturally characteristic of youth. And we can easily conceive that, under the depressing circumstances of the times in which Ecclesiastes lived, this disposition to moroseness might be specially prevalent even amongst the young. They would be apt to catch it from their seniors. A despondent and peevish parent is not likely to encourage liveliness in his children. Happiness is an eyesore to the austere and sullen. Probably, therefore, there was many a young man in those days who had become soured and disgusted in presence of the evils of the period, and who was thereby missing the happiness which naturally springs out of the vigour and vivacity of early manhood. Such are here exhorted to throw off their gloomy discontent, to allow their nature freer and fuller play, and not to be afraid to enjoy cheerfully all lawful pleasure. For that it is lawful pleasure only that is here in view, is manifest from the qualifying word which is added: "but know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment." This recollection is to be the young man's safeguard. He is not to be afraid of happiness; but he is to be happy as in the sight of God. He is not to be afraid of natural enjoyment; but he is to enjoy himself as remembering that he is a moral and responsible creature, accountable to the great Judge for all his deeds. The natural

cravings of his "heart" and of his "eyes" are to be under the control of his reason and conscience. This reverence for God and regard for the Divine judgment will prevent lawful pleasure from passing into lawless. He will enjoy his ride, but with his hand on the reins; he will enjoy his sail, but with his hand on the helm.

And surely there can be no harm in telling young people that it is right to enjoy their youthtime, whilst they have it, provided only they take their pleasures as from the hand of God, and as remembering their responsibility to Him. No doubt, work and sorrow have their own ministry in the development of moral and spiritual character. But play has its uses, as well as work; pleasure has its ministry, as well as pain; and a pure joy may develop the soul, as well as a sacred grief. True religion never condemns the natural and innocent pleasures of the young. Healthful was the advice of Wordsworth, addressed to his young daughter:

"Dora, sport, as now thou sportest,
On this platform light and free;
Take thy bliss, while longest, shortest,
Are indifferent to thee.

"Who would check the happy feeling
That inspires the linnet's song?
Who would stop the swallow, wheeling
On her pinions swift and strong?"

And yet the poet also counselled his daughter,

amid all the happy pleasures of her youthtime, not to forget eternity, duty, and God:

"Duty, like a strict preceptor,
Sometimes frowns, or seems to frown;
Choose her thistle for thy sceptre,
While Youth's roses are thy crown.

"Grasp it; if thou shrink and tremble,
Fairest damsel of the green,
Thou wilt lack the only symbol
That proclaims a genuine queen."

It is this combination of duty and pleasure, of thoughtfulness and sprightliness, of godliness and natural enjoyment, that is so beautiful in early life. And although, as a rule, it may be more necessary to exhort young people to a thoughtful piety than to the enjoyment of innocent pleasures, yet there are some who are apt to miss the characteristic happiness of early years through a morbid peevishness, a fretful anxiety, or a mistaken ideal of duty. Such have need, rather, to be exhorted as in the words of Longfellow:

"Maiden, that read'st this simple rhyme,
Enjoy thy youth, it will not stay;
Enjoy the fragrance of thy prime,
For O! it is not always May!

"Enjoy the Spring of Love and Youth;
To some good angel leave the rest;
For Time will teach thee soon the truth,
There are no birds in last year's nest!"

Such counsel as this, rightly understood and rightly

followed, will never lead any one into a life of frivolity or vice. A hearty enjoyment of innocent pleasure is, indeed, rather a moral safeguard. Corroding care often leads to dissipation. Gloominess and sensuality are no infrequent companions. It is often when a young man loses his relish for simple and natural enjoyments that he betakes himself to sinful excesses and vicious indulgences. Whereas he who remembers that "God will yet bring him into judgment," but who "lets his heart cheer him in the days of his youth" as frankly accepting and enjoying the blessings which God sends him, is likely to find his very cheerfulness helpful in raising him above the temptation to vice and sensuality.

Ecclesiastes proceeds to counsel the young to cultivate a genuine piety in prospect of old age. "Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth, or ever the evil days come, and the years draw nigh when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them." There is a touching pathos in these words. The writer himself was now probably growing old; and perhaps the infirmities of age were coming upon him with all the greater heaviness because he had not himself, in earlier years, followed the counsels which he is now giving to others. All through this book he has been writing as a man of wide and varied experience; and if we regard those confessions which he puts into the lips of Solomon as being autobiographical, there was a time when he had given himself up to sensual indulgence. The

picture, too, of old age, which is here so graphically sketched, seems to be drawn from a special standpoint; for it is not relieved or softened by any of those touches which we might have expected to find. We ourselves know aged men and women who would not say they "have no pleasure" in their life. The Bible, too, elsewhere speaks of the "hoary head" as being a "crown of glory," when "it is found in the way of righteousness;" and it describes those who are "planted in the house of the Lord" as still "bringing forth fruit in old age," and as "flourishing in the courts of our God." So that Ecclesiastes, in the picture which he here presents, seems to be thinking of the cheerless old age of the worldling—of the man who has *not* "remembered his Creator in the days of his youth" and prime. Youth, without piety, has its excitements and pleasures; but age without piety is a dismal thing. For then "the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened;" or, as our own poet says, "a web is woven across the sky." "And the clouds return after the rain." In youth it is often the case that the clouds seem comparatively few, and there appears to be a long interval between one trouble and another. But to a cheerless old age the sunshine seems evanescent, and calamity appears to be the pervading element of life.

Some suppose that, in the imagery which follows, the approach of death is likened to the oncoming of a terrible storm, and to the effect of such a storm on

the inhabitants of a town. I am disposed, however, to abide by the more popular view, that the characteristic features of old age are here presented under the emblem, mainly, of a fine mansion or castle going to ruin. The castle used to be a strong one, well-manned and defended, with its servants busily grinding the corn in their handmills, with its sounds of music and revelry, with its golden lamp of oil suspended by the silver cord, and its wheel at work bringing up the water from the fountain. But now "the keepers of the house tremble." The castle-warders have no longer the strength they once possessed: the arms and hands are trembling with feebleness or palsy. "And the strong men bow themselves:" the legs are become weak and bent. "And the grinders cease because they are few;" the failing teeth are no longer doing the work they did before. "And those that look out of the windows are darkened:" the eyes that used to watch from the castle-turrets can no longer see afar off. "And the doors are shut in the street:" the ears have become deaf to what is going on outside: the man of pleasure, who used to be always going out in quest of some new enjoyment, is now shut in at last. "And the sound of the grinding is low: and one rises up at the voice of a bird"—or rather, as it might be translated—"it is as the voice of the sparrow;" a reference, probably, to the weakness and faintness of the old man's utterance. "And all the daughters of music are brought low:" he can no longer hear or

sing sweet music as he was wont to do. Yea, he is "afraid of that which is high, and terrors are in the way:" climbing tasks his breathing, and he feels as if danger were ever threatening him. "And the almond-tree blossoms:" an allusion probably, as is generally supposed, to the hoary head of age. "And the grasshopper is a burden:" the least weight is now heavy and troublesome. "And the caper-berry fails:" the old man may wish to excite his appetite, but it does not respond to the stimulus. And death is now near at hand, when he shall go to his "long home," and "the mourners" shall attend his funeral. Then at last "the silver cord is loosed, and the golden bowl," which was suspended from it, "is broken:" the flame of life has gone out. "The pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern:" there has come the drawing of the last breath, and the periodic processes of life have all ceased. "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return to God who gave it." Return to God—to be "judged!"

It is by such considerations as these that Ecclesiastes enforces his solemn and pathetic appeal to the young to "remember now their Creator in the days of their youth." He cannot, however, mean to tell them that old age is necessarily so dark and cheerless that piety can do nothing whatever to brighten it, and that therefore, if they would enjoy the delights of a pious life, they must enjoy them whilst they are

young! No: what he means, surely, is rather this, that old age without piety is a cheerless thing, and that it is a godly youthtime and manhood which leads on to a godly, patient, and even cheerful old age. He knew that young people, in the midst of their pleasures, are often apt to make light of piety, and to think that they can be happy enough without God. And so, he bids them look forward to old age, when the sources of their present pleasures will be dried up; and he asks them to think how it will fare with them then. He would fain teach them how they may escape, not of course the natural infirmity of age, but the dark gloom of such infirmity when it is unrelieved by the spirit of godliness.

Yes: and when any man who in his youth enjoyed his pleasures as in the sight of God, and in his prime girded himself for life's activities as in the sight of God, seeks, in his old age, to bear all his infirmities as in the sight of the same God, what a testimony is this to the value and power of religion! The physical weaknesses, which are so graphically described in the passage before us, may all be experienced: but, along with these, there is a hidden spring of calmness, kindliness, endurance, and even cheerfulness. Oh, let young people think of this! That which can thus give comfort, peace, and hope, even when the eye is growing blind, and the ear deaf, and the limbs weak, and when the man is shut in from so many sources of enjoyment—must not that be the best and the most enduring of all

treasures—the best for youth, as well as the best for age? Let the young, then, "remember their Creator in the days of their youth:" this is their best way to enjoy the present; this is also their best way to prepare for the future!

XXI.

THE EPILOGUE.

CHAP. XII. 8–14 (*Revised Version*) :—

"*Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity.*

And further, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words, and that which was written uprightly, even words of truth.

The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well fastened are the words of the [1] *masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd. And furthermore, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.*

[2] *This is the end of the matter: all hath been heard: fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgement, with every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.*"

[1] Or, "collectors of sentences" (Margin).

[2] Or, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter" (Margin).

WE have now come to the epilogue of this remarkable book. Some think that this epilogue was added by a later hand, and was intended to commend the book to its readers, by testifying to the wisdom of its author and to the soundness and value of his teaching. It is alleged that an author would scarcely speak of himself as a "wise" man, or commend his own work in this marked fashion. But many scholars who have carefully studied the language of the epilogue have come to the conclusion that it was written by the author himself; and, on the whole, there does not appear to be any adequate reason for departing from this view. It is true that "Koheleth," or "Ecclesiastes," is here spoken of in the third person: but then the author has already done this more than once. Then, too, with regard to his commendation of himself and of his words, it is only fair to remember the literary form of the book, which, as we have seen, is that of dramatic personation. Koheleth, or Ecclesiastes, is, according to the initial representation of the book, Solomon, the son of David. The author seeks to teach his countrymen by means of certain meditations, confessions, and maxims which, by a literary device, he

puts into the lips of that king who was so renowned for his wisdom. He represents Solomon, when giving his own experience, as saying, "I, Ecclesiastes, was king in Jerusalem, and I have gotten me great wisdom above all who were before me in Jerusalem." And so we may regard the author as still carrying out the literary form of his book, when he speaks here, in the epilogue, of the "wisdom" of Ecclesiastes, and of the manner in which he "taught the people knowledge." No doubt this was virtually a claim on behalf of his own teaching; for he was conscious that he himself was a lover of wisdom, and that he was qualified to be, in some measure, an instructor of his countrymen. But this consciousness is here expressed in the form of commending to his readers the words of the wise king who has been represented as speaking throughout the book.

The Epilogue begins by repeating the words with which the book opened: "Vanity of vanities, saith Ecclesiastes; all is vanity." This word "vanity" is, as we have seen, one of the keynotes of the book. The writer wished his countrymen to see that the difficulty which they now experienced of extracting a satisfying happiness out of their material conditions was simply an exacerbation of the chronic difficulty of the ages. The experiment of manufacturing a satisfying good out of the things of this world has often been tried: it was tried by Solomon himself under the most favourable conditions; and even then it failed. And so Solomon is represented as giving,

in this book, the result of his own experience. He warns men against those false aims, foolish pursuits, and sinful courses, which can only increase the vanity of life. He also shows how this vanity may be greatly alleviated by practical wisdom, godliness, and beneficence, and by a cheerful, thankful, and contented enjoyment of the simple, ordinary blessings of Providence. And yet, at the same time, he recurs here to the keynote that "all is vanity:" because, even when the wisest and best possible use is made of the present life, there still remains an underlying element of unsatisfactoriness which man cannot remove; there are disappointments and dissatisfactions which man cannot escape; and there are problems and anomalies which perplex the reason, the conscience, and the heart, and which will only be solved hereafter in the light of the final judgment.

The Epilogue proceeds, in the words to which I have already referred, to commend the maxims and counsels of the whole book. "And further, because Ecclesiastes was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs." There may be here an allusion to the fact that Solomon was the author or compiler of the book of Proverbs; and doubtless there is also a reference to the proverbial character of this book of Ecclesiastes itself. The writer thus indirectly justifies and commends the method which he had himself adopted in trying to teach his countrymen. The book is full of pithy and sententious

sayings, which he had either himself written or had gathered from various sources. "Ecclesiastes sought to find out acceptable words, and that which was written uprightly, even words of truth." He had endeavoured to convey his instructions in a form most likely to win the attention and impress the minds of his readers; but, in the origination or selection of his proverbial sayings, his main regard had been to sincerity and fact. He wished to arouse his countrymen to a more healthful life by bringing the influences of truth to bear on their consciences and hearts. For "the words of the wise are as goads:" they are sharp and incisive; they stimulate men to a better life, and urge them along the path of true progress. The meaning of the next clause is more doubtful. The word translated "assemblies" ought perhaps rather to be translated "collections," and may refer to collections of such wise sayings as those to which the writer has just referred. The clause would then read thus: "As nails fastened, or driven in, are the masters of such collections." Those who have mastered the writings of wise men —those who are well versed in such collections of wise sayings—those who lay such sayings to heart, and really act upon them—are like nails driven firmly into a wall; they acquire a certain steadfastness of conviction and character. Or perhaps the phrase "masters of the collections" may refer rather to the "masterpieces" of such literature—the wise words that stand out prominently from the rest. "The

words of the wise are as goads, and the master-sayings of the wise are as nails driven home." If this be the meaning, then the expression is somewhat similar to our own, when we speak of a man as "hitting the nail on the head," or as "clinching his argument." And when the writer adds that these wise words or collections of wise words are "given from one shepherd," he is probably referring to God as the one Fountain of all true wisdom. He who is the great Pastor inspires wise men to be the teachers and helpers of their brethren. But the writer would also remind his readers that it is not all books that are thus helpful. "And furthermore, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh." There was "no end" to the books that might be written by men vainly attempting to solve the problems of the universe; but often the only result of studying such books was to plunge the reader into disappointment and fatigue. Instead of getting any enlightenment or help from such books, one only gets a sense of utter "weariness." It is a case of "the blind" trying to "lead the blind." But it is otherwise with the words of those who are themselves taught and inspired by the great "Shepherd" of men. The "entrance" of such words "giveth light." Such words "find us" at the depths of our being: they are penetrating and incisive; they are like goads, and like nails driven home. "The word of the Lord is quick and powerful, sharper than any

two-edged sword." "Every Scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work." "Furnished completely unto every good work:" here is a healthy, practical purpose served by those "words of the wise" which are inspired by the Spirit of God.

Ecclesiastes himself, in the writing of this little book, had a practical object in view. He had not indulged in any elaborate speculations; he had not attempted to solve the riddle of the world. He had simply recorded the results of his own experience and observation; and he had confessed himself unable to fathom the mysteries of Divine Providence. But he felt that he had a practical message for his countrymen. He had laid before them certain maxims for the guidance of their conduct. He had endeavoured to put them in the way of securing the "chief good" of life—of making the best of this present existence, with all its unsatisfying elements, and all its insoluble problems. And now, at the very end of his book, he seeks to drive the nail home, and to clinch all his exhortations by one pithy, pregnant counsel in which he sums up his practical philosophy of life: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil,"

A life of godliness and virtue—this is the "chief good" for man. There is no better or deeper satisfaction to be found on earth than that which springs from "reverencing God" and "keeping His commandments." This was the grand "conclusion" at which Ecclesiastes had arrived. He had tried human wisdom and learning; he had tried pleasure, revelry, and sensual indulgence; he had tried riches and luxury; and he had found them all to be "vanity and feeding on wind." But he felt that, in a life of piety and duty, there was a real satisfaction and nourishment for the soul of man. To remember and reverence the great Creator, to keep His commandments, to discharge the various duties which He has appointed—this is the very best use which we can make of life; this is the highest good to which we can attain, amid all the difficulties, disappointments, sorrows, uncertainties, transitoriness, and mystery of our present existence. And, in order that our souls may be sustained in living this life of godliness and virtue, we are ever to remember that we are responsible creatures; we are to look forward to a future life and a future judgment. To live in the light of that coming judgment leads us to keep watch even over our secret conduct, and deepens our reverence for all God's holy laws. It also enables us to bear up with greater patience under those anomalies of Providence which perplex and oppress us, by pointing us forward to a day when all wrongs will be redressed, and the righteousness of God will be fully

vindicated in the final result of His dealings with mankind.

And now, in closing my exposition of this book, I would briefly sum up the relation between its main ideas and the fuller and clearer teaching of the New Testament revelation. There are four principal ideas which recur with more or less frequency in the book, and which, taken together, constitute that practical philosophy of life which the writer sets before us. These four ideas are: the vanity of earthly things; the good that lies in enjoying the ordinary blessings of life with a pious and thankful contentment; the duty of reverencing God, and obeying His laws; and the wisdom of living in recognition of a future judgment. Now, these four ideas are all virtually indorsed by the New Testament, although they are more or less modified or expanded by its fuller revelation.

I have already hinted that the estimate formed by Ecclesiastes of the vanity of life may owe its darker colouring to his own personal experience, and also to the special circumstances of his times. And we can easily see and feel that the glorious revelation of the Fatherhood of God, which has since been given to the world in Christ Jesus, must greatly modify the view which is taken even of the sadder and sterner facts of life by those who accept that revelation. On the other hand, all that is said by Ecclesiastes regarding the utter vanity of a life of worldliness is fully in harmony with the spirit of the

gospel. And, even with regard to that underlying element of unsatisfactoriness which he predicates of all human life, this also is recognized by the New Testament. Sin, sorrow, pain, and death are facts which cannot be explained away. Christ Himself was burdened by the sin and misery of the world. "The whole creation," says Paul, "groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. The creature was made subject to *vanity*, not willingly." The gospel does not attempt to deny the imperfect and unsatisfying character of the present world. But the gospel, by its grand revelation of the Divine Fatherhood, and by the prominence which it gives to the fact of God's discipline of His children, enables us to look at our surroundings with different eyes. We can see that affliction has its spiritual uses. We can believe that even our trials happen by the permission of One who chasteneth those whom He loveth, and who can "make all things work together for our good."

> "We thank Thee, Lord, that all our joy
> Is touched with pain;
> That shadows fall on brightest hours,
> That thorns remain;
> So that earth's bliss may be our guide
> And not our chain."

Thus the unsatisfactoriness of earthly things enters as a most important factor into the spiritual education and training of human souls. The very element of "*vanity*" in our life is not *in vain*.

Then again, as I have already pointed out in the course of my exposition, the New Testament clearly indorses the second idea of Ecclesiastes, that we ought to accept and enjoy with gratitude and cheerfulness the simple, ordinary blessings which God bestows upon us. This book continually maintains that the element of transitoriness and unsatisfactoriness in life is no reason for nursing moroseness, or practising asceticism. And the gospel also bids us "rejoice in the Lord." Christ seeks to cast out of our hearts all gloomy and faithless anxiety. It is recorded of the early Christians that they "did take their food with gladness and singleness of heart." The apostle Paul, too, denounces those who "forbid to marry" and who "command to abstain from meats;" and he tells us that "every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving." No doubt the gospel also bids us exercise self-denial for worthy objects, and self-discipline for purposes of moral and spiritual improvement. But it is the enemy of a morose asceticism; it condemns the notion that we can please God by making ourselves miserable; it helps us to appreciate simple pleasures with a childlike heart; and, bringing us into the light of a Father's love, it promotes a spirit of cheerful contentment.

Then thirdly, with regard to the fearing of God and the keeping of His commandments, the New Testament fully indorses the idea that the "chief good" for man lies in a life of godliness and virtue.

The gospel, it is true, seeks to infuse a spirit of love and trust into our reverence for God: but it does not abolish this reverence. It reveals to us a "Father in heaven" whose "name" is to be "hallowed." It proclaims, indeed, the forgiving mercy of God, and offers pardon to the "chief of sinners;" but it does not lessen the sanctity of God's law, or relax the demands of that law on our conscience. It points us to our great High Priest who has offered the perfect sacrifice of Himself upon the Cross. It gives us a still larger view of the Divine commandments, and seeks to bring us into harmony with their inmost spirit. It does not "make void the law through faith;" it "establishes the law." The Saviour, whom it proclaims to us, is the King whom we are bound to obey, and who said, "Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets; I came not to destroy, but to fulfil." And it teaches us that we are to find our true happiness, not in any forms of self-indulgence, not in any mere material surroundings, but in "taking Christ's yoke upon us and learning of Him," and coming into a right relation to God and God's law and God's kingdom.

Finally, with regard to a future life and a future judgment, the New Testament speaks with a clearness and decision which were impossible to Ecclesiastes. To him the region beyond death was altogether dim and shadowy, and even the condition of the pious dead was wrapt in gloom. But still he clung to the assurance that the spirit returns at death

"unto God who gave it," and that God would yet judge both the righteous and the wicked. This was his hope, in presence of much that was perplexing and unsatisfactory in human life. Now, the New Testament speaks on this point with unmistakable decision. True, the details of the unseen world are still hidden from our view. But the facts of a future life and a future retribution stand out clearly on the pages of the New Testament. Christ's own words imply the reality of heaven and hell. He speaks plainly of reward and punishment—of the "Father's house," and of the "outer darkness." We are told, too, by Paul, in words which may well remind us of the closing words of Ecclesiastes, that we "must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad." Thus Christianity teaches us to look at this life as the vestibule of another, to regard God's dealings with men here and now as but a fragment of His working, and to enjoy our blessings, discharge our duties, and bear our trials, not as creatures of a day, but as children of eternity.

THE END.

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