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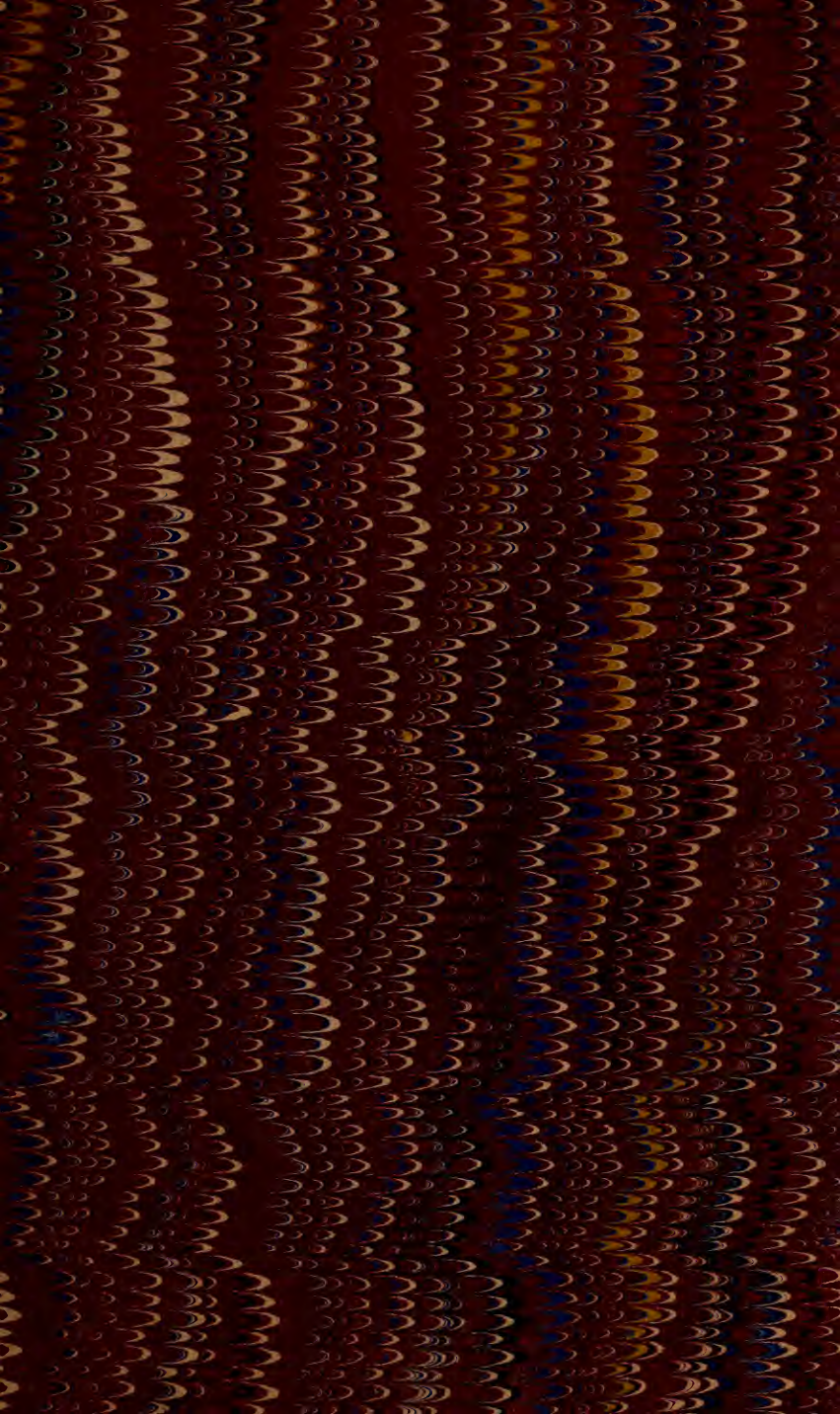
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Elements
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CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

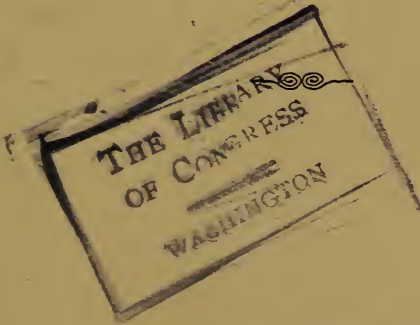


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A. J. Gordon D.D.

ELEMENTS
OF
CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

✓ BY
A. J. GORDON, D. D.



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AMERICAN BAPTIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY
PHILADELPHIA
1895

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NOTE

THESE articles first appeared in "The Young Peoples Union," when that paper was under the control of the American Baptist Publication Society. Their worth demands their present form. Especially is this so in that, since our beloved Dr. Gordon's translation, every word of his seems as gold to be sacredly treasured.

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ELEMENTS
OF CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

“Sow a thought and reap an act; sow an act and reap a habit; sow a habit and reap a character; sow a character and reap a destiny.”—Thackeray.

I

PURITY IS POWER

*My strength is as the strength of ten
Because my heart is pure.*

—Idyls of the King.

I

PURITY IS POWER

AS a defensive weapon certainly it is such—else why are we exhorted in Scripture to “put on the armor of light”? A sunbeam cannot be defiled even if it fall upon a dunghill; no more can the soul’s purity be stained by contact with sin if that purity be an emanation from the Sun of righteousness. “If,” we say; and the whole question turns upon this point. After the solemn warnings against making professions of sinlessness with which John’s first epistle opens, we are almost startled to find farther on the bold assertion: “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin, for his seed remaineth in him, *and he cannot sin because he is born of God*” (1 John 3:9). The meaning seems to be that the divine life in the soul of the regenerated man does not sin, though the human tends constantly to do so. That life is a ray of the Father’s glory, a beam of the uncreated light, pure and incorruptible, and if that life is in us, and has perfect sway, we shall so far be invulnerable to the shafts of temptation. The trouble is we so often go into battle without our armor; through prayerlessness and unwatch-

fulness leaving behind the "breastplate of righteousness," and trusting to the weak defense of our own morality, we are vanquished at the first onset of the foe. With the "armor of light" firmly girded on, we have the best security which God can provide. A good-sized electric burner, they tell us, is equal to a couple of policemen for guarding certain dangerous quarters of a great city; and Christians are lights in the world set for defense as well as for irradiation.

Lady Powerscourt, in one of her letters says: "I have been much arrested of late by Acts 5 : 13: 'And of the rest durst no man join himself to them; but the people magnified them.' Just what believers should be among men. The question is not, Shall we put out this or that person from our society? but, shall we not so live, so speak that no man who is not in reality 'of us' durst join himself to us?"

An exceedingly suggestive comment. What so effectual guard can be placed upon the purity of the church as a holy life in each of its members? There is a kind of wholesome repulsion in true sanctity of character which holds the worldly aloof from it; and hence a godly membership is the best warden a church can have for protecting it against the accessions of the unconverted.

Therefore we want more high-churchism if we are to be kept pure. Not ecclesiastical highness;

not the highness of ritual exclusiveness and self-righteousness; but the highness of holy living in such as have their conversation in heaven, and look down from the lofty regions of an exalted self-consecration upon the vanity and folly and fashion of this world as upon something infinitely beneath them. The kind of exclusiveness which we want is the exclusiveness of singular and guileless lives in the church of Christ. "The reason we have so many low sinners," says one, "is that we have so few high saints."

It is the low church that gets inundated by worldliness and worldly men. Men, like water, always find their level. If the style of life in the church is on a level with the world, the world will easily and naturally break through the thin barrier of a religious profession that intervenes and flow in. Ungodly lives will not run up hill to get into the church. If they can get in by simply keeping their own grade and elevation, they may do so.

Moreover, Christians can only give an effective and unanswerable testimony against sin and every form of worldliness as they are themselves separate from the world and "solid for Christ." Would you arrest the current of a stream? You can do so by building a dam of ice. Bring your frozen blocks cut from the winter's quarry, firm and compact as granite, and lay them into a solid wall

across the stream. You will thereby check the current and turn back the waters for a while. But because the ice is the same substance as the water which it would resist, it soon dissolves and returns again to its fluid form, and its resistance ends. So put a worldly Christian into the world and he may oppose for a while and feebly its evil tendencies; but because he is of the same substance as the world he will soon be resolved back into his original element, and his testimony will cease. Granite Christians cut from the quarry of heaven are what are wanted; new creatures in Christ, formed out of the Divine nature, whose fibre is neither weakened nor dissolved by the flow of worldly influence sweeping over and past them.

Let us understand the Christian's calling then. He is not set to conform the world to Christ; but being himself taken out of the world he is to be not conformed to the world, in order that he may win men therefrom and bring them into the church. To bring the world into the church while still unconverted is the destruction of all Christian purity, and the end of all ecclesiastical integrity. For when the world moves into the church the church moves out. There is no community of life between them, and they cannot keep house in the same tenement. True, they have a necessary contact. They touch and inter-

penetrate like air and moisture. But once establish such an affinity between them as that they shall mix and coalesce, and the end of the church has come. It is a mixture which, like certain chemical combinations, is distinguished by the fact that one of the elements is precipitated, and goes to the bottom; and that element will certainly be the church.

And the doctrinal standard should be as high, certainly, as the practical. There is nothing so vital and so conservative as purity of faith. Men of the world are jealous of their belief. They won't believe a thing because it is *true* half so readily as because it is flattering to their pride and congenial to their natural disposition. Hold the doctrines that Paul held, and we shall not find men embracing them for the pleasure of it simply. Unregenerate human nature won't run to a doctrine that condemns it and puts God's mark of reprobation upon it. The light of the glorious gospel attracts men who are willing to be searched by it and condemned by it. But it is not a light like that which draws the millers and the twilight flies—only to sport in its beams for their own diversion.

Purity is power. The rose, among the sweetest and most beautiful of God's creations, is armed with thorns, nature's sharp bayonets for warding off attack. Purity is the defense of beauty;

modesty is the safeguard of innocence. "Keep thyself pure." The severe chastity which repels familiarity is as absolutely essential for the safety of the soul as genial attractiveness is for its beauty.

II

HONORING ONE'S HEREDITY

“Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me ; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments.” — The Bible.

II

HONORING ONE'S HEREDITY

IT is a great blessing to have been well born, as it is the highest privilege to have been new born. Holiness does not run in the blood indeed, but God's favor does descend from father to children upon such as love him and keep his commandments. If we cannot inherit our parents' piety therefore, we may inherit our parents' prayers. Many a saint dies with a large balance of unanswered intercessions to his credit. He prayed daily, "Lord, bless and sanctify my children to the latest generation," and the Lord hearkened and heard, and a book of remembrance was written. For God keeps a ledger as well as a day-book; and by-and-by he will square his accounts and pour out upon children and children's children the blessings which parents earned at the throne of grace. Wonderful is the law of transmission in blood and in brain, but especially in the book of human generations! A great English preacher says, "Alas, if some grandfather of mine got drunk at the coronation of King George III., I am somewhat the worse for it." But this happily is not all. Each of us may say: "If some

ancestor of mine fasted and prayed on the day of Washington's inauguration, asking God for the salvation and sanctification of his posterity to the latest generation, I am somewhat the better for it." The Bible honors pious heredity: "The unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also" (2 Tim. 1:5). The threads of human destiny are wondrously woven together in the web of life. The warp we fill in to-day, but the woof was spun years and generations ago. What Grandmother Lois wrought upon her spinning-wheel of faith and prayerfulness and holy diligence, and dyed in sacrificial blood, Timothy now weaves into a like precious faith, and so fashions the garment of his character. Therefore, honor your ancestral faith.

"I am not obliged to wear my father's shoes," said a young man to us, as by request of his aged parents in the country we had gone and commended Christ to him. There was a tone of impatience in his words as he said this which led us to inquire further. The reason of his remark soon appeared. Since coming to the great city he had found some shoes which do not fit so tightly as his father's. He had learned that he could be religious and yet go to the theatre, play cards, visit billiard halls, drink wine, etc. He

had discovered ministers who distinctly recognized liberty in these directions as entirely compatible with Christian sincerity. Why then wear the straight-laced shoes of his father's orthodoxy any longer—boots that cramp and restrain and pinch—when easy latitudinarian slippers can be had in which one can walk the paths of religion without being made miserable on the road? Here we touch a vital point. Christian parents have often reason to be more anxious on account of the *religious* influences thrown about their children than for the *irreligious* influences. As half a truth is more dangerous than a whole lie, so an adulterated religion is more to be dreaded than unmixed error. Liberal Christianity had fascinated the young man of whom we speak, and when we met him ten years later he was staggering in barefooted immorality down to death, his condition hopeless, unless he shall yet be willing to return to the Father's house and hear the joyful welcome: "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him, and shoes on his feet." "Stick to your father's religion until you can find a better," do we say? No! we do not believe in comparative religions. A faith which does not rest alone on Jesus Christ as the co-equal Son of God, on the sacrificial death and justifying resurrection—which does not hold steadfastly to the new birth and the cross-bearing life which the

Saviour enjoined, is not the religion of the gospel, whatever else it may be. It is a delusive counterfeit. If your father's religion was a religion of faith in Christ, of daily prayer, of self-denial, of separation from the world with its vanities and follies, then stick to your father's religion indeed, for you will not find a better. There is but one religion and that is the true one, not the better or the best, but the only.

Honor your ancestral training. "Doctor, how early should the training of a child begin?" asked an anxious mother of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes. "A hundred years before the child is born" was his wise and witty reply. So far back did the training of the poet-doctor begin, and so far back has the character-building of most of our eminent men commenced. Ralph Waldo Emerson was not the product of liberal Christianity. Half a dozen generations of Puritan and orthodox ancestors wrought in the workshop of virtue and morality and sobriety bring forth at last this ideal moralist. It was his rigid ancestral religion that constituted the root of his high character. John Henry Newman was not the fruit of Roman Catholic Christianity. His paternal tree struck its roots down deeply into Huguenot soil. As a rose bush may sometimes climb upon a thorn tree and bloom there, so that its fragrant flowers seem to have grown upon that evil root, so the sons of

Puritan and Huguenot may appear in connection with the rationalist or Romanist faith, when they really have no root connection with that faith. Is it not a shame for a tree to despise the root which bore it? How much more for a boastful liberal to despise Puritanism; a self-confident moralist to sneer at "blue orthodoxy"; an upstart society man or woman to look down upon the boorish laborers, when a glance backward might show in every instance that it is the child despising the father who begat him. Woe to the young man who is so proud as to suppose that he is his own father! Woe to the character which imagines itself to be its own builder and maker! Are we aware to whom we are most indebted? Not to our schoolmasters, highly as we value their services on our behalf. That great-grandfather who worked at the anvil toughening his muscles and ours, and putting iron into blood of coming generations; that sturdy grandmother who drudged in the backwoods farmhouse, building up the cellular tissue of her character for her posterity; that father and mother who made us what we are, not by the rod which they wielded in their hands, but by the virtue and sobriety which they elaborated in their lives—these are the character-builders whom we have most occasion to honor.

"The mother's heart is the child's schoolroom," says an eminent writer. Let not young men or

young women play truant from that schoolroom when they get out into the world. Here is a college from which we do well never to graduate. He, who like President Adams, is not ashamed to pray through life, "Now I lay me down to sleep," is little likely to break through the morality which was learned at his mother's knee.

And what if we have no pious mother's heart behind us to inspire us with good impulses? Then let us rejoice that God has not left us to hopeless orphanage. "There is little hope of children who are educated wickedly," says a Puritan writer, "*since if the dye have been in the wool it is hard to get it out of the cloth.*" Nay! but God's cleansing extends even to fast colors: "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." And not only to fast colors, but to the birth fountains of our being. "Born again not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth forever." Here is a new and holy heredity for us, if our natural heredity is altogether against us.

Blessed are they who in looking up to fathers and forefathers find in them such lofty and uplifting examples as give them a new inspiration and quickening every time they contemplate them.

III

MAKING THE MOST OF LIFE

*“ I hold it truth with him who sings
To one clear harp in divers tones,
That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.”*

—In Memoriam.

III

MAKING THE MOST OF LIFE

BY life we mean our entire life—past, present, and future, the best and the worst parts of our earthly history, the days which we regret and the days in which we rejoice. We are not simply what we are, but what we were as well. As a tree gathers up all the growths of former years and contains them in the trunk, so our life is the summary and substance of all our past. This fact gives unspeakable seriousness to our daily living. Every to-day will soon become a yesterday, and then it will have been fixed and stereotyped forever; but it will still be a part of our corporate self.

Let us observe then these several facts and draw a profitable lesson therefrom. First, we cannot detach ourselves from our past. Our years are all vertebrated together, and memory is a kind of spinal cord holding them in vital union. If there is a chapter of sinful history in our early career, it may have been fully forgiven by God and by men; but its shadow will steal over us now and then to darken our joys and to discount our characters. There is a certain loss of credit,

of which one is constantly made aware whose early life has been stained by some notorious transgression. And though such a one may have the best of friends to indorse for him, he never can be quite sure that he has recovered his standing. We remember a minister of the gospel who had been guilty of a scandalous offense in early life. He repented, and was forgiven, and was afterward happily and usefully settled as the pastor of a church. But some one who knew his former history happening to move into the parish let out the secret; and the result was a complete undermining of his influence, ending in his resignation of the pastorate. The one who uncovered the buried sin certainly proved himself a child of the adversary. For if "to err is human, to forgive divine," surely to unearth a forgiven sin is devilish. Nevertheless, here is the serious lesson for us to learn: a bad past is a drag on a hopeful present. "The excesses of youth are drafts on manhood payable twenty-five or fifty years from date." Run up no debts then, young man and young woman, in your early says. See to it that you do not enter life mortgaged, and so heavily mortgaged that some enemy of later years may foreclose on you and bring you into hopeless bankruptcy. A sweet childhood, a virtuous youth, a stainless and irreproachable holy life are an unspeakable inheritance for manhood

and old age to rejoice in. While, therefore, it is still possible to lay up such an inheritance let it be done with the utmost diligence. But if unhappily we have a past behind us of which we are ashamed, there is a comforting reflection for us.

We may get a blessing out of a sin-stained past. Let us, therefore, make the most of that part of our lives which we most regret. Thus we may

Rise on stepping-stones
Of our dead selves to higher things.

The one who can strike the lowest note in the scale of regret is often the one who can sound the highest note in the scale of exultation. It was because Paul knew himself the chief of sinners that he was able so loftily to magnify Christ, "the chief among ten thousand," and the one altogether lovely. "The sting of death is sin," says the apostle. And who does not know that the sting of sin is conscience? In moments of sweetest joy that sting will sometimes pierce the heart with an indescribable pang of remorse. But the pain of an accusing conscience may only brighten the joy of an assured forgiveness, so that we can say exultingly, "Where sin abounded grace did much more abound." We have supposed that the sting of the bee had no other use than to inflict pain upon its enemies. But the following from a book on natural history shows quite the contrary:

At a recent meeting of the Physiological Society of Berlin, it was stated that when the bee has filled the cell with pure honey and has completed the lid, a drop of formic acid obtained from the poison bag connected with the sting is added to the honey by perforating the lid with the sting. Numerous experiments show that this formic acid preserves the honey and every other solution from fermentation. If this be well established, it will show that the sting and the poison apparatus of the bee have a further purpose than that of a defensive weapon. Another interesting fact suggests itself in connection with this. So far as is known, most of the insects that have the stinging apparatus similar to that of the bee are collectors and storers of honey.

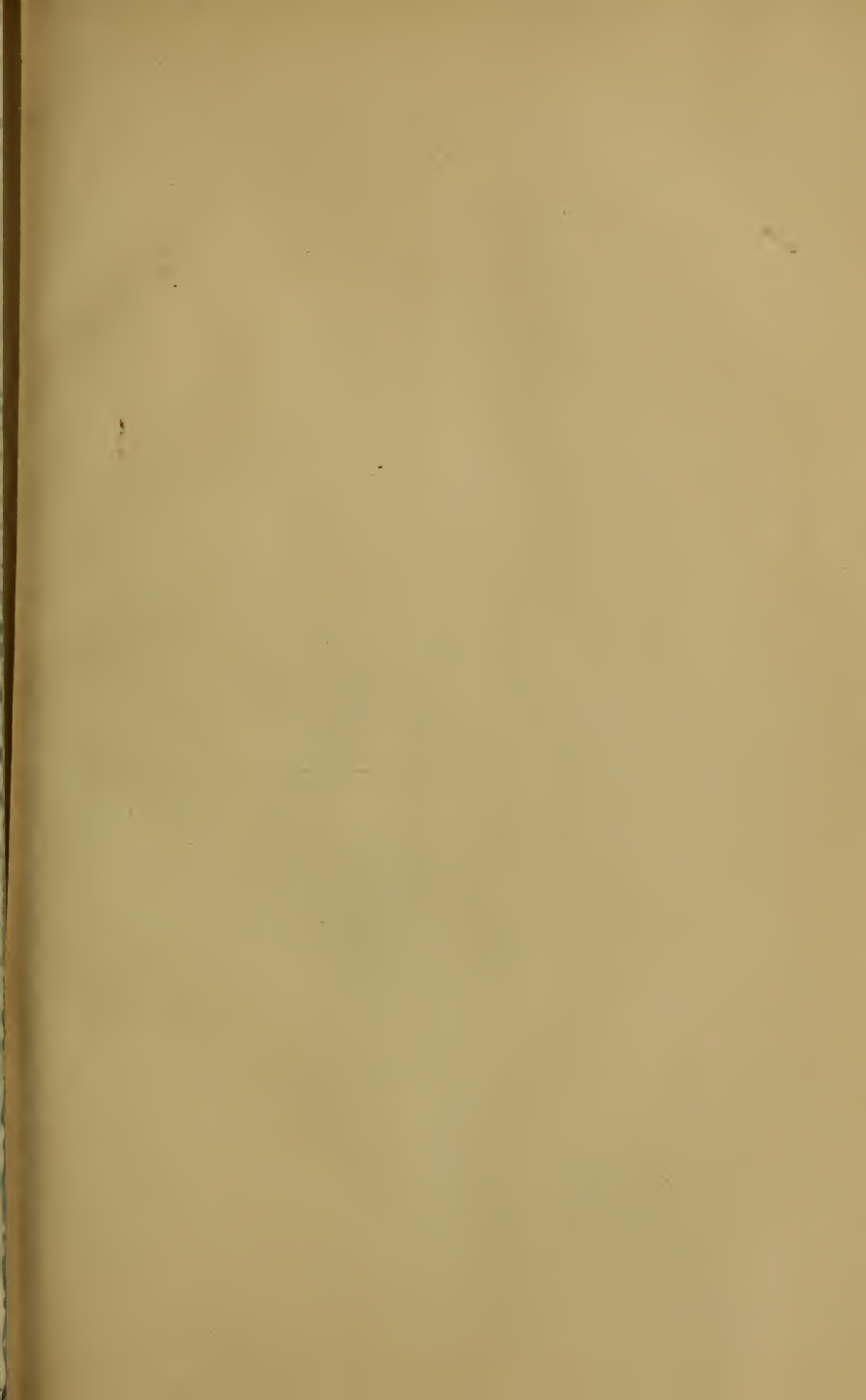
Blessed parable this. As often as our guilty past comes before us and sin thrusts its sting into our conscience, we may believe that this is only to keep the honey of grace sweet and pure, making us love much because forgiven much. Let memory drive the sting of sin deep into our hearts, and we will cry, "Yes, I have sinned; but the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanseth from all sin." John Bunyan aptly says, "Some men tell us that when grace and good nature meet, you have a good Christian; but I tell you that when grace and a great sinner meet you have the best Christian." It is so because the memory of great sin enhances the value of great grace. There is nothing that keeps the honey of assurance so sweet as the occasional thrust of the sting of conscience.

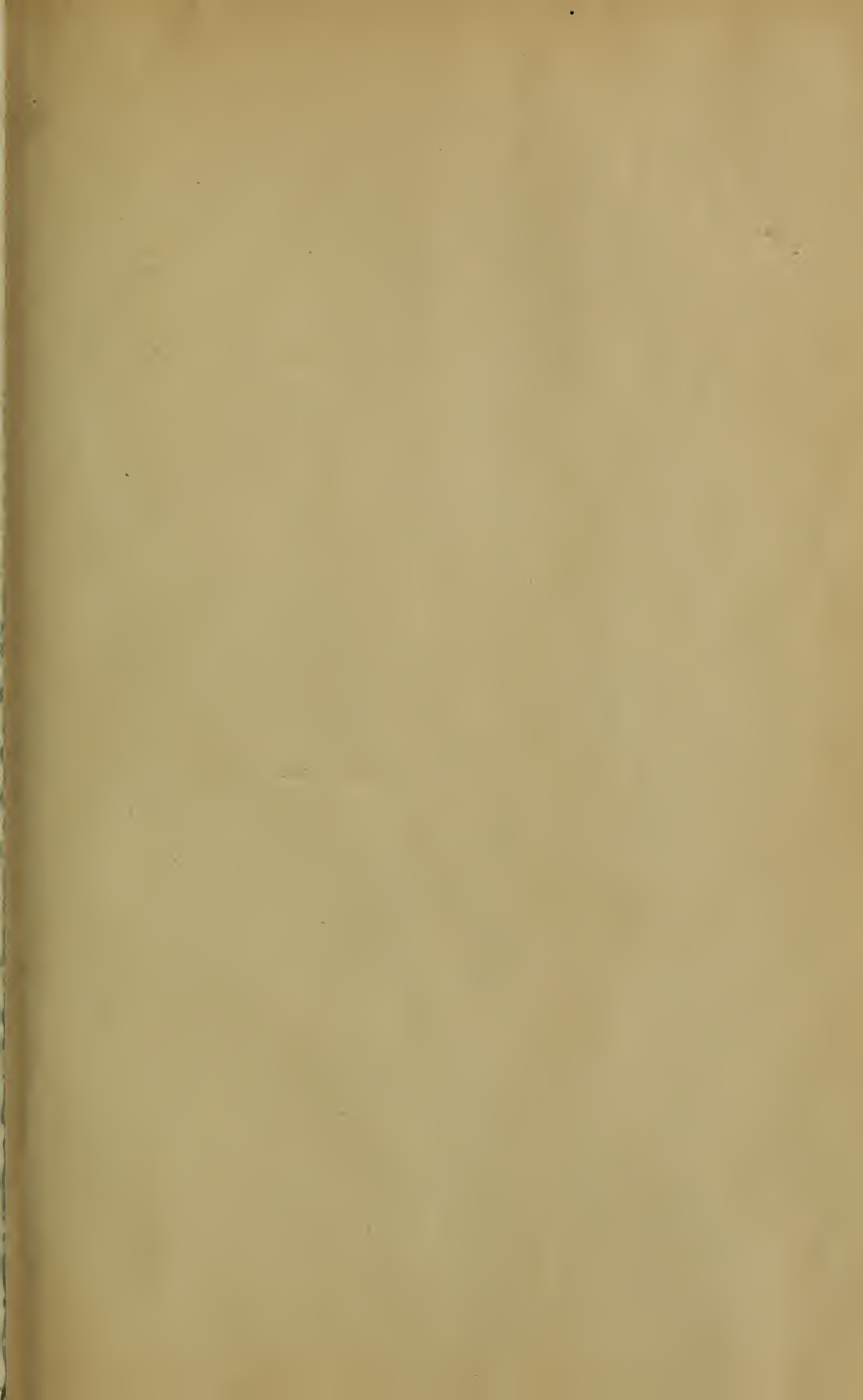
We certainly can get salvation for our sinful past.

God not only can forgive, but he can forget. "Your sins and your iniquities will I remember no more against you," said Jehovah. And perhaps we have as great occasion to be grateful for the infinite forgetfulness of God as for his infinite memory. Man can do, God only can undo, making our sinful past to be as though it had never been. When the Saviour cried on Calvary, "It is done," then indeed it was undone also. Atonement was finished, guilt canceled; redemption done and sin undone.

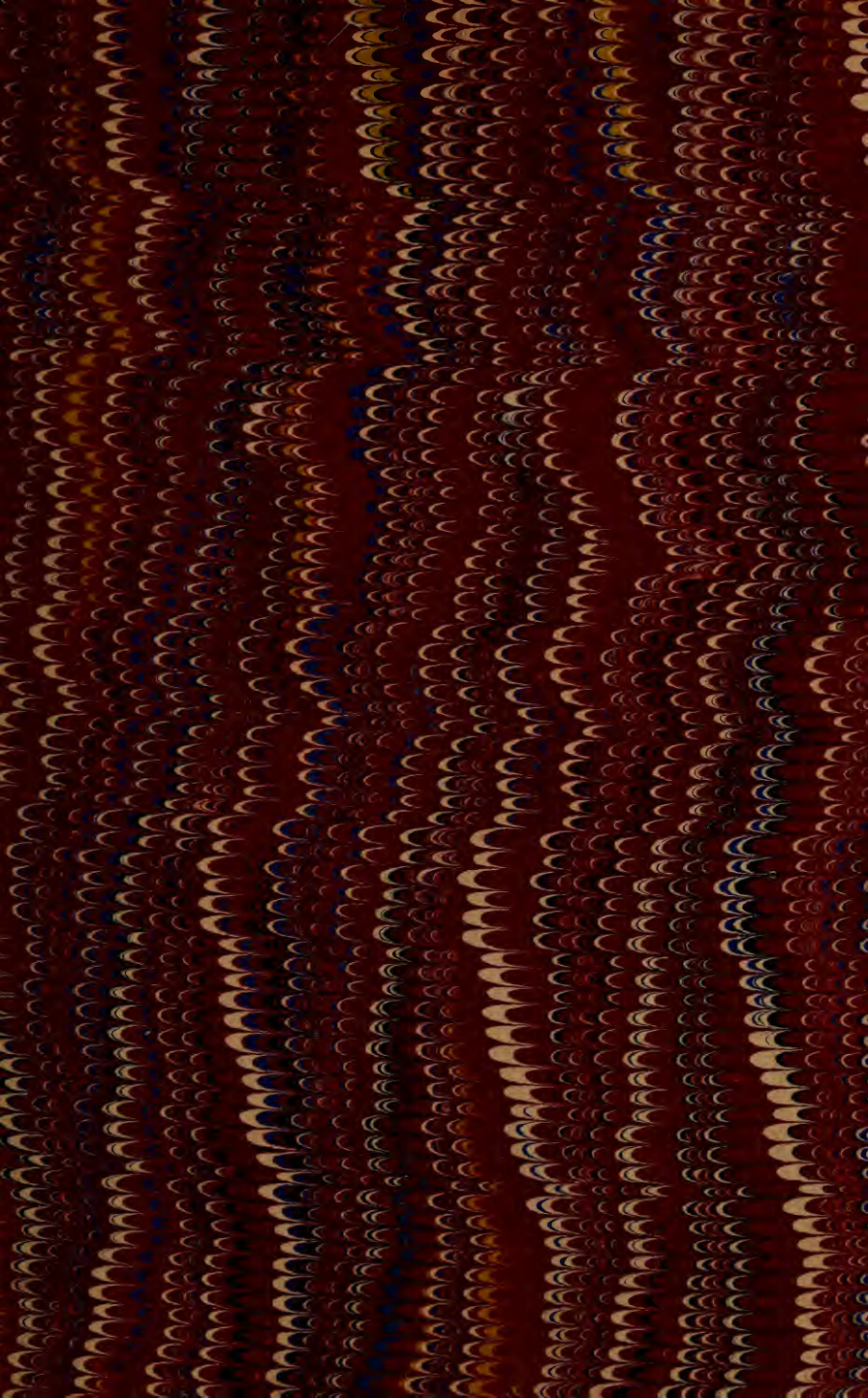
To make the most of life is not to get all we can of paltry joy and sensuous delight from it, but so to use it as to turn its sins and its follies, its failures and its falls into occasion for magnifying the grace of God, even as the touch of Midas was fabled to transmute stones into gold.











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