

THE
SOUL'S LIFE

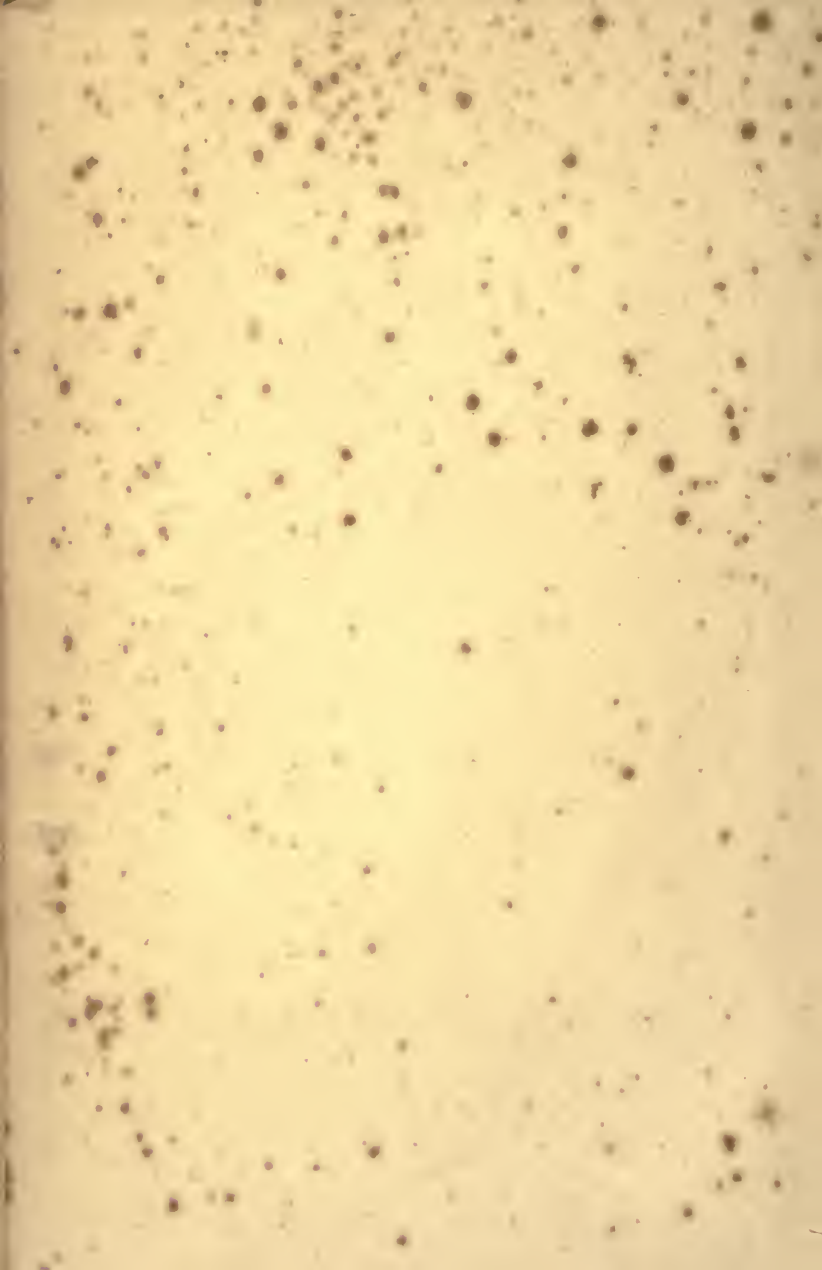
EDWARD GABBETT, M.A.

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THE SOUL'S LIFE.



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THE SOUL'S LIFE:

ITS

COMMENCEMENT, PROGRESS, AND MATURITY.

BY

EDWARD GARBETT, M.A.,

VICAR OF CHRIST CHURCH, SURBITON, AND CHAPLAIN TO THE
RIGHT HONOURABLE THE EARL OF SHAPTESBURY.

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THE SOUL'S LIFE.

I.

A CALL TO SERIOUS REFLECTION.

“Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.”—PSALM iv. 4.

THUGHTLESSNESS and excitement supply the food upon which sin lives. Whenever men offend against God's law, it is against so many solemn motives, such awful truths, such warnings of coming judgments, that if men thought at all, it would be impossible but that their soul-alarming power should check the evil desire, and frighten them back from the flowery paths of sin. Things in their length and depth past human speech, and prospects in which are bound up every hope of peace and every affection of the soul, all combine to arrest men's feet in the giddy race of life, till, earnestly awake to the eternal realities of the things unseen, they “stand in awe, and sin not.”

The all-pervading presence of the invisible God, spying out the path, and writing in the book of His Divine remembrance every thought, and word, and act, even the most hidden secrets of the heart, sobers the madness of human presumption, and calls for

vigilance and care. The magnificent works which show His power; the vastness of the visible creation; the solid globe, hung upon nothing, and the height of the far-stretching firmament, witness to His almighty strength. That sight, at which the sun hid his light, and the powers of earth were shaken, when, on the hill of Calvary, the incarnate Son was uplifted on the accursed tree—a spectacle to men and angels of human ruin and of Divine love, shows how great must have been the guilt, and how wide the breach between man and God, when none but He was found holy and mighty enough to reconcile them.

The rapidity with which the present becomes the past, and time, in its onward flight, carries us towards our latter end; the vanity of all earthly things, and their utter inability to give an abiding happiness or satisfy the soul; the certainty, and probably near approach, of that time when all human things must be given up, and the messenger of death call us to the everlasting shore, teach us how little time is to be lost, and how needful it is to “walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.”¹ The sure second advent of Christ, and that judgment-seat on which, in His own order of events, He will appear in righteousness to judge every soul that liveth; the glories He has prepared for those who are found faithful, and who love the Lord Jesus in sincerity; that deep hell which, like some frightful precipice, yawning before the traveller's feet, startles into wakeful alarm the soul that was slumbering in trespasses and sins, and from which arise to the ear, in awful dissonance, the lament-

¹ Eph. v. 15, 16.

ation of lost souls, and the weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth, reduce the interests of this world to their proper insignificance, and point out, as the great object of our present being, the salvation of the soul, and the laying up of treasure unto everlasting life.

Why is it that, in the face of these things, men still run the race of evil, and spend their days in a vanity as thoughtless as if there were no God who saw them, no other life than this, no judgment which awaited them beyond the grave; as if their pulses would beat on for ever, and the flowers of earthly pleasure never fade and die? It is not from ignorance of them; for however the poor heathen, who never heard of God, might plead this excuse, most certainly it cannot be made by those on whose ear sounds, week by week, the Sabbath bell, calling them to God; and even upon whose listless indifference must break, now and then, the voice of the earthly minister, and the call of the Spirit of the heavenly Redeemer. Nor is it because they disbelieve them. A few sceptics may be found, but with the great majority of the thoughtless, God-forgetting world it is otherwise. Men believe them for the most part. Few venture to deny them. But then it is a bare belief, like that of which St James speaks: "Thou believest that there is one God: thou doest well. The devils also believe, and tremble." But why does it end here? If men know and believe that it remaineth for "all men once to die, and after this the judgment," why do they still live without the fear of God, and find their objects and their pleasures in the things that perish? It is because, though

they know and believe, they do not think about them. The objects of belief are not allowed to occupy any abiding place in the memory ; and, therefore, they have no influence over the life.

The precious dew from heaven, bringing sweetness and fertility with it, falls upon the fruitful field and on the barren rock alike ; its own nature will be the same in both cases ; the difference of its effects will arise from the nature of that on which it falls. The sun may shine equally upon the living man and upon the cold corpse ; the one will enjoy its quickening and enlivening influence, while the stagnant pulses of the other will remain still and cold as before. And so it is likewise with the awful truths of an overruling God, a sure death, and a coming judgment. They may be known to men of all characters, but it is only in those who will receive them, and remember them, and meditate over them, that they can bear fruit. Men who allow them to fall upon the outside of the mind, and refuse to let them penetrate further, or come into contact with those stagnant depths of conscience which lie beneath, believe them with one part of their being, while they reject them with the remainder ; accepting them with the head, but denying them with that practical will and those influential affections which we denominate the heart. Such men hear only to forget, and believe only to neglect, and are like the hard, rough rock, like the cold, senseless corpse, on which all blessed influences are lost and vain. However magnificent a truth may be, though high as heaven, far-reaching as eternity, and wondrous even as God himself, it will be powerless to touch the heart, unless it is recalled to the memory,

and inwardly digested in the mind. Men hear these truths and assent to them, it may be, without thought and examination; and as they hold them loosely, so they lose them easily, because in the giddy whirl of life, and the intoxicating round of its anxieties and its pleasures, they are carried with the stream of a world that lieth in sin, and care not to give them a serious thought, or to stand still for a moment for solemn reflection.

This thoughtlessness has a deadly effect upon the soul in two ways, in that it completely reverses the true value of things, and the ordained order of God. In the first place, the most tremendous truths—enough, if humbly received, to bow the soul with awe, and shake it to its inmost depths—appear of no importance, because they receive no thought, and are robbed of that cool consideration without which human minds are incapable of comprehending any deep thing. To the minds of angels, then, a thought, a transient glance of the mental eye, would be enough to show the nature and vastness of a truth. But human minds have human weaknesses, and therefore need to look at truth again and again, to meditate and remeditate over it, before they can see its full importance, or trace out its consequences. Who with a thought can measure Eternity, that endless *for ever*, which, like a shoreless ocean, has no limits; or can grasp the mystery of the Incarnation; or can measure out the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of that love “which passeth knowledge?” Who can realize the infinite glories of that future rest which is prepared for the people of God, or the might of that wrath which on the day of great visitation shall fall

upon the disobedient? The tremendous certainties of the revealed word, and the wonders of the world to come, being carelessly heard, and little remembered, come to appear of small importance; while the transitory objects of sense, and the perishing pleasures of the world, merely because they are much thought about, and kept in mind by the carnal hearts which love them, come to appear of paramount importance, though they be all the while trifles light as air, and fleeting as a morning cloud.

In this present state of imperfect knowledge, men measure objects more by the amount of care and attention which they give to them, than by their essential worth, which as yet eludes the grasp. The smallest object held close to the eye will shut out from view the greatest mountain at a distance; and thus the little cares and pleasures of daily life fretting continually upon the mind, and thrusting themselves daily and hourly upon the attention, occupy them, too often, to the total exclusion of those glorious truths on which human happiness depends, and which constitute the very purposes for which men are sent into the world. Nothing can help them to look at things as they really are, or to judge of their true position before God, unless they first put from them the bustle and excitement of the world, and amid silence and solitude look into themselves with that cool and dispassionate judgment which solitude and silence beneath the eye of God can alone enable them to practise. So David found: "Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still."

But why is it that men are so unapt to give themselves these needful times of silent and solemn reflec-

tion? Why are they so little fond of thinking, and so eager in general to shun their own thoughts, and to avoid holding communion with themselves? Is the fault in the world in which they live making it impossible? or is it in their own deceitful hearts making it difficult?

The fault is undoubtedly in man himself. There is a wisdom in the unconverted heart which is earthly, sensual, devilish; and this prompts the heart to keep out unpleasant truths, and to "love darkness rather than light, because its deeds are evil."¹ Many a process of thought goes on in the mind unconsciously. A man feels that he is living far from God, and far from hope, in a way which the light of God's word forbids, and his own conscience seriously condemns. He knows that if he gives himself time to think, there will come rushing upon his soul many a bitter and painful recollection, many an unwelcome truth, obliging him to give up in alarm the sins he loves, and the world in which he finds his treasure. Conscious of this, and yet, in the evil bias of a perverse will, determined not to give up his sins, or else, in the mere weakness of a fallen heart, unable to bear the frightful truth, and pass through the bitter struggles of repentance; fearing the pain of putting away what he loves, rather than desiring the glorious bliss of being reconciled to God, he determines not to think, and therefore in recklessness hurries from pleasure to pleasure, and plunging into the vortex of worldly excitement, bars out reflection from the very threshold of the mind. How monstrous this state is, and how unnatural, one single expression will

¹ James iii. 15; John iii. 19.

serve to illustrate. Such a man is afraid of himself. Afraid of himself! Oh! what a coward is this, who dares not to face his own thoughts; who is afraid to see the truth, and shrinks, scared, from the monitions of his own heart and conscience; who, like a criminal self-condemned and self-punished, dreads the tribunal of his own heart, and has not courage to measure how he stands beneath the eye of the Everlasting King! "For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things."¹

Afraid of himself! Oh! what a hypocrite is this, who hopes, perhaps, all the while, for heaven and God, and yet shuns the thought of heaven and God, as he would the breath of a pestilence; who voluntarily darkens his own eyes, and closes his own ears, and cries, "Peace! peace!" even while he knows in his inward heart that there is no peace.

Afraid of himself! Oh! what a slave is this, who, not daring to be alone lest unwelcome thoughts should intrude themselves, must ever depend upon the company and society of others for those sources of peace and satisfaction which he ought to have in his own heart, but of which Satan has robbed him; who, in his servile obedience to evil, looks upon his own thoughts as foes, and his foes as friends; who barter his peace on earth, and his inheritance in heaven, for a delusive security from which, perhaps, he may never awake, till the opportunities of time are lost for ever in the certainties of eternity. For such a man the grace of God is alone sufficient, that, strengthened by the Holy Ghost with all might according to His glorious power, he may rise superior to such a temptation as this. Let him not

¹ 1 John iii. 20.

be afraid of communing with his own heart ; and if he finds any startling secrets there, let him not fly back from them, like a child scared with a shadow, but let him listen, like awe-struck Elijah on Horeb, to the still small voice within, for it is the voice of God calling him to wisdom and to heaven.

But at the same time, while the heart is mainly in fault, and strives by a continual occupation of the thoughts to keep out the light of life, it must be confessed also that there is something dangerously engrossing in the world in which we live. Amid the tumult of its cares, and the clashing of its interests, and the dulcet tones of its pleasures, the inward voice cannot well be heard. If men would hold that communing with their own hearts, which alone by Divine grace can enable them to stand in awe and sin not, they must leave its noisy scenes, quit even the society of those they love for a season, and be still, when none is near but He who seeth in secret and rewardeth openly. Thus it was amid the stillness of the night that Jacob's eye saw heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the sons of men ; and thus that he wrestled all night, and prevailed with the mystic Angel of the Covenant. Thus Moses, when he stood upon the mountain that burned with fire, spent forty days before God, in prayer and devout meditation, before he received from the Divine hands the tables of the law. Thus David came before God, and sought him in those inward communings, which yet remain, embodied in the Psalms. Thus Isaiah saw the glory of the Lord when His train filled the temple. Thus our Divine Master Himself, in whose footsteps His disciples are taught

to walk, went aside into desert places to pray apart even from his disciples; and it is in such hours that the eye of the conscience is most keen, and that the unseen things of the invisible world most assert their power and awful pre-eminence.

Few will be ignorant of the influence of such a time, perhaps, as David says, "upon their bed," when sleep has gone far from them, and as if amid a sleeping world they alone were wakeful; when night and darkness have shrouded all objects of sense from their view; when all has been so still they could hear their hearts beat, and the busy thoughts within have seemed as active and awake as all else was drowsy. Many will have found at such a time as this, that the veil has been uplifted from their eyes, and, as if by a new revelation, the mysteries of the future world have been brought close and near. Their life has seemed to be but as a step between them and it, so that the soul with trembling awe has seemed to measure the dark abyss and step in expectation into the confines of the wondrous eternity, to see afar off the towers of the heavenly Zion radiant with glory and immortality, and to hear the cry of the lost in their abode of misery. Then for a time all earthly things have sunk into their proper insignificance, and they have felt indeed, that for other objects than the vanities of a transitory world their life has been given them. Then, memory being all awake, there have come trooping forth from the darkness which gathers round the past, the sins of their life, sins of thought, sins of word, sins of deed, sins of omission and sins of commission, time misspent, talents abused, opportunities lost, grace

rejected, a whole array of accusers to plead against the soul. Then have they wondered how they could so long have forgotten God, or so blindly have run the race of folly, and the eyes have overflowed with tears, and the soul has been bent in prayer to wipe out the iniquities of the past in the blood of the Lamb of God, and to light up with a better, nobler hope the portion of the future. Many and many a saint standing in bliss before the throne of God, will have cause to bless throughout eternity some such hour as this, and to rejoice for evermore in that time of reflection, which first opened his eyes to see the vanities of the world, and the wants of his soul, and the glories of his Saviour.

But at such times all is not dark. There is, indeed, a difficult threshold into the way of life; but this once past, and the struggle of giving up the world, and of tearing away sins which have twined themselves closely round the heart, once over, it is, indeed, a way of pleasantness and a path of peace into which the steps have entered. The gate may be narrow, and the road into which it leads strait and difficult to flesh and blood; but there is light and glory in it too, a sure strength to uphold the feet, and the beams of eternal day to cheer us onward. It is with the soul as it was with the Israelites of old, when the Lord led their armies out of Egypt. By day they saw but the pillar of cloud; it was by night that the dark cloud became a living fire, glorious and magnificent, lighting up their camp, and keeping watch like a sleepless sentinel over the slumbering hosts of the beloved. Thus also, when we look up into the heavens above us, it is by night that we can look farthest into their clear and fathomless depths, and

with adoring hearts can watch the endless multitudes of shining worlds that deck with their gleaming orbs the over-hanging firmament. It is thus with the soul's experience. It is not amid the bustle of the world, in its crowded marts, and exciting scenes, that God is seen most manifestly. He is present indeed with His people, for His dear Son's sake, the strength of their hearts, and a very present Comforter ; but it is in their hours of silent meditation, when the glare of life is shut out, that they best can scan the firmament of the Divine perfections, and in devotion unutterably sweet can know Christ and the power of His resurrection, possess the assurance of His love, and delight themselves in the multitude of His peace. Oh for a glimpse of God ! to see Him in the beauty of His holiness, to come nigh to Him as children reconciled in the blood of His Son, and to speak to Him as a man speaketh face to face with his friend ! Oh for a glimpse of God ! to realize His love, feel with an actual enjoyment His presence, and rest on His promises, as on the breast of a loving father !

None can tell but those who are taught by a rich and sweet experience, what is the bliss of such thoughts, when faith is strengthened into especial vigour, and hope is bright, and an absorbing love wraps the soul in the ecstasy of a holy devotion, such as angels might feel. These are things given to our hours of solemn communing with the heart—not indeed as won by human meditation, but as the gift of God, through Him whom at such times the soul can best apprehend, as its Saviour and Redeemer, its strength and portion for ever. "Stand in awe, and

sin not: commune with your own hearts upon your bed, and be still."

Even now the readers of these words are invited to pause for a moment in the race of life, and sincerely, as beneath the eye of the heart-searching One, to review their true position. Be still, and ask yourselves how your past has been employed. Have you sought forgiveness of your sins through your Saviour's blood, or uncleansed and unforgiven do they still call to God for vengeance? Be sure they will come into the ears of the Most High; yea, they are written in the book of His remembrance, and nothing less precious than the blood of Christ, the Lamb without spot, can ever blot them thence. Seek for pardon this day, this hour, ere the day of grace and the period of conviction pass away, and the things that perish once more occupy your hearts.

Or examine your past yet more closely; break it up into the successive months and years of which it has been composed, and while you do this, lay it down as a certain fact, that no one part of it has ever passed by without leaving its effect for good or evil behind. Look at this last year, and be sure that there has been a change wrought in and upon every living being, for the soul never can stand still in its spiritual race; it either advances or retrogrades, nearer to or farther from God. How has it been with you? Have you gone on unto perfection, seeking to be more and more like your Master? Has your faith grown stronger; your hope been higher and more animating; your love more constraining and influential? If it has not been thus, then have you walked upon the downward

road which leadeth to destruction, more hardened in sin, more careless of God, less open to conviction, less anxious for the welfare of your souls.

This is an awful question ; commune with your own hearts, and answer, that so you may the better know how to guide your steps by the grace of God during the future which yet remains to you on earth. Bear one thing especially in mind ; that the effect of the past, whatever it has been, either for good or evil, has been produced by degrees : link by link the chain has been forged ; step by step the difference has been wrought. It is not possible to crowd a year into a day ; but it is very easy, day by day, to treasure up unto the day of wrath the iniquities of a year mispent. It must be by daily faith, daily prayer, daily vigilance and effort, that the Christian grows nearer Christ : it must be by daily operations of the sanctifying Spirit that the heart can be changed and conformed to the Saviour's image. Day by day, therefore, examine yourselves, that daily faults may be at once corrected, ere by repetition they grow into a giant strength to bind your souls to earth. Begin at once ; and if up to this moment you have shunned serious and solemn reflection, now at least look back, and this very night, before you again commit yourselves to God, "stand in awe, and sin not : commune with your own hearts upon your bed, and be still."

II.

GOD'S SECRET REVEALED.

“His secret is with the righteous.”—PROVERBS iii. 32.

IT is a remark which has long and frequently been made by those who are brought much into contact with different classes of their fellow-men, that the possession of gospel truth, while it sanctifies the heart, strengthens likewise the intellect. Men sometimes bewilder themselves with the distinctions which they draw between different parts of their nature, and while they speak of the will, the affections, and the understanding, as constituting parts of their being, sometimes speak of them as if they were separate as well as distinct. In truth, not only are they not separate, but they are not separable; all having, more or less actively, a conjoint action and influence. Thus it is impossible that anything can be really good for man which does not satisfy them all. A man who chooses sin as his portion, merely because it accords with the will, without satisfying the affections, or recommending itself to the conscience, acts as if he were to select some poison for his food simply because it is sweet to the taste, though bitter when swallowed, and destructive to the life. The promises of the Saviour, received by a loving faith, and impressed by the power of the Spirit upon the will and the conscience, having once a footing, so to speak, or more

properly a throne in the spiritual being, rule from that throne over the entire man, and extend the elevating influences of truth over every power and faculty. Intellect itself becomes strengthened by it. An inexperienced person would oftentimes feel astonished at the strength of mind, the beauty and elegance of expression, and the persuasive wisdom, which he may hear from the lips of Christians, naturally of ordinary intellect, and deprived of the advantages of education.

That this is no dream is certain, for we find that the Psalmist, nearly three thousand years ago, expressed the same experience: "Thou, through thy commandments, hast made me wiser than mine enemies. . . . I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts."¹ So again, speaking not of himself, but of the effect wrought upon others, he said: "The entrance of thy words giveth light: it giveth understanding unto the simple."²

Nor is it difficult to trace, even after the manner of human philosophy, the mode in which this effect is produced, not only by the immediate teaching of the Holy Spirit, but likewise in the way of natural effect, by the very largeness and sublimity of the subjects submitted to the believer's knowledge. It is a literal truth, that the very babe in Christ, the weakest and most untaught Christian, has for the daily subjects of his meditation higher mysteries and sublimer realities than the utmost reach of earthly science can grasp. Great, indeed, is the advancement of

¹ Psalm cxix. 98--100.

² Psalm cxix. 130.

human inquiry in this our day; and yet its highest achievements, after all, do but spell out some part of the universe, and trace the laws that guide, and guess at the harmonies that pervade, this lower and physical world. In the world of mind and spirit it goes all astray, and does but argue itself too often into the denial of the simplest experiences of the mind.

But the believer is admitted into the very council-chamber of the Godhead—into the innermost mysteries of the Divine mind, and the profound purposes of the Divine will. His very first lesson is to recognize above him, and around him, a world of spirits, of whose very existence mere reason can catch no trace. He stretches his thoughts beyond the circle of an individual interest into that great family, of which the incarnate Saviour is the eldest brother, angels and archangels its ministers, and the Church on earth and the Church in heaven its living members. He recognizes within his own breast a deathless spirit, which shall outlive the solid earth and gleaming heavens; shall stretch, in the immortality of its existence, into the measureless “for ever,” and make even the perishing body the partaker of its endless life. He learns to act by the laws of a perfect and infallible wisdom, holding communion, not (in the words of a fantastic and unreal philosophy) with the spirit of the visible universe, but with the Spirit of the living God Himself; with that mighty Mind, that all-pervading, all-searching Wisdom, which has framed and still supports the broad universe, and which has been pleased to communicate by the revealed Word His awful will to man. How is it possible that the intellect should not catch somewhat of

the nobleness and elevation of the objects on which it feeds, and that the converted and sanctified man should not daily advance into a higher knowledge, from grace to grace, and from strength to strength, till it reaches at last the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ? By the power of His word and Spirit the soul grows again into the similitude of that God, who is all perfection in one Being—perfect love, perfect holiness, perfect truth, perfect wisdom.

Here, then, it is seen what ought to be the object of admiration in the world. There is apt to arise among those to whom God has given great mental powers an idolatry of intellect, which leads them to look with comparative contempt upon others whose understandings they find to be unadorned with the outward glitter of learning and accomplishments. It would be a great mistake to undervalue the gifts which God gives, and which, when consecrated to His praise, are noble instruments for a noble work. And yet there is something far higher than intellect—higher even in the very things on which intellect prides itself, and that is grace. The worshippers of intellect do but worship one form of fallen human nature. The worshippers of grace worship that God of whose power and wisdom grace is but the emanation. Whatever, therefore, may otherwise be a man's endowments, if the Spirit of the most high God is with him, writing anew upon his soul the lineaments of His own Divine image, that man is worthy of our honour and respect; for he is one who will soon put off the weaknesses of the earthly tabernacle, and in the glory of a regenerated nature will

stand near the throne of God. It is not to the wise, nor to the learned, nor to the disputer of this world, that the holy God reveals the sweeter and higher lessons of His Spirit; but to the humble, child-like heart, which comes in the deep sense of its sins, lowly and trembling, to the cross. God's thoughts are not as our thoughts; he turns away his face from the vain confidence of human strength, and reveals His mysteries unto babes, for "his secret is with the righteous."

In tracing out the meaning and sweetness of this promise, it will be well to consider—

I. The intimacy between God and man implied in the promise.

II. The nature and blessedness of the secret which is revealed.

I. The intimacy between God and man implied in the promise.

To whom is it that men open their confidence, and explain their secret purposes? Not to the stranger, of whom perhaps they know nothing, but his mere name and title; not to those who have already slighted and injured them; not to the passing acquaintance, between whom and themselves there is no bond, closer than that of a formal courtesy; but to those they love, and by whom they know themselves to be beloved; those with whom they have had long and familiar acquaintance, and in whom, through constant intercourse, they have learned to place confidence. Thus, likewise, it is in regard to God and the soul. While He offers His word to all, there would be, even to our minds, a manifest impropriety in His revealing His secret to those who have no love

for His name, nor reverence for His wisdom, nor awe for His majesty. Imagine a man of high attainments discoursing of some profound discovery in science to a rude, unthinking boy, to whom the very terms he uses would be a strange and unknown language. However profound should be the knowledge conveyed, though it should comprise the discoveries of ages, and the solution of mysteries which have ever perplexed mankind, yet to the boy's ignorance it would be inexplicable, and from the boy's rudeness, only provoke, it may be, the taunting laugh of ridicule. All that could be done in such a case would be to explain the rudimental knowledge, which the boy is capable of understanding, and to leave its deeper mysteries for his maturer years and powers.

Just thus it is that God deals with the soul. He gives milk for babes; broad simple truths, conveyed in His holy Word, as clearly as human language can express them: and when these are received, then He leads the believer on to a further and higher knowledge. And that there exists this spiritual intimacy between the believing soul, and the God in whom it believes, is the distinct teaching of the Bible, which uses indeed the very same term to express it, which we ourselves use to express earthly friendship. We speak of "knowing" a man, to imply not a mere acquaintance with his history, or even with the nature of the opinions which he may hold, but a knowledge of experience, gained by personal intercourse, and conversation with the man himself, and which supposes, between us and him, a relation of friendship mutually felt and acknowledged. Just in the same way the word "know" is used in

the Scriptures of life. Thus our Lord describes the object of his ministry, "This is life eternal, that they might *know* thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."¹ Thus St. Paul speaks of it as the great end of the spiritual life, "that I may *know* him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings."² So likewise St. John recommends the greatness of love by this, that "he that loveth not *knoweth* not God; for God is love."³ In the same sense of a spiritual recognition it occurs in the Old Testament Scriptures. Thus, "The sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they *knew* not the Lord."⁴ And of Samuel himself, at a time when he was ministering before the Lord, and must be supposed at least to have known something of His being and attributes, it is said in the following chapter, "Samuel did not yet *know* the Lord."

It cannot be supposed that the word, thus used to describe the state of the believer, was meant to express no more than a head knowledge, a mere assent to His being, a confession of His attributes, or an acknowledgment that the Bible is His revealed Word. It rather implies an intimate acquaintance of experience, and personal intercourse; a recognized union of love betwixt the soul and its Saviour; God speaking to man in His Word and by the sensible impressions of His Holy Spirit upon the heart; and man speaking to God in the exercise of prayer, laying open all his wants, and pouring out his heart, as the Psalmist calls it, in adoring supplication into the ears of his tender and ever-present

¹ John xvii. 3.

² Phil. iii. 10.

³ 1 John iv. 8.

⁴ 1 Sam. ii. 12.

Lord. Yes, and more than this; it is not intercourse between two parties, who are far separated from each other, by the distance between heaven and earth, but the Saviour is ever near, yea, walks at the right hand of the believer, and the believer, on his part, realizes with a most keen and actual perception the presence of his Saviour.

Why should we speak doubtingly of this, because we see him not with the eyes, nor touch him with the hand of the flesh? Are there no other organs and faculties than those which are outward? Why should the recognition of him be less real and actual, because it is spiritual, and not physical? Is the action of the mind unreal, because it is invisible? Why should not the higher faculties, the soul, and the affections, have a power of their own to realize into intense existence that constant presence of the invisible God, which is a simple literal fact, though not a fact which the dull senses of the body could of themselves have perceived? And may it not be supposed, that there were originally in man's nature before the fall, spiritual senses, so to speak, whereby it took cognizance of spiritual things? For just think how intimate a proximity, how intense a consciousness of the Divine presence is included in that description of man's un-fallen state, which sets him forth, as talking with God in Paradise in the cool of the evening! We cannot converse with that which is not with us, nor can we hold intercourse with an unreal being.

Men are apt to regard spirit as something invisible, not alone to us, but in its very nature. But it is not so; for spirit may be circumscribed within definite limits, as much as matter may, or else what

is meant by "a spiritual body,"¹ such, as it is taught that the bodies of the risen saints will be in heaven? Is not this, moreover, the difference between the angels and God Himself, that while both are alike spirits, the angels are spirits finite—that is, limited in the space they occupy—while God is a Spirit infinite, having no body, but pervading all in all with His Majesty? To speak, therefore, of the presence of God is not to speak of an indefinite or unreal thing, a mere influence, a negation of life and active power; but it is to speak of something as really present as a natural body can be, but of such a nature that the senses of the body cannot recognize it.

But might not the soul in its unfallen state have possessed this power of spiritual sight, and spiritual communion, and will not the soul possess it again, when, fashioned outwardly and inwardly after the likeness of its glorified Master, it shall see God face to face, and know him, even as also it is known of him?² If so, then once more, may not the converted heart, made "a habitation of God through the Spirit,"³ attain, even here, this sight of faith, and know God, not merely by a loving intercourse with him, as a Being distant and far removed, but as a Being close at hand, knit to it by a tender intimacy, and extending to it a sweet and mysterious communion, on man's part of reliance, on His of protection; on man's part of faith, on His of instruction; on man's part of hope, on His of comfort; on man's part of love implanted by grace, on His of love spontaneous and overflowing, the love of a parent towards children adopted in His own dear Son?

¹ 1 Cor. xv. 44.² 1 Cor. xiii. 12.³ Eph. ii. 22.

The experience of the mind itself may also illustrate the manner in which Divine grace can quicken in the soul this power of clearly seeing the Invisible. For to some men, at some times, thoughts and ideas become things actual; and the more they are accustomed to abstract notions, the more vividly they are retained upon the mind. There are men to whom this power becomes an actual disease of the intellect, so that the things they see and handle are almost forgotten by them, in the entire absorption of their attention on the world of thoughts which exists in their own breasts; the practical world without being lost in the ideal world within. Shall not this faculty of the inward sight be esteemed to be the remaining traces of those finer and more spiritual qualities, which were clouded at the fall by the predominance of the carnal and grosser elements of man—qualities which still remain, and only need the teaching of the wonder-working Spirit to recall them into a Divine vigour, and to a reality of perception, to which the action of the bodily senses is weak and dim?

Another thing must be taken into account, in order that the spiritual intimacy between the soul and God may be clearly set forth. Add the power of a blessed experience, making all the promises of God facts in their proved truth, and all the qualities of God subjects of the soul's personal knowledge. Does not the soul know the strength of God, when it feels in itself His grace accomplishing that spiritual change in the will and desires, which it is itself powerless to effect—a change so complete that all things have become new, and the hopes, objects, opinions, and pleasures are so entirely diverse from what they once

were, as to constitute a new birth altogether? Does not the soul know the holiness of God, when it finds the effect of this change to be an intense hatred of that sin, which it once hugged to its bosom as the chosen treasure of the heart, and a hungering and thirsting for that righteousness, from which it once shrank back offended? Does not the soul know the truth of God, when in the vicissitudes of its past life it has found His word to be "yea and amen" for ever, and every tittle of His promises to be blessedly accomplished amid the sore conflict of the daily Christian warfare? Does not the soul know the love of God, when it feels, sweetly penetrating to its inward heart, a peace and joy such as it never knew in the times of its alienation, till the soul looks back to its Saviour like some calm placid water, which reflects, from its shining depths, the image of the clear blue sky that smiles upon it from above? Thus, there arises a personal, familiar intercourse, a spiritual intimacy, an individual knowledge of experience between the soul and God. What glory, what bliss, what heavenly wisdom, what undecaying joys, what mysterious knowledge, are all involved in this acquaintance between the pardoned sinner and the loving Saviour, weak man and the great, merciful, and majestic God! Not little is the dignity, nor poor the communion, nor scant the privilege, contained in this promise, "His secret is with the righteous!"

II. The nature and blessedness of the secret revealed.

In setting forth the reality of that spiritual knowledge of God, which is the glory and bliss of the believer, the present topic has been, in some degree, anticipated.

1. The secret which God reveals to His people includes a clear knowledge of God's being, and of the revelation of His will. This is in one sense a secret of God, because it is the principle of a life of probation to leave unimpaired the freedom of man's choice. As man is a responsible being, and the very object of this life is to try him, it was necessary that God should not be so revealed, as to make belief in Him a matter of moral compulsion, instead of an act of faith and love. If God had continued to make Himself known by some visible Shekinah; should He, even now, unveil His full countenance, and from out of the light and glory in which He dwells, break forth upon men's vision in all the lustre and blaze of Godhead, it would be impossible for any to disbelieve, what would thus be sensibly revealed: and as disbelief would then be impossible, so belief would lose its moral nature and responsibility in an irresistible necessity. The spiritual discipline, whereby, under the teaching of the Holy Ghost, the high imaginations of the human heart are now subdued before the awfulness of a world unseen, would be lost; nor in its absence could fallen hearts ever be clothed with that holiness, without which none shall see God in heaven.

God is, therefore, in the position of one who has retired for awhile from full and open sight; leaving traces enough of His presence to enable man to find Him, if he will, but hiding Himself sufficiently, not to force knowledge upon the unwilling mind. We may be most confidently assured, that the real sources of unbelief are not in men's heads, but in their hearts. The fault is in the will: perhaps in the pride of intellect, barring out conviction as with a bolt of adamant,

because it is willing to be convinced only in its own way, and not in God's.

That this conclusion is no uncharitable fanaticism, the word of God may teach us. Thus, our Lord, who knew what was in man, said, "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God."¹ St. John puts his seal to the truth of this, when, setting forth the testimonies of the faith, he adduces the experience of the soul itself, as the highest of them all. "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself."² That marvellous and elaborate structure of evidence, both external and internal, which the wise providence of God has provided for His Church so perfectly, that upon every principle of human reason the truth of God's Word must be held proved, does indeed build up the faith of the soul as it comes to Christ. But when Christ has been found, the soul, as far as regards its own personal convictions, needs it no longer. The believer has the witness in himself, in the Divine sufficiency of the Saviour to meet his every want, difficulty, and desire. In short, the secret is unfolded: the Holy One has revealed Himself to the adoring heart, coming forth from that retirement which still hides Him from the world; His truth is to the Christian a fact experienced, more indubitable than his own existence, or that of the world around him. God has revealed Himself by His Spirit, and in no ecstasy of a false enthusiasm, but in sober, solemn earnestness; the believer knows that God is, because he finds in himself the fulfilment of God's promise, "that his secret is with the righteous."

¹ John vii. 17.

² 1 John v. 10.

2. The secret of God includes the full saving comprehension of the gospel of His dear Son. It is one thing to be accurately acquainted with the doctrinal outlines of the gospel scheme, so that it may be all laid out as in a Divine map; and another, and a very different one, to feel its power savingly upon the soul. The one, man may by himself accomplish,—the other, the Spirit alone can teach. That this is so, we have again the express Word of God for our authority: “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”¹ Nor is it difficult to trace the truth of this, when we look around into the world, or rather, perhaps (for this is the truest wisdom), when we compare with ourselves, our unconverted with our converted state. What constitutes the difference between the two? Many will reply, that it is not doctrinal—that they held just the same body of Divine truth then as now; but then it was held coldly and formally, as an abstract system, and not as one in which their own individual safety was irrevocably concerned. There was wanting that self-knowledge, that deep conviction of personal sin, that soul-subduing penitence, which is the very key of all saving knowledge. Then came the Holy Spirit, rousing the slumbering conscience, startling the soul into a knowledge of its danger, and quickening the dead affections with a living fervour.

This one change has changed the whole. The entire gospel scheme is seen in all its glorious beauty, so as the soul never saw it till now. Then its truths appeared to the eye unreal, as objects depicted upon

¹ 1 Cor. ii. 14.

the canvas ; now they have become acting, influential verities. Then men were like persons walking amid a lovely landscape, but so occupied with other thoughts that they did not recognize its loveliness ; now they stand in adoring wonder at the beauty of the gracious scheme. Then Christ was as a historical personage, whose history and work could not, indeed, be altogether forgotten ; now He has become a present Saviour, the chosen of the heart, decked with all His spiritual glory, "chiefest among ten thousand, and altogether lovely."¹ Then the world to come was as a far-off future, the unwelcome remembrance of which would every now and then startle the conscience ; now it has been brought close to the soul, and blended intimately with all its daily hopes, wants, and affections. The change which was wrought, when the converting Spirit brought the soul from darkness to light, has no less affected its estimate of the present world. Like a blind man, whose sightless orbs have been newly opened to the light of day, we drink in joy from the prospects on which we gaze.

And see, how this one saving knowledge of Christ opens to our souls all the profoundest mysteries of the will and Word of God. Amid the darkest intricacies of our own personal experience, the light of His saving love guides the soul still. Amid the apparent anomalies of His government, as at present exercised over the world, it supplies the key, which explains them all. The work, the character, the offices of Christ ; the wondrous operations of the Spirit ; the issue of the great contest, which He per-

¹ Cant. v. 10, 16.

mits as yet to be carried on between good and evil; the accomplishment of His promises; the triumph of His Church; and the advent of His kingdom;—all are seen, by the light which shines from the cross of Calvary, to be working together for one object, and to be overruled by one power. Were the believer to stand, as he will do hereafter, amid the ruins of all created things, the dissolution of the solid earth, and the rolling up, like a parched scroll, of the visible heavens; his faith would remain unshaken, knowing that this would be but the accomplishment of His will, and the fulfilment of His prophetic word, “whose secret is with the righteous.”

3. Another secret of God is the sweetness of His peace.

This is a secret, because none but He can plant it in the soul, and none but they, in whose souls it is planted, can tell either its nature or its bliss. Here again we walk by the guidance of the Word. Thus the apostle calls it “the peace of God, which passeth understanding,”¹ because no effort of the mind, nothing but the blessed experience of the heart, can enable us to comprehend it. Thus he speaks with a similar meaning when he quotes a passage from the prophet Isaiah, which is popularly understood to describe the future joys of heaven, but which the apostle himself expressly refers to the present consolations of the believer,—“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit.”² Yes, the secret teaching of the

¹ Phil. iv. 7.

² 1 Cor. ii. 9, 10.

Spirit alone can plant in the heart that peace, which was the Saviour's last dying legacy to his Church. Talk to the man of the world of the calm, deep assurance of faith; of the tender, gentle gladness of hope; of the constraining sweetness of a perfect love that casteth out fear; tell him of the adoring thoughts, which crowd upon the soul, when the meditation on Christ is sweet; tell him of the entranced delight, with which, in the pages of the Holy Word, we converse with the mind of God, and hang with holy rapture on all the revealed mysteries of the unsearchable love of Jesus, till the very pages seem to glow with a reflected radiance,—and he understands you not. Tell him of the joy of prayer, and of the confiding trust which the soul feels, when pouring out all its wants into the ears of its sympathizing Lord; tell him how you step adoring into the very highways of heaven, and in sweet communion with the Father of spirits, bring your thanksgiving before the foot of His throne; tell him these things, and those further glimpses of God, which come gushing forth from your recollection, and will you not seem to him as one that dreameth? Will he not turn away with an open sneer, or with the smile of suppressed contempt at what he will think your wild and fanatical folly?

Was it not thus, that the unbelieving world ever regarded both our Lord Himself and His disciples? The grounds of Christian peace are so different from anything which the man of the world has ever known; its effects and influences so diverse from anything that he has ever felt, that he cannot comprehend them. Did you tell him of the wild excitement, and the giddy intoxication, and the glittering parade of this

world, he would know what you mean fast enough ; but when you talk to him of a peace which is serious, yet joyful ; sober, and yet rapturous ; and which derives its nutriment from objects you cannot see, and from an influence you cannot handle, it is as if you spoke parables to him. You may reiterate the tale over and over again in the ears of the worldly, that the Christian has peace ; and yet they will never know that peace itself, till the darkened eyes have been opened, and the veil which hangs over the sin-blinded conscience has been removed.

Why should we wonder at this, when we recollect that our Lord described this gift, as His peace. "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you."¹ Yes, "His peace," not alone as resting from end to end on His merits and effectual righteousness ; His, not alone as being planted, preserved, and strengthened by that Holy Ghost, whom He hath purchased for His people, and whose office it is to testify of Him ; but His, as that which He Himself possessed, and which shed its unclouded sunshine within His breast during His earthly humiliation—the very reflected smile of the everlasting Father. It is as if He imparted it, fresh from His heart, to the heart of the believer, in the contact of a loving faith, and breathed it personally into the soul out of His own infinite fulness. How can such a peace be known to the ungodly, over whom hangs this awful declaration of the Eternal, "There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked"?² Can the uncleansed heart nestle, like the beloved disciple, on the breast of Jesus, and receive His gifts? Can the carnal soul,

¹ John xiv. 27.

² Isa. lvii. 21.

full of the active corruption and stained with the deep pollutions of unrepented sin, partake of the nature of the Holy Christ, or catch even a glimpse of that rich inward treasure, which is the especial gift of that Lord "whose secret is with the righteous?"

Let those who covet to know these deep things of the Holy One, and crave, with a hallowed ambition, for a wisdom such as is the glory of angels, and will be the bliss of heaven, remember how it is to be attained. Not by strength of intellect or by works of righteousness can they earn the precious gift. The soaring intellect does but soar, like the giants of old, who builded Babel's mighty tower, to its own confusion. It is the gift of God, bestowed upon the believing heart through the merits of the righteous One—the merits of that Saviour who has left on eternal record this striking warning to human pride, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight."¹

¹ Matt. xi. 25, 26.



III.

CHRIST'S MESSAGE.

“Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us : we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.”
—2 COR. v. 20.

IT is a matter of great difficulty to realize the immensity of the interests which are connected with this matter-of-fact world. Looking both at the petty details, which make up so large a portion of our life, and at the narrow and personal interests, which form the objects of mankind in general, it is difficult to conceive that there are really higher objects and more mysterious purposes in process of accomplishment, than those which meet the outward eye. This is occasioned in part by the closeness with which attention is engrossed by individual interests, and by very proximity to the causes which are in operation. Thus, in the natural world, would you see the loveliness of the scenery amid which you are walking, you must not be content with the luxuriant foliage by which you are immediately surrounded ; but must seek some eminence, from which you may embrace a larger sphere of vision, and catch the thousand hues and endless varieties of form which blend together into one harmonizing whole. Would you see the full proportions of some great mountain, as it rears its snow-capped head to heaven, you will not do so by standing immediately beneath its base, but by

retreating to a distance, whence you can catch at a single view its breadth and height, from the smiling villages which cluster round its foot, to the distant clouds which rest upon its summit.

Thus, too, it is in the mental world. There is nothing so difficult as to trace the changes of opinion which are going on in our own times. We are too close to the events, and too much concerned in their passions and interests, to be able to take either a comprehensive, or an impartial view of them. Accordingly, how constantly do men of the greatest intellect mistake the signs of the times in which they live! The most sagacious of modern politicians stood at ease on the very brink of a revolution, and was apparently wholly unconscious of the dangerous elements which were fermenting beneath his feet.

Thus it is likewise that in spiritual things men lose, in the details of individual life, their realized sense of the mighty interests which progress around them—those mysteries of the world unseen, compared to which all things else are insignificant; the immortal soul fallen, but, even in its degradation, great and wonderful; the ever-present, invisible God; the coming judgment; the future eternity, either of reward or punishment; the revelation of redeeming love in the sufferings and death of the Saviour; the exaltation of the God-man, very God and very man, to the right hand of the Majesty on high; the proclamation of His gospel to the world by the lips of human ambassadors; the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost; the progress of the work since then amid the warfare excited against it by the wickedness of man, and by the malice of the

great adversary ; its present state amid the world, and its future triumph, when, in the fulness of time, the crucified Jesus shall come again, having on His vesture and on His thigh His name written, "King of kings and Lord of lords." These make up the true interests of man. How hard it is to realize their existence, and to believe that the careless sons and daughters of men have all of them undying souls, and that not a minute of time flies past but that some immortal creature passes into the changeless, endless, fathomless eternity, the heir either of an infinite heaven, or of an infinite hell ! It is the more difficult to realize it, because spiritual things do not occupy any separate sphere of their own, or any particular portion of the life of man, but are intimately united, bound up, and interspersed inextricably with the daily cares of our mortal life. In fact, two mighty circles of existence are rolling around us at the same time, blending together their united interests, and yet each known by processes wholly different ; the one by sight, the other by faith.

It is well that it is so ; for if things temporal and things eternal had been revealed with the like clearness and intensity, it would be impossible that the interests of this present life of trial should go on at all. Could the armies of glorious angels be seen with mortal eyes ; could the glory of the manifested God be traced ; or could the progress of His counsels be watched with outward sight, as, in the stately march of Omnipotence, they move towards their full completion ; they would necessarily concentrate upon themselves all the soul's thoughts, till everything else was forgotten. Instead of moving forward on their

race, men would stand still, in awe-struck suspense, to watch these visible footprints of Deity. God has therefore so drawn back into the distance these actions of His will, as not to overpower all other things. Thus our fallen hearts run into the danger of leaning to the other side, since we see them not clearly and actually enough, nor amid the labours of familiar life trace around us and within us the mysteries of the mighty God.

With some such feeling St. Paul seems to have written this chapter. He identifies the hope of their salvation with agencies familiar to their eyes and hearts. He bids them not to look for some more visible interposition of God than was already given them, but to recognize His word and grace, communicated by the ministration of men like themselves. "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."

Men need the grace of God to prevent their overlooking the mightiness of their eternal hope in the familiarity of the instruments by whom the gospel is preached. Had they been left to arrange things according to their own views, and to frame a gospel history of their own, they would have selected, perhaps, the unfallen angels, or the spirits of the just made perfect, as the ministers of saving truth. But God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor our ways His ways.¹ "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which

¹ Isa. lv. 8.

are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are, that no flesh should glory in his presence."¹

St. Paul's description of the ministerial office includes three thoughts—

I. The embassy.

II. The message.

III. The object of the message.

I. The embassy. This has two parts, the person sending, and the persons sent.

The person sending is Christ—on whom have been placed the spirit of the prophet, the robes of the priest, and the crown of the king. It is that Saviour, the tidings of whose advent lit up even the days of man's fall, just as the early beams of the rising sun may gild the blackness of the tempest. It is He, whom prophets foretold, whose day Abraham saw afar off and rejoiced, and whose glory many mighty kings desired to see, and saw not. It is He, for whose arrival the whole creation, from the Fall to the fulness of times, groaned and travailed beneath the burden of that sin, which none but He was mighty enough to remedy: He, who, veiling his Godhead in flesh and blood, hung upon the cross at Calvary, when the darkened sun, and the shaken earth, and the riven rocks, and the risen dead, and the veil of the temple rent from the top to the bottom, proclaimed the greatness of Him who died abhorred of man, but chosen and accepted of God: He to whom witnessed the awful voice from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased;" He, who, being quickened on the third day, rose from the dead, taking captivity captive, and amid the

¹ 1 Cor. i. 27-29.

acclamations of rejoicing heaven ascended up on high ; He, who sits in heavenly places, having beneath His conquering feet principalities and powers, thrones and dominions, things visible and invisible, and whose Almighty hands now hold the government of the world, having all power given unto Him in heaven and earth : He, who will come again in the full blaze of His Divinity, when from the great white throne of judgment He will call the countless multitudes of the risen dead to stand before His tribunal. Think of Him, on the one hand, as the crucified Nazarene, who bore in the days of His flesh the full indignation of God against sin ; think of Him, upon the other, as the risen and crowned King, the great God, and terrible. So it is in the text : first, " We are ambassadors for Christ ;" then, " as though God did beseech you by us," by which expression we may either understand the Father Himself, as consenting to His Son's embassy ; or the Holy Spirit accompanying it ; or the union of the perfect Godhead with the perfect manhood in the one person of the Redeemer. Whatever thoughts the mind can conceive of power and majesty, of love and tenderness, of mingled awfulness and gentleness, of all that can sway and command, with all that can touch and move the soul—they meet in Him in whose name Christian ministers speak, and whose commission they bear, for " we are ambassadors for Christ."

The expression clearly denotes the present intention of Him who sends. Jesus does not merely send, because eighteen hundred years ago He committed unto the apostles and to their successors the great commission, to go, and teach all nations, but because He still lives to renew it in heaven. His tender, human

soul still yearns over His people, and longs to gather souls into His kingdom, as truly as when He died for them in the days of His flesh. He sends, not as one who was, but as one who is; as one who ever liveth to intercede for us; as one still present; as one living being may send to other living beings; blending His authority now in heaven, with His sufferings once endured upon earth; as "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever."

But from the person sending, the thoughts pass to the persons sent. He has intrusted His great commission of saving love to sinful men. How great the contrast between the pure and spotless Being who sends, and the weaknesses, infirmities, and inconsistencies of those who are sent! Yet thus it has been from the beginning. In the word of God scarcely is there a saint in whose portraiture may not be traced the lines of that fallen and corrupt nature which every one experiences in himself. Moses, the meekest of men, was provoked to unseemly anger; David, the man after God's own heart, was seduced into sin; Elijah's fervent spirit fainted within him; Peter denied his Master; Paul and Barnabas were at strife. Why has all this been recorded, but to teach the same lesson, that the prophet is nothing, and the teacher nothing, but God all in all?

The same thing may be looked at more closely. Not only does the weakness of the messenger set forth, by contrast, the greatness of the message with which he is intrusted, but his need of the Saviour whom he himself preaches clothes the message of grace with the deeper eloquence and pathos. Had the tale of man's ruin and God's grace been spoken by

the lips of holy and unfallen angels (who, however weak before God, had yet been clothed to our eyes with majesty and honour), surely the tidings had sounded harshly from creatures, who themselves know nothing of the ruin which they declared. The living actual participation of its sufferings was needed in the messenger, to make the message tolerable to human hearts. Thus it is with our dear Lord Himself. Surely we should fear to come near to Him, if the awfulness of the God were not tempered by the gentle sympathies of the man; were He not our brother, as well as our Redeemer, Himself having borne the sorrows which He came to remedy, and fathomed to their lowest depths the melancholy experience of human nature. Now, they who are ambassadors are themselves partakers, and stand as the personal witnesses of the ruin which they proclaim, and of the love whose saving sweetness they declare.

But where are their credentials? A messenger does not come without some token from him by whom he is commissioned. And if that Being, who speaks by His ministers, be so great and mighty, may they not be asked to show that He is with them by some proof of power, some evidence of authority, some token commensurate with the glory of the Monarch, for whom they are ambassadors? This is just. Christ's ministers can easily show their credentials; here they are in the living word of God, which is instinct in its simple majesty with the power of the Holy Ghost, and is mighty to the pulling down of strongholds. Oh! great are the triumphs of the word! Is there a soul to whom it has never come home, fixing in the awakened conscience some conviction of death and

eternity, some warning of a holy God, from which it has been unable to escape? Is there one who has never felt some text fasten on his heart with all the energy of awakening grace; or perceived the veil of the future world lifted up, and its unseen realities revealed in their awfulness; or to whom it has never come, sweet as the fanning of an angel's wing, or as a breath, fresh and redolent of heaven, bringing in its blessed promises balm to the wounded conscience? Is there one who, hanging over its pages, has never felt, with irresistible emotion, that he has been, indeed, communing with God; or who has not drunk in with wonder and adoration the mysteries it has revealed, from the day when the Spirit moved upon the face of the primæval waters, all down the wondrous tale of a Saviour's redeeming love, to the second coming and dominion of the Son of man? Oh yes, here in the word of God—this enlightening, quickening, purifying, transforming word; this word of beauty, which has at once fascinated the poet, and taught the politician, and instructed the philosopher, while it has saved the believing soul; in this word, which has already changed the aspect of the world, and wrought such victories that the Star of Bethlehem has shone over the world, as the full-orbed Sun of righteousness, are the credentials of the ministry. Apostolical doctrine is the true test of the embassy. Without this the comeliness of an outward polity is valueless, as a broken cistern, or as cups, beautiful indeed, but empty of the living waters. The glory of a church is, in apostolical doctrine, resting on that eternal word which, changeless as its Author, shall never pass away, till every jot and tittle has been fulfilled.

So long as this pure truth is preached, the weaknesses, which are inherent in the men, should not lessen the authority of the ministers, as they gather from the oracles of truth the seal and title of their office. "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."

II. The message must be considered.

The manner of the message itself well merits attention. What sort of communication might sinners have expected to receive from such a great and awful God, as He with whom we have to do? This whole globe is but an unappreciable speck amid the vastnesses of His universe. Throughout its circles, who can doubt but that there are other races of intelligent and mortal beings, far higher than man, more capacious in intellect, and more exalted in position? That God should speak at all to man is a marvel of infinite grace. Add to the fact of his littleness before God, the fact of his rebellion; that the fair face of this creation is stained and foul with the pollutions of his sin; and above all, that the souls of men actually love this sin, yea, love it more dearly than oftentimes they love their God or their salvation. Taking all this into consideration, say, in what manner it might have been expected that He, who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, before whom the very heavens are unclean, and even the unfallen angels chargeable with folly, would speak to these willing, conscious, wilful, wayward transgressors. Let the soul of the wicked, as it is tossed with its certain fearful forebodings of judgment and fiery indignation, itself answer the question. What

then might we have expected to find presented in His revealed will? We open our Bibles, and what do we find there? Admonitions of wrath indeed there are, gleaming upon the sacred pages in the name of Him who is as a consuming fire; but they are clustered round other, and very different truths, and are coloured by them, just as the threatening storm-cloud may be coloured by the gorgeous rays of the setting sun. For what is the great theme of the Bible but love, redeeming love, that blends in itself all the attributes of the Triune Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost concurring in the great work of man's salvation? Yes, the great theme of the Bible is love, whether flashing from amid the thunders of Sinai, or from the lips of the incarnate Son; whether from amid the shadows of the law, or the light which shines from the cross of Calvary; whether in threatening, in warning, in comfort, or in promise, it is love; still love infinite, that fills it all.

Not the perfection of the redemption which this love has provided is alone worthy of admiration, but also the manner in which it proclaims that redemption. It is offered not in the harsh tones of authority, nor in the august accents of kingly dominion, but in moving tones expressive of the great love wherewith God loves us. What terms of gentle expostulation, of yearning tenderness, of endearing love, of sympathizing pity, can human language supply more touching than those which are used by the apostle, "As though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God?" There is something sublime and wonderful beyond all expression in such a message, from such a being as God, to

sinners as we are. It touches the deepest feelings of the soul, and calls up wondering thoughts of His grandeur, and our weakness. The only analogy, however weak and imperfect, which anything human can supply, is to be found in a wise and loving parent, as he gently persuades a wayward and unruly child. Just so God deals with man, only that the difference which parts Him from those with whom He pleads is measureless. For did God but speak one word in wrath; did He but look upon us in His awful displeasure, at that sound, at that glance, heaven would stand aghast, and earth shake with dismay, and all the broad creation fall to remediless ruin. That this voice, where it might command, should plead, and argue, and expostulate; should beseech and pray wayward sinners to accept of their own salvation, is a miracle of love, to which nothing else in the whole world is comparable. Clearly may be seen in it alike the awfulness of the danger which hangs over the unconverted soul, and the infinite measureless goodness which desires to redeem it. Away with the perverseness of pride; away with the obstinacy of offended vanity; away with the coldness of an infidel indifference! With what adoring breathless eagerness, what lowly obedient willingness, what rapturous thanksgivings, ought not man to listen, when the mighty Jehovah, upon the very outskirts of whose essential glory he cannot gaze and live, condescends to use such words as these, "As though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God!"

III. Lastly, the subject of the message itself adds the climax, the crowning triumph, to all this miracle

of grace. What is it that God entreats us to do? Is it something for the glory of His great name, and on which the stability of His kingdom depends? Away with the vain and foolish thought. It is for man's own salvation, the salvation of those souls which else are lost or perishing, and for whose sins no blood less precious than that of God's dear Son was adequate to atone: it is for the salvation of these bodies, in whose pleasures they are wrapped up in so blind an eagerness, that for the sake of a passing gratification they dare too often the wrath of God, and the eternity of hell; it is for these very souls and bodies, great in the immortality either of pain or pleasure which remains for them, that He pleads.

Let the nature of this entreaty be precisely observed, for it is pregnant with meaning: "Be ye reconciled unto God." The same form of expression is universal throughout the Epistles, in which it is never said that God is reconciled unto us, but that we are reconciled unto Him. Thus, the apostle Paul, speaking of God's great love, and the full assurance of hope which should be derived from it, urges, "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life."¹ Again, "Having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled."² In the verses immediately preceding the text the same mode of expression is used repeatedly; thus, "All

¹ Rom. v. 10.

² Col. i. 20, 21.

things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself."¹ There is a great truth in all this—namely, that the chasm which now separates God and man is of man's framing and not of God's; it is that man has changed towards Him, and not that God has changed towards man; man who has been alienated from Him, and not He from man. He has never altered for an instant, nor checked, even in the moment of our darkest sin, the free stream of that love, which from the creation to this moment has flowed forth ceaselessly towards the souls of men. The same justice and truth which are His attributes now, were equally His attributes when he talked with unfallen man in the garden in the cool of the day; and the same perfect goodness, which prompted the creation of man in his own image, is equally stamped upon all His dealings with us now in this state of sin and sorrow.

It is easy to illustrate this from natural things. Does not the same sun which, when it shines through a clear atmosphere, is dazzlingly bright and radiant, seen through a mist appear to the eye fiery as the glare of a conflagration? Yet the orb itself has not changed; the difference is in the medium through which we look at it. So it is with us and God. He is the same, unchanged and unchangeable, but we have altered our feelings, and therefore our relation towards him; and it is no wonder that, seen through the medium of a guilty conscience, even the God of love should appear stern and awful. Even

¹ 2 Cor. v. 18, 19.

after Adam had fallen, if man had been found universally as willing to meet God as God was to meet him, he need not have perished. But the fall tainted his blood, and perverted his will, and turned away his once pure and holy soul, till it became carnal, and at enmity with its Creator, Preserver, and Saviour. If, then, the change, by which man and God became opposed, was in man; so in man likewise must be the change by which they can again become reconciled. Who shall effect this change? Can evil cure evil, or sin cast out sin? It can be wrought by Him, and by Him alone, who being a Spirit can work spiritually, and being a Holy Spirit can impart of His own holiness to those in whom He dwells.

Do we ask, further, how the soul can become the subject of these converting energies? we answer, it is through the atoning merits of God's dear Son, who has purchased the precious gift of sanctifying grace, and hath enabled the Father to be just, and yet the justifier of them that believe. At the same time there must be a concurrence of our will with the will of the Holy Ghost. What is the exact point, where the union begins, we know not indeed: but it is certain, that the Spirit does not work in the soul against its will by any irresistible influence from without, but by an influence from within, which carries the will itself along with the purifying motions of converting grace. Hence it is that men are called in Scripture to do that, which another Scripture declares their inability to do of their own selves. Thus, in a well-known chapter,¹ "Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye

¹ Ezek. xviii. 31, 32.

have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye." Compare this with the expression of David in the fifty-first Psalm, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me;" and with that of Jeremiah, "Turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the Lord my God;"¹ and you will see that there must be a sense in which the believer does that which the power of the Holy Ghost is alone able to work in him.

The same combination of prayerful effort with the concurring aid of the Spirit is common in Scripture. For instance, "Work out your own salvation;" for "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do."² In like manner, in the text, the ambassadors of Christ "pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled unto God;" and yet this very work of reconciliation is effected by God's grace, not ours; for "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." There can then be no work of grace where the will is not moved. Let each man ask himself how stands it with him? Is he really in earnest in seeking pardon and peace, through the blood of God's dear Son? It is certain that he will not find it unless he seeks for it with an entire sincerity and earnestness, as dying men seek for life. Let him not say that he cannot do this; plead not, that seeking, he cannot find, or finding, is yet unable in the weakness of faith to grasp the precious promise. That which he cannot do of his own strength he can do in the power of

¹ Jer. xxxi. 18.

² Phil. ii. 12, 13.

God. "I can do all," saith St. Paul, "by Christ strengthening me." Effectual assistance is proffered to those who will accept it, and not hang back in the perverseness of an unconverted will from the gracious call of their God and Saviour, as He speaks to them from the cross on which He died, and from the throne to which He has ascended. Will any stand aloof from Him in the opposition of unrepented sin, when such a call as this sounds in their ears, from such a Being, "Be ye reconciled unto God?"

And lastly, to quicken faith and hope into a more earnest search after this blessedness, let the mind recall for a moment the position of those who are unreconciled. They are strangers and enemies to God! Oh, tremendous thought! Foes to the Almighty! Antagonists to Him who is the very fountain of life and peace, and beyond whose light is the outer darkness! Enemies, banded beneath the standard of the accursed spirit, against Him whose is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, and whose hand can kill both body and soul in hell! If we refuse all invitations of peace, and of our own will still stand as foes, whom shall we blame but ourselves, when on the day of His great wrath, the hand of the holy Judge shall pour out "indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish upon every soul that doeth evil?" What such an end will be, God alone can fully tell! what the awfulness of eternity! what the infinite capacity for joy or suffering of an undying soul! what the certainty of the judgment, and the fearfulness of the world beyond it, He, who is Himself eternal, Himself infinite, alone can comprehend! A glimpse into these things is afforded in the holy urgency

with which God, having given His Son to die for our redemption, now calls and invites, beseeches, prays, expostulates with us to accept His work. Why should the mighty Jehovah be so urgent, if it were not for the immensity of the interests at stake? Why, but for this, still perpetuate in His gracious providence the commission of His ministers, and send them to sound aloud in men's ears the tidings of their wondrous message, "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God"?



IV.

THE EFFECTUAL CALL.

“Speak, for thy servant heareth.”—1 SAMUEL iii. 10.

THE period during which the events recorded in this chapter occurred was the close of what is commonly called the Theocracy, or God-government of Israel. The name is derived from the circumstance, that during this period (which began at the settlement in Canaan, and ended with the appointment of Saul to be king) God Himself acted directly as the King of His people, making known from time to time the immediate purposes of His will by revelation to the Judges, who were set over them as the visible ministers of the unseen Monarch. Arguing from the natural conclusions of the human mind, it might have been expected that this period would have been one both of national glory and of religious advancement; an era of bliss and happiness, almost more than human. Doubtless this would have been the case, had it depended upon the will of that mighty and unchangeable God, who had already signalized in the sufferings of smitten Egypt, and in the terrors of Sinai, and in the miraculous acts which accompanied the wanderings of His people in the wilderness, and in the triumphant manner in which He established them at last in the promised land, the wisdom and strength with which he was prepared to

redeem and guard them. As far as concerns the faith of Israel, they had those outward and visible signs of the Divine presence, which the infidel in all ages has been wont to demand, but which have ever proved to be, in themselves, powerless to touch the heart. There dwelt among them the visible Shekinah, which imaged the Deity. There spoke among them the mystic Urim and Thummim, which made known his will. The tale of their wondrous deliverance was yet fresh, and there was scarcely a spot in Canaan's fruitful land which was not consecrated by the remembrance of some mighty act, by which God had turned the tide of battle, and driven their foes before Israel's face, as the stubble is driven before the whirlwind. Yet, when we look to the actual history, we find the state of the favoured race to have been very different from what might have been expected. The history of three centuries, as contained in the Book of Judges, is but the history of human sin, and of Divine chastisement.

And now, at the time of Samuel's call, very low appears to have been the state of religion. Eli, devout indeed and sincere, but in his old age weak of will and feeble of purpose, effected nothing to restrain the flowing tide of ungodliness. His sons—sons of Belial, bold and shameless—did but degrade the holy priesthood that they bore, into a means of grovelling avarice and reckless lust. The manners of the people at large were degenerated, and their strength enfeebled; and, worst of all, the face of God Himself was turned away in displeasure; His voice was silent; and no open vision any longer testified that His face shone upon His people.

What, then, was the cause of this? Was there weakness and faithlessness in God? No! The cause was not in God, but in man; in that perverse depravity, which no outward privilege could change, no love soften, no chastisement correct. It is but another lesson in that melancholy book—the book of the human heart—which, whether it be seen in nations or in individuals, presents, from age to age, the same sad and sickening lines of depravity and sin.

Is, then, the direct government of God over man now to cease for ever, ending with such a result as this? No, blessed be God! there will come a time, the hope of which flashes brightly on the pages of His Word, when God shall again be revealed as the immediate King of a redeemed people. Then man, regenerated from his long corruption, shall dwell again beneath the smile of the Holy One, and need no other King than He, who shall sit, crowned and sceptred, upon the throne of David, and of whose dominion there shall be no end. In that millennial kingdom, to which with longing eyes the Church of Christ is looking (whether or not it will exactly correspond to the views of this man or of that, as to the exact mode of prophetic fulfilment), there will be, beyond a doubt, a state, such as the world never yet has seen. There will be a revelation of Himself, on the part of God towards man, and an amount of holiness and love, on the part of man towards God, at present unknown and unimaginable. And when the mind contrasts the Theocracy yet to come with the Theocracy which has passed; the future kingdom, all righteousness and peace, with the distracted and darkened state in which Israel lay—it cannot but ask,

What is it which will constitute so great a difference between the two? There has intervened between them the glorious work of the redeeming Christ: man could not do without that. No visible blaze of Deity, were it bright and awful as that which Moses saw upon the quivering mountain, would suffice to change a soul, which the blood of Christ has not washed, and the Spirit of God has not quickened and regenerated. Converting grace was outpoured indeed in Samuel's days, as in later times, but it was then as the scanty drops compared to the full refreshing shower which now falls around the Church. Before the full glory of God can be revealed saving grace must gather together the sanctified heirs of the Redeemer's kingdom. Is not this what God did when He called Samuel, and what He is doing at the present time among ourselves?

The effectual call of the believer may be considered under three aspects,—

I. As to the person calling.

II. As to the manner of the call.

III. As to the object and effect of the call.

I. The call should be examined on the side of the speaker.

He, who spoke, was as yet unknown to Samuel. We are expressly told, that Samuel did not yet know the Lord, where the word "know" is undoubtedly used in the same sense which it bears in the New Testament Scriptures, and in which it is used by ourselves, in our familiar conversation with our fellow men. This meaning has already been explained, and it will suffice briefly to allude to it now. A clear distinction must be drawn between the knowledge of

God's existence and the knowledge of God. To have merely heard with the ears that there is a Person distinguished by this name; or have been informed of the nature of that marvellous work which the Saviour came to accomplish; to entertain an historical belief as to the facts recorded in the Scriptures; or even more than this, to give a theoretical assent to the truth of man's sin, and of his need of a Redeemer; or an acknowledgment of the general duty of seeking and serving Him, is to know the existence of a God and Saviour, but not to hold a personal relationship to Him—that is to know the God and Saviour Himself. All this may exist, and does exist in many souls, in whose dead affections there is not one spark of spiritual life, and who lie in the darkness of an unregenerate state, without one ground of hope, either to sanctify life, or to lighten death.

Such a knowledge may exist in none more perfectly than in those fallen spirits, who, reprobate beyond hope, and evil beyond redemption, even in the depths of hell “believe, and tremble.” Alas for the soul, in which there exists no better knowledge of God, and no higher proof of grace, than is possessed by those accursed angels, who, it may be, know all of Christ, except His beauty and His love! His work, His office, His power, His kingdom, all known, but His grace unknown, His love undesired. Such is not the knowledge spoken of in the word as the great object of the Christian's attainment. This is the true knowledge of God, which experience alone can give, and which is acquired amid the actual lessons of the spiritual warfare. This knowledge is begun when God's great love calls the soul

out of darkness into his own marvellous light, and gives it, not the spirit of bondage again to fear, but the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.¹ It is carried on in that daily experience which blends a deeper acquaintance with the heart with a clearer insight into the spiritual law of God. The blessed teaching progresses as the impotency of our own strength is learned on one side, and the faithfulness, and truth, the wisdom, and redeeming efficacy of the Saviour, on the other. It will be completed when perfect love shall cast out fear, and the regenerated saint shall see God face to face, and shall know even as also he is known.²

But while we thus distinguish between the knowledge of the being of a God and Saviour, and the knowledge of that God and Saviour Himself, as being different things, and the latter only effectual to eternal life, it must likewise be remembered, that the one is a necessary preparation for the other. Though Samuel did not as yet know the Lord, doubtless the child of devout Hannah had not been left ignorant of His being and greatness. Nor can it be thought that Eli, who, though not endowed with sufficient decision to curb the licentious wickedness of his sons, was yet possessed of no small share of personal piety (as was seen in the meek submission with which he received Samuel's account of the Lord's message), would leave him uninstructed in all the past history of his race, and the noble acts of a delivering God. The melancholy history of man before the deluge; the deluge itself; the call of Abraham; the deliverance from Egypt; the wanderings in the wilderness;

¹ Rom. viii. 15.

² 1 Cor. xiii. 12.

the giving of the law ; and the settlement in Canaan, must all have been known to him. Though this knowledge could not supply the place of that personal acquaintance with God, which alone is unto everlasting life, yet greatly must it have prepared the mind of Samuel to receive the revelation, when to the ear of the sleeping child there came, amid the solemn stillness of the night, the awful accents of the unseen God, unheard by all but him to whom they were addressed, " Samuel, Samuel ! "

In like manner, though the knowledge of the being of God, and of the title and work of the Saviour, is not of itself enough for redemption, yet it ought to prepare the way for conversion ; and greatly does it add to the soul's condemnation, if it refuses to listen, when the accents of inviting love are sounding in its ears. For what is the word of God itself, with its wondrous revelations, as it comes in its Divine energy, touching the conscience, and fixing itself upon the awakened heart ? What is the call of the earthly minister, as with holy zeal he lifts up his voice like a trumpet, to sound, above the din of life, the alarms of death and judgment, and of the world to come ? What are those startling dispensations of Providence, which bring, sooner or later, before every one of us the admonitions of another and a better life ; pain, disease, separation from those we love, the sudden accident, the open grave ? What are those convictions of sin, which now and then come to the soul, as if the veil of things seen was for a time uplifted, and the soul caught a glimpse beyond it of the deep Jordan, and the everlasting shore, and the glorious heaven, and the tremendous

hell? What are all these things, breaking the deep night of an unregenerate state with thoughts supernatural, but the call of God Himself? They are the voice of Him, in whose being we believe, whose almighty power we confess, whose justice we reverence, and before whose majesty we bow with involuntary awe. They are the voice of Him, whose we are, body and soul, and upon whose will all things visible and invisible depend. The call of God! and dare we refuse to listen to it? Shall we turn away unquickened and unconcerned? Shall we silence it in the noise of the bustling world, and the false refuges of a deceived heart? If we do, surely our own acknowledgment of the God who speaks, is enough to condemn us, and to make us speechless on the great day of visitation. But, oh! let us not refuse to listen: let us not turn away from Him who speaketh from heaven: let us hear, it may be wondering and trembling, as Samuel did, but yet, as Samuel, willing and attentive; and let this be the response with which we answer, "Speak, for thy servant heareth."

II. Let us look at the manner of the call.

Here again it is seen how needful is an attentive faith. For when God speaks, He does not accompany the message with such visible signs, as would make acceptance an outward necessity rather than an act of willing obedience. Thus God spake to Samuel, and there was no outward glory seen. No vision of light accompanied the voice; no form was revealed to assist the ear in the recognition of the speaker. Neither was the voice audible to any but the child, so that there was no correlative testimony of others to

assist him in distinguishing from whom it came, as its solemn accents thrilled upon the silence of the night. Nor does it appear that there was anything in the nature of the voice itself which would prove it to be Divine, or else why did Samuel twice run to Eli, thinking that the old man had called him? It needed the experience of the aged priest to instruct the boy as to the Divinity of the Speaker. "Eli perceived that the Lord had called the child." And thus it is, that the first messages of converting grace are brought home to the soul. They come, not with pomp and "observation," but unaccompanied, it may be in many cases, by any striking outward circumstances whatever. No angel from heaven, revealed in more than mortal beauty, no spirit of the departed, brings back from the other world the wondrous tale. No vision, either of hope or fear, dazzling the soul by an evidence supernatural, forms the ordinary mode in which the converting message is first brought home to the heart. It would be rash to say that no consciences are aroused by such means as these, or that, even in these days of ordinary illumination, no extraordinary vision is ever communicated by the Spirit. So many cases have occurred, where conversion has first been begun by such means as these, that the source from which they are sent cannot be doubted; but yet they are not ordinarily employed, nor constitute the usual channel, through which the Spirit operates.

The message is a spiritual one, and it comes spiritually. It is revealed, not to the senses, but to the conscience; and therefore to the conscience, and not to the senses, it is addressed. It comes in a form

not more marked than that of an inward impression ; of an awakened anxiety, which the mind cannot shake off ; of the predominance of one topic, which fixes upon the conscience, and will not be forgotten. It may be, that when the call first comes, a man may regard it but as one of those passing lights and shadows that cross the soul every now and then, throwing athwart it influences either of gloom or gladness, and coming and going he knows not when or how. Yet there is in this message of God a something, by which it is easily distinguished. For those unconscious moods of mind have no reason in them. No cause can be assigned for them ; no ascertained grounds, no definite objects or lessons which they come to work. Whereas this conviction has a definite state and a confessed object, which cannot be denied. There is in the anxiety of the awakened soul, a reason, which it cannot fail to see. The sense of sin and conscious guilt ; the shortness of life, and the certainty of judgment ; the fear of hell, and the craving of the soul for some better hope than it has hitherto found—are not things shapeless and indefinite, mere traceless shadows, which indicate no substance. They are things so clear in themselves, so exact in their causes, so approved to the conscience in their lessons ; they follow, moreover, so exactly the same form amid the endless varieties of circumstances and character, which distinguish the souls of men from each other, that we may well be assured they are not mere words, mere feelings, mere sensations, but a direct communication from the living God to the soul, which he purposes to save.

And there is this other mark about them : they

are not to be easily put off, but are like the mystic voice, which sounded in Samuel's ear. Once and again he had gone to Eli: but Eli could not set at rest the soul which he had not quickened. No sooner had the boy again returned to the silence and darkness of his chamber, and laid him down where he was before, but again the Lord came, and stood, and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" The Almighty had His purposes to work, and those purposes must be accomplished. Thus it has been with the soul. At one time it lay asleep, till in the slumbering conscience there sounded the accents of the Saviour's call. It hears—it marks—it trembles. It knows not at first how, or why it feels thus, nor recognizes at once the object and source of all those new feelings and emotions, which now stir into life the deep stagnations of its former slumber. It rises, and runs, it may be, to some Eli, and will not be put off, believing that he has caused the feeling, and must satisfy the want. Perhaps it is attributed at first to some physical cause, some morbid state of the body, or to the influence of some outward circumstance; and in this error it runs for a remedy there, where it attributes its disease, to the skill of the earthly physician, to the charms and comforts of society, to the sympathy of friends, or, deeper folly than all, to the pleasures, or interests, or dissipations of life. "It is not in us," they reply, "to account for this anxiety of yours," and with this answer they would quiet the alarm of the disquieted conscience. Its deep depression is for a time cheered, and it goes and lies down again in the same slumbering state as before.

But no sooner is this the case, than the same

unaccountable feeling, as the world would call it, comes back again, and ringing into the very innermost recesses of conscience comes the same call, "Sinner! sinner!" Up again starts the soul, and this time, it may be, it takes refuge with another Eli. With indignant reproach it turns upon the preacher of the word, and asks, "Why do you talk to me thus? What mean you by awakening in me these awful fears, as if I were some poor blind heathen who never heard of God?" and having thus, with a reproach to the human instrument of conversion, pushed from it the unwelcome thought, it lies down again. Yet again and again returns the same alarming cry, "Sinner! sinner!" O happy soul, if some Eli, who has learned by his own experience what the call means, shall point thee to Him from whom it comes! shall tell thee that it is the voice of the Saviour, who died for thee, who lives, and wills to save thee, and that all these anxious fears, which now agitate thy breast, are but the wakening up of the dead and slumbering soul from its grave of sin. When the soul shall once have thrown off these trammels, which bind the heart, as the grave-clothes bound rising Lazarus, it will then be free, redeemed, and blessed. But if it resist that call; if it quench these strivings of the Spirit; if it refuse to hear Him who is speaking; then never more, perhaps, may sound in the ears that voice of love. Grace once resisted, may be withdrawn at last, and the soul be left to perish in its guilt.

Happy art thou, O soul! if the wise counsellor shall thus persuade thee to go and lie down again in thy silent closet, not indeed to sleep as before,

but to wait attentive and adoring, till grace shall renew the call. Then thou shalt listen, not fearful and alarmed, not tossed with desperate anxiety, but filled with happy hope; and when again the gracious voice calls thee as before, "Sinner! sinner!" that voice shall not be unanswered; but thou, looking up to the Saviour, from whom it comes, and realizing by faith His smiling and gracious face, shalt reply, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

III. The object and effect of the call next demand attention.

Samuel's call was but the beginning of his spiritual life—the first of many revelations vouchsafed to him. His duty did not end with the acceptance of the call, but, as his answer denoted, included a zeal to do, and to obey. Of his long and honoured life, as a judge over Israel, the historical Scriptures fully supply the particulars. That life was not one of ease, or of unmingled prosperity, even in the discharge of his prophetic office. He lived to see Israel covet another king besides the great and unseen Jehovah, and he likewise lived to see Israel mourn beneath the reign of the king whom they had coveted. Even the first call was accompanied by the declaration of a judgment, sudden and perilous; and of a catastrophe, which should involve in one ruin the aged priest, whom he loved, as well as the men of Belial, his sons, and should put the very ark of the Most High apparently into the power of the enemy and the blasphemer. This wondrous call, therefore, was not all joy, and honour, and happiness, but involved likewise temporal sufferings, pain, and misfortune.

Yet, for all this, the prophet's faithful heart bowed in meek submission.

So it must be with the Christian. The call of converting grace does not come all happiness and joy. All happiness and joy it is in its accomplishment ; such happiness and joy, that with them the wildest license of sin, and all the imaginable fruitions of time and sense, have nothing to compare ; but its present message implies much that is sore and painful to flesh and blood. If we accept it, it must be with all its consequences ; with the crown beyond it all, but with the cross to bear first, with its trials, its obligations, and its sacrifices. Yes, and the soul in the ready instincts of its sin knows this full well. Why else is it that so many hearts refuse to obey the call, and wilfully wrap themselves up in sin's deepest slumbers, that they may not hear the voice which speaks within their heart ? It is because they know there is a cross to bear after Christ, and they cannot make up their minds to carry it. Did the message convey a gospel without conditions ; all promises, and no obligations ; all hopes, and no duties ; did it tell merely of an all-sufficient Saviour, and a loving God ; of joy, and peace, and the hope of a happy death ; of a glorious resurrection, and then a wondrous heaven beyond it ; were these all the topics it conveyed, what ear would refuse to listen, what heart would turn away ? Even he, who loved the wages of unrighteousness, and who perished amid guilty Midian, could exclaim, " May I die the death of the righteous, and may my last end be like his ! "

But there are other topics than these conveyed in the gospel call—even the nature of sin, the depravity of the heart, the certainty of judgment, the holiness of God, and the struggles of the believer's conflict; and from these the soul turns away, and will not listen to the message which speaks of them. The effectual call of grace is but the beginning of the believer's life; and though over that life there shines all the glory of the future world, and the smiling face of a crowned Saviour, yet between it and his rest in heaven, there are dangers to meet, and duties to perform, and temptations to overcome, and foes to vanquish. Men can never accept the call of saving grace unless they first count the cost, and are prepared to dedicate themselves wholly unto God. They must be separate from the world around them, neither living for the same objects, nor walking by the same rules, nor adopting the same carnal fashions. They must be a peculiar people, the pure and holy followers of a pure and holy Master.

For this end there is no slight sacrifice needed, no few struggles to be borne. As Samuel saw ruin fall upon Eli's house, so the Christian must be prepared to see many of the things he loves taken away, ay, and himself to rejoice in their loss. He must see the things he has cherished next his heart slain by the sword of the Spirit, even though the blow that slays them pierces the very soul; and as they lie before him, bedewed in the tears he sheds over their loss, he must learn to view them as foes weltering in their blood, and to rejoice in the slaughter, as in "the day of the Lord, great and terrible." He must see old habits, which have grown with his growth,

and tempers which, from long indulgence, have become second self, taken captive by grace, and laid at the cross of the dying Saviour, as the trophies of the travail of his soul. He must expect that his earthly life will be filled with many a trial and affliction, under which the head will grow sick, and the heart faint; till by the discipline, as in a school stern but needful, he learns beneath the teaching of the Spirit, those heavenly graces, without which no man shall see God. He must be prepared for all this, because by no other means can the soul be trained for the glorious inheritance in reserve for it, when the pilgrims of Zion, living and reigning with Christ, shall become "kings and priests unto God."¹ But what then? Are we not prepared to make the sacrifice? Is it not better to see our sins slain before our eyes, and live, than to keep them with us, and perish? Though they be dear to us as a right eye or a right hand, surely it is better to go into life maimed, than having two eyes and two hands to be cast into hell, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.² Anything is better than to go slumbering in a delusive dream, and awake, when it is too late, to the realities of an awful eternity. "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light."³

It behoves every one to make the decision, for time is short, and death and judgment near. It may be, that twice already has the cry, "Sinner! sinner!" been sounded in your ears, and that once, and once more only it will be heard. Place before you the two alternatives in all their breadth and awfulness;

¹ Rev. i. 6.

² Mark ix. 43, 44.

³ Eph. v. 14.

measure them honestly and courageously, as beneath the eye of God. He calls upon you this day; He calls by His Spirit in your hearts, "Sinner! sinner!" Will you not answer? Shall the precious opportunity slip by, unused and unaccepted? It is not Eli's voice that calls with the accents of man's solicitude, but that of the mighty God Himself. Hardened sinner, who hast lived hitherto without hope, because without God, what wilt thou do in the day of the great water floods, when the hailstones shall fall, and the stormy wind of judgment shall rend the refuges of lies?

Think again, before you turn back to your slumber, all heedless and unconcerned! Shall the Eternal call, and man disobey, and live? Shall life be proffered to you, and you choose death, and yet expect to be saved after all? Before thee stands the gracious and long-suffering Saviour. Which of the two wilt thou choose? Doubting sinner, why dost thou hesitate? Why cast those lingering looks behind, as if the world were too fair and beautiful for thee to leave it? Time is flying on, and God alone can tell, but that thy day of grace may come to an end this very hour. Hear, even now, in thine heart the voice of a Saviour's love! Oh! may God give thee grace to accept Samuel's call, and to answer with Samuel's faith, "Speak, for thy servant heareth!"

V.

THE GREAT MYSTERY.

“Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.”—
1 TIM. iii. 16.

NO source of mental error is more common than that which arises from the ambiguous use of words. It is the choicest weapon of sophistry, with which, as in a net, it entangles the feet of the careless and unwary, when a principle is laid down, in which a word is used in one sense, and then a conclusion is drawn, in which it is used in another. It is a source of mistake, into which minds honestly desirous of finding the truth may fall, without being conscious of the mode in which they have seemingly been led to a conclusion, from which their conscience, and reason, and judgment may alike revolt. Nor has there ever been a time, when there was more need to watch vigilantly over our use of words, than the present; for there never has been a period, when more errors arising from this cause were prevalent among mankind. This is the case with the word “mystery” used in this text and in many other places of the New Testament Scriptures. It forms the common plea of Rome, and of those who fraternize with Rome. When, with the Bible in our hands, we would examine closely into the nature of the power she claims, and into the

authority of the doctrines she teaches; when, for instance, we appeal to the monstrous contradictions involved in the doctrine of transubstantiation, we are told that it is "a mystery;" meaning that it is something, upon which we may reverently gaze, but into the nature of which we must not accurately inquire. And of the æsthetic emotions, which Rome knows well how to produce by the pomp and solemnity of her services, the feeling of mystery forms no small part. The subdued light which streams through windows rich with colouring; the exquisite music, which rouses into high excitement the imaginative sentiment of religion; the priests decked with symbolical vestments; the prayers in an unknown tongue; the forms of carved images of saints filling every niche; the gorgeous altar; the lights; the censers; the uplifted host; all are instruments, admirably adapted to impress the fancy, and produce that undefined feeling of religious awe, which believes without knowing, and worships without understanding, and bows down before that which it dares not even seek to comprehend.

It is necessary for us to bear in mind, that the sense, in which the feeling of mystery is thus excited, and that in which the word "mystery" is used in the Word of God, are wholly different. There is not one passage of Scripture, in which the word occurs in the meaning which it bears in the popular language of our day. We commonly mean by it something half-hidden, half-seen; partly lost in obscurity, and by its glimpses of truth, not clearly disclosed, arousing the imaginative faculties, and filling the mind with an awful fear at some unrevealed wonder. Very

powerful, beyond a doubt, this sentiment is, and effectual to sway the soul in the absence of a reasonable conviction, and the might of an overruling motive. It is, however, the shift of weakness, seeking to assume an importance not its own, rather than the attitude of inherent greatness, moving the heart by its own majesty. Thus, however congruous it may be with man's dealings, it would be incongruous with the power and majesty of God. You will find, accordingly, that in the Divine record, the word is used to describe a truth, baffling the research of reason, but now as fully revealed by the revelation of the Word, as it is possible for the deep things of God to be to the narrow understanding of man.

Is there, then, it may be asked, no mystery still encircling the great truths, which have been made known to us? Certainly there is: but it arises from no obscurity in the revelation given, but in the incapacity of the human mind fully to apprehend subjects which transcend the reach of its natural knowledge. There is the same difference here, as there is in the natural world, between small objects dimly seen, and great objects fully revealed. They may both at first sight create the same impression upon the mind; but in the one case it is the effect of ignorance, in the other of knowledge. Thus, when we look at some hill, over whose top and round whose sides may be gathered the mists of earth, we may be impressed with the same sense of vastness, as when we look at some great mountain, as it rears its majestic proportions towards heaven: but the impression in the one case is but an illusion, which a more exact knowledge will dispel; the other

a truth, which further knowledge and longer gazing will but deepen and intensify. In the same way the mysteries of God's word fill the soul with wonder, not from the obscurity amid which they are hidden, but by their own majestic proportions. Standing, as it were, side by side with them, the mind gazes amazed at truths reaching so high, and spreading so wide beyond its vastest conceptions. How great is the mystery, which reveals our own being, as stretching through the grave, and gate of death, on and on throughout eternity! Great is the mystery, which unfolds the final destiny of a soul in an eternal heaven, or hell! Great is the mystery of the resurrection, when the perishing flesh and blood shall spring from its long corruption into a new life, and the vile body be changed from its shame and weakness into a vessel of glorious immortality! Above all, "great is the mystery of godliness, God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, and received up into glory!"

That the word "mystery" is used in this sense only, of a truth too great for the human mind to have discovered it, but now revealed by the Spirit, let the following quotations testify.

Our Lord, when asked by the disciples to explain the parable of the sower, thus expresses the privilege of the believer: "Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God."¹ St. Paul speaks by the Spirit to the same effect, "I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery."² Again, "We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery,

¹ Mark iv. 11.

² Rom. xi. 25.

even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory : which none of the princes of this world knew : for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath *revealed* them unto us by his Spirit.”¹ And once more, “ Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is *now revealed* unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.”²

These texts sufficiently prove what meaning should be affixed to the word “mystery,” and the explanation throws light on the language of St. Paul in this place. The apostle first states a general truth ; then adduces certain facts in support of it ; and both the truth itself, and the facts on which it rests, have a further connection with the mode of conversation which becomes a Christian in the Church, which is the house of God. Under these heads, his language may be considered :—

I. The facts recorded.

II. The greatness of the mystery involved in them.

III. The practical lessons to be derived.

I. The facts recorded.

These are points in the life of our Lord, commencing with His Incarnation, and reaching to the time of His final exaltation. Though these facts are very familiar in the records of our faith, they are yet in

¹ 1 Cor. ii. 7-10.

² Eph. iii. 4, 5.

themselves clothed with so profound an interest, and touch so closely the sympathies of our hearts, that it will not be labour lost to examine them more closely.

All know the interest, with which the mind hangs over the adventures of one of our fellow-men, and those startling vicissitudes with which life is full ; or the pleasure, with which we regard the tale of some act of heroical constancy, some deed of self-sacrificing love, or some undeserved suffering, willingly borne by one like ourselves, for the sake of a loved object of affection. With how much more intense an interest ought not these things to be regarded, when, the acts and sufferings being human, and such as man may possibly have done and endured—they have been accomplished in a Person, who was Divine, and who, though Himself “very God of very God,” became blended, in the greatness of His love, with the sympathies, and wants, and sorrows of man.

To read the story of our Lord's life, is like tracing, here upon earth, His visible footprints. This affection He felt ; this sorrow He bore ; this fondness of familiar love He knew ; this pain He endured ; this poverty He suffered ; these joys He shared ; these tears He shed ; this reproach He carried ; this death He died. There is scarcely a thought of familiar life, or a single struggle of the spiritual warfare, with which the loving soul does not identify Him, and in doing so, connects itself with Him, the sinner with the Saviour, the creature with the Creator, the man with the God.

It is a higher kind of the same feeling, which leads men to delight in treading the very lands in which the Saviour walked, as if the local spots which had been consecrated by His presence, brought them

into more close and realized contact with Him. It is the same feeling, only yet more profound and spiritual; for unity in an affection, is a thing far more true and real, than sympathy in an outward scene. Men only need a larger faith thus to realize Him, and realizing Him, to make this life of theirs radiant with the traces of His love, till it becomes as Bethlehem's manger, and Siloam's pool, and the temple-courts of Jerusalem. It is this truth, which runs, as a connecting thread of gold, through all the facts recorded in the text. They happened to Him, who is Himself God, the eternal, loving, and omnipotent Jehovah, though shrouded for a time in the flesh; and who has thus dignified human things with the rays of His own majesty and honour. "God was manifested in the flesh."

Openly had He shown His face, when He created our first parents and when He talked with them in Paradise; but the fall darkened that revelation, and the blinded conscience, and the perverted will, hung as a veil between man and God. The heavens, indeed, declared His glory, and the firmament showed His handiwork; but the sinful heart did but dimly read this mystic handwriting, and the ear but faintly catch these accents of the universe. But now God revealed Himself, and came in His mighty love to remedy the disastrous ruin, which had fallen upon the earth. He came, and in what form was He manifested? Surely it was in some shape worthy of His glory, His majesty, and power. Oh yes, indeed it was; in a form Divinely worthy of Him, and wonderful beyond the conception of man. He was manifested in the flesh, the flesh with its decay and corruption; the

flesh scarred and torn with its throes, and sufferings, and dissolution. Around it was revealed the spiritual beauty of the God; and matchless holiness, and sublime humility, and divine patience, and immeasurable love circled, as with a living diadem of glory, the tabernacle of the suffering flesh. In the form of the despised carpenter's Son dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and through that body the beams of His Divinity so shone, as to be conspicuous even to the eyes of men. "He was justified in the Spirit."

The Spirit's influences sealed as with a visible signet His great commission. Power, which even the dumb elements obeyed, before which devils shrank, and the grave gave up the dead; wisdom, which spake as never man spake, piercing into the innermost secrets of men, and revealing the profoundest mysteries of God; righteousness, in which the keen eye of earthly malice could not detect a fault, and which stands perfect in the severe scrutiny of the All-seeing Father; love, which forgot itself, and into the length, and breadth, and depth, and height of which it will be the glory and happiness of saints in heaven to look for ever, and yet for ever find new themes of praise; all these were found in our Lord, in the glory of the Holy Ghost, whose unmeasured gifts anointed Him for His great office.

"He was seen of angels." Were they not present, amid Sinai's glories, when the typical law which prefigured His work, "was ordained by angels in the hand of a Mediator."¹ Who, but they, proclaimed that He had come, when before the eyes of the wondering shepherds the inner depths of heaven were

¹ Gal. iii. 9.

opened, and their ears caught the song of the heavenly multitude? When in the solitary wilderness the Divine Saviour was confronted for forty days with the adversary, who but the angels came, and ministered unto Him? Who were they, clothed in white, who first told to the astonished disciples the news of His resurrection, but members of those countless legions who waited upon His slightest will, and watched, wondering, his sore anguish upon the cross? Who but they, declared to the assembled disciples, that He would come again in like manner, as they had seen Him go into heaven; and whose songs but theirs, did David's prophetic tongue describe, as welcoming the ascended Conqueror: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in."¹

Yet trace His wondrous condescension. He came for man's salvation. He was preached, not among the fallen angels or the spirits of the just made perfect—these were left to gather from the Church on earth their deeper lessons in the manifold wisdom of God—but among sinful men, who sat in the valley of the shadow of death. Nor was He preached in vain; for with the proclamation went forth the energies of converting grace, bowing the hearts of men before the preaching of the cross. "He was believed on in the world," not indeed by all, but by those whom the Father drew unto Him. And then, as if in receiving the belief of man He had indeed accomplished the work he came to do, "he was received up into glory," going before into that kingdom, which He has prepared for His people. Observe through all this, how

¹ Psal. xxiv. 7.

the glory of God, and the happiness of men, and the witness of angels, and faith on earth, and glory in heaven, are all blended up in the same wondrous gospel of our God and Saviour.

One truth is immediately to be derived from these facts, and that is, the Divinity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. That they are true of the second Person of the Trinity, and true of Him alone, is most certain. When was the Father, or the Holy Ghost, manifested in the flesh, or received up into glory? "No man hath seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him;"¹ and of the manner of the Spirit's operation, our Lord declares, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."² It is, therefore, to the redeeming Christ that the title of Deity is here directly ascribed—"God was manifest in the flesh." There is no truth in the whole world over which the Church needs to watch with a more jealous care, than over this. It is the foundation of all the rest. Take it away, and the doctrine of the atonement is taken away with it, and all the hopes of the Christian heart, like some edifice whose foundation has been undermined, sink into ruin. Take away the Divinity of Christ, and His example, and His teaching, and His promises, lose their power, and the whole body of faith becomes cold and formal as a carcass, from which the living spirit has fled. Take it away, and you destroy our knowledge even of the mercy and goodness of God: for if

¹ John i. 18.

² John iii. 8.

He has not given us His own dear Son, He has not given us the greatest thing He had to bestow, and then, for aught we can tell, His love may be finite, and limited as our own. Take away the Divinity of Christ, and the gospel is but a system of morals: we are sinners without a Saviour, left to atone for our own sins as best we may, and to bear in our own strength the severe scrutiny of the great judgment day. Christians should hold fast as the very anchor of their souls, sure and steadfast, this truth—this soul-subduing, awe-inspiring, wondrous truth—that God was “manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, and received up into glory.”

II. Let us see whether we must not, as we look at these things, cry out with the apostle, “Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness.” Wonderful beyond the thoughts of man are the manner, and the completeness, and the glory of redeeming love. Wonderful is its manner. Think of God manifest in the flesh. Contrast together His greatness, and our littleness; the eternity and immutability of His being, with the brief span of human existence; His glorious magnificence with the degradation and depravity of our lost estate: on the one side the creating, preserving, and ruling Jehovah, the self-existent fountain of life; on the other, the worm of the earth. How small is man compared to this vast globe, on which he lives! In its turn, how small a speck is this globe to the ten thousand mighty worlds, which fill with life and motion the vastnesses of the universe! How small this measureless universe to Him, whose mere will called it into being, and upon

whose slightest word it depends ! Now unite together the first and the last links of this chain ; man, the weakest of all (if not in his power, yet in the degradation of his sin), and God the source and fountain of all ; and then think, what a truth it is, that God should have been manifest in the flesh !

There is also another thing which must be taken into account here, and that is, not alone the littleness of man, but his wickedness. The one may but have engaged pity ; the other must drive away love. We feel in ourselves, who are the finite and imperfect reflections of God's moral being, that abject distress always constitutes a plea for compassion, and we can therefore easily conceive, how the utter ruin and misery of man, and his very helplessness to redeem himself, may fitly have moved towards him the bowels of the Divine mercy. But when we think of his wickedness, we can see that this must have repelled the tenderness, which the other may have excited. It is not alone that man is in a fallen and sinful state—a son of God fallen, but mourning under his fall, might be a noble and glorious creature still—it is, that he loves his fall, cherishes his very misery, and presses to his breast, as the dearest thing he has, the very iniquity that has caused his ruin ; and this not ignorantly, but with a heart wilfully averted from that beauty of holiness, which, in the work of the dying Saviour, and the pages of the spiritual law, his God has been pleased to reveal to him. It is that man's perverted will bears the last stamp of an utter degradation, in that he glories in his shame, and has lost the very desire for holiness and God.

Imagine a loving parent dying for a rebellious and

unruly son ; or an earthly monarch quitting his throne to share a beggar's hut, out of a pure desire to remedy the beggar's misery ; and the image would be infinitely faint to represent the work of Christ for us ; it would fall as far short of the truth, as the earth is lower than the heavens, and a drop of water smaller than the fathomless depths of the great ocean. And why, may we suppose, that God has done this, and that He framed from eternity in the council-chamber of the Triune Godhead the mighty plan of saving grace ? We can only give one answer ; it was because He looks at man's undying spirit, and measures the worth of his soul by the endless eternity which remains for him beyond the grave. Who is not lost in the attempt to realize that immense "for ever," during which the soul will live ? The Eternal alone comprehends eternity ; and how he esteems it has been shown in what he has done to redeem us from the eternal hell, and minister an access unto us abundantly into the eternal heaven. Is it not then a great mystery, and suggestive of wondering thoughts of Divine goodness, that "God was manifest in the flesh ?"

And it becomes so still more, when we add to it another mystery—namely, that the salvation which has been wrought directly for man, reaches indirectly even to the hierarchies of heaven, the sinless beings, who crowd with life this universe of God. Why else does the apostle here particularize, that "He was seen of angels," if the angels are not in some way concerned in the work, which he accomplished ? All profitless speculation, which has no foundation in the word of God, should be rigidly avoided ; but it is a

duty to recognize the breadth of the Divine counsels, and gaze upon those glimpses of mighty truths, not as yet fully revealed, which are dropped here and there in the Word; not that we should build upon them theories of our own, but that, taking them as they are, we may form a higher conception of those infinite mysteries of redemption with which we are concerned. That the angels are nearly interested in all the work of Christ, both during His ministry upon earth, and during the extension of His gospel now going on in the world, is from the Word most certain. That their interest has not ended with the facts referred to in the text, with the birth, temptation, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord, is in the same degree indubitable. For thus St. Paul teaches us, that his commission to preach among all men the mystery of the gospel had this among other purposes, "*to the intent* that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places," by which the angels are doubtless intended, "might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God."¹ Thus, St. Peter, when he describes the blessings of the work of Christ, adds as a conclusive indication of them, "which things the angels desire to look into." There is another very remarkable passage which occurs in the Book of St. John's Revelation, and which intimates a participation of the angels in the present work of the gospel: "I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which showed me these things. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not; for I am thy fellow-

¹ Eph. iii. 8—10.

servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book.”¹ And once more, that the angels are beyond a doubt to be sharers in the future dominion of the crowned Jesus, is clearly taught by the mouth of St. Paul. Thus, he includes amid the inhabitants of the heavenly Jerusalem, not alone “the church of the firstborn and the spirits of the just made perfect,” but likewise “an innumerable company of angels.”²

And this turns our thoughts to the fact, that “He was received up into glory,” that glory, of which we shall likewise become partakers, if we are His people. Who, of his own mind, could have conceived such a reward, crowning the long and sad experience of labour and toil, and sin and weakness, which make up the life of man? To be where Christ is, in those mansions which He has gone before to prepare for His people; to be like Him, because, seeing Him as He is, we shall catch the reflected rays of the glory on which we look, like the face of Moses when he descended from Sinai, bright with the glory of the manifested God—this is, indeed, a height, to which human thoughts had never soared, unless faith had given them wings, and the Spirit itself sustained their flight. Who is there, who contrasts his present state with that future hope, his present weaknesses with that future glory, who will not exclaim, “Great is the mystery of godliness?”

III. Nor are the practical lessons to be derived from all this less valuable. Foremost of all is the duty of believing and accepting this wondrous redemption, as alike due to God, and necessary for

¹ Rev. xxii. 8, 9.

² Heb. xii. 22.

ourselves. With what exertion of Almighty power and wisdom has not this great mystery been perfected! What a stir has there been in heaven! what goings forth from everlasting to everlasting! what counsels in the breast of the Godhead! what ministrations of angels and men! what pains and sufferings of God's own dear Son! what outpourings of the Spirit's energies to bring to pass that mighty plan of saving souls, which was designed in the eternity before time, which will compass all time, and only be brought to its conclusion in the eternity after time! What else can it be than an act of contempt and hostility that the soul commits, when it looks on with indifference, or turns away with dislike from all these manifestations of God's power and goodness?

Translate such conduct into language, and what is it but a denial of God's truth, affirming that it does not need what He declares to be vitally necessary for us? What but a refusal of God's love, willing rather to be an enemy than seek the mode of reconciliation which he has prepared? What but a contradiction of God's wisdom, asserting that all has been done in vain, a mere platform erected for a needless display of power, rather than for the supply of a deep want of man? What but a contempt for His glory, turning away from the choicest offers of His grace, as if they were worthless, and undeserving even of a thought? However men may seek to hide, with many a plausible excuse for sin, the depravity of the human heart, no other argument is needed to prove it, than the possibility of this neglect of the choicest work of God—the wonder of angels, and the admiration of heaven. To neglect God's offers is to despise the

God who makes them, and to despise God is to stand in awful opposition to him; awful as the anathema which it incurs, for "Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker."¹ Surely righteous and just is the decree, "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God."²

But if acceptance of all that Christ has done for us is due to God, it is not less necessary for man; for it supplies the link which unites his personal interests with all its immeasurable hopes. To know the work of a Saviour, and the sufficiency of His redeeming merits, and the glory of the inheritance which He has prepared for His people, will but aggravate despair if we are cut off from the personal participation of them. Without acceptance on our own part, they are but as a glorious dream, which we never can enjoy; with acceptance they are a glorious reality, of which faith seals the individual inheritance. To use a very familiar image, faith is the hand, whereby we grasp the arm of Christ. Cleansed by His merits, and leaning upon His strength, we walk side by side with Him, all along the wondrous path, through the fellowship of His sufferings, and beneath the shadow of His cross, to the power of His resurrection, and to the glory of His kingdom. Without faith we are but spectators, with it we are inheritors of the promise. Oh! may the Holy Spirit give to every heart this precious gift of faith; for though it is but a little word, it contains a world of meaning, and towers far above the reach of our own unassisted strength. To know our need of Christ, and to estimate aright our hopeless condemnation without

¹ Isa. xlv. 9.

² Psal. ix. 17.

Him, is what the Spirit alone can teach us. The natural man stands in the same relation to the truths of the gospel as a blind man does to the beauties of a landscape, which he cannot see. Let this prayer be on every lip, "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law."¹ "Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief."²

Again; these blessed hopes of salvation have an importance predominant above all things else in the world. They ought to occupy the same place in man's estimate of life, as they occupy in the dealings of God towards mankind. There they are the first and the last, the Alpha and Omega of all. In His Word it is the spiritual relation of the soul towards Himself, and the restoration of man to the sonship he has lost, which is the one great central object, round which everything else is grouped. The Scriptures contain, indeed, the history of nations, and reveal something of the great empires, which filled the world of old with the lustre of their renown; but they do this so far, and so far only, as their history was connected with the fortunes of the Church of God, and of that chosen race from whom, according to the flesh, came the Desire of all nations. And as regards the future, the Word asserts, indeed, the sovereign power of God over nations, and the particular providence, with which from age to age He rules their destinies; but it tells us likewise, that all these destinies will be directed to the establishment of the kingdom of the Redeemer, and the coming in of the promised times of righteousness and peace. In the sight of the Almighty, the changes and

¹ Psal. cxix. 18.

² Mark ix. 24.

chances of human events, the revolutions of empires, the fortunes of thrones and dynasties, and all the vicissitudes of human societies, are wholly subsidiary to the wider spread of the everlasting Gospel, and the extension of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, till it covers the earth, "as the waters cover the sea."¹

If the mind passes from God's dealings with bodies of men to His dealings with individual man, the same truth is yet more prominent. Infinite love and wisdom guide, indeed, and prompt them all, though to us they seem mysterious, and hard to be understood, and would altogether baffle our search, did we not know the end to which they are directed. This end is the sanctification of the soul, and its "preparation for the inheritance of the saints in light." All the good and evil of life; health and strength, sickness and disease, prosperity and adversity, riches and poverty, joy and sorrow, are no more than the instruments by which God works this greatest thing of all, the ripening of the saint for His own kingdom and glory. The soul! that alone is valuable before Him, as a jewel fit for the Redeemer's crown; and to the soul's well-being all else is subordinated. "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"² This is God's measurement of things, and this should be ours. We must not alone accept, but accept with all our heart, and mind, and soul, and strength, counting all things "but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord."³ Is the soul all-important

¹ Isa. xi. 9.² Mark viii. 36, 37.³ Phil. iii. 8.

to us, as it is to God? Can we give up all for it, even as Christ did, who gave himself for its redemption? Is its salvation by the blood of Christ the one thing needful, to which we give the first-fruits of our time and thoughts, and the whole dedication of our hearts?

Once more; let us see how vast is the debt of gratitude due to Him, who bought with His blood man's fallen and guilty race. How fervent, how absorbing, how unreserved the love we should pay to Him, who died, the Just for the unjust, to bring us unto God! The scale, by which alone it can be fitly measured, must reach from heaven to earth, and from the height of the glory, which the Son of God quitted to become incarnate, to the depth of that humiliation to which he stooped; it must count the tears He shed, and the pangs He bore, and fathom with a plummet, deep as the purposes of God, the agony and bloody sweat, the cross and passion of the dying Saviour. We cannot do this. Not even throughout eternity can we comprehend the whole measure of these mysteries; and yet till we can do so, we cannot mark the limits of the love we owe, or the obligations we bear. It is a debt, whose vastness we cannot even conceive, much less exhaust. All we have and all we are—our zeal, our worship, our praise, our faith, though it never fainted, our hope, though it never grew weak, our love, though it never was chilled—would be but a poor instalment of its payment. It will, be the glory and bliss of heaven to go on for ever fathoming its length, and breadth, and depth, and height, and yet for ever to find it towering upward above our utmost thought, in the

infiniteness of that love, which passes knowledge. Reader, is it thus that you have accepted, have valued, have loved your Saviour? Pray for grace to enlarge further and further still your worship, adoration, and praise, till the whole soul is full, the whole heart sanctified. Measure what you ought to give by what you have received. Great beyond controversy should be our love of God, since "great beyond controversy is the mystery of godliness; God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory."



VI.

THE NEW LIFE.

“You, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses.”—COL. ii. 13.

IT is scarcely possible to read the verse, by which the text is immediately preceded, without being struck by the close union described to exist between the sinner and the Saviour. “Ye are risen,” saith the apostle, “with him, through the faith of the operation of God, who raised him,” that is Christ, “from the dead, and you hath he quickened together with him.” Not only were the hopes of all the world bound up in the death and resurrection of the Saviour, but no lapse of time has power to break the actual identity which unites them. The Colossians, to whom St. Paul wrote, were lying in heathen darkness at the time of the great event, which witnessed to the completion of Christ’s work ; yet, in the eternal counsels of God, their spiritual quickening into life appeared contemporaneous with the fact of the resurrection. At all events, that one act of the mighty Spirit, which raised our Lord’s human flesh from the grave, and recalled His human soul from the place of departed spirits, contained potentially within itself all the energies of grace, which should act to the end of time upon the regenerated souls, and the risen bodies of the saints.

No lapse of time can weaken, no force of events can interrupt, no power of hell can break the union of the sinner with the Saviour. It enables the believing soul to overcome the temptations of this world of sin; it rises into superior life amid the shock of death and the opening glimpses of another world; it survives, unharmed, the decay of the grave, and the dissolving powers of corruption; it blesses the spirit as it rests in Abraham's bosom; and it springs forth in heaven into an exhaustless fountain of bliss and glory, infinite as the Saviour to whom it unites us, and long as the eternity which we are called to enjoy.

It should likewise be observed, that this union is not one of justification alone, but of sanctification also; indeed, it is to the latter rather than to the former that the text directly alludes. It describes not only the imputation of Christ's meritorious righteousness to us, but likewise the inwrought likeness of Christ's holiness in us. The two are not indeed equally complete on this side the grave; in the better world beyond it, doubtless, they will be. The work whereby we are justified, is of God altogether, and of God alone, without any concurrent act of man's at all. It began in the love of the Father, and was completed in the work of the Son, and man is a recipient only. The work of justification is therefore complete as the God by whom it is accomplished. The work of sanctification, on the other hand, begins, indeed, wholly, and is wholly carried on, by the power of the sanctifying Spirit; but then it acts upon the carnal elements of poor fallen hearts, and is blended with the infirmities which cling to flesh and blood. However perfect it may be in the

strength of Him who works it, it becomes imperfect from the weakness of those in whom it is wrought. Doubtless the Almighty could complete the work of sanctification at once if it seemed good to Him to do so : it could, however, only be done by an irresistible effluence of grace, which should act from the outside, and not from inside the will. But it has ever pleased Him to work instrumentally, setting into motion the springs of the soul itself, and strengthening and directing their action ; and to what a degree the sins and weaknesses of the heart may fatally impede this work of the Holy Spirit, who is there among us who does not know by a most melancholy experience ? The work of sanctification within us is therefore imperfect on this side the grave, but works, nevertheless, a most true, though faint, image of our Master.

So wonderfully has God harmonized all His dealings together, that this unity of the sinner with the Saviour is true, not alone of our Master's character, but likewise of our Master's life. All the great transactions of it are, as it were, acted over again in the heart of the believer. Thus the fact of our Lord's incarnation is used to represent the nature and completeness of the new birth of the soul. Vast as was the difference which parted the glorious state, which the Son of God left, from the lowly humiliation which the Son of Man put on ; so entire is the change distinguishing the new man of grace from the old man of nature. The trials of our Lord's life, and that sore contest He waged with evil spirits for forty days, finds its imperfect counterpart in the trials of the Christian life, and that struggle, which we daily carry on with the

principalities and powers of darkness. As our Lord died to break the yoke of sin, and to take away the handwriting of ordinances which was against us, nailing it to His cross and triumphing openly in it; so we are called to die unto sin, to be crucified unto the world, and to mortify, even to death, those carnal lusts and appetites which reign over the unregenerate soul. And lastly, the resurrection of Christ is not only the meritorious cause of the renewal of life in the soul, purchasing for us that Holy Ghost who alone can quicken it; but it is at the same time a lively image of it, representing in no faint colours both its mode and its effect. Wonderfully close is the union of the soul with the Saviour in faith, and a holy resemblance both to His character and work. Happy, indeed, are they to whom may truly be applied these words of the apostle to the Colossians, "you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses."

Three points are suggested for consideration by these words:—

I. The state of the natural man, "dead in sins."

II. The state of the spiritual man, "quicken together with Christ."

III. The procuring means of the change, "having forgiven you all trespasses."

I. The natural man is "dead in sins;" a figure of frequent use in the Word, and which represents in a very significant manner the inability and unfitness of the unconverted heart to receive, or understand, the things of God.

There are few persons who have not been called to

mourn over the earthly remains of a beloved friend or companion, who has been cut off, perhaps in the midst of his days, by what seems to us to be an untimely death. How striking is the change, which that one moment of death has wrought upon the now senseless clay, however feeble and exhausted by pining sickness may have been its state beforehand! The incessant play of thought and feeling over the countenance, so subtle that we are scarcely conscious of its existence till we feel its absence, is now exchanged for a rigidity of feature, which is startling in its immobility. The soft eye, which beamed with expressive love, is dull and lustreless; the lips, still sweetly smiling, have lost in relaxing decay their delicate firmness; the cheek, once mantling with the hue of health, is pale and cold as the marble; the limbs, once full of the buoyant activity and spring of life, are all stiff and still; there has passed over the whole frame something which we feel at once to be "not life." Worst of all—the thinking, feeling, sentient heart has ceased to beat, and, in the absence of the living spirit, the poor flesh is but the decaying remnant of the being we loved, and not the being himself. The voice, which once called the smile to that lip, and the light to that eye, though modulated to the same deep tenderness as of old, has ceased to kindle any answering sympathy. No glance of love repays the tender embrace; no silent pressure of the hand acknowledges the falling tear. Our love, and grief, and care, are all too weak to act again upon that loved being, whose very life was once a constant sympathy with us.

If these words recall any tender memory in

those who mourn, let that past experience teach the deep significance of the image, which is here used to express the state of the unconverted soul before God. It is dead. The Holy One looks with infinite love on the creatures whom His hands have made, and His counsels redeemed; but no glance of grateful love is repaid to Him again. He calls; the accents of saving grace fall upon the dull ear and insensate conscience; but no motion of a holy desire, no kindling of a willing obedience, gives back the answer. His loving-kindness and tender mercy strew the soul's path with benefits numberless as the sand, but they are all unfelt and unacknowledged. He lays open before the heart the mysteries of His redeeming love, and pleads with it by His name of "Father;" or He rolls over the conscience the thunders of His displeasure, and uplifting the veil of the future world, reveals that awful hell, which gapes open-mouthed before the pathway of the wicked. But all in vain alike are the one and the other; neither the sunshine of His grace, nor the thunders of His judgment, break the deep slumber of that soul: it is dead. The death which holds the cold, lifeless limbs of the flesh, is not more real, and not half so awful, as this death, that darkens the conscience, and perverts the reason, and corrupts the heart, and shuts up the soul in the deep lethargy of sin from the call of the Saviour's love.

Perhaps we shall realize this death of the soul yet more fully and exactly, if we add another thought. Think how small a portion of the being whom we love consists in the life of the body, and how large a portion in life of the spirit. However complete may

be the functions of the mere fleshly tabernacle, and however goodly its outward grace, it never could be an object of true love to us without the thinking spirit, which inhabits it. Imagine to yourselves a living body not containing a living soul: the limbs, the features, the proportions, the acts, the appetites, the motions—all those of man; but yet guided by no feelings, thoughts, sympathies, or affections which belong to man, and say whether such a “living death” would not appear to our eyes ghastly and revolting. Just such must appear before God a rational being, who is yet spiritually dead; a being, that is, which has every other kind of life but that which God Himself has. Something of this may be recognized by us in a form familiar to our daily experience. Do not we sometimes meet with people in the world who are by natural constitution cold and unfeeling, and insensible to those emotions by which men are generally swayed? When we meet with an extreme case of this sort, we feel it impossible to love such a person. And do we not express that impossibility by using the very figure which I am seeking to illustrate, when we say, that there is “no life” in that person—meaning a life inward and mental? In short, that insensibility to feelings of tenderness and gratitude, which marks the state of the natural heart towards God, is felt most keenly, when exercised by others towards ourselves.

Not our duty alone, but our interest likewise, is bound up in shaking off this spiritual death. Those persons who are incapable of warm affections are for that very reason incapable likewise of active pleasure, or of real and deep happiness. They may not indeed

be conscious of this themselves, and if you tell them so, will receive your words with the same smile of cold incredulity, with which worldly men hear others speak of the Divine pleasures of the gospel; and yet the fact is so, nevertheless. A man is only capable of understanding what he himself feels; and if he has no personal experience of those keen sensations, which crowd hours into minutes, will likewise have no personal comprehension of the lively rapture, which they bring. Those alone who are accustomed to feel keenly, and to enjoy warmly, will know how much is lost by this cold, apathetic insensibility. Thus, too, the soul unquickened is ignorant of the delights which it loses by its very incapacity of enjoying them, for it has no personal experience of any state better than that of self-satisfied indifference: but the Christian, who has had sweeter experience, knows the love, and joy, and peace, and rich unutterable bliss, of which the dead soul is deprived. What a depth of privation and what a weight of endurance is contained in the state of that soul, which is "dead in sins and the uncircumcision of the flesh."

The point of the apostle's description is placed, not so much in the natural corruption of the heart, as in the effect of actual sins in increasing and intensifying that corruption. "You," saith the apostle, "being dead," not in sins, but "in your sins and the uncircumcision of the flesh," by which latter expression are described, those carnal and unsanctified appetites, which dwell in the flesh, and rebel against the law of the spirit. Have not all believers had melancholy experience of the deadening effects of actual transgression upon the conscience and the

affections? That still small voice, which is the witness of God within the soul, is, in its natural instincts, quick and active, and sensitive in all men. Great is the pain, deep the apprehension, intensely bitter the self-dissatisfaction, accompanying the first act of wilful sin; but this tenderness and alarm are soon lost, when the sin, whatever it may be, comes to be repeated again and again. It passes away little by little, like the departing light of day before the gathering shades of night. Anxiety gives way to indifference, and indifference to carelessness, and carelessness to contempt, and contempt unto hardened obstinacy. A man soon learns to hate the being whom he injures, till the very consciousness of guilt aggravates into an angry opposition the first indifference of the soul. Just in proportion to the goodness and holiness of the person we have injured, and to the obligations which that injury has violated, will be the active repugnance of the heart to admit the recollection of its sin, till, as with a bar of adamant, the threshold of the soul is closed against every call of grace.

Cannot all men recall something of this process in some page of the soul's melancholy history? Happy is he in whom the torpor has not become deadly; as it does become in thousands, when every spiritual perception becomes as completely closed to the influences of truth, as the deaf ear is to the most ravishing music, and the blind eye to the most magnificent spectacle. Let us, indeed, bless God, if "once dead in our sins we have now been quickened together with Christ."

II. Attention is next called to the state of the spiritual man, "quickened together with Christ."

Experience of the dead soul all have certainly had ; happy they who have experience of the living soul likewise. The ceaseless activity of bodily life, which makes it happiness to live, and pleasure to move, and which for one part or the other of the frame finds ceaseless occupation, represents the motions of the Spirit, now stirring with an inward life the once slumbering soul. The conscience no longer acquiesces in its former state of alienation from God, but now paints its sins in colours intensely vivid. Alarmed, and sensitive at the first approach of temptation, it gives true warning of approaching dangers. The heart is no longer insensible to the perfections of God, and to the beauty of the Saviour, but is moved with an intense longing to know Him more, and love Him better. "Like as the hart panteth for the water-brooks," so it pants for the fuller enjoyment of His grace, and yearns with the rapture of a holy desire for the "exceeding great and precious promises" of His word. The unseen God, the dying Saviour, the sanctifying Spirit, eternity, heaven and hell, are no longer mere words, which pass the lips without conveying any of their tremendous meaning to the heart ; but they have become to it the great realities of life, mighty verities, ruling all the thoughts and hopes. In short, the soul has been called out of its grave ; it has arisen from the dead, and now stands a living thing before God—all ear, and eye, and heart—all love, obedience, and attention. It has received life from the dead "and is quickened together with Christ."

The mode by which this change may have been brought about, may not be the same in all cases,

though the change itself is in all cases identical. Sometimes it comes all at once, sudden as the light from heaven, which struck to the ground persecuting Saul. An irresistible effluence of grace rouses the slumbering soul into a startled consciousness, till it looks around it, alarmed as some sleeper who has been suddenly awakened to find a fierce conflagration threatening his very life. Sometimes it meets a man amid the bustle of the world, as it came to Matthew of old, who, called by our Lord, arose from the receipt of custom, and followed him. Sometimes it comes little by little, first beginning with a solemn thought, then a serious conviction, then a holy resolution, then self-knowledge, then prayer and the sanctifying grace of the Holy Ghost. But let it come how it may, the effect is life still, like the breathing of the wind into the dry bones of Ezekiel's valley of vision. The difference wrought is so entire, that it is impossible that the soul should remain unconscious of its own change. Although its time may be uncertain, its effect is so clear, and accompanied with so many strivings and thoughts of heart, that a man may as easily be ignorant of his recovering from some sore malady, or his deliverance from some sudden and alarming danger, as be ignorant of those converting influences whereby he has been called out of darkness into light, and by which "he is a new creature; old things are passed away, all things are become new."¹ "What are these new emotions," the soul anxiously inquires, "which now stir my heart with aspirations never felt before? What new hopes and desires after holiness, as unutterably sweet as they are large

¹ 2 Cor. v. 17.

and capacious, are these, which now turn my whole soul towards God? How is it that my heart, once hard and impassive as the rugged rock, is now soft to all the influences of the Spirit, and melts into tender and adoring love towards the Saviour, whom it formerly despised? Why is it that this conscience, never troublesome to me of old time, is now so sensitive, that it bleeds from its inmost depths at the remembrance of my sins? How is it that I now turn away disgusted from those pleasures, objects, and associations, in which once I delighted; and that I never feel so happy, as in those acts of worship and meditation, and prayer and praise, which I once loathed as so many hated things? Why is it that I, who never had any anxious thoughts about my salvation, am now so restless and alarmed, that my whole being seems absorbed in the question, 'What shall I do to be saved?' Thus it is that the soul questions with itself, and inquires into the nature of that new experience, which is giving it every day deeper insight into itself, and into its God. And what is all this change, but the in-breathing of the life of God, till the dead soul moves, and thinks, and feels, and loves, and enjoys, and worships, and adores?

Another truth arrests attention in the language employed to describe this quickening of the soul. The converted soul contains within itself that germ, or seed of life, of which the glorification, even of the body, will be but the expansion throughout eternity. The life of the spirit, and the life of the flesh, as proceeding alike from one Lord and Giver of life, make up the one promise, and are so identified with

each other, that when the one commences the other is said to be possessed likewise. Thus, St. John declares, "He that hath the Son, hath life."¹ In this expression there are two things to be noted: first, the use of the present tense of the verb, not, "shall have," but "hath;" and, secondly, the force of the word "life," as implying, not the gift of living, but an inherent, essential, and undecaying life. Even in our own experience of the body, we should not call it "life," if the body, so to speak, merely vegetated; that is, if it merely possessed a passive existence, without the active powers and attributes of life; just as the flower lives, and yet, in a higher sense of the word, can scarcely be said to "have life." Life is the full development and the delighted exercise of the faculties, both of the flesh and of the spirit. In our present state, how imperfectly can we be said to have such a life as this! The body lives, yet amid what wants and weaknesses! what dangers and uncertainties! what elements of decay and seeds of death! With the soul it is still worse. The spiritual life is feeble at best, on this side the grave; not from any weakness in Him that gives it thought!—but from the weakness of the hearts into which it is in-breathed. It is not only feeble, but it is partial likewise. Is there a man, some part of whose soul does not lie "dead;" that is, in whom there is not some faculty undeveloped, some grace unpractised, some virtue unknown? In one man conscience is weak, and scrupulous; in another affection is cold, wavering, and inconstant; in a third reason is frail and dark. In every man some infirmity

¹ 1 John v. 12.

still remains, and there is ever some diseased portion of the heart, into which the healing balm of Gilead has not fully penetrated. Yet all this will be fully removed, when the life, now begun in the soul here, will be perfected in the soul and in the body hereafter. Let us not be impatient beneath the imperfections of this present state. Instead of repining that the work is not already accomplished here below, the Christian should praise and adore the infinite love of God, that so great a miracle is begun. If sanctification were complete on earth, it would make earth to be so like heaven, that we should cease to long, so fervently as we do now, for the rest "which remaineth for the people of God." Great is the joy, and sweet the peace, already possessed by the quickened soul. What will be its height of bliss and glory inconceivable, when every lingering trace of its corruption shall be removed, and the full crown shall be put in heaven to that blessed work, which God accomplishes in us on earth, when He "quickens us together with Christ, having forgiven us all trespasses"!

III. The procuring means of the change remains to be noticed, "having forgiven us all trespasses."

The miracle of conversion, great as it is, and passing the strength of any creature, would be easy to the Almighty. The Almighty Spirit—which, on the day of Pentecost, by means of a single sermon, bowed before the cross of the despised Galilean, three thousand souls as if they were one man—needs but to descend in His plenitude of gifts to change the hardest heart, till that which has been the dwelling-place of evil spirits, becomes a temple prepared for

the habitation of the Holy One. To us, indeed, such a work seems, as in truth it is, wonderful beyond thought, and yet to Omnipotence it cannot be otherwise than easy; and if this had been all, our salvation had not needed that wondrous machinery of grace, by which alone it is accomplished. But there was another impediment to be removed, before the Spirit could go forth in His might to work and conquer in the souls of men. Between man and God, sin had dug a chasm, deep and broad, as between heaven and hell. To bridge over this gulf was a task not light even to the Almighty. Divine love might have stretched out its saving hand across it, had not Divine justice stood there to bar the act. To unite mercy and truth, righteousness and peace, was a problem as far above the wisdom of created mind, as the power to execute it was beyond the grasp of created strength. All things else were easy but this one. Was it needed for the purposes of His will to create new worlds? God did but speak, and it was done; He commanded, and they stood fast.¹ Was it needed to deliver a chosen people from the hands of earthly enemies? He did but blow with His wind, and through the deep sea, as along a conqueror's pathway, moved on in safety the armies of Israel. But to save souls; to remove out of the way those sins, which stood between us and Him, and yet to keep His truth and vindicate His justice—to be just, and yet the justifier of man—needed a sacrifice great and wonderful even before God, the sacrifice of His own dear Son. Till we can measure the infinite descent from heaven to earth, and the glory of the Son of

¹ Psalm xxxiii. 9.

God before the world began; till we can gauge the love exercised in exchanging the worship of angels, and the companionship of the Deity, for an earthly life of shame and humiliation, for the manger and the wilderness, the cross and the grave—we never can tell the greatness of the price, or the preciousness of the ransom, by which God and man have been reconciled. All this needed to be accomplished before any soul could be quickened. The gift of the Holy Ghost could not be bestowed, till in the blood of the dying Son of God, and for the merits of His infinite propitiation, God had “forgiven us our trespasses.”

It is worth while to notice, in passing, the illustration of the true nature of sin, which is supplied by this word “trespasses.” It is of great importance to adopt some clear test, whereby to strip away the disguise under which sin oftentimes hides itself, and to discover its true essence. “To trespass,” is to pass over certain bounds and limits, intended to restrain our movements, as when some traveller should rudely push through a protecting fence into some spot which he has no right to enter. In the soul’s life, the commands of God are its land-marks. The heavenly pilgrim must not pass them, lest he quit the green pastures, and the protecting shelter of the everlasting fold, for the barren wastes of sin, and the ravening wolves of the great adversary’s army. Sin is the simple transgression of these bounds, the violation of these laws, either by doing what God has forbidden, or leaving undone what God has commanded; it matters not which. Many a false delusion, by which the soul is

encouraged to cry "peace, peace," when there is no peace, is struck away by the simple use of this test. To omit duty is to commit transgression; and if sin be opposition to God's will, as shown by the violation of God's law, where will the essence of sin be found in such intense bitterness, as in the unwilling, ungodly soul shrinking from the holy Saviour, not under the force of some violent temptation, but from a mere repugnance of the will, when, seeing it will not see, and hearing it will not understand? Let the soul bring itself honestly to this test, and it will be able no longer to deny its sin, nor wrap itself up in that delusion of its own righteousness, which holds it back from the offers of a Saviour's love.

Is the sense of transgression awakened in any man's soul! With what deep thankfulness may he turn to the rich fulness of this promise, and the all-sufficiency of this blood-shedding. Here the soul may rest, assured that the Saviour has "forgiven us *all* trespasses"! All are blotted out, as a thick cloud, from the book of the Divine remembrance; though they be numerous as those of David, "more in number than the hairs of his head;" and heinous as those of St. Paul, who calls himself the chief of sinners; but adds, "howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting."¹

Does the soul inquire, how it may know that its sins are forgiven? By this; whether the Holy Ghost hath called it into a new life; for all the parts of this text must be taken together. If the soul be still dead in

¹ 1 Tim. i. 16.

its sins and the uncircumcision of the flesh, then is the guilt of its transgressions uncleansed and unforgiven; if the soul be quickened together with Christ, and renewed after his image, then its pardon is accomplished, and God hath forgiven it all sins.

One final lesson springs so immediately from the text, that it must not be omitted. The words enable us to distinguish between the false calm, sometimes characteristic of the last hours of the unbeliever, or of the nominal Christian, and the sure and well-founded peace shed upon the dying couch of the converted child of God. It happens sometimes that men, who have lived utterly without God in the world, in the total neglect of all means of grace—it may be without even a profession of religion—show no fear at the approach of death, and die with an unruffled equanimity of mind and conscience. Those who witness such an end, being unable to distinguish it from real peace of mind, are encouraged to live in the same forgetfulness of God, and the same carelessness to the great realities of death and judgment, as the person whose closing life they witness. That lesson, which ought to arouse the conscience, is thus perverted into a means of folding it into a deeper slumber. Yet such a calm is indeed as different from true peace, as the slumber of the grave is from the refreshing sleep of life. It consists not in any firm, clear hope, upholding the soul in its day of trial, but in a mere deadness of conscience, increased by a whole life-time of self-delusion, and not to be shaken off, even amid the natural alarms of a dying hour. The blindness of the mental eye has become so deep, the hardness of the conscience so confirmed, the

slumber of the soul so deadly, that the soul passes on unmoved to a change, which might well make even the mind of an angel pause and wonder. That one step, by which we pass from a world seen and known, to another unseen and unknown as yet, will unfold so many mysteries, clear up so many doubts, that for a mind to regard it with indifference, whatever may be its opinions, is wholly monstrous and unnatural. Even the unbeliever himself must feel the awfulness of the moment, which is to prove, or to disprove, for ever, the convictions and controversies of a life. To the believer, however completely fear may be taken away by his strong assurance in a Saviour's effectual righteousness, the soul must needs stand in awe, and, as it were, hold its breath in suspense, when the moment comes for it to step, wondering, into another existence.

Here, then, is the test, supplied by the text. If the calmness of a dying hour consists in a mere lack of feeling altogether—if it be marked by an absence of all emotion for good or evil—if the soul be moved by no sense of the greatness of the event, at the threshold of which the feeling stands—then it is indifference, not peace; the stagnation of an utter death, and not the calmness of an assured life. The Christian has peace—not because he is unconscious of the importance of the great change, but because he has around him the Everlasting Arms, beneath him the Rock of Ages, and before him the Saviour crowned with glory, and honour, and immortality, waiting to receive the soul on the shore of an everlasting world.

Thus the whole course of the spiritual life, from

the first quickening of the believing heart, to the moment when it shall be gathered safely into heaven, is crowned with the same promise. It stretches across the firmament of the soul's hope, bright as a rainbow, spanning the visible heavens, and, like the rainbow, it reflects through the tears of its affliction the glories of the Divine Word, "You, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses."



VII.

THE CONTRITE HEART.

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit : a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”—PSALM li. 17.

IT has sometimes been objected to the gospel, that it begins its work by crushing the natural confidence of a man in himself, and reducing the mind to a state of helplessness and despondency. The objection supposes, that a mind thus influenced loses the motive for exertion, and sinks into a heartless, lifeless creature, all self-execration and disgust, moved by a gloomy and degrading fear, and living in an abject and helpless dependence. Those who, by the grace of God, have personal experience of what a Christian’s feelings really are, know what a monstrous perversion of the truth such a statement is. Considering, however, the readiness with which the mind colours with its own theories every fact on which it dwells, it is not wonderful that men, who are without this personal experience of a believer’s thoughts, should confound with an abject listlessness that lowly sense of guilt, which the gospel does really demand. The fault is not so much, that men should fall from ignorance into such an error, as that they should persist in it after it has been repudiated, and shutting their eyes to patent facts, should refuse to accept the believer’s statement of his experience. The active energies, the

ennobling hopes, the holy constancy of purpose, the righteous self-control, and the elevation of desire, undoubtedly produced by religion upon nations and churches, ought to show conclusively that such likewise is its effect upon individuals, since they are but the units, of which nations and churches are composed. Nor can we avoid this conclusion, unless we esteem the dark ages of Paganism to have been more great and virtuous than those of Christianity; and such an estimate would suppose either a depth of prejudice, or an amount of ignorance, with which argument would be useless.

The gospel does, indeed, begin its work by producing in the soul a sense of contrition, resembling in some faint degree what the objection supposes; but it is only as the entrance gate into other feelings; as the threshold, over which it passes into truths so mighty, and hopes so infinitely glorious, that no influences of the world can for a moment be compared with them, it is as if a man should stoop his head beneath some lowly portico, and then stand astonished at the sublimity of the building, into which he has entered; or, as if a traveller should pass through some narrow ravine, dark with overhanging rocks, and then should emerge all at once into the light and beauty of a matchless landscape. It was, doubtless, with this feeling that the compilers of the Liturgy placed at the commencement of the public service such passages as the text, that the soul might approach God in the humble frame of mind, and with the lowliness of heart, befitting a sinner before the great and awful Jehovah. We do not come before Him, as equals with an equal, between whom there

is a mere distinction of station, but no dissimilarity of being; but as those who are altogether inferior and dependent: not as those who think they are doing Him any benefit, or presenting precious and costly gifts, which may add to His glory and win His favour; but as those who need to receive all, and who, in their deep unworthiness, have nothing of their own with which to purchase acceptance. "Thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it; thou delightest not in burnt-offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

These words express—

I. The nature of the broken and contrite heart, which God requires.

II. The beauty and nobility of the Christian service.

I. What it really is, that God will accept. It is not an abject, spiritless, lifeless despondency, without self-respect or animating hope. It is possible, that such a notion may have partly arisen from the use we commonly made of the expression "broken-hearted." It is used to denote such an utter misery, such a deprivation of all that is loved and dear, such hopeless, helpless necessity, as destroys life with the weight of absolute despair. Such a crushing blow we do not very unfrequently see, not indeed in the man of God (for he, though cast down, is never destroyed), but in the men and women of the world. For instance, a heart has been so wholly wrapped up in some object of earthly affection, that when in the counsels of God that object has been taken away, all hope is stricken beneath the blow, and the mourner never lifts up the head again on earth. But such is

not the believer's temper, nor such the meaning of the scriptural language, when it speaks of the broken and the contrite heart.

Both words express so much the same meaning, that it will not fall within my present purpose to enter at large into their exact separate force. The word "broken," in its familiar acceptance, implies the separation into parts more or less complete, of something which had previously presented a hard, firm, and compact surface; and "contrite," in the derivation of the English word, means much the same—namely, the rubbing or grinding down of some hard substance into a state suitable to our use. But mark, what it is, which is broken and contrite; not the soul's hope; nor the soul's powers and faculties; nor the soul's joy and peace; but its pride and self-confidence. The image is that of the rock. On its barren surface the dews from heaven may fall, and God's quickening sun may shine from day to day, and from year to year, and yet, if all be rock, and there are no clefts and fissures, in which soil and moisture may rest, dew and sun will be alike in vain, and it will remain bare and barren as at first. So the heart of man, in his unconverted state, is called a heart of stone. God promises by the mouth of the prophet Ezekiel, "I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh."¹ Thus, too, our Lord, in the well-known parable of the sower, represents the unbelieving heart under the image of stony ground.² As no external influences can soften stone, so the unregenerate heart resists the promises and threatenings,

¹ Ezek. xi. 19.

² Matt. xiii. 20.

the goodness and the wrath of God, and all those mingled motives, whereby grace can act upon the soul. How else is it, that men live in cold indifference to all they themselves believe to be worthy of pursuit, and in utter contradiction to all they themselves confess to be the true principles of action; but because the heart in its evil blindness is hard, and cold, and dead? As the body, under the influence of some deadly mortification of disease, may become callous to that to which in a state of health it would be keenly sensitive; so the soul, even if not convinced, would be sensitive to all that touches its eternal hopes, were it not that the fatal disease of sin produces a spiritual deadness, till it cannot think, or feel, or see. This must be broken down; and how? but by bringing home to the soul the sense of guilt, by teaching it to see itself as it really is before God, and to become conscious of the facts of its own inner existence, till, mourning beneath its wants, it is brought in faith to the cross of the Saviour.

This is the broken and contrite heart, that acknowledges its natural depravity, and utter spiritual weakness. In stating this depravity and weakness, the strongest terms are inadequate to express half the truth. It would not be true to say, that there remain in the soul no traces of that uncorrupted image, in which it was first created; or that there is nothing beautiful, elevated, and noble in human nature, depraved and ruined though it is. There is undoubtedly much gentleness in one heart, much constant self-denying affection in another, vigour and force of will in a third; but these lingering traces

of the Divine image do but throw into the darker contrast the utter moral corruption associated with them. Just thus, amid the ruins of some old building, the exquisite tracery of a window, or the proportions of a column, or the carving of a capital, does but make us lament the more, that a structure once so beautiful and stately should have fallen into decay. Let a man but look into himself, and he will have the same feeling in regard to the state of his own soul. Only let him quicken his sense of what God intended his nature to be, by looking from his own sins to the glory of his Saviour as, in all the perfection of His holiness, He exhibited in His own person human nature without a spot or taint of sin.

Can any heart view the degradation of its present state, and not long with a godly ambition to recover, through the merits of God's redeeming Son, his lost inheritance? Sharp, indeed, and heavy, may be the blow with which the hammer of the Spirit breaks the stubborn heart; but blessed are its effects. It is not sent that we should sink into despair; but that into the clefts of the opened conscience, and in the bleeding wounds of the awakened soul, the Holy One may pour the wine and oil of His rich consolations, till, in the sense of pardoned guilt, the broken bones may rejoice, and the sad heart break forth into songs of thanksgiving. In this temper men should be prepared to come before God. Are we mourning beneath our incapacity to save and help ourselves? If not, how can we think that God will accept us? Let us bring no more vain oblations, nor the empty formality of a lip-deep service. Away with all thoughts of purchasing our

acceptance before Him, by anything we can do, or anything we can give, though all the gold and silver of the world were ours. There is an offering, indeed, which He the Holy One will accept, but that offering is so pure and spiritual that His grace alone can prepare it. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

II. The beauty and nobility of this service next claim attention. If this can be proved, it will be evident, that a deep sense of sin does not destroy either the self-respect, or the animating hopes, on the assumed absence of which the unbeliever bases his objection against the Christian character.

The assertion may seem paradoxical, and strangely different to what at first thought we should suppose the effect to be. But it is a great truth nevertheless, and one to which the heart and conscience bear witness. The believer, with his contrite and broken heart, has a far higher respect for himself, and entertains an infinitely higher estimate of his own nature, destiny, and fortunes, than the self-confident heart of the man of the world ever frames for itself. All notions of the natural perfectibility of man—that is, that man may by his natural powers attain the highest state of perfection he is capable of reaching—do but degrade the nature which God has given us. The Christian retorts upon the world its accusation, and charges it with having a mean estimate of man, and of lowering his noble nature into the saddest impersonation of towering weakness, and incapable pride, the mind of man can possibly conceive.

Let us take the state of man, as he is in himself,

apart from all which is gained from revelation, and let us even, on this low platform, place the man of the world and the man of God side by side; then let us ask, whether thus far they are not equal, to say the least—whether, on any point, the man of the world has a right to claim the pre-eminence? He will talk to you, indeed, of his intellect, of his love of moral good, and of his social affections; well, and has not the Christian these just as much as he? Is the intellect we possess of necessity less than his, and are we less careful in training, nurturing, and developing it? Among the great master-minds, which have left their impress upon the world, and have guided mankind on to the great discoveries of science, and to the schemes of philosophy, which mark our day, the names of Christian men stand pre-eminent. And why else is it, that the school is reared next the Church, and strenuous efforts made to teach men to think for themselves, and to cultivate to the utmost the intellectual gifts which God has given them? Is a Christian man less capable of exercising a resolute will, or of practising self-restraint; or less careful over the social affections, and over the true constant love of family and friends, than the unbeliever is?

The answer again is the negative. When, therefore, the believer mourns beneath a sense of sin, it is not, that he lowers his own condition beneath the standard of the unbeliever, but it is that, keeping the same level in himself, he raises his standard of hope and excellence still higher. The estimate which we put upon a thing, is comparative to the nature of the test by which we estimate it. If a

man had never seen any building loftier than an ordinary house, that would become his standard of height; but when he has stood beneath some vast cathedral, from whose towering roof the lofty spire stretches up toward heaven, his standard of height in a building is raised, and he perceives that the house is comparatively low. If a man had never seen any mass of water larger than a pond, he would think a lake enormous; and yet, when at a subsequent period he became acquainted with the furthest bounds of the broad sea, the dimensions of the lake would seem to him to be, as they really are, comparatively insignificant. If he wanted to measure the stature of a man, and had never seen any natural object higher than a hill, he would form a larger estimate of it than another man would do who compared his puny littleness with the gigantic proportions of some majestic mountain.

The same mode of calculation is universal in regard to our mental acquirements, and to the progress which, at different periods of our life, we may have made in any art or accomplishment; and by this alone can the spiritual state of a soul be rightly measured. The unbeliever thinks, that there is nothing greater or wiser than man; and therefore he limits his standard of what is great and wise to his own miserable experience, or to that of men weak and sinful as himself. The believer, on the contrary, lifts up his eyes to a standard, as incomparably greater than himself, as God is greater than man; and if he thinks meanly of his own spiritual endowments, it is because he has made the clear gain of conceiving something immeasurably higher, purer,

and more glorious. Did he compare himself with his fellow-men, then, if he were a man of gifts and graces at all, he might think well of his own state; but when he compares himself with mighty nature, and with nature's mightier God, he finds between himself and his standard of perfection a difference, so vast as to fill him with the deepest humility and contrition.

With this standard it is that we are taught to measure ourselves, gathering our conceptions of what is good and holy from the full revelation of Him of whom St John declares, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."¹ Thus our Lord taught His disciples, "Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."² We can never indeed—no, not even in heaven—expect to attain to the absolute holiness of God; but there is a great lesson, and as blessed as it is great, in this very inability. For the infiniteness of the model set before us for our imitation does but suggest wondering thoughts of those heights of grace and knowledge, which the soul may traverse beneath the guidance of the Spirit, but which, when traversed, will but open fresh heights beyond, and still leave the cloudless perfections of the Deity, stretching above the soul's furthest thoughts, vast and immeasurable. Just as when a traveller, desirous of impressing his mind with the height of some inaccessible mountain peak rearing its tall head into the clouds, climbs with laborious toil to the highest point that he can reach, and then stretches his gaze upward and upward still—so the saint, attaining throughout eternity fresh measures of grace, fresh

¹ John i. 5.

² Matt. v. 48.

capacities of knowledge, will worship in happy wonder the perfections which still tower above him, infinite as Deity.

But it will be said, that the example of God Himself is so utterly unattainable, as to be practically of little value in forming our estimate of what we ought to be. Let us look, then, from God to His Word, and there we shall find a standard of holiness laid down, with especial and direct reference to human nature, as it is and as it ought to be. Here is described every grace befitting man, through the whole blessed series up to that charity, which crowns and adorns them all. This is a law spiritual, and it pierces far below the outward actions of the life into the inner thoughts and intents of the heart. It demands a holy hatred of sin, not from the fear of its consequences, but from abhorrence of its moral depravity; unstained innocence of life; consistency of thought, and word, and work; a tongue ruled by grace; a gentle, tender heart, to feel for every woe; a ready hand, to help every want; a life rich with good deeds, and all flowing on like some full, deep river—that makes the smiling landscape musical with its waters, and fertile with its influence.

Nor is this all; but in the blessed pages of the Word we have all grace portrayed in the life and character of our blessed Master. Qualities apparently most contrary to each other, were all united in Him, like so many varied rays making up the glory of the one sun. In Him we see not an abstract standard of holiness, but the actual example of it, exhibited amidst the self-same weaknesses, trials, and afflictions, with which we ourselves contend. He has presented

in His own person, human nature without sin, such as God intended it to be, and such as it will be in the perfect regeneration, which we hope to attain in heaven. How vast is the difference which the absence of this one thing made ! so that nature in ourselves, corrupted and impure, is all beautiful and lovely in Him. Yet there was not a grace in Christ, of which the reflection—faint perhaps, yet most true and real—ought not to be found in ourselves ; for this is what St. John teaches, when, setting forth the glory of the Incarnate Word, he commends it by this—“ Of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.”¹

Can we wonder that the believer forms a lowly estimate of his own character, when he measures it by a standard such as this ? And now let it be asked which of the two more ennobles his own nature and hopes, the self-confident man of the world, or the broken-hearted and contrite Christian ? The first thinks himself perfect already, faultless in intellect, and clean in heart ; the latter thinks his own nature wonderful—as indeed it is—but yet only a melancholy ruin of what once it was, and but the faint image of what it will be. He conceives himself to be capable of a far higher condition, and realizes as the actual object of his desire, a state of perfected regeneration, when to the cloudless intellect all shall be clear, and to the purified heart all shall be holy. Which of these two thoughts most elevates the man ?

If, from the estimate of our own nature, we turn to other great truths, the advantage which the Christian has over the man of the world will be still more

¹ John i. 16.

conspicuous. The latter considers himself to be composed of body and mind; the former adds to these an undying spirit, made in the very image and similitude of God. The one deems himself formed to act his petty part upon life's great theatre for three-score years and ten, and then to die, as the beast dieth, sinking into blank annihilation, with all his soaring hopes, and boasted intellect: the other believes that he shall live for ever, and exist in the power of an endless life, through countless ages of light and glory. The one estimates the highest object of his being, to accumulate corruptible wealth, or to gain the applause and approbation of his fellow-men: the other labours to lay up treasure to everlasting life, and to attain "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven."¹ The one acts in the consciousness of being surrounded by earthly witnesses, the rivals and competitors of his race: the other, standing in the same relation to his fellow-men, stretches his thoughts beyond them, to an innumerable company of witnesses, and above all, to the all-pervading presence, the all-seeing eye, and the all-ruling strength of an awful and majestic God. The one finds his best happiness in intercourse with human creatures like himself, the earthly partners of his life: the other, deriving a yet greater sweetness from the charms of earthly love, even than the man of the world does (because he sanctifies them with a holier principle, and knits them in a diviner sympathy), finds his purest joy of all in communion with the unseen "Father of spirits," through the intercession of His

¹ 1 Pet. i. 4.

dear Son. The one derives the maxims by which he acts, from no higher authority than the loose and uncertain deductions of human reason : the other acts by the immediate revelation of the Holy One, a revelation unalterable as Him, with whom, is no variableness, nor shadow of turning. The one considers all things here below to be ordered by a blind chance, or by an inexorable necessity, and all the mingled events of life to be but a disordered chaos, without governance or order : the other realizes above and around him the constant operation of a God, as good as He is wise and strong, who orders them all to a definite purpose, and has pledged His truth, that they "shall work together for good to them that love him."¹

Can there be a doubt as to the scale in which the balance preponderates ? On the side of the world, great assumption, but great weakness ; a mean hope ; a dark and troubled present ; and a future, void and blank as the annihilation, supposed to end it : on the other, the confession of a depraved and feeble nature ; but with it a mighty hope, a present lighted by clear principle and firm assurance, and a future high as heaven, long as eternity, and magnificent as God.

Here is the very essence of the broken and contrite heart. If it were before men alone that we stood, then should we hold ourselves erect as men do. We abase ourselves, because we look to the infinite perfections of the Deity. We confess our weakness, because of the greatness of the enemies against whom we fight, and of the dignity of the inheritance to which we aspire.

¹ Rom. viii. 28.

See, once more, how great a work of grace the possession of a broken and contrite heart supposes, and in what sense we are to understand the assurance, that such a sacrifice God will not despise. The haughty spirit, with its narrow views and earth-loving desires, God utterly rejects, though around it should be thrown all the pomp and glory of this lower world. The gaudy setting of human state cannot hide from Him the deep abominations of the unconverted soul. But lay before His throne the sacrifice of a broken heart, and this He will accept ; for this is the workmanship of His own Spirit, the trophy of His Son's righteousness, the temple of His love.

Wouldst thou sit in heavenly places with Christ Jesus ? Bow down thyself, that He may exalt thee ; lower all thy vain thoughts into the dust before the cross ; mourn and weep for the multitude of thy transgressions, and then, from amidst thy tears, look up and smile, as the accents of an eternal love thrill sweetly upon thine ear. " Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy ; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." " The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit : a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

VIII

THE ENLIGHTENED CONSCIENCE.

“What is this that God hath done unto us?”—GEN. xlii. 28.

OF all the scriptural narratives, there is none which requires for its full explanation a larger knowledge of human nature than the history of Joseph and his brethren. The motives under which Joseph acted are clear enough. He was guided by an express commandment of that God before whose eye the soul is open, and who alone can infallibly touch the chords of its responsive emotions. We cannot but wonder at the apparent severity, and, we may almost say injustice, of his conduct on the occasion of the visit of his brethren, and that he did not in a gush of renewed affection forget all the past, and throw himself with the eagerness of a brother into the arms of those from whom he had been long separated. That his conduct did not proceed from any want of affection towards them, the deep emotion he is recorded to have felt, abundantly testifies. Even at the first interview, his heart was so full, that it was only by turning from them, and allowing his grief to flow in unseen tears, that he was enabled to carry on the part he had adopted. With how true a tenderness his heart was yearning over them all the time, is seen in the passionate emotion which, when his object was gained, he allowed to break forth with a vehemence

so great and loud, that all "the house of Pharaoh heard." Why it was that with severe looks, and rough words, and harsh accusations, he made them experience something of the unkindness of which they had themselves been guilty towards him in other days, throwing, as it were, their souls back upon themselves, we may gather from the result. Joseph, it must be remembered, was a child of God, and knowing in his own experience the comforts of God's presence, rightly understood the heinousness of sin, and the necessity for true conversion of heart, before the sinner can be reconciled to God. Whereas it would seem that up to this time his brethren had never rightly felt the sinfulness of their acts against him, and against their aged father. Now their consciousness of guilt was awakened, and though we cannot exactly trace the manner in which they connected their present difficulties with their former sin, nor know the precise mental links by which the end was wrought, it is evident that in this light it presented itself to their mind from the very first. Conviction being thus aroused, every succeeding circumstance was coloured with the same remorse, and but tended to awaken into a late, but deep repentance, their long-slumbering consciences.

If this were the effect produced, and if to produce it was the object of Joseph's conduct, as we are led to conclude it was, we can no longer think him unkind, but must conclude that he was guided by the truest wisdom, and prompted by the most lively love. What could he give them comparable to this? What was the worth of Goshen's land, and of all Egypt's

plenty amid a time of famine, comparably to a quiet conscience, and the favour of that God, who is as a sun and shield to them that trust in Him?

This leads our thoughts on from Joseph to One yet mightier than He, to that second and greater Joseph, who ascended up into heaven, and having "led captivity captive, has received gifts for men." Very striking, indeed, are the points of resemblance between the history of Joseph and the history of Christ, comparing small with great, and things earthly with things heavenly. Like Joseph, our Lord came unto His own, and His own received Him not; and it was by the hands of those who were bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh, that the atoning Son of God was nailed to the accursed tree, the rejected of man, but the well-beloved of God. As it was with Joseph, who seemed removed for ever out of his brethren's path, but to whom the pit, and bonds, and the prison became, in the will of God, the high-road to greatness, as he that governed Egypt; so too it was with our Lord. At His crucifixion, it seemed as if hell had triumphed; and yet the cross was but the entrance into glory, and the humiliation of the grave but the prelude to His mediatorial kingdom, when the Father should put all things into His hands, and He should reign over men and angels, things visible and invisible. What do Joseph's brethren represent, as, pining with the sore famine, they came to seek food from him they had injured, though for a time they did not recognize the stripling Joseph in Egypt's lordly governor—but the return of the sinner to Christ? Like them, we come to Him, whom in times past our sins have

crucified afresh, that we may enter for His sake into the green pastures of a Divine peace, and into the rest remaining for the people of God in heaven.

May we not carry the comparison one step further, and say, that Christ often deals mysteriously with His people, and makes Himself strange to them for a time, just as Joseph did to his brethren? Many will remember when they sought to find Him, and yet seemed driven back again; when they cried for grace, and yet seemed to cry in vain; and when it appeared as if, both temporally and spiritually, their God had turned away His countenance in displeasure? Was it not with us, as it was with Joseph's brethren, that this mode of God's dealing quickened the dead conscience, and by some fine and subtle link of thought recalled sins long since committed, and, perhaps, long since forgotten? When this work first was begun in them, they were perplexed about their own state. They stood still, as it were, on life's high-road, to review the past, and to look into the future. And as they searched into the secrets of memory, and into the fears of conscience, they found hanging over them a charge of guilt so sudden, and so startling, that their hearts failed them, and they were afraid, and cried out with the sons of Jacob, "What is this which God hath done unto us?"

The great subject here presented is the enlightenment of the conscience, and three topics relative to the Divine dealings are suggested by the narrative.

I. The motive of the dealings of God with the conscience.

II. The mode in which He acts.

III. The state of conscience to be produced.

I. The great motive of God's dealings with the soul, from which arises all that seems dark and severe in life. It is not that God has pleasure in the sight of us suffering. What! God have pleasure in the pain which racks these bodies of flesh! in the disappointments which, like some wintry wind, nip and wither, more or less, the earthly hopes and prospects of men! pleasure in the death which separates from each other those who love—husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters! pleasure in those pains and agonies of conscience, those tears of repentance, and all that inward strife, by which alone the soul is brought to God! No! the fondest mother that ever hung over her babe, or pressed with rapturous love the dear treasure to her bosom, never shrank half so sensitively and tenderly from giving pain to her child, as God shrinks from giving pain to His people—or, rather, would shrink from it if the soul's necessities did not engage His very love to remedy them by any means, however sharp and painful.

The soul sunk in sin represents in its melancholy history the experience of some poor drowning wretch, just snatched from amid the deep waters. Perhaps the man only intended to bathe a limb, but lost his hold on the land, and sank all at once beyond his depth, without the power to save himself. Then came the first startled shock—the shrill cry for help—the terrible agony and strife for life that did but sink him the more hopelessly beneath the waves; but as the waters overcame him, and he sank more and more deeply, all this passed away; and (as is the case with drowning men) if he yet experienced any feeling at

all, it was only one of gentle lassitude, the faint sensations of departing life, as the stream closed above his head. It may be that at this moment some friendly hand has grasped the sinking corpse, and dragged it forth, all unconscious. And now the busy toil of philanthropic love seeks to restore life, and with many an application of human skill, to stir again into motion within the veins the stagnant blood. It succeeds ; the stream of life again begins to flow ; the heart, which seemed as if it had stopped for ever, beats again ; and a deep sigh denotes returning animation. But with this comes returning pain, and it is accompanied with such a pungent and bitter agony, that the man, were he left free to choose, had rather die than suffer it. "Let me die," he exclaims, with the first powers of returning speech.

Should the physician then let the man die ? Would it be true philanthropy and love to cease the effort, just as success was crowning it ? With what detestation and scorn would all regard the man who could act so, and rather let the man perish than put him to the pain of recovery ? No ; life is too precious to be wasted, with all its hopes, and fears, and interests, and duties—anything to preserve life. So it is with the soul ; it is too infinitely precious to be permitted to die ; anything but that. Like the drowning man, the soul, it may be, had at first no intention of wholly plunging into sin ; it only intended to sin a little, and to lave in the cool waters of gratified iniquity the heat of some riotous passion, and then to withdraw again. It only meant to sport and dally with sin for a time, and flattered itself with the thought that, when the sin grew dangerous, and likely to gain

too great a power, it would withdraw its limb, and step back to the firm safe shore of peace again. Poor deluded heart ! it did not know the slippery precipice on which it planted its foot—a precipice, on which it is as impossible to stand still, as it is impossible for a man to save himself, when from the top of some tall cliff he has been precipitated headlong down.

How different has been its experience, as it felt itself slip all at once into the very depths of open transgression ! Then came the strife of an alarmed conscience ; the desperate struggle of a soul battling, in its own strength, with sins into which it has madly ventured ; the remorse ; the bitter self-loathing ; the hatred of the sin, which at once hates and caresses while it hates. Then, in the unequal contest, sin gradually prevails, and deeper and deeper yet in the awful waters sinks the soul, while its pains and fears pass away, like the struggles of a drowning man, into indifferent carelessness, and the evil pleasures. The conscience is now dead, and the dead thing no longer feels the pangs it once experienced. But God meets with it ; not that God did not offer help before, but that the soul, battling in its own strength, would not accept of it. But His arm now catches hold of the sinner, and drags him forth from his sin by the might of an imperious conviction ; and with the breath of the Spirit, and amid the light of His truth, and the warmth of His love, seeks to quicken the dead heart into life again. Then comes the agony ; the sudden startling glimpse of sin ; the horror with which the soul clearly views, for the first time, the frightful hell into which it was sinking ; the amazement of seeing, in the full light of day, the baseness of its own sin ;

the fear with which it views the gulf which has been placed between itself and God; the effort with which it struggles against what is dear to it still. All this comes as life comes, and the dead conscience wakes up from its long torpor. What then? Shall God withhold His hand, and leave the soul to perish, rather than let it live and feel? Oh no! Like a physician, He watches the inward struggle, and with the medicine of a chastening providence stimulates, if need be, and deepens more and more the pangs of awakened conviction.

Can we wonder that the means effectual to produce such an effect should be sore and painful? We must expect startling visitations of Providence, awful monitions of death and judgment, painful afflictions of the flesh, and quick strivings of the Spirit; some text of the Word fixing itself firmly upon the heart, like a shaft from the quiver of the Holy One, like a blow of the sword of the Spirit. But meanwhile the soul is still in gracious keeping, and our God will not lay upon it more than it is able to bear. Only let the disturbed conscience inquire what it is that God is doing; let the question be prayerfully asked, "Why am I tried thus? What is it that yet clouds from my view the sight of the Saviour? What mean this stir and fearful emotion? What these thoughts of sin, and of a righteous God? Whence comes this power with which the world unseen has taken possession of my thoughts? What is this that God is doing unto me?"

II. Consider the mode of God's acting upon the conscience. There is no one unvarying instrument used; for the instruments of conversion are infinite

as the wisdom of God, and various as the peculiarities and temptations of men. In their kind and in their degree they differ widely. It would be a great mistake to think that none are truly converted but those who have been awakened by precisely the same process, and have passed through precisely the same experience as ourselves. For what is this but to limit the wisdom of God, and to tie down to our own narrow thoughts the freedom of His operations, whose Spirit is as the wind, that bloweth where it listeth?

Nor are the instruments the same in degree, any more than they are in kind. Some souls require stronger and longer chastisements than others do; just as in natural things we are conscious that some men are more easily moved and persuaded than others. Here is the key to explain many of the Divine dealings, and answer many a question, why God deals thus or thus with us, and sends to us heavier afflictions than He appears to send to others. Here is one man, whose nature is all soft, yielding, and pliant; weak, it may be, and from that very weakness more apt to catch impressions, just as a single wave may leave upon the sand a track, which it will take years to wear upon the rock. Another man is thoughtful and inquiring, and still retains the impressions of his early life; not, indeed, in all their freshness and early power, but still deep and strong. Another is gifted with an overflowing energy of mind, firm in will, confident in thought, impetuous in act, stubborn in purpose, and with a natural pride, that spurns control. Here is one, just horror-stricken with his first sin, and tossed with all the pangs of an alarmed conscience. Here another, who has sinned

for a lifetime ; with whom grace has wrestled for years and years ; whose iniquities have become a second nature, and have grown, from long indulgence, into uncontrollable strength, like the arms of some sturdy forest tree, which may be broken, but cannot be bended. Shall God deal with all these souls alike ? Shall we complain, because to the stronger will shall come the sharper remedy ? Shall we not rather leave it in His hands, who knows us better than we know ourselves, and who cannot err, either in the motive, or in the mode of His operations ?

Thus it happens that consciences are quickened by very different modes. Upon one, the truth breaks all at once, like a lightning flash, cleaving the darkness, and exhibiting at one fearful glance the soul's whole danger. Upon another, it opens gradually, like the morning spread upon the mountains ; there is the first early ray that streaks the east ; then it grows and deepens over the heavens, till the sun comes forth in all its power, and higher and higher yet climbs up towards the zenith. To one it comes in an awful sense of sin, uncheered for a time by any clear view of Christ. To another it comes in joy, and triumph ; the soul exults in the beauty of the gospel, and melts into tenderness at the infiniteness of the love exercised in its accomplishment.

Yet let it come how it will, its effects will still be the same ; arousing conscience into a holy activity, as it did with Joseph's brethren. Look for a few moments at the cause of their alarm. They were astonished to find their money in their sacks, for they thought they had left it behind them in Egypt, in return for the corn, which they were carrying back to pining Canaan.

They found, that they had indeed their corn, but they had their money too : their corn was still unpaid for. Instead of being free men, they found themselves debtors, and in the power of that strange, mysterious governor, who had already given them so much cause for dread, and who held in his power the supplies necessary to preserve their lives, and the lives of their children. And is it not thus with the soul, in the first startled consciousness of its state before God ? The soul thought that it owed God and Christ nothing : it now finds that it owes them all, its very life and existence having been purchased by the blood of the Lamb without spot.

It once thought that it was in safety, and could stand without fear at that dread tribunal, before which we must all appear to give account of the things which we have done in the body : it now finds itself hemmed round by the accusations of guilt, and shrinks alarmed at the very remembrance of the account it must render to God. Perchance it thought, that its sins had been conquered, and renounced long ago ; but now it finds them still reigning, and craving for their gratification as clamorously as ever. When this possibility of condemnation is once fully realized, all things are seen as the soul never saw them before. The excuses, long accepted in palliation of its sin, and the arguments of its self-delusion, are all swept away in this rush of conviction ; till the soul stands, like Joseph's brethren, as they looked upon one another, and caught from each other's faces the reflection of their fear. It cries out with the Psalmist of old, " Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up ; they are more than the hairs of mine

head : therefore my heart faileth me.”¹ Amazed at its own state ; shaken by this sudden arousing into life of convictions long dead, and thoughts never known before ; and with the wonders of the world to come flashing upon its view, the soul wonders, weeps, prays, and asks, “ What is this which God is doing unto me ? ”

III. The effect to be wrought is great. This is the full reconciliation of the soul to God through the blood of His dear Son, and the inheritance of that kingdom where the people of Christ will live and reign with Christ for ever. For the accomplishment of this the Son of God achieved His mighty work, and bowed Himself to the manger and to the garden, to the cross and to the grave. It is with God's dealings towards us, as it was with His dealings towards Joseph ; the future was all known, all ordered in those councils, which seemed at first dark and mysterious. The seven years' famine ; the staff of bread broken ; and the dire calamity forcing Israel's sons to seek corn in Egypt, were all His. His, likewise, the deep purposes, which provided for the great event, and sent Joseph before, as the appointed instrument, whereby to save His people in the day of their calamity. The effect produced by these events upon Jacob, and upon his sons, their settlement in Goshen, and the abundance enjoyed by them there, were all ordered by Him. In the same way, God prepares His people now for the time of coming trial, and provides beforehand for them the supply of all their need in the evil days coming upon the earth. There is a famine in the world even now ;

¹ Psalm xl. 12.

not indeed of bread, but of righteousness and peace. Search the whole earth through, and nothing will be found in it to satisfy the yearnings of an undying spirit, beating with the pulses of a spiritual life. Where shall we find bread for the soul? Shall we find it in our own works, or in the cold philosophy of the world? Shall we find such a happiness, as a rational and an immortal creature ought to seek, in the mere round of worldly business, or in the excitement of worldly society, or in the parade of worldly pomp? Shall we find peace in an unawakened conscience, or in the formalism of an outward service? No. The soul is far too great, even in its fall, and is endowed with faculties too active, and affections too capacious, to find a true satisfaction in things like these.

What then! shall the soul pine for what it cannot have, and hunger and thirst for a righteousness and peace unattainable below? Are all these thoughts of heaven; these hopes piercing into the future; these desires for God; nothing more than unreal dreams, never to be accomplished? Blessed be God, they are not. There is corn in Egypt. There is a Saviour in heaven, the bread of life, "of which if a man eat, he shall live for ever." Here is the great question, Whether men have come to Christ to find it? Let not the soul fear, though at first it should seem to come in vain. Perhaps you know not, that this is Joseph, against whom you have offended; the loving Lord, whom you have crucified with your sins, and counted the blood of His covenant an unholy thing. Perhaps you know not that you must come to Him as suppliants, weeping and mourning beneath your

guilt, and conscious of your unworthiness. Learn this lesson, and then come to Him again, bringing with you gifts of a sweet savour, in the broken and contrite heart. Surely He will not cast you out. Have you been reconciled unto Him, and wept upon His neck, as you confess your sins, and He clasps you in His arms, like a loving brother, who welcomes you to His side again? He is yearning over you now. "It is Joseph," indeed, your Saviour, your Brother, your God, your portion for ever.

If this reconciliation be not effected, then will the Saviour still be stern and strange, as Joseph was to his brethren; a King and Judge, not a friend and brother. Then shall we see His justice, not His mercy; His power, but not His love. Then shall we never reign with Him in Goshen, nor reach that happy land, where He is gone before to prepare a habitation, and to store with bliss and joy the mansions of a heavenly inheritance. The soul's participation of the spiritual life here, is the pledge of its possession of the heavenly life hereafter.

Then will be the final consummation of God's gracious purposes towards the soul, when its wants and weaknesses, its fears and trials, will all be ended in heaven. Sweet, indeed, is the peace, and unspeakable are the joys, of the saint even here upon earth. The presence of the living Saviour is with him; the glory of the world to come shines all around his earthly path; the messages of love are radiant upon the pages of the world; and many an hour of sweet communion and holy joy breaks the long struggle of the spiritual warfare. Yet these things

exist, amid the infirmities of an incomplete sanctification, and amid lingering effects of sin on the spirit and on the flesh, on the world within and on the world without, never to pass away on this side heaven. There is corn, but it is corn sent down from afar into Canaan's starving land. The gracious purposes of our redeeming God do not therefore end here, nor will be completed till we have gone out of the region of sterility altogether, to dwell amid the eternal abundance and the undying glories of His kingdom in heaven. That kingdom will not be more wondrous in the sights of unimaginable beauty, and the strains of seraphic harmony, which will fill the eyes and ears of the saints, than in the completed regeneration of the soul itself, and the full recreation of that similitude of God, in which it was first created. With what rapturous ecstasy of praise will it look up to the beatific vision of God, around to the wonders of the heavenly world, and within to the completed work of the Spirit upon itself! Cannot we imagine it held silent for a time, by the depth of an admiration that passes speech, and then breaking forth into a strain of adoring wonder, caught up and echoed back by its fellow-saints, "What is this, that God hath done unto us?"

If, then, the object of all the Divine dealings be to remove from the soul the fatal influences of its sin; if the accomplishment of this purpose needs dispensations suited to the character and circumstance of every individual heart; and if the purpose to be gained is the soul's peace with God on earth, and its inheritance with God in heaven—ought it

not to be the prayer of every believer, that it may receive the lessons needed for its peace, in any way that God sees best? To Thee, O Lord! we commit our souls; deal with us as seemeth best in Thy sight; give us, or take away from us, health and strength, prosperity or fortune, as Thou seest fit; only give us Thyself, the knowledge of Thy truth, and the possession of Thy love; let us be Thine—Thine to live with Thee, Thine to die with Thee, Thine to dwell with Thee for ever!

In tracing out the dealings of God, let it be noted, in conclusion, what is the state of conscience we ought to desire, and what the state we ought to shun. There are three such states which are conceivable; the dead conscience, the tender conscience, and the scrupulous conscience. The dead conscience is hardened by a long course of sin, and seared against the sense of guilt, as with a hot iron. It shrinks from no temptation; it is shaken by no alarm; it is guided by no warnings of transgression past. The very sense of right and wrong has become confused, and it passes from one to the other, without scruple or remorse. The eye, blinded by self-partiality, can no longer see, nor the ear, stopped with the love of the world, perceive the admonitions of coming judgment. It passes on its road recklessly, as some madman, who, with his eyes wilfully shut, plunges down the frightful precipice that yawns before his path.

The next state is that of the tender conscience. Keenly alive to the enormity of sin, and guided by the remembrance of past transgressions, it is like some vigilant sentinel, who watches at his post. Like those plants which close at the approach of

the human hand, it shrinks in a holy sensitiveness from the very approach of temptation, and gives timely warning when the moral atmosphere of the soul's life is dangerous to its peace. It makes no subtle distinctions, as false as they are subtle, between sins of lesser or deeper dye; but hates and shuns them all alike, as being abominable to God, and ruinous to man. It directs its own admonitions, by the pure light of the unchanging Word; and, sitting as God's assessor in the soul, it whispers approval, or thunders condemnation, according to the sure balances of eternal truth.

The third state is that of the scrupulous conscience. This is always filled with a timid alarm, and catches no righteous confidence from the lessons of the Word, and the promises of the Spirit. Beneath this alarm, the soul almost fears to act at all, lest it should act wrongly; and may be compared to some timid traveller, whose fears magnify every distant object into a danger, and every one it meets into a foe. It lives by distrustful suspicion, and throws around its own feet a net to impede and hamper every step. Its very doubts turn things innocent into things dangerous, and, on the principle laid down by the apostle, that "whatsoever is not of faith is sin,"¹ multiply tenfold the temptations of its path. It strains the bow of the Christian warfare so tightly, that it is in danger of snapping altogether; and leaves the soul in danger, either of rushing into an utter recklessness of despair, or of losing, in the hesitations of a constant doubt, the sweetness of its peace and the assurance of its faith.

¹ Rom. xiv. 23

It may make the difference still clearer to draw an illustration of these three states from one common object. The dead conscience is like the flesh of the body in a state of mortification, in which all the powers of sensation are lost, and pain itself becomes indifferent, but only in a torpor which precedes the grave. The tender conscience is like the flesh of the body in a state of healthy life, capable of injury and the keen sense of pain, yet hardy enough for the movements of activity, and the endurance of continued toil. The scrupulous conscience is like the flesh of the body under the influence of an inflamed and gangrenous sore, when the slightest touch is agony, when every movement is cramped from the dread of hurt, and the active labours of life have become impossible.

If we had to choose between the first and last of these states, we should prefer the last without a moment's hesitation. Better, far better, anything than a spiritual death of soul, when all the faculties of life are already lost. The scrupulous conscience, though it causes to the soul much needless pain, and opens to it unnecessary sources of temptation, proves that life is there, and leaves the prospect of perfect spiritual health within the soul's attainment: But better than either is that state of the conscience which is tender without being scrupulous, and robust without being callous. This is the true object of prayer, the comfort of the believer, the pledge and earnest of heaven.

Here, then, is an answer to all thy questions, O soul, as to the reasons of those Divine dispensations, which are as yet too dark to be perfectly com-

prehended by thee. Whether it be by temporal visitations, or by spiritual difficulties, that thou art tried, it is to this common object that they are alike directed. This enlightenment of conscience, and this bringing of the heart closer to Him, who is the light of the world, constitute the great end of the Divine dealings. Comfort thyself beneath thy sorrows, with the assurance that "this it is, which God is doing unto thee."



IX.

CHASTENING MERCY.

“Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest him out of thy law.”—PSALM xciv. 12.

IN one sense, the believer stands in the world in precisely the same condition as the unbeliever; but in another sense, he stands in a position wholly different. He stands in the same position, inasmuch as he is liable to the same bodily afflictions and temporal disappointments. The rude tempest of life's changes and chances blow upon him, and upon his house, as vehemently as upon others. He does not live here on earth in any supernatural preservation from the contingencies to which other men are liable; nor is his heart closed against human sympathy, or indurated by a cold stoicism against human sufferings. He bears his full share of the miseries, characteristic of a world stained with sin, and darkened from its primeval brightness by sin's baleful shadow. Nay, it oftentimes appears as if the believer had more to bear than other men. The remark, as to the prosperity of the ungodly, is as old as the days of the Psalmist, whose own mind was exercised by that problem, suggestive of many searchings of heart, how it was that a God of holiness and truth permitted wicked men to receive so large a portion of earthly

prosperity. The believer, therefore, is in this respect, at least, on the same footing as the unbeliever.

We have reason to admire the Divine wisdom, for thus ordering it. For had it been otherwise, then men had no doubt ascribed to the influence of outward prosperity, that peace and joy which the Comforter, who is the Holy Ghost, breathes into the soul of the child of God; and had recognized in that state the gratification of earthly desires, rather than the influence of a spiritual and heavenly hope. Such a reward, moreover, would have been most dangerous to the soul itself. For we know, that the soul's happiness is directly identical with its spirituality. The source of it is not human, but Divine; and it is enjoyed, just in proportion as the heart, renewed by grace, is enabled to rise above the atmosphere of merely human things, and breathe the purer air of the love of God, and of the powers of the world to come. If the believer's reward had been earthly, in his preservation from the outward trials which vex humanity, the nature of the soul's reward had been directly contrary to the nature of the soul's joy. There had been no earthly discipline to subjugate the fleshly to the spiritual; and the soul, remaining in a low state of grace, had but drank slightly of the living stream of inward joy, flowing ceaselessly from the love of the crucified Lamb of God. This freedom from outward trial we shall indeed possess hereafter: but it will not be till the soul's spiritual manhood has first been perfected, and the fire of the Holy Ghost has purified for ever from its carnal dross the regenerated spirit of the saint.

Another lesson should also be learned from the

fact, that the happiness of the believer consists not in immunity from earthly trials, but in a Divine elevation of mind, far above their influence: this lesson is the supremacy of the spirit over the flesh. Give to the dying flesh everything its corrupt appetites can crave; the full gratification of sense; "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life:" but amid all these things let the soul be uncared for; the conscience disturbed by warnings of sin, and fore-shadowings of judgment; and what will the flesh avail to give happiness? The man will remain wretched and miserable.

Reverse the picture. Let the soul be perfectly at peace; let the conscience rest in full assurance of hope upon the cleansing blood of the Redeemer; let the heart be filled with a rejoicing love and a holy admiration at the beauty and perfections of Christ: but amid all these things let the body faint with hunger, and pine with disease; let the man's earthly course be threatened, as when over the broad sea there hangs some great cloud, mantling it with darkness; yet the man will remain undisturbed, will smile at the contending elements, and preserve in his inmost heart its still, sweet song of peace unsilenced for an instant. Do we not thus see the supremacy of the spirit over the flesh, and are we not led to extend the same thought into the bright "hereafter"? The essence of heaven will doubtless be in the spirit. The outward world will be changed and glorified, indeed, and yet perhaps will be by no means so wholly different to what it is now, as some are apt to think; but the great change will be in the world within—the world of our own hearts.

This will be so divinely satisfied with grace and peace as to run over, like a full cup, into endless praise.

There are thus many reasons for blessing God, that the earthly condition of the believer on this side the grave remains the same as that of the unbeliever in outward things. In regard to the light kindled in his own soul, and to the radiance this light throws over all things around him, his position is wholly different. His altered relation to the world, alters in like degree the relation of the world to him. To the unconverted man, this life is his all, and he centres in its poor self all his wishes, hopes, and prospects: to the converted man this life is but the threshold of another, and a better life. Its glorious rays shine upon his present state below, undiminished even by that darkness of the grave across which they pass to him. On a journey many things are delightful, as a change from the past, and as a prospect for the future, which, if they formed a permanent condition, would be intolerable. Thus it is with life's journey. Deem yourselves travellers, whose hearts are all on fire with the expectation of their journey's end, and of the everlasting peace, which awaits them there; and there are many things which will become sources of joy, which, if you consider yourselves permanently settled here below, would be miserable beyond endurance. Here, as you journey in some far land, stands the lofty mountain, that rears its head amid everlasting snows towards heaven; and here the traveller, who is ambitious of gazing from its heights upon the world below, pursues his venturous track. Here yawns across the path the frightful precipice, where one

false step would be hopeless death. Here slumbers the avalanche, which loosened by a breath, would soon thunder in awful desolation upon the valleys at its base. What is it that nerves the traveller's heart, and makes the very risk delightful to his bold spirit? Is it not the prospect of the summit he hopes soon to gain, as it lifts itself above him into the clouds? The hope of success gives pleasure to the very dangers, by which alone success is to be attained. Thus too the believer feels, and acts. Here towers before him the Zion of his hope, all glorious and magnificent. Its very beauties nerve him to press on, in the strength of God, the more resolutely upon his way. Now he wades through the deep waters of affliction. Now he gains height after height of grace and knowledge; now he just avoids the force of some overwhelming temptation; and yet he thinks it all delightful, in the hope of that everlasting reward which is to crown his journey's end. Every lesson of love is sweet, even though a chastening rod teaches it. The path to heaven lies through much tribulation: but "blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest him out of thy law."

Three topics are suggested for thought.

I. The benediction pronounced.

II. The discipline used.

III. The wisdom imparted.

I. "Blessed is the man." So says, not alone the Psalmist who wrote, but the God, whose Spirit inspired these words. They express not a human opinion as to what condition may justly be deemed happy, but an authoritative declaration by that God, who having Himself framed the constitution of His

human creatures, and embracing in the compass of His knowledge all things that were, and that are, and that shall be, is alone able to pronounce certainly upon the sources of human happiness. This is the great end which, by the laws of their being, all men desire to attain. It is wise upon the threshold of life, to decide what way we may best pass through its changing scenes, instead of hurrying blindly on, like so many children, that have neither definite objects nor definite principles.

To omit this precaution is not less foolish than it would be for a sailor to launch his bark upon the broad sea, without any harbour for which to steer, and to leave himself to be idly buffeted about by every wind and wave, he knows not, and cares not, whither, till he is dashed at last against the iron-bound coast, or engulfed in the furious waters. It would be as foolish as for a traveller to start upon a journey without an object, wandering over the wild wilderness, till he is lost in the deep morass, or entangled in the far-spreading forest, or precipitated down the dangerous abyss. Nay, the folly of the sailor or the traveller, who should act thus, would be less of the two, for their journey would be optional: they need not to start upon their useless journey unless they choose; and if wiser thoughts should return while they are still in sight of home, they would have it in their power to turn back to the point from which they started. But it is not so with us. Our voyage, our journey, must be made, whether we will or not. The eternal wheels of that great system amid which God has placed us, carry us on without any volition of our own. We have no power to stop, nor power to

turn back and moor our bark in some quiet haven, while we make up our mind in what direction we shall journey. Our course is onward and onward still, without a moment's pause in that mysterious progress, which, like the current of some resistless stream, is carrying us towards the great ocean of eternity.

But though we have no power to stop, we have power to direct. It depends, humanly speaking, upon ourselves what shall be the conclusion of it all. God, in his Word, appeals to the reason, the conscience, the affections; and proffers, if men will but accept the gift, both knowledge to guide, and strength to reach the haven. All round about them there are warnings enough to make them stop and think. We look upon life as we would look from some tall hill upon a broad sea spread beneath our feet, and we see it covered with melancholy wrecks of human souls. Here one madly rushes on to sure destruction; there another sees the structure of his earthly hope going to pieces beneath his feet, and leaving not a plank between him and the deep waters; there a third, drifting helplessly about without an object, all blankness and disappointment, and wholly unprepared to buffet with the storm, by which he soon will be assailed; here and there a few are seen pressing firmly on, strong in faith and bright in hope. Though our eyes cannot clearly see, as yet, across the broad gulf which parts us from the other side, yet we perceive enough to know that there are two worlds beyond it, one of which every soul must reach; the one, the land of endless night and hopeless grief—the other, the land of everlasting day, and endless life, and infinite fruition. Surely there is enough

in this to make us pause, and inquire for what we ought to live, and listen to the message of love, which comes from the lips of that Spirit, who is the Author and Giver of life. Here is the true source of happiness pointed out by Him that cannot err, and who Himself must bestow the gift. How much is included in this "blessed"! It sets before us the bright hope of heaven, the glory of the dying but risen Saviour, the power of effectual grace, the reward of righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, and seals the state of the child of God with the benediction, "Blessed is the man."

The words are not alone the infallible declaration of the All-wise, but also the unfailing promise of the All-powerful. We value a blessing pronounced even by our fellow-men. When some saint of God is with us, ripe, it may be, alike in maturity of years and in maturity of grace; and who appears in all the beauty of holiness, as if already clothed with the beams of coming glory, we think ourselves happy if we gain the benediction of the aged Christian. We rejoice if his hands press our brow, and the voice, mellow with age, invoke a blessing; yet the benediction of the holiest of men is but the prayer of a man like ourselves to that common Father of us all, whose Spirit is alone effectual to sanctify. If we had lived when Paul's fervent spirit, or John's loving heart, could have breathed over us their benediction, yet even thus it had been but a prayer after all, to which God alone could have given the answer. But the benediction contained in this text is breathed by the lips of God Himself. It is no prayer, but a promise from Him who, being Himself the fountain

of all perfection, can alone communicate to the soul His gifts of grace, and peace, and glory. It is as though the Holy One who inhabiteth eternity, stooped from His holy place to lay His hands visibly upon the believer's head, and poured down the immediate influences of His Spirit. When God declares that "blessed is the man," it is the promise of a blessing, sure as His own unalterable nature, and abundant as His own overflowing compassions.

What a Being is this from whom to receive a blessing! What is there which it will not include, that the regenerated soul can long after? Do we want knowledge? From whom can we gain it but from Him, of whose boundless wisdom all the wonders of heaven and earth are but the visible expression; and whose all-searching mind reaches back into the ages numberless, which were before the worlds were made, and forward into the ages numberless, which shall be after this world has passed away? Do we wish for eternal life, and days that shall outlive the brief span of the visible creation? We can have it from none but from Him who is the self-existent Source of life, the mysterious "I am," the infinite Jehovah, which was, and is, and is to come. Is it pardon for our sins we need, and that assured sense of acceptance, which can alone bring peace to the alarmed and agitated conscience? We can receive it from Him alone, who has sent His own dear Son to make that pardon possible, and to enable Him to be just, and yet the Justifier of the ungodly. Is it peace we desire? Whence shall it flow but from the God of peace, upon the undisturbed perfection of whose being there rests not one breath of perturbation—who has

given His promise of peace, and blended His own glory with its accomplishment, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace"?¹ Is it the exercise of love we desire? Whom can we love so fitly as the God of love, who "so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."² Is it dignity and honour of which we are ambitious, to rise superior to this poor state of ours below, and lose its fleshy weaknesses and imperfections in the power of a better life? This too we may have; for what is there grander than this promise, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."³

How infinite a fulness of bliss is included in this benediction of the Holy One! Its nature explains what must be the character of its recipient. The stains of corruption must be washed out from the soul, and "the new man be created after God in righteousness and true holiness,"⁴ before it can enter into this inheritance of glory. It matters not at what cost, or through what struggles, for our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."⁵ The present pain is forgotten in the anticipated bliss. "Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest him out of thy law."

II. But then comes the discipline which is used. Where upon the earth shall we expect to find these

¹ Luke ii. 14.² John iii. 16.³ 1 John iii. 2.⁴ Eph. iv. 24.⁵ 2 Cor. iv. 17.

favoured sons of God, these holy heirs of heaven? Shall we find them marked even now by the foretaste of their coming glory? Shall we look for them where the carnal heart, when left to itself, would place the elements of peace? These sons of God are gathered out of every station, and rank, and position in life. They wear the purple of the monarch, as well as the tatters of the beggar. They sit among the great as among the lowly, among the rich as among the poor. Blessed be He, to whose almighty strength all things are possible, and who can rear His sons for glory, even amid the sorest temptations known to human hearts; and who can teach the noble to sit as loosely to his wealth and station, as He can teach the poor to rise above his poverty. But while God can save His people under any circumstances, however adverse, it is not by outward circumstances that they are to be distinguished; just as in truth there are no outward circumstances here below to which, in one form or another, the chastening rod does not reach. We are not to look for God's children amid the flush of undisturbed prosperity, the haughtiness of human pride, or the blind confidence of souls which know no fear. The foretaste of his future inheritance is indeed enjoyed by the believer here below, but it is inward in the heart, and not conspicuous in the outward life. It is seen, and felt, and enjoyed in the experience of the soul, and is rich beyond expression, in a sweet and unutterable joy; a holy and magnificent hope; a calm and assured peace, such as no outward gifts can bestow.

This inward life needs the discipline of a chastening rod. The soul's state here below is that of a school,

in which, "under tutors and governors," it is trained for its inheritance; and this school must have its lessons. Those strokes of the Spirit, which are to slay in the soul the sins that debase it, must needs be quick and keen; not sparing, if need be, the dearest thing we have, but brought home so closely, as to cut asunder every bond that ties the soul to earth. It is no sign of God's blessing to have a life of such uninterrupted prosperity, that it is like a green bay tree, whence not a single withered leaf has fallen, nor a bough been cut away by the sharp knife of the good husbandman. As it is no proof of health, that the body becomes incapable of pain, and sinks into the stupor which precedes dissolution; so it is no proof of spiritual health to be free from anxieties and struggles in the soul itself. When the elements of suffering are so deeply seated in the darkened will and the world-loving affections, nothing less than a spiritual death is unable to feel the pang. The more God loves us, the more He desires to make us like Himself; and to do this, the more He slays in us our sins, and weans us from the objects of our earthly idolatry. His Providence makes the wound only that His grace may heal it, and that the bones which He has broken may rejoice.¹

Adorable is that wisdom, which has exactly suited the outward condition of man to the necessities of his inward state. The afflictions which now fill the world formed no part of the counsels of the Creator towards His creatures. These provided for a state as free from all outward ills as the soul of man unfallen was free from all inward stains. It is possible that to

¹ Psalm li. 8.

some minds it may have seemed a harsh act in God to drive man for a single transgression out of Paradise, and to send him forth, as a mourning exile, to till the ground cursed with thorns and briars for His sake. Yet it was in truth an act of loving mercy, which regarded not alone the vindication of His justice, but likewise the necessities of His creatures. A sorrowless world was fitted for a sinless creature; and had man continued sinless, doubtless the world had continued sorrowless. But man's sin changed this suitability of the outward to the inward; and to restore the proportion between the two, was the merciful object of man's expulsion from Paradise. Had a sinful creature been permitted to dwell in a sorrowless world, it had prevented for ever his recovery of the lost inheritance and his restoration into the forfeited favour of God. Delighted with the enjoyment of his present state, and having lost by his corruption the love of the Holy Creator, he would have desired no other condition than that which he already enjoyed. Living thus without the fear of God, or any higher object than the world could give, when he died, his death had been but the certain entrance into everlasting perdition.

How certainly this effect would have followed, we may gather from the experience of our own hearts. Who must not confess, and mourn over the confession, that he loves this world too well, and in the cares and enjoyments of things seen and temporal, is dangerously apt to forget the higher hopes of the things unseen and eternal? This is so, in spite of all that darkens life, and in the face of that uncertainty of all human expectations, which ought to raise our

affections to a better inheritance, "where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal."¹ With what greater peril had not this life been accompanied, if with all the corruptions of our souls remaining as they are, the world around us had been bright and cloudless as that future land, where the saints "shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."² The bodily happiness of threescore years and ten had been no compensation for the eternity of anguish, which would have been man's hopeless doom beyond it.

Moreover, not alone in that case would man have desired no restoration to the inheritance which he had lost, but he would have possessed no knowledge of the sin by which he was defiled. We are not as yet able to see things as God sees them, nor to appreciate the essential enormity and moral baseness of sin as he appreciates it, or as we ourselves shall perceive it by the light of heaven. At present, we only know sin by its effects, by the ruin it has caused, and by the misery it works. Sorrow is the shadow of sin. Sin itself is like an object placed behind us, which we cannot see, because our own body interposes, and the partialities of self hide it from our view. But though we cannot see the object itself, we can see the shadow which it throws before our eyes, and in the hideousness of the one we can clearly perceive the

¹ Matt. vi. 20.

² Rev. vii. 16, 17.

hideousness of the other. Every sorrow of afflicted humanity; every darkening cloud of evil; every pang of bodily pain; every mental sorrow; every tear; every inward struggle—should have to our ears a voice, and with their accumulated testimony, should witness to the infinite hatefulfulness of sin.

Let it be borne in mind, that if the outward world around had not been clothed in colours suited to the corruption within, both these lessons would have been lost. Ignorant, on the one side, of the glorious inheritance from which he was an exile; ignorant, on the other side, of the ruin which had passed upon his own being, and of the gulf which parted the fallen creature from the holy Creator—man had spent a few years of false and deceptive pleasure, only to fall, without help and without hope, into an awful condemnation for ever. It was, therefore, an act of most loving wisdom in God, to suit man's state to man himself; and prepare in this sad world a fitting discipline, by which, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, he might recover the inheritance lost at the fall, and be renewed again into that holiness, without which none shall ever see God in His glory.

Let the emphasis belonging to the word "Thou" be also noticed. A correction of faults may be taught in the world, but how widely different to God's teaching. Harsh, and stern, and rough in their process; hardening and debasing in their effects, are the rough lessons of the world. For instance, a man grows up into manhood, under the influence of a false and mistaken indulgence, cursed with a headstrong, vehement, and passionate will, that frets at every obstacle, as an unbroken colt frets upon the

bit, or as the brawling stream foams and roars its way over an opposing rock. The man, when he goes into the world, finds that it will not do to act in this temper towards his fellow-men; that they can be as angry and impetuous as he; and that the rude "many" can heap upon him more suffering than he alone, rude as he may be, can heap upon them. He is thus compelled to restrain his passions, for the rough contact of the world rubs down the angles and sharpness of his natural temper, as stones are smoothed by the endless rolling of the ocean waves. But, at the same time, the heart becomes hard as the stone; its passions have been driven inward upon itself, and the chastening, if such it can truly be called, has but hardened, while it smoothed. It has fostered either a misanthropic hatred, or a cold suspicion, or a stern indifference, or an intense selfishness, which, in the instinct of self-preservation, has lost all the sympathies of its kind. The experience of most men will supply illustrations of this, and it is applicable to other faults than to those of temper.

What a chastisement is this, compared to what comes from the hand of a tender and gracious God! He smites only in love, and wounds that He may but the more abundantly bless. Oh! we need chastisement; God and our hearts know it. We need chastisement: and correction of our sins, of some sort or other, we shall certainly receive. But let us not fall into the hands of man, for his mercies are cruel; let us fall into the hands of God, for "blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest him out of thy law."

III. It remains to consider the wisdom imparted.

This chastening, be it ever remembered, is but a means towards an end. It is an evil in itself—a good only in its effects; and if these effects are not produced, it is evil only, and not good. Divine chastisements do not always make us wise in the Divine law. It is God's purpose that they should do so; and the Spirit of truth, which, like a wise and kind tutor, shall lead the child-like soul on from grace to grace and from strength to strength, is abundantly offered to all who will ask for it through the Saviour. But this instruction cannot begin, till in the school of affliction, the self-confidence of the human heart has been broken down, and all high imaginations subdued into a lowly and penitent sense of sin. The heart must first have learned something of itself, before it can proceed to know God. It must have tasted something of the vanity of the world which now is, before it will become a willing pupil in the mysteries of the world which is to be. It must be conscious of the weakness of its own strength, and of the inability of its own intellect, either to teach itself, or to unravel the deep things of the Divine dealings. It must become dependent and humble, like a child, before its great Father in heaven can reveal to it his exceeding great and precious promises. "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein."¹ These are the preliminary lessons, preparatory to the higher teaching of the Holy Ghost, and these it is the purpose of the Divine chastisement to impart.

But human nature can refuse even these, and turn the very instruments of grace into new elements of

¹ Mark x. 15.

sin. Afflictions will sometimes harden the heart, instead of softening it; and will only exasperate opposition, instead of teaching repentance. The stubborn soul, instead of learning submission, will sometimes dare to question the wisdom of God, and to rear itself into affronted rebellion against the hand that smites it. And even if this be not done, the cares of life are only less dangerous than its pleasures; and form the constant plea, by which the heart excuses itself for forgetting in the things of time, the mightier realities of eternity. Thus our Lord, in the well-known parable of the sower, enumerates them as one means, whereby the good seed of life is rendered unfruitful; "That which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with *cares* and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection."¹

Dark, indeed, is the state of such a soul, which neither love can touch, nor chastisement correct. If the very dispensations intended to show the unsatisfying nature of life, and make us set our treasure on a better and more enduring inheritance, do but make us love our earthly treasures the more for their very uncertainty, what further can God do, when mercy and justice have alike failed to break down the impenetrable barriers of sin and of the world? Let none be misled by the idea, that affliction in this world, invariably and of necessity, gives a firm hope of a better one. Many a heart is sick of this life, which is wholly unfit for the life to come. Weariness of pain or sorrow, is not repentance for sin. A morbid impatience of life is so far from being a

¹ Luke viii. 14.

favourable sign of the soul's knowledge of God, that it may well excite a most just anxiety, and lead to a jealous examination of the real state of the soul in which it exists. Say not, that God has sent us affliction here, and that therefore we shall be happy hereafter. God sends affliction to correct and remedy our sins, and if it does not have this effect, it will only make life a dark road into a darker future. The promise is not only, "Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord," but likewise, "and teachest him out of thy law."

Think of all the wonders contained in that law; wonders in the revelation of God; wonders in the wisdom which schemed the plan of salvation; wonders in the love that wrought it; wonders in the Spirit who alone can fit the soul for it; wonders in the presence of the God of peace with the believer here; and wonders in the unimaginable glories, which remain for the regenerated saint hereafter. The chastening hand of God teaches us to feel our own personal interest in all these mighty truths, and kindles an individual earnestness in our search after the promises, which nothing else can give. The Word of God can never be fully comprehended, till the soul has acquired a personal experience in its own wants and weaknesses. To look forward to affliction future, and to feel affliction present, are very different things. However dear the promises may be when we do the first, it is only when we do the second that we appreciate their blessed consolations, as the Spirit applies them, sweet and fresh from heaven, to the sores of the bleeding heart. Look into the Psalms, those records of the experiences

of universal man, and say, who ever understood them, till trial and sorrow came? We may admire beforehand, but cannot enter into and feel them as we do afterwards. For instance, who can appreciate David's pathetic pining after God but those who mourn beneath the absence of a peace which they once enjoyed—"As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God! My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God."¹ Who that has not passed through the agonies of a bitter repentance, or stood beset with troubles from without, and contests from within, can fathom the tenderness of the lamentation, "Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me."² Who but one whom God has already taught out of His law, and who has felt, in times of doubt and fear, its precious comforts, can join fully in the Psalmist's rapturous praise, "Oh, how I love thy law! it is my meditation all the day":³ and in a previous Psalm, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb."⁴

Let us learn from these things the light in which we ought to regard affliction. Talk not of it as a punishment. There is no wrath in the mind that sends, nor anger in the hand that inflicts it. It is not a judicial chastisement, but a loving warning from a gracious Father's hands. He never shows His love to the soul so much as when He chastens it. If

¹ Psalm xlii. 1, 2.

² Psalm lxix. 1, 2.

³ Psalm cxix. 97.

⁴ Psalm xix. 9, 10.

he did not care for it, he would leave it to go on wandering as it would, and to perish in its wanderings. View chastening dispensation as a mercy altogether, and from amidst your tears, look up and kiss the rod that smites you. When we look back in heaven upon our past, it will be in these very times we shall see the brightest traces of God's love, and catch our most rapturous themes of endless praise.

Lastly, when we pray for grace, and for a closer walk with God, let us bear in mind what that prayer may possibly include. It may be through afflictions alone, that the graces for which we pray can be taught us. Let us not repine, therefore, when they come; but in a holy confidence leave our all to Him, and hold fast in life and death the promise, "Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest him out of thy law."

X.

THE GREAT TEACHER.

“Quench not the Spirit.”—1 THESS. v. 19.

WHAT we call the spiritual life of the believer consists in the quickening of holy thoughts, affections, and desires. When we look at this life in one aspect, the picture is indeed most melancholy. It is so, when we regard the imperfections of our present state of grace, and the degree in which the instincts of sin, the engrossing temptations of the world, and the snares of the great adversary mar those hopes, which rest in eternity as their life, heaven as their home, and God as their end and object. But when we regard it in another aspect, the future is most glorious and animating. It is so, when we think of the end to which these quickening energies of the Spirit are directed. It is nothing less than the wiping away from the heart of man of the corruption sin has introduced into it, and its renewal in the primeval image of the holy God. When this is accomplished, then shall the soul reflect in true, though faint colours, the moral likeness of the Creator; like some calm placid sea, reflecting from its breast the colours of the bright blue heavens, which smile upon it from above. Though the transforming work is as yet incomplete, who can doubt but that the Holy Spirit is abundantly able to carry

it on unto perfection? We view the soul as it is by the light of what it was, and what it will be.

Contrast the present state of the believer with what it once was, when he lay in the utter darkness of an unregenerate heart; and even his present state, however imperfect, becomes wonderful. Then compare it further with what it will be, when, the work of regeneration being completed, he shall stand face to face with the Holy One; and alike from the experience of the past, and from the hopes of the future, the work already begun is clothed with no common interest. We regard it with something of the same feeling of delight which we gather from the sight of the first budding spring-flowers, as, peeping from beneath a coverlet of snow, their tender hues first meet the eye. These few frail blossoms, exquisite as they are, cannot, in their actual beauty, bear comparison for a moment with all the thousand luxuriant blossoms which, in a few weeks, will deck the earth with grace and fragrance. Whence, then, arises this sense of delight, but from their contrast with the bare sterility of winter in the past, and with the promise of spring's full budding loveliness in the future? In the same way, even the imperfect state of holiness of the believer here is wonderful, from its contrast with the corruptions, both within and without the heart, which remain uncleansed; and from that fuller maturity of grace, of which it is but the opening bud, the fair promise of the fairer future.

The inward life of the believer is yet more wonderful, when we think of that Power, by whom alone it is effectually wrought. These noble hopes, lifting

up its thoughts to an eternal inheritance, are a direct influence from Heaven, and witness to the exhaustless fulness of the Divine Being; nay, they are not only heavenly, not only Godlike—they are more; they come from God. They are ministered not by the spirits of the just made perfect, nor yet from the hands of angels and archangels fresh from their abodes of bliss, where they stand ever before Jehovah's throne—but they are the personal influences of God Himself: they are the direct acts of the Almighty: they are the visible traces of Deity here on earth: they are the manifested presence of the Infinite, as bowing the heavens, and coming down in the plenitude of His gifts, He sanctifies the saints here below, and prepares them for the company of the redeemed above.

Remember the striking, though brief description of the state of the world before the coming of Christ, given by St. Paul, as a state in which “sin reigned unto death.”¹ Here lay, spread over the world, the gloomy dominion of the evil one. There may have been a solitary ray of light, shining here and there; but still the general condition of mankind was hopeless sin, and the general end of mankind endless death. What power less than that of God himself was adequate to descend into such a kingdom, and break the fetters of its bondage? From the beginning of time, holy prophets had been sent to make known the Divine will; nay, more, angels had passed, as upon the mystical ladder seen in Jacob's vision, up and down between earth and heaven, upon their messages of love. But while these agencies had not

¹ Rom. v. 21.

been wholly in vain, still the general ruin of sin lay over mankind, in all its unrelieved gloom. Then, in the fulness of time, came the great Redeemer to open the way of life, and to win pardon and peace for man by His agony and death.

But not even the work of the Son Himself was effectual to gather together the Church of the redeemed. The greatest event which ever happened came and passed by unnoticed. The stars of heaven indeed, in their courses, witnessed of His advent, and the ears of a few poor shepherds were opened to catch the hallelujahs of the angelic host, as they sang of the blessings of His kingdom. There came, indeed, from the farther parts of the earth a few worshippers to bow down before the new-born King, as the first-fruits of the Gentile nations who should afterwards believe on Him ; but to the great bulk of mankind, the birth of the Saviour passed by unnoticed, and did not hush into praise, even for a moment, the busy clamours of the world.

Then followed our Lord's personal ministry. Not wholly in vain indeed was this, for He gathered together the company of the apostles and the other disciples ; yet how weak in faith were they ! How little chance did there seem to be, that these men, who all deserted their Lord in the time of His trial, would ever carry forth the standard of the cross over the length and breadth of the world, conquering and to conquer ! Great were the miracles which our Lord wrought, when He made the blind to see, and the deaf to hear, and the lame to walk, and raised the dead from the grave : great, likewise, the multitudes that thronged around Him, because they saw the

miracles which He did, and loud their acknowledgment, "that it was never so seen in Israel." Yet, when our Lord was led to His death, it was with the sanction of the Jewish people and the furious cries of the angry populace, "Crucify him, crucify him!" It would thus seem, that no great effect was produced even by the personal Ministry of Christ; and that up to the period of His ascension into heaven, there were no signs to be perceived of the speedy coming in of His kingdom, or of the gathering together of a believing people, included in the promise, "He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied."¹ Thus the evil dominion of Satan remained unbroken, and sin yet reigned unto death.

How different was the effect when, in the order of the Divine counsels, the Holy Ghost came, and was freely poured out upon the souls of men, and the almightiness of grace went forth to bow men's hearts before the cross of the despised Nazarene! Then the feeble disciples, who had shrunk hitherto from persecution, as timid birds shrink from the first breath of the tempest, stood forth in an heroic constancy, and counted it all joy to suffer, and to die for Christ. Then the stubborn heart and sin-loving soul heard, wondered, and believed. Then, as if waking up from a long sleep, mankind began to gaze adoringly at the Divine counsels, which for ages had been advancing to their completion. Then hell shook, and the firm pillars of its dominion tottered beneath the preaching of the Cross. Bel bowed down and Nebo fell, wrestling yet indeed, and warring against the people of God the carnal weapons

¹ Isa. liii. 11.

of persecuting wrath; but all in vain to stop that marvellous work of the Spirit. It has gone on from that day till now, gathering souls to Christ, and working by degrees the accomplishment of the promise, that "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the seas."

All the solemn and heart-subduing convictions, all the heavenly hopes ever experienced, are the operations of God Himself, working both to will and to do. Oh! wondrous dignity! Oh! amazing miracle of love! Highly should we estimate the holy vocation wherewith we are called, when He, upon whose unclouded majesty no human eye could gaze and live; He, before whom angels and archangels veil their faces; He, upon whose slightest will the whole created universe, with its ten thousand times ten thousand worlds, depends for existence; when He works in our hearts the knowledge of the Redeemer, and calls them to believe and live!

And is it possible that men can reject this influence, and resist this call of love? Alas! it is. Why else the need of warning exhortation? Why else the fearful denunciations of avenging wrath? How else that state of judicial blindness, which seeing, sees not, and hearing, does not understand? Why else the exhortation contained in the text, "Quench not the Spirit?" The lesson includes,

I. The person of the Spirit, as to His nature and office.

II. What it is to quench the Spirit.

III. The reason for the apostle's exhortation, "Quench not the Spirit."

I. In considering the Spirit, and of His nature, two truths stand in the foreground—that He is a person, and a Divine person. No one, who is in the habit of reading the Bible, will need to be told what constant reference is made in it to the Spirit, and that in all these references there is as constant and as exact an ascription of the work of sanctification to Him, as there is of the work of creation to the Father, and of redemption to the Son. Without entering into an unprofitable discussion upon the exact meaning of the word “person”—which is confessedly not a scriptural word, though the meaning expressed by it is a scriptural meaning—it is enough that we mean by it a being, capable of willing, choosing, and acting by himself. It should, however, be noticed, that the word, in its common and familiar use, seems to imply separation, while, as applied to God, it only means distinction, not separation; for while we must not confound the Trinity of Persons, neither must we break the Unity of the Godhead. The number of places in the Word; where personal acts are attributed to the Holy Ghost, is nearly coincident with the number of places where He is mentioned at all.

The word “Spirit” is the same with the Saxon word “Ghost,” and is applied to the third Person of the Trinity from the speciality of His operations, and not from the difference of His nature; for, of the whole united Godhead, it is said by our Lord, “God is Spirit.”¹ The original Greek word means, something inbreathed, and may thus be used from an analogy between the spirit or immortal essence of man, and

¹ John iv. 24.

the influence of the third Person of the Trinity. In the scriptural record of the creation it is said, that after the framing of man's body, "the Lord God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life," or lives, "and man became a living soul."¹ And thus, wholly independently of the spiritual nature of the Triune Deity, the third Person may be called, pre-eminently, "the Spirit," because He proceeds from the Father and from the Son, and is inbreathed into the soul: coming insensibly, as the wind which we cannot see, yet visible in its effects like the wind, known by the motion it communicates to external objects.

The practical importance of recognizing the Holy Ghost as a person, is, that we may know and admire His love, and thus derive fresh and noble motives not to quench His influence. The love, indeed, of Christ ever stands most prominent of all, because His work is the great procuring cause of all. Had it not been that He was "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world,"² no ray of the Father's boundless love had ever shone upon man. Had it not been for the completion of that sacrifice in the mysterious agony of Gethsemane, and the cross and passion of Calvary, no Holy Ghost had been outpoured; or, if outpoured, had ever stirred the depraved soul of man from the deep corruptions of sin. The love of Christ will ever, therefore, constitute the most prominent theme of the believer's praise. Yet neither should the love of the Father be forgotten nor the love of the Holy Ghost, for they feel the same infinite compassion towards us, and share the same redeeming work for us. Thus free, even as the love

¹ Gen. ii. 7.

² Rev. xiii. 8.

of Christ, is the love of the Spirit, who witnesses to Christ; and tender is the compassionate zeal, with which, by drawing it to Christ, He seeks to save the soul. In Eph. iv. 30 we are charged not "to grieve the Holy Spirit;" from which we learn that the Spirit so loves us, that when we resist His influences, and thus seal our own condemnation, it is a grief to His Divine pity to see us perish, and that souls intended to shine as stars in the Redeemer's crown of glory, should be extinguished in the utter night of hell. Does not the very work of the Holy Spirit witness this? For is it not an act of love, that He should knock at our hearts, and wrestle with us from time to time in those convictions of sin which move, more or less, the soul of every man that lives? The very nature of the Spirit is His essential holiness; and what is holiness? not alone a freedom from sin, but a measureless hatred and abhorrence of it, separation from it far as light from darkness, and heaven from hell. Is it, then, no work of self-sacrificing goodness, that the Holy Ghost should stoop to come into contact with all the hidden infirmities of the soul of man, cleansing its secret depths of sin, and carrying on the work with so Divine a patience, that, though rejected and grieved, yet for Christ's sake he does not leave us? Sublime, beyond the love of man, is that love of the Spirit, which again and again pleads, and strives, and expostulates with the heart! If there be in the soul one spark of generous feeling; one throb of holy gratitude; one impulse of noble affection; should we not meet this Divine Spirit with willing obedience, and loving reverence, not quenching

His influences, but following more and more His sanctifying motions?

That a separate Person of the Deity should engage in this work of sanctification indicates the infinite importance of the work itself? Practically speaking, it is as important even as the work of Christ, both being co-ordinate parts of the same great scheme. But as this point will rise again in another part of the subject, let the thoughts pass on to the other truth, that the Holy Ghost is not only a person, but a Divine person. In other words, the Spirit is Himself God, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Son, blessed for evermore.

It is needless to dilate upon the scriptural evidences of this great truth. It will suffice to touch upon them as briefly as possible, and then pass on to what is more closely connected with our present subject—namely, its practical bearing upon the hopes of our spiritual life. The scriptural proofs of the Divinity of the Holy Ghost fall under three classes. The *first* includes those texts, where the title of Godhead is directly applied to Him; as, for instance, in the warning of Peter to Ananias, “Why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost? . . . Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.”¹ The *second* class contains those texts where the Holy Ghost is enumerated together with the Father and the Son, as the common object of faith and source of blessing. On comparing these passages together, it is found that they are mentioned in different places in a different order, so as to express as strongly as

¹ Acts v. 3, 4.

possible their co-equality of dignity. In the baptismal formula they stand in the order most familiar to us, "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."¹ In the familiar benediction, which is incorporated into our public worship, the order is changed, the name of the Son being placed before the Father, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all."² In the benediction contained in the opening verses of the book of St. John's Revelation, the order is again altered, and the name of the Holy Ghost, under the title of the "seven spirits before the throne," is placed before the name of the Son, "Grace be unto you, and peace, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first-begotten of the dead."³ The *third* class of proofs contains texts which apply to the Holy Ghost the attributes of the Deity, such as omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence. For instance, omniscience is attributed to Him, "The Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God."⁴

Look, then, at the practical importance of this truth. The assurance of our hope must rest on the certain adequacy of the strength, which is to work in us the knowledge and obedience of the Divine will. That we should in ourselves be able to resist the united force and fraud with which the great adversary and his legions of evil spirits war against

¹ Matt. xviii. 19.

³ Rev. i. 4, 5.

² 2 Cor. xiii. 14.

⁴ 1 Cor. ii. 10.

our souls, is absolutely impossible ; yet unless it be done, our salvation is impossible likewise. We cannot hope for success in this conflict unless we are assured that we have an all-effectual strength to assist us ; and we cannot tell that the strength promised is all-effectual, unless it be infinite. The Spirit may be mighty, and yet not almighty. To have a mere probability on which to rest, and not an absolute certainty, would be fearful indeed, when there remains, as the only other alternative, the awful and endless hell. If the Spirit is not God, He is finite. If He is finite, then He is limited in power. If He is limited in power, then there are some things which He cannot do. If there are some things which He cannot do, what certainty can we have that the conversion of our souls, and the conquest over our spiritual enemies, is not one of those things which He cannot do, mighty though He be ? He must be omnipotent, or there can be no assurance for us ; and He must be God, or He cannot be omnipotent.

Again, He must be omnipresent, for He is promised to every praying heart that seeks His coming ; and unless He can be everywhere present at the same time, not by a mere diffusion of His being, but in His complete plenitude of gifts, how can He carry on His sanctifying processes in all the ten thousand times ten thousand hearts which need His help ?

So, likewise, He must be omniscient. We need all wisdom to direct us, as well as all power to help us. How else shall He know our exact wants, and the precise kind of help, which the ever-varying necessities of the soul need from day to day ? How else shall He reveal to us the deep things of God, unless He

Himself be God? Doubt it not, feeble and alarmed soul! The Spirit which helpeth thine infirmities is indeed Divine, and endowed with all Divine attributes. Be no more feeble and alarmed, for happy and blessed art thou. God Himself, and none less than He, will descend at the call of believing prayer to give thee victory over all thy foes. With God for thy Father, God for thy Saviour, God for thy Sanctifier, Comforter, and Guide, what shall make thee afraid? Only take heed that thou cherish His presence, and "quench not the Holy Spirit."

II. From the nature and office of the Holy Ghost, let us pass on to inquire what it is to "quench the Spirit." Power of our own for good we have not, for our will is altogether by nature carnal, and at enmity with God; but power against God unhappily we have; not power to gain, but power to refuse; not power to rise, but power to sink, by resisting those motions of the Spirit by which God calls us unto Himself. In other words, we are able to silence conscience, and to put from us, by a resolute effort, those remembrances of judgment and eternity, and those glimpses of the beauty of Christ, of which every soul must be more or less conscious. This effort is said to "quench the Spirit," by an image evidently taken from the action of water in extinguishing fire. The description of the Holy Spirit under the similitude of fire, is not of unfrequent use in the Word of God. Thus, John the Baptist, describing the more glorious ministry which our Lord should accomplish, when His own had come to an end, declared, "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire."¹ So also, when the Holy

¹ Matt. iii. 11.

Ghost descended upon the apostles at the day of Pentecost, "there appeared unto them cloven tongues, like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them."¹ Very aptly does this powerful and subtle element represent the penetrating, purifying, and enlightening influences of the Holy Spirit.

The action of fire in consuming any object, supplies a striking emblem of the manner of His operation, as well as of His nature. A fire does not break out all at once into its full fervour; but at first gradually kindles around the substance to be consumed—the spark, the smoke, the flame, then the full heat and radiance. So it is frequently with the soul. The work of the Holy Ghost may begin in it unconsciously at first; an increasing alarm and anxiety about its salvation waxes stronger and stronger, till at last all the heart is absorbed by it. Very many persons, instead of fostering these first sparks of grace rather seek to quench them. The great adversary knows full well, that if he permits the whole soul to be really aroused, not all his wiles will afterwards stop the work. In his devilish wisdom, he seeks to extinguish the flame at its first beginning, and to quench, either in the follies, or in the vices, or in the cares, or in the pleasures of the world, that light in the soul, which, duly fostered, would shine more and more unto the perfect day. Does there live a man, who has never had personal experience of the mode by which the tempter succeeds too fatally in arousing the perverse tendencies of the fallen heart into opposition to the influences of grace?

An impression has been made upon the heart and conscience. Perhaps under the preaching of the

¹ Acts ii. 3.

Word some text, or even some part of a text, has fastened upon the soul, stirring its inward depths with a holy alarm. The man cannot rest under what he hears—he strives to ward it off; but still the words come penetrating more and more, till the whole conscience is awakened. What is the conduct of the man? Instead of going into his closet, and there examining between his own soul and God, whether the impressions felt have been justly produced, and his state be really one of that imminent danger which it has been declared to be, he strives to forget it all; pushes the subject resolutely from him, and plunges into the thoughts of pleasure, or of business, directly he leaves the church doors. By repeating this conduct, whenever the impressions return, he soon finds them to grow weaker and weaker; or rather, his own heart becomes hardened and deadened into an utter insensibility. What is this, but to quench the Spirit?

Perhaps a man has been laid upon a sick-bed. While he lies tossed in burning fever, or worn away by slow decay, his very temptations seem to have left him. The world that now is has sunk into the comparative insignificance which belongs to it. Through the darkened light of the sick-room, he has seemed to look upon the awful realities of the unseen world. Then holy thoughts have led to holy purposes. Or, perhaps, some one of those near and dear to him has been taken away, and as he has wept over the lifeless remains, or stood sobbing by the side of the open grave, it has seemed as if death and eternity were brought close to him, and under the feelings which the stern lesson of his mortality has produced, he has exclaimed with our Lord, “What shall it profit

a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Yet how startlingly, perhaps, has the whole future of that man's life contradicted all the serious resolutions which then filled the soul! The sickness has passed away, and as the blood has again flowed briskly through the veins, and the pulses of the heart have beaten high again with returning health, all these thoughts have gradually faded away, like morning mists before the sun, and the man has gone back to the world as greedily as ever. Or the open grave has been closed; time's soothing balm has gradually stanchd the bleeding wounds of the affections; the man's home has smiled around him again, but what has become of his holy purposes? They have become "as clouds without water, and trees thrice dead." Directly the affliction has passed away, its lesson has passed away likewise—wiped out from the unwilling remembrance by the flowing currents of the busy world. What is this but to quench the Spirit?

Even the believing children of God are often guilty of this sin. There exists, perhaps, in faith or practice, some inconsistency which mars the perfection of Christian obedience; or there is some temper to be conquered, some indulgence to be renounced; or there is some especial worldliness of thought and affection, that needs to be sanctified. When, by some striking lesson, either of Providence or of grace, the Holy Ghost has brought home to us the knowledge of our deficiency, do we always apply ourselves in prayer, and watchfulness, and earnest effort, to its correction? Are we not apt to forget it; or to put off the needful work; or to go on as if it mattered

not what stains of the world polluted the wedding garment of our faith, or what dishonour is thrown upon the Master whom we love and serve ?

There is another shape of the same sin. There are souls, called by the grace of God out of darkness into light, who still retain so much of their unconverted selves, as to allow their thoughts to dwell with a fond remembrance on the sins and follies which they profess to have quitted for ever. Old sins are permitted to come back, not as things in themselves abhorrent, and dark with that guilt which the blood-shedding of God's dear Son could alone expiate ; but as still coloured to memory with the pleasure which they once afforded, and with those fascinating hues which a guilty imagination throws around its iniquity. The soul thus renews the stains of its old pollution, and violates again that spiritual law which pierces to the thoughts and intents of the heart. The thoughts of sin dwell upon the mind unchecked, till they stir up by their very presence a multitude of unruly desires, and awaken afresh into unholy activity the heat and violence of passion. How must the Spirit be grieved, when the soul once cleansed thus turns back again into the world, and falsely defiles itself with the pollution it had renounced ! Surely this also is to quench the Spirit ?

III. The apostle's expostulation suggests reasons why we should be very jealous over ourselves that we do not resist the work of the Holy Ghost upon the heart.

1. Look at the vast importance of the work of sanctification, the accomplishment of which has been assigned, in the economy of redemption, to a distinct

Person of the ever-blessed Trinity. No power less than Divine could accomplish it. The work is so great as to require, and to occupy, the undivided strength and wisdom of one Person of the Godhead. In itself it is so vitally necessary, that without it the work of Christ Himself would be in vain for our salvation. Suppose the guilt of sin all washed away in the blood of the Lamb, yet the power and contamination of sin would remain still, and would yet constitute a double impossibility, closing, as with the swords of the cherubim, the gate of heaven against our entrance. The counsels which permit the admixture of good and evil men together in the Church of Christ during this present state of trial, will terminate on this side of heaven. Into that happier world nothing that defileth can enter, nor will one solitary taint of sin darken its everlasting day. Were sin admitted, the very nature of heaven would be changed; for what is it that teaches the soul to long with so fervent a desire for its attainment? Not the labours of this world, not its trials, nor its afflictions, but its sins, constitute the burden which the soul pathetically longs to throw off. Should the soul take its sins with it, this hope would be lost. Is it not from this that God permits the sanctification of his people to be imperfect here on earth, that by their longer experience of sin, they may have a deeper hatred of it; and by their deeper hatred of it, a more earnest desire for that future state in which they will be free from it for ever? If the soul were able to throw off the motions of sin finally and for ever, the moment it began to perceive its heinousness, it would lose the lesson of its inveteracy and

bitterness. Suppose a man brought into contact with some loathsome corpse. Could he at once turn away, he would soon forget it ; but if he is compelled to be near it, closed up with it in some chamber, does not his abhorrence and disgust increase with every hour of its hated companionship? So the soul, hating sin, yet still polluted by what it hates, learns to feel a more intense abhorrence of it, and to pine the more for the time of final freedom from it. In heaven, God will no longer tolerate its presence ; and that wrath which is now restrained by His compassion for the souls of men, will then blaze forth into the full severity of a righteous retribution. Here, then, is one impossibility which will bar an unsanctified soul out of heaven.

Another arises from the soul itself. While the love of sin remains, it could find no pleasure in heaven were it possible to gain an entrance into it; rather, to such a soul there can be no heaven ; for heaven will be God manifested, as the very light of the New Jerusalem, which is above. What delight could there be in heaven, if there be no delight in God? The heart that shrinks from the remembrance and thought of Him on earth, would shrink with a yet deeper horror from the more perfect vision of Him in heaven. Every ray of glory, every smile of love, that shone from God, would be to such a heart, as the pangs of the undying worm, and the agony of the unquenchable fire.

Thus, from a double impossibility, there can be no entrance into glory, till the heart, cleansed from the guilt of sin by the blood of Christ, is likewise freed from the power and the love of sin by the might of

converting grace. The two processes are co-ordinate parts of the same scheme, each wrought by a co-equal Person of the undivided Trinity.

2. What, then, will become of the soul which rejects the influences of the Spirit, who alone can cleanse and ripen it for heaven? There are awful instances on record to prove, that God's Spirit will not always strive with man, and that a time may come, when grace, long-resisted, may be withdrawn, and the soul left to rush on, in the blindness of its own iniquity, headlong into perdition. Nor must we conclude that this state of reprobation is necessarily accompanied by an inward disbelief and rejection of the Word of life. The most hopeless state into which the soul can possibly fall, is that in which it assents to everything, and feels nothing, and becomes like the reed, which bending to every blast, resumes its upright form again, directly it has passed by. What, then, is the state of such a soul, but one of hopeless and helpless condemnation? If that grace which alone can convert and quicken is rejected, there is no other power which can call the soul out of its grave of sin.

This truth lies at the foundation of our Lord's awful denunciations of the sin against the Holy Ghost. Those who committed it, had rejected not alone the ordinary, but also the extraordinary influences of the Spirit likewise—those miraculous signs and wonders which testified to the Divine commission of our Lord and His apostles. The last evidence which could be given of the truth had been given, and had been rejected. The resources even of Divine wisdom had been exhausted in vain. As there remained no mightier Spirit to accomplish that which the Holy

Ghost was not permitted by the unbelieving heart to do, "it became impossible to renew the soul again unto repentance," and therefore "there remained no more sacrifice for sin, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation." And though, with the cessation of miraculous powers in the Church, the exact sin against the Holy Ghost may probably be no longer committed, the warning yet remains. Even the long-suffering patience of God may be exhausted at last: the grace which has been often offered and often refused, may be taken away, and the soul, in its wilful blindness, be left "without hope, because without God in the world."

3. But suppose that grace be not withdrawn, and that, though resisted now, it may be renewed and accepted at some future time; yet great beyond thought and expression is even thus the loss which the soul inflicts upon itself. Fearful is the presumption, which can argue in such a way; awful is the risk of the uncertain future, on which it rests the momentous interests of the world to come. Great, indeed, is the sin, which makes the very goodness of God a plea for the continued violation of His law and resistance of His love. Whether any future may be allowed to us at all, is known to the All-wise, and to Him alone. Whether, if life is prolonged, the soul will be disposed then to accept what it rejects now, His omniscience alone can tell. But suppose that all these things are so, and that the soul is really quickened by converting grace after all, yet great is the suffering, and keen the agony, which it has laid up for itself meanwhile. Every act, whereby we quench the Spirit, only makes the conscience more hard, and the whole soul more

indifferent to its future influences. And if grace triumph at last, it will only be through such heavy dispensations, such bitter tears, such dread struggles of soul, such awful pangs of conscience, as will leave traces indelible during life.

Lastly, how shall we have wisdom to accept chastening mercy, and to rejoice even in tribulation, unless the Spirit of God enlighten the understanding, and teach the soul? So St. James argues, when, exhorting his brethren "to count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations," he directly subjoins, as if the lesson were too hard for unassisted flesh and blood to learn it, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him."¹ From every wondrous truth of the Word of God, and from every experience of the human heart, should be gathered the same lesson, "Quench not the Spirit."

¹ Jam. i. 5.

XI.

THE SOUL ENCOURAGED.

“But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour.”—ISA. xliii. 1—3.

IT is well worthy of remark, how those relations of God to man, which form the groundwork of the believer's obligations, are here adduced as the foundations of his confidence and peace. It is as if the mere sense of duty, and that restraint of self which duty conveys to many minds, were forgotten in a feeling of rapturous gratitude and praise. There is, in truth, no restraint experienced in the discharge of Christian duty, because love is the fulfilling of it all, and clothes every act which service dictates, not in the harsh colours of obedience, but in the bright and fascinating hues of a generous service. Let the heart love, and the impulse of that affection will accomplish all the law. The fact, that our obligations and our triumphant confidence are both derived from the self-same dealings of God, has, however, a further lesson; for it shows that the two must stand or fall together, and that if we lower the one, by an

inevitable necessity we lower, in the same degree, the other likewise. Men should think of this, before they seek to bring down the strict requirements of God's law to the limit of their own weak powers, and the narrowness of their own fainting love. Thus, men sometimes complain, that the ministers of the Word describe in colours too dark and painful, the depravity of the human heart and the nature of sin; forgetting, that if we lower these, we lower with them the standard of what human nature might be, and ought to be. We paint sin in these dark colours, from the perfect beauty of the Saviour, with whom we contrast it, and from the greatness of the sacrifice, whereby alone He was able to atone for it. If we measured man by man, we might call sin, what many delight to think it, a mere weakness and infirmity of nature; but when we look at the spotless perfections of God, and then turn our gaze back into our hearts, we are shocked by the depravity we find there. Other men complain, that we set up too high a standard of Christian obligation, and stretch it to a degree to which men in general cannot be expected to attain. But we can only lower our estimate of what we ought to do for God, by first lowering our estimate of what God has done for us, and so stripping from our faith all that now raises it into heights above our reach, and depths beyond our fathoming.

Say, if you will, that the state of man by nature is only that of partial ruin; say that God has indeed been good to us, but yet not with such measureless and disinterested goodness as we are accustomed to suppose; say that we are not what we ought to be, and yet not very far below it; say that what we owe

to God is not our all, but such a service as may suit the world's pleasure and convenience; say that to speak of the Saviour's infinite love is all fanaticism, and that to yearn after any greatly higher state of grace than mankind generally attain, is a blind and mistaken enthusiasm; say that a decent moral life may well enable us to bear the scrutiny of the great judgment-day; say all this, and what will be the result? You get rid, indeed, of many obligations, supposed to be binding upon the soul, and relax the bonds of Christian duty so far, as to set yourselves free to live much as you like. All this you do; but then, in doing it, what a miserably mean, poor, spiritless, despicable thing you make religion to be in your estimation! You reduce it to a cold, lifeless, outward form, that can neither fill the intellect, nor warm the heart, nor guide the life.

Say, on the other hand, that the state of man by nature is that of utter helpless ruin, and most just condemnation; say that God loved us with an affection so infinite, that he sent His own dear Son to die for us; say that the Son has purchased our forgiveness at the incalculable price of His own incarnation, sufferings, and death; say that, having won forgiveness for us, He offers us His Holy Spirit to deliver us from the power of sin, and raise the soul into a state of regeneration, in which it shall be like even unto Himself; say that, when this work is completed, God will take the soul into those mansions of peace and joy, and cloudless knowledge, and undying life, which Christ hath gone before to prepare for us; say that such mercies deserve a love, which shall absorb every power, faculty, and thought, so

that a whole life of ceaseless service would be too little to express our adoration; say all this, and what will be the result? You raise the standard of that service, which your faith demands, to the very highest point to which sanctified human nature can ever reach; but what a noble, spiritual, soul-subduing thing religion becomes in your estimation! It becomes a real power; a lofty and ennobling influence; a spring of deep sweet love; a fountain of hopes so high, so great, so measureless, that all the world besides is poor and mean in comparison with them. Which of these two do you choose that your religion shall be? The lifeless, senseless thing which the world esteems it to be; or the Divine and heavenly influence which God says that it is?

To lessen the estimate of all we owe to God is to lessen likewise the estimate of all we may receive from God. They both rest on the same foundation. What is the ground of our obligations, but that God is our Creator, our Preserver, our Saviour, and our King? These are the very grounds of the assured confidence of which the prophet speaks, "Thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour."

In these words we find,

I. A charge given—"Fear not."

II. A reason assigned—"Thou art mine."

III. Protection promised—"I will be with thee."

I. The charge given. The aspects under which the quality of fear is described in the Word are so various, that we must look somewhat into its nature and objects. Thus it is spoken of in some texts as a feeling to be exercised, "Be not high-minded, but fear;"¹ and in others a thing to be avoided, "Fear not." Now, one kind of fear is the coward's fear, which cannot bear the sight of danger. Such is the fear that makes a man shrink from examining into the true state of his soul before God, and from estimating in their proper magnitude the difficulties from within and from without, which stand between us and heaven. Such is the fear that makes men hide from themselves the thought of death, and of all those awakening remembrances of the past and glimpses into the future, which are centred round it. Such is the fear, under whose desperate instinct men prefer to rush headlong over the frightful precipice of judgment to come, rather than see their danger, and by seeing avoid it. There is another kind of fear, which never shows itself till the time of actual trial comes, and it is put to the test. It is a sort of vain confidence, which looks boastingly into the future, and by magnifying its own strength, diminishes in a like proportion the estimate of its danger. It is arrogant and boastful beforehand, and yet, when the trial comes, it sinks at once into despondency and despair.

There is no such fear as either of these in the hearts of God's people, who have their hands upon

¹ Rom. xi. 20.

the Almighty, and beneath their feet the Rock of the sure promise. They are deeply conscious alike of their danger, and of the inadequacy of their own strength to meet it; but they stand fast, "strong in the Lord and in the power of his might." Fear of a kind they have, if that can be justly called fear, which has about it no shrinking timidity, no half-hearted doubts, no treacherous indecision. Such a fear is theirs, which neither underrates on the one hand, nor exaggerates upon the other, the dangers through which they have to pass; but measuring them all in their just proportions, holds fast with noble confidence the Saviour's promise. It has no thought of yielding, no intention of flying, but braces up the more in the power of grace every sense and faculty, to fight the noble war, and to stand in the evil day, triumphant over principalities and powers, and the rulers of the darkness of this world. Such a fear as this—a righteous, godly fear—the believer may have; but the cowardice of the world, which is loud to boast, and slow to act, and quick to doubt—which is prone to distrust even the Almighty, and disbelieve the All-True—this he must never know. It becomes neither the dignity of his calling, nor the faithfulness of his God.

But there are not only different sorts of fear, but there are also different objects towards which fear is exercised; and it is remarkable that it is mainly in this respect that the believer and the unbeliever are separated. Both fear, but they fear very different things; and vast is the importance of this diversity. The timid child and the courageous man fear alike; but the child fears some imaginary and unreal shadow,

or some petty, puny thing that he is able to tread beneath his feet; the courageous man fears what is truly a fit object of dread, and which not to fear would be blind folly and presumption, not a reasonable courage. So it is with these two great divisions of mankind, the believer and the unbeliever.

What things are they which we ought to fear? Shall we fear the opposition and hatred of the world—that world which we profess to have abandoned, and which, when we come to analyze what the formidable name means, is composed of a very small circle of men, whose praise and blame are awarded by standards false and fantastical? Shall we fear those who can injure the body, but cannot touch the soul, and whose greatest cruelties the constant heart of the untutored savage can bear unmoved? Shall we fear pain, or sickness, or temporal misfortune? He may do so, indeed, who makes this world his all, but not the believer, who recognizes in them the medicines of the soul sent by the great Physician. Shall we fear the devil? No, we will hate him, wrestle with him, watch and fight against him, but not fear him while we have God on our side. Shall we fear death? What! fear that which does but end the contests of our life, and brings us into the possession of that crown for which we have toiled and prayed all our life long! Is there, then, no just object of fear? Yes, fear God—great, majestic, holy, true, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, Creator, King, Judge. He is, indeed, the true object of fear; and to stand beneath the condemnation of His justice, is that from which the soul shrinks shudderingly.

But such a fear does not stand alone, nor is it a bare naked terror. Once we feared Him with dismay and dread, and it was the voice of His terrors which aroused from its death of sin the hard and unconverted heart. And fear Him in the sense of adoring reverence we do still, and the loss of His favour we dread more than the loss of life. But we no longer fear even Him now, in the same way that once we did, because fear is lost in love—rapturous, fervent, happy love. He is not against His people, but for them; “Fear not, for I am with thee.” He it is who fights on our side, cheering the fainting heart, kindling anew the decaying desires, and in His everlasting arms bearing up the soul triumphant over sin, the world, and the devil. When He who alone deserves to be feared, is our friend and guardian, who else shall make us afraid?

Let us note, likewise, that the absence of this fear of God makes everything else fearful. He that throws away his just reverence for the Almighty, shrinks like a trembling coward from other things. They really become fearful. The world becomes the object of fear, because we have set on it our affections; and if we lose its favour, we lose all that we love. Affliction becomes an object of fear; because, if there is no better life beyond the grave, it darkens the only life we have. Satan becomes an object of fear; because we have no strength to resist him, and because, like a cruel tyrant, he will first tempt, and then accuse before the judgment-seat the soul which he has tempted. Death is an object of terror, for it brings us before that God whom we are unprepared to meet, and is the very gateway to the world

of intolerable woe; where "their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." All are fearful when God is not feared. Safety and peace are beneath His wing; strength and protection are in His hand; love is in His smile, and comfort in His voice, as before the contrite heart He still repeats the words of blessed assurance, "Fear not, I have created thee; I have redeemed thee; I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine; I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour."

II. A reason is assigned, "Thou art mine."

These words were spoken to Israel after the flesh, and to them they still remain a covenant of peace, sure and steadfast for ever. Yet, as the relations named—Creator, Redeemer, and Saviour, are not peculiar to them, but are enjoyed in the same degree by every believing heart, others may safely take to themselves a share in this animating promise. All these relations are adduced not as reasons for anything we are to pay to God, but as reasons for that which we are to receive from Him. The particular light in which they are regarded in this text, is as the ground of confidence, that the Holy One will ever be true and constant to His people, and will no more forget them than He can forget His own love—no more desert them than He will desert His own truth. He encourages us to plead all these things in our prayers before Him; as the Psalmist did when he exclaimed, "I am thine, save me."¹

Who that has learned anything of his own weakness, anything of the inconstancy of his own purposes, and the inconsistency of his will, who does not

¹ Psal. cxix. 94.

hold to his breast this blessed truth, that the certainty of the believer's hope does not depend on our holding God, but on God's holding us; not on our faithfulness to Him, but on His faithfulness to us? In other words, it is not in our power to realize His promise at all times, with equal clearness and comfort; but our salvation rests on the immutability of that promise, which, whether we can realize it or not, still stands firm, notwithstanding our weakness, on the foundation of eternal truth. So St. Paul comforted the souls of the faithful with the assurance, "If we believe not"—by which expression is to be understood, from the context, not an absolute, but a comparative want of faith—"If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself." ¹

If it were otherwise; if with every weakness of our faith, the promise grew weak too; if with every fluctuation of hope, the rock on which hope rests fluctuated likewise, then all our peace and joy would vanish, like a dream of the night when one awaketh. The Spirit teaches us this by the expression of St. Paul, when he terms the believer's hope "an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast." ² Realize the image of some stately ship around which raves the fierce wind; before her are the rocks, on whose rugged sides, should she once be driven, all were lost, all her precious freight of human lives. But she holds on by her anchor, which keeps her from the threatening shore and from the thundering surf. The ship is not still; see how she heaves and pitches; now reared up towards heaven on the top of some mighty wave, and now plunging headlong again into the deep. But

¹ 2 Tim. ii. 13.

² Heb. iv. 19.

let the waves toss her as they will, so long as her anchor holds fast, she may bid defiance to them all. So it is with the soul, sadly shaken amidst the tempests of trial, tossed and disquieted, and yet safe amid it all, for her anchor is within the veil. One end of the strong cable is in the hands of the Almighty, and it is His strength and truth which hold it, and not ours. One end, indeed, is in our own hands, and we may cut it away, or throw it off, if we will; but God forbid that ours should be the suicidal hand to part our hope, and leave our souls to drift helplessly away into destruction! Till then, God holds in His hands the other end, sure and steadfast, and blow and rave how the tempest will, not all the strength of hell shall tear our souls away from that anchor.

Would any one see to what a strong rock that anchor holds? Let him pass his thoughts over the relationship between us and God, of which the Spirit speaks in this place, "I am thy Creator; I am he that formed thee." The act of creation, with all the marvellous exertion of goodness and wisdom by which it was accomplished, forms in itself no slight ground of confidence. When He made man in His own image, stamping upon the soul His moral likeness, and delegating to Him the supremacy of this lower world, surely He could not look with indifference on the ruin which sin produced, and that contradiction to His will which the wiles of the fallen archangel effected. Nor did He do so. Then came forth—not slumbering in the long repose of ages, but already prepared in the bosom of the Godhead—the wondrous plan of saving love, "I am thy Redeemer, thy Saviour; thou art mine." And, oh! with how wondrous a

sacrifice have we been purchased, with what mysteries of Divine grace redeemed, when the eternal Son of the Father, Himself very God of very God, came down to win again from death and hell the souls which were lost, with His own spotless obedience and intolerable agonies ! He Himself took flesh, aye, and bears it still, at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Who is there that shall gainsay the plea, when stepping from His throne between the sinner and His accuser, the spotless Lamb of God shall point to the wounds and scars of His cross, and claim the sinner as His, cleansed and forgiven, the trophy of the travail of His soul. Who shall interpose when He says, "These are mine ; I bought them with my blood ; with my stripes I have healed them ; with my holiness I paid their obedience. I became sin for them, and they have taken me to be their Saviour. They are mine, the heirs of my kingdom and the memorials of my sufferings" ?

With such a plea to be urged on its behalf what believing soul can doubt, or fear ? Yet there is more still ; not indeed greater than this, but the results of this ; as if before the soul God would open, in the vastest heights of His love, heights still more vast. He that has ransomed the soul, does not leave His work incomplete, but quickens the souls that He has ransomed, gathering them by converting grace into His kingdom. "I have called thee by thy name," words which imply a personal, immediate invitation. What heart is there to which this invitation has not been brought ? Is there one whom, with tender accents, Christ has not called—not with the careless or formal tones which a master or a stranger might

use, but such as a loving father may employ to call back a wandering child? Such tones many may remember to have heard from the lips of some dear earthly friend, whose tongue, in the notes of love, has clothed with deep and eloquent meaning the very repetition of our name. "I have called thee by thy name." Yes, all is His work; the grace which has quickened, corrected, strengthened, taught, sanctified, has all come from Him! Here is the assurance that God does indeed hold us safely with His hand, this true and covenant-keeping God; not one inconstant in will, and feeble in strength, but He whose word is yea and amen for ever, and beneath whose feet are principalities and powers, things visible and invisible. Think of this, thou trembling, fearful soul, who lookest into the future with many misgivings, and dark anticipations of trials and temptations. Is not this enough to comfort thee? "Fear not, for I am with thee; I have created thee, and redeemed thee; I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine; I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour."

III. A full protection is promised.

This does not consist in absence of trial and danger; the expressions of the text imply their presence, many in number, and varied in kind. There will be deep waters of affliction, such as those of which David complained of old, "Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me."¹ There will be waves of temptation, now violent and impetuous,

¹ Psal. lxi. 1, 2.

as the full torrent that sweeps away every opposing obstacle; now silent and insidious, as the stream that slowly and surely undermines the overhanging bank, till the whole mass sinks into the waters. There will be acts of discipline, kind yet painful, which shall pierce into the inner thoughts and intents of the heart, and by many a sharp process cleanse and purify the corrupt dross of the soul, as the silver is purified by the fire; "that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."¹ There will be no extraordinary interposition to preserve the child of God from those miseries "to which man is born as the sparks fly upward." Hereafter, indeed, they shall be all removed from us in that future rest in heaven, where every lingering stain of sin will be finally washed away, and which will be a state of perfect happiness, because a state of perfect holiness. But this will not be till the regeneration of the soul is completed, and it is made "meet to be partaker of the inheritance of the saints in light." Meanwhile, the believer must bear his part among his fellow-men, and exhibit the glory of his hope in that Divine strength, which enables him to pass through them all, more than a conqueror, "through Him that loved him."

The protection promised in the text, consists in the constant presence with the soul of its unseen, but almighty Saviour. "The Lord is at my right hand," rapturously exclaimed David; "I shall not

¹ 1 Pet. i. 7.

be moved.”¹ So, too, Paul expressed his hope, “He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.”² The Holy One will be the companion of the soul through all its weary pilgrimage on earth, and then the everlasting portion of its joy in heaven. His eye will be ever over the righteous, to watch against every open force and hidden danger, and foresee all that may be needed for their final deliverance. His hand will be ready to lift us up when we fall, and support the tottering steps, among the rugged dangers and deep pools of the “vale of tears.” His grace will be ever near to cleanse away more and more its deep sins, and wipe from it the stains of the world contracted on the journey heavenward. His power will restrain the restless malice of evil spirits, and his wisdom so order all events, that the soul shall not be crushed beneath its weight of trial, and that “all things shall work together for good to them that love Him.” In short, the soul’s temptations shall not be more than it is able to bear, but shall be tempered ever by His power and goodness, who says to the great sea, “Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed.”³ Thus the floods may be deep and dangerous, and as they beat over the soul, may seem as if they would submerge its hope altogether; but no, “they shall not overflow thee.” The purifying fire may be keen and searching, and may consume, like the flame that fell upon Elijah’s offering, many a pleasant sin, and many

¹ Psal. xvi. 8.² Heb. xiii. 5, 6.³ Job xxviii. 11.

an earthly hope; but yet the soul shall not only remain unhurt, like the three holy children in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, but shall come forth brighter for the trial. "Thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee." The preserving hand will never be withdrawn, and the grace of the Comforter will strengthen and cheer the soul in its sorest times of difficulty and distress.

The experience of every child of God witnesses to the truthfulness of the promise? Can we not, when we look back into the past, remember how, again and again, when all seemed to us dark and hopeless, the thick clouds of affliction have been parted, and the sun of God's smiling face hath broken gloriously forth from between them? Can we not recall times of trial, so sore and heavy, that we now wonder how we ever could have borne them, and how the feeble strings of the human heart did not break altogether beneath the weight? And how was it, indeed, but that the Lord was with us all the time, though perhaps our blinded eyes saw Him not; and when the blast of trial grew dangerous, He stretched His Almighty shield between us and it, and kept us safe. With the trial came the grace to bear it; and with grace, such thoughts of peace and abundant consolations from on high, that at the time, perhaps, we did not perceive half our trial, and only do so now when we look thankfully back over the past. Shall not hope catch from memory its song of happy praise? Shall we doubt that God will be with us in the future, as He has been in the past, faithful and true, gracious and merciful? Oh no; let us trust our souls to Him without hesitation or doubt, know-

ing that "His strength is made perfect in our weakness;" and that He is a "faithful Creator," able and willing to keep that which we commit unto His charge against the great day.

The condition of the believer and of the unbeliever is sharply contrasted. When we say that God does indeed chasten the soul by means of earthly trials and affliction, we do not mean that earthly trial and affliction are the lot of the people of God alone. Sorrow falls, we know, upon all men, as the common effect of that sin which has stained the souls of all. A man loses nothing in the calculation of human happiness by becoming a follower of the Saviour, while in the calculation of heavenly happiness he gains all. There is not only as much sunshine in the world to the righteous as to the unrighteous, but far more. Both have to share alike the ills which cling to flesh and blood, and mar this our present state with pains and tears. But what a difference in the strength which the two have to meet them! The unbeliever must do so in his own feeble powers, and is like some man who endeavours to walk without a supporting staff amid the surging waters of a tempestuous sea. Now one wave, and now another, passes over him; he is driven hither and thither; he loses his footing and his courage; he strives and sinks, struggles and sinks again; till the waves cast out at last upon the shore of eternity the dead corpse, an eternal monument of human presumption and human weakness. Meanwhile, the Christian seeks a strength not his own; his feet are on the sure rock. The light of the word directs his footsteps; the flood is deep, and strong,

and dangerous, but He that sitteth above the waves is mightier. And if, for a moment, his heart sinks, as he contemplates the dangers which still lie between him and the everlasting shore of heaven, then this promise comes back to the heart like a refreshing breath from above—"Fear not: for I have redeemed thee; I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour."



XII.

SPIRITUAL ENEMIES.

“Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”—EPH. vi. 14—17.

THE word of God, in describing the Christian life as a state of danger and difficulty, does but declare what is closely accordant with the personal experience of all men. The more we are accustomed to take cognizance of the inward workings of our own mind, the more we shall be assured of the truth of the fact. In this accordance of Scripture with our personal experience, is to be found no slight evidence of the perfect knowledge which inspired the word, and no small confidence in the Almighty Power, which will fulfil every one of its promises. All must feel that no system can be a safe guide, which hides any portion of the truth; it betrays rather, in this very act, its weakness and falsehood. Suppose a person, anxious to engage another man to join with him in some task of admitted difficulty, and to involve him in such a participation of the interest as would bind up his truth and honour in its successful accomplishment; suppose that the person himself is somewhat diffident of the adequacy of their means,

and consequently apprehensive of the difficulties with which their common cause will be endangered—how would he endeavour to enlist the other man in the cause, but by endeavouring to lessen the difficulties, and to conceal them from view, till the fatal step had been taken which committed them both to the enterprise? But if, on the contrary, he felt perfectly sure of the adequacy of their means to overcome all obstacles, then he would rather seek to detail and explain these obstacles as exactly as possible, and thus supply the knowledge which, if strength be adequate, would alone be necessary for success.

Now, these two different ways of dealing constitute precisely the modes in which the world and God variously deal with the soul. That evil spirit, by whose subtle intelligence the world in its enmity to God is moved, knowing that persuasion can only be accomplished by the concealment of the truth, speaks smoothly and falsely to the soul. He tells it of nothing but joy and peace, as if this life were one unmingled pleasure, one absolute enjoyment, unbroken by fears and doubts and struggles, and bright as a cloudless summer's day. Thus thousands are led to go forth into the world, the unconscious victims of a lie. They are as unconscious of any coming trial, and as forgetful of the future, as if neither pain, nor sorrow, nor death had aught to do with this part of God's creation. Yet such a picture of life is stamped with falsehood, by its absolute contradiction to every experience of the human heart. View life in what aspect you will, and come to what conclusion you will as to the relative value of time and eternity, yet, at all events, it is not an existence

of unmingled sunshine. It is not rightly imaged by a smooth stream, as it flows on in calm and unruffled beauty towards the sea; but rather by the same stream, interrupted by rocks and stones, now smooth, and now foaming its noisy way amid a thousand obstacles. It is no cloudless summer day, but alternate storm and sunshine, light and shadow, as uncertain as the wind that blows, and various as the flitting lights that pass across the earth.

Very differently does the word of God deal with us. It sets before us such prospects of bliss as make the heart leap with the transport of rapturous hope, and gives to every believing heart such assurances of peace on earth, and of a blessed rest in heaven, as leave in the soul no room for doubt and fear. But at the same time, it warns us that success will arise, not from the absence of trial and difficulty, but from the effectual strength of the Spirit, who will enable us to conquer them. He employs many an image to teach this lesson, that it is through tribulation, through many a sacrifice and with many a tear, that we shall enter into heaven. We are bidden at the same time to gird up our loins to the mighty task, assured that we know the worst: that all the truth has been told us, and that along the toilsome way there will be a sleepless eye to watch, and an almighty hand to strengthen, and an exhaustless grace to bless and comfort.

Experience, even that of the young, witnesses that such is life, and that any other view of it must be but as an idle dream, or rather a device of the evil one to lull the soul into a false security? Alas! for those who slumber beneath such a fraud, and only wake up

when help and hope are past into the reality of a despair, the more terrible from the deep delusion with which it has been preceded. Life is not a plaything; not a sporting time for thoughtless vanity; not a thing to be idly wasted and got rid of with as little thought as possible. It is a scene of mighty interests; a time for momentous work: it is the seed-time of eternity. How are we walking through it? Let the young man, who is about to enter upon its actual responsibilities, view it in all its stern reality; not in the colours drawn from delusive fancy, but in the hues more true and sober, but at the same time far more glorious, which the word of God throws over it. Let the man who, in the pride of his strength, is now battling amid its crowded competitions, stop for a time, and inquire whether he is spending it aright, or wasting his toil for that which will not profit. Let the old man, whose gray hair, and trembling limbs, and increasing infirmities, warn him that the leaves are already beginning to fall from the goodly tree, and that the hour will soon come for it to be cut down, look back to the past; and if his time has hitherto been wholly wasted upon the world, let him gird up his strength, and give the hour which still remains to him to the Lord's battle. "A hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness."

Such is the aspect in which life is presented to us by the inspiration of the Spirit; at one time, under the image of a journey; at another, of a race; at another, of a warfare, as in the text. The cause of the warfare is in the wickedness of the human heart, and the restless malice of those fallen spirits who,

evil beyond repentance and lost beyond hope, stand in the strength of an utter despair against the Almighty. Its arena is the soul itself, because Satan, instead of vainly battling against the barriers of Omnipotence, now strikes at God through the side of man. The stake at issue is the salvation of fallen souls. The Spirit exhorts us not to shrink from its difficulty, by describing the all-effectual assistance, which God promises to give, under expressions drawn from an earthly war: "Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

The points suggested for consideration are,

I. The charge inculcated, "Stand therefore."

II. The assistance given to the believer in his warfare.

I. See the believer's position, "Stand therefore." The word implies, in the first place, vigilance. The sentry, who is set to watch against the approach of an enemy, must keep himself ready at any moment to resist him. In the spiritual war, the enemies against whom we have to watch are so strong, and wise, and subtle—so deeply acquainted with all the weak points of the soul, and so skilled to suit their temptations to its peculiar weaknesses, that we know not how, or when, or in what form they will attack us. The principalities and powers of darkness are present in their countless number to contaminate

every spot of this lower world ; and there is no place so holy, no time so sacred, no act so solemn, but they will mingle up their temptations with it. Yes ; and we have more than these to watch against ; there would be, comparatively speaking, little danger of a surprise, if we had not foes within the camp. The perverted affections of fallen human nature are at enmity with a holy God ; and their intricacies and self-deceptions what mind of man can fathom ? We live, moreover, in a world, which has been for well nigh six thousand years so filled with the dominion of Satan, that our Lord calls him “ the prince of this world.”¹ Life is like a plain, broken here and there with many a dangerous trap and pit, and here and there decked with flowers, beneath each of which a poison lurks. Here all seems smooth, but the foot no sooner presses it, than the treacherous surface sinks into the deep morass. Here it is rugged and uneven, and offering but a narrow path on which the traveller may safely tread. In plain words, the dangerous cares of life, and its still more dangerous pleasures, surround us ever here below ; nor is there an affection, though it be pure as the love of a mother to her child, which may not become the means of sin. Many a temptation comes in a shape of grace and loveliness, or steals gradually into the soul, little by little, just as we may inhale a deadly poison from the very atmosphere we breathe, and from the luxuriant richness of some tropical vegetation. How shall we walk safely unless we watch and pray, and pray and watch again ? With what tender urgency did our Lord Himself inculcate this lesson, “ What I say

¹ John xvi. 11.

unto you, I say unto all, Watch.”¹ “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.”² We know neither when our foes will come to attack us, nor when our Lord will come to call us to our account. We know not how short our life may be, how near our death. Let us not faint, then, in the painful watch. The night may seem long and tedious, and flesh and blood may grow weary; but be sure that the day of our Lord’s kingdom will come at last, yea, that its first beams are already shining in the distance “like the morning spread upon the mountains.”

Again, the position of standing implies a resolute resistance in the consciousness that our all, and that “all” compassing an eternity, is at stake upon the issue of the war. It may be possible for a man to wield a sword when he is sitting, but he cannot do it effectually, and it would be a mere mockery of a real warfare thus to fight. We must put all our strength into the contest, and like trusty warriors put our whole soul in every blow we give. In the spiritual war there is nothing so needful as this entire, undivided purpose of heart. It is itself victory, itself triumph. The strength put into our hands by God is all effectual if we will but use it; but an undecided and hesitating heart, divided against itself, and longing for the pleasures of the world and the flesh even while it is beneath the banner of the cross—this is ruin indeed. It enervates the will; it unnerves the courage of the heart; it loosens the hand that grasps the weapon; it makes devotion, which should stimulate all, impossible. To go forth with

¹ Mark xiii. 37.

² Matt. xxvi. 41.

a doubting mind is to be vanquished before we begin the fight, and to give up the contest before we have arrived at the battle-field. May God keep us from a double-minded and unstable will ! Surely such time-serving souls, as seek to serve Christ and mammon, and to stand aloof from the noble war between the two, will be cast out from the kingdom when the battle shall be won, the throne of the conquering Jesus be established in righteousness, and even death be swallowed up in victory. The craven heart will be outcast, when the faithful soul wears its crown.

One lesson, as to the mode in which we shall encourage this resolute fortitude, is very needful to be learned. We are often discouraged by the number of our temptations, and by the length of our war. We look aghast at a contest which is never to end on this side of the grave, and instead of beginning the needful work, are apt to look idly on in the listlessness of despair, like a man who, feeling it impossible to accomplish a given task, has not even the heart to make the attempt. We couple together in our thoughts our trials past, present, and to come, and heap them up to an aggregated burden beneath which the soul faints. We thus weaken, by the greatness of the necessity, the courage by which alone we can meet it. Surely this is a want of simple trusting faith towards our heavenly Father. The past is already gone, with its varied lot of good and evil, and the remembrance of its blessings and the recollection of its lessons should alone remain. The future is not yet come, and may, indeed, be very different from what we expect ; at all events, it will

bring its own strength with it, and will be blended with such accompanying mercies, as will cheer the soul beneath every trial. Let us leave the future then to God, and deal with that present which alone belongs to us. When new temptations come, we shall have new strength to vanquish them. If the strife should last for years, it will bring the comforts and the vigour of years. Every day that has its contest, will have likewise its victory and its reward. Let not the soul sink into the mere distraction of a causeless fear, but brace up, by the grace of God, all its energies to meet the struggle which lies immediately before it. Not more true in regard to the wants of the body, than to those of the soul, nor more full of rich comfort to the one than to the other, is the warning of our Lord, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

The expression, "Stand therefore," further implies, both a confident courage, and a successful issue. To stand, is the contrary act to a dastard flight, which throws away the weapons of war, and seeks for safety amid the chances of the rout or from the forbearance of the pursuing foe. Little chance of mercy, indeed, have they who flee beneath the assaults of the confederate host of hell; for he who will then be their conqueror, can no more be touched by pity towards man, than he can by saving repentance towards God. Tender is even the wrath of God compared to the mercies of hell.

It does not become a Christian man to rush heedlessly into temptation, and with presumptuous pride place himself within the open influences or the secret ambushments of sin; but neither may he flee from

them, when they meet him in the way. The man who flees from one danger, will fall, in his heedless haste, most certainly into another. Thus, to withdraw from the world altogether into the life of a religious solitary is to avoid temptation, and not to conquer it. The triumph of faith is to be in the world, and yet not of the world; to be amid its influences, and yet rise superior to them, in the strength of a love which has placed its treasure in heaven. He must stand, and not turn and flee, when the enemy approaches. Less dangerous to the spirituality of the soul are the temptations which arise from the world without us, than those which have their place in the world within us, when the heart pines beneath an unnatural solitude, or preys morbidly upon itself, or rises into rebellion against a vow, accepted in ignorance and loathed in silence. Why, indeed, should the believer shun the trial, when he may meet it in full confidence of success, "strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might?"

In the preceding verse, this victory supplies the very topic on which the exhortation is grounded: "Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand *therefore*." Difficult and wearying to human hearts as the protracted warfare may be, the child of God will be supported through it all, because it is not his own strength that will win the victory. "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong." Fight, indeed, we must, and yet we shall be enabled to do so by a strength not our own. The conquering Jesus

fighters in us, as once he fought for us—the “Captain of our salvation,” as St. Paul, using the image of the text, calls Him. He really won the victory for us, when, having borne upon the accursed tree the penalty of sin, and died even as men die, he descended face to face with death and hell, and then, with victorious might, burst their bonds, and rose on the third day triumphantly. Our great foe has been crippled from that day, and is as one already stricken unto death. It is not we that conquer him now—it is not we, but Christ, who dwelleth in us. Even those glorious angels, who stand as a wall of fire around God’s people, are girded not with their own majesty and power, but with His, to whose people they minister. The glowing language of the Psalmist is, indeed, fulfilled in the believer’s experience, though the eye of the flesh does not perceive the shapes that minister around him. “Plead thou my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me; fight against them that fight against me. . . Let them be as chaff before the wind, and the angel of the Lord chase them.” But the might which drives away the tempting spirits is not that of the created angels, but that of the uncreated Son of God, who uses them as His instruments. Feeble is the arm of flesh, and frail our hearts, and cold and weak our zeal; but we go forth, conquering and to conquer, “through Him that loved us.” The grace of the Almighty Spirit works in us, both “to will and to do of his own good pleasure.” Otherwise; what a mockery would the command be, if we had not power to fulfil it! But now it is more than a command; it is a sweet and

blessed promise ; the merits of the all-sufficient Saviour, and the presence of the Holy Ghost, are all involved in the exhortation, "Stand therefore."

Once more ; the word "stand" implies something of martial array and order. We never stand alone, though perhaps in the imperfection of our present state we may not fully recognize the fellow-soldiers with whom we are surrounded. We are but members of a mighty army, of which cherubim and seraphim, angel and archangel, saints on earth and saints in heaven, are loving brethren ; all marshalled beneath the same conquering Christ. We are never quite bereft even of earthly sympathy, but go where we will throughout the world, shall still find at our side those who are partakers with us of the same glorious war.

Look at the goodly array of some earthly host ; in what exact order, and with what a careful subordination of rank and authority, is it marshalled, till the human masses become a mighty living machine, to be wielded by the will of one guiding mind ! Yet the place of every single soldier in that host is not half so exactly ordered, as is the position of every individual believer in the armies of the living God. No man so poor in worldly means, so low in station, so weak in intellect, but has a specific post of influence to occupy, and a specific duty to perform ; and feeble as he may appear to be in himself, and small as may be the sphere he may fill, he shares the importance, as he will share the glory, of the spiritual army of the risen Saviour to which he belongs. How blessed the difference between the utmost confidence which the earthly soldier may place in his commander, and which the Christian warrior feels in the Master whom

he serves ! The human captain exhausts the resources of his skill, when he places his host most suitably for defence or for attack ; and though he may foresee the general course of the whole contest, yet what may happen to each individual soldier in the host he knows not. He may embrace the whole in the grasp of his counsels, but he cannot control the fortune of each individual member of it. Our great Captain knows all, for "in Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."¹ He appoints to each man his place in life ; the vocation he is to fill, and the part he is to perform in his Church. He knows what will be his exact temptations, what his dangers, what his weaknesses ; and thus from His throne in heaven He can supply to all exactly the grace of which they stand in need.

All these things, indeed, we cannot as yet fully see and comprehend, but we know enough to make us accept with full assurance of faith all the rest. We can accept the general truth expressed by the Church of England in the collect for Saint Michael's day, "that God has ordained and constituted the services of angels and men in a wonderful order." Beyond this we rejoice in the belief, that Christ will arrange all things for the good of His people, and will not permit one believing soul to be tried beyond that which it is able to bear. Let us see how the saints of old have fought and have prevailed, and be assured, that as their trials were the same as ours, our victory will be the same as theirs. Think of the glorious company of the apostles, of the goodly fellowship of the prophets, and of the noble army of

¹ Col. ii. 3.

the martyrs, and count it all joy to suffer with them in the same cause. "Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

II. The Divine assistances given to us in our warfare call for notice. These are described under illustrations drawn from the armour and weapons of the earthly soldier; the images being of course taken from habits existing at the time the apostle wrote, and consequently less familiar in all their parts to ourselves. They represent the warrior going forth in his panoply of proof, having all the vital parts of the body cased in steel, impenetrable to the weapons of offensive war which were then in use. Upon the head towers the helmet, whose waving plume might gleam conspicuous to friend and foe above the surges of the fight. Across the chest extends the breastplate, from whose bright surface the sword might glance away innocuous. The loins are firmly but lightly girded, so as to admit of activity and unimpeded motion. The feet, usually protected merely by the sandal, are now so shod that they may tread without injury upon the broken weapons or the sharp spikes which strew the battle-field. Over all is held, to guard the undefended portions of the body, the ample shield, that might turn away the close flight of the archer's weapons. Picture to yourselves the warrior thus

arrayed, and conceive how each part of his armour would come into use amid the din and strain of the conflict, and would leave him free to wield to full effect his offensive weapons.

In applying this to the Divine assistance given to the believer, it will not be well to keep too closely to the mere terms of the illustration, lest it should become less easy of practical application to our own wants. The great apostle, referring rather to the exigencies of the soul itself than to the actual order and place of the weapons he uses as illustrations, begins with the girdle of truth around the loins. Till the truth is found, and accepted, and loved, and till it forms the support of the whole being, it cannot even commence its life before God, much less its contest with sin. To receive willingly, and firmly to hold the truth, is the first great lesson of the spiritual contest. Where, then, shall we seek it? Shall we gather it from "the muddy pools" of human tradition, or filter it painfully drop by drop from the books of our fellow-men, however wise and holy they may have been, while God Himself speaks to us? We have the living word by which they were taught, and may drink of the same pure fountain by which they were refreshed. The wisdom to which they listened, still utters its wondrous accents to us. The same living Scripture is still instinct with the same living Spirit. To turn from the fountain-head to the human channels which it has filled, would be a madness which no man in the world would so bitterly condemn as these very fathers, whose perverted authority some would place in lieu of the word of God, could they, from the bosom of Abraham where they rest, utter in

our ears their warning from the dead. We need for our guidance, truth which is certain and unalterable; and from none can it be derived, but from the eternal and unalterable God.

Or, we may understand by the girdle of truth the faithfulness of God Himself, as it holds firm all His promises, and seals them with the certainty of that word which is "yea and amen" for ever. Could there be the slightest uncertainty here, every hope would fall from us like the ungirded panoply of an earthly soldier. With what a Divine care does our gracious God provide for this necessity! Recall the assurance which the Spirit has given by the mouth of St. Paul, "Wherein God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us: which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil."¹

In either case, the subject of this truth is the same, even the message of saving righteousness, by the perfect merits of the sinless Lamb of God. We place the Saviour's atonement like a breastplate over the heart, sheltering beneath His righteousness the deep depravities of human nature. In the sense of guilt, hopeless till Christ is known, is the soul's weak point against which Satan has ever loved to turn his deadliest weapons. At one time he thrusts the soul into iniquity from the mad-

¹ Heb. vi. 17—19.

ness of an utter despair. At another, he torments it with fears and glimpses of hell so intolerable, that it takes refuge from them in the coldness of a sceptical indifference. But this breastplate, which is given through the blood of the Holy Saviour, he cannot pierce. Not all his sophistry can find one flaw in the Redeemer's work—one insufficiency in His saving merits.

Say that the soul has sinned grievously, and depict in all their heinousness its abounding transgressions ; yet the righteousness of Christ doth still more abound, and His precious blood can so perfectly cleanse, that though our " sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."¹ Say that the soul needs a Saviour, who shall combine with a holiness superhuman, a true human heart, and all the sad experiences of human life ; we point to the Son of man, born of a human mother, nursed at a human breast, nurtured into manhood amid the stern realities of human poverty, and in His true participation of human suffering, " a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief."² Say that He who shall conquer on our behalf, over sin and Satan, death and hell, must enjoy a power such as man never wielded, even spiritual as the foes whom we need that He should vanquish ; we point to the Son of God, " made flesh " indeed, and yet Himself " God of God, light of light, very God of very God." Say that we need a guardian upon earth, and we point to the Spirit, whom He has sent down to witness of Himself. Say that we need a representative in heaven, and we point to the right hand of the Majesty on high, where Christ " ever liveth to

¹ Isa. i. 18.

² Isa. liii. 3.

make intercession for us.”¹ Let the adversary plead what he will, yet in the glorious work and wondrous offices of Christ, we find an answer to it all, and cry out with the apostle, “Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.”²

Armed with this full assurance, the soul walks undismayed through tribulation. Though its path should be full of briars and scorpions, yet the feet, shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace, shall pass unharmed amidst them all. If there be peace within the soul itself, springing from a sense of reconciliation with God through the blood of Christ, then the ills of life and the injuries of our fellow-men are deprived of their power to hurt us. The dangerous path, with all its snares, and fears, and vexations, is smooth and firm beneath our feet, as the waters of Galilee were beneath the feet of the Redeemer. We shall feel them indeed still; but the wounds they make will be but superficial, just as thorns may tear the flesh, but will leave all the vital parts unharmed. The power which the world has to injure us, consists not in the clouds which may gather round our outward life, but in the shadow they may cast within the soul itself. The heart that is truly wretched, is not like a lake whose surface is ruffled with the wind, while the deep waters below sleep on unmoved, but it is like a lake which is broken up from its inmost depths by some cause which acts from within, and stirs the whole mass of water into agitated motion. The deep assurance of the love of God,

¹ Heb. vii. 25.

² Rom. viii. 34.

settling down like a blessed calm upon the soul, is too surely founded to be shaken by any outward ills. The soul walks amid them, and over them, unhurt. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee."¹

But though we are thus secure from Satan's fatal injuries, it is not our Master's will to give us perfect peace as yet. It will come, but it will be beyond the grave. Here for a time we are exposed to his shafts, and though vitally safe, may yet suffer sorely from his fiery darts. God arms us against them with such a defence, as will depend in some degree for its efficiency upon the use we make of it. The shield of faith is itself both ample to protect the frame, and strong and impenetrable to resist every dart. A simple, undoubting, undivided acceptance of the Divine promises, takes the sting away from every trial. We are weak, and our foes are strong; the sin which we desire to bring into subjection may appear formidable to our eyes, and the atmosphere of our earthly life may seem darkened with impending trials; yet between us and them we place the broad buckler of the promises, and sheltering ourselves beneath it, can bid defiance to them all. If we firmly grasp the assurances of the word, and go in faith, just as our necessities may demand, to the open throne of grace, there to receive fresh gifts of the Spirit and to quicken hope and love, then none of the shafts of the evil one shall really hurt us. Should they for a moment touch the will and fix in the conscience, it will only be till we shake them off again, just as Paul in Melita shook the deadly viper from his hand and

¹ Isa. xxvi. 3.

“felt no harm.” But if we fail to come to the living Source of strength, can we wonder if we fall wounded and bleeding beneath our sins, and carry with us, even to our dying day, the yet painful scars of the fiery darts?

Amid this contest, the believer must ever retain a clear and consistent profession. It must be conspicuous as the burnished helmet upon the warrior's head. He must not leave it doubtful to any that see him under what banner he is marshalled, and what Master he serves. The cross must be seen, not vainly and superstitiously marked upon his brow or drawn upon the yielding air, but stamped upon the life and conduct. There must be at all times a noble singularity; not in the affectation of manners, or a disregard to the ordinary courtesies of man with man; but a singularity of principle, object, and desire, which may testify to the nobler hope which beats within his breast, and the higher rule by which he walks. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”¹

Last of all, we must not wage a merely defensive contest, for we shall best defend our souls by being the aggressors. Remember that our sins have already got possession of the heart, and must be driven out with a slaughter which shall not leave one remaining. There must be an active strife against Satan's kingdom. And what shall be our weapons? The force of human argument? the power of a convincing rhetoric? the stores of a capacious knowledge? All these indeed we may use, and wisely use, but not

¹ Matt. v. 16.

on these must be our confidence; they are wholly subordinate to one without which all else is weak as a rotten reed. The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, is powerful to awake the slumbering conscience, and strike down the highest imagination, and lay bare the soul's innermost secrets, and pierce through all the most wily sophistries of hell. Yet keen and sharp against our foes, this sword touches tenderly the broken heart, and heals the wounds of the anxious conscience with the consolations of the Spirit. If we fail with such a weapon as this in our hands, ours will be the sin, and ours the ruin; but if we trust in God we shall not, will not, cannot fail, but shall go forth as "more than conquerors through Him that loved us."

Nor must this offensive warfare end with the enemies which fight within the soul itself. Our battle-field is the world, and we must extend our contest into every form of evil which exists about our earthly path. The kingdom of Christ is militant as yet, and in the mysterious counsels of the Father the sore strife between good and evil, Christ and Belial, is going on around us more fiercely than ever, sounding its clash and din of war in every ear. What a host of confederate foes are banded against the Redeemer's kingdom! On one side is the world with all its boasted pride and wisdom. A bold infidelity denies the very being of God, and takes from man that immortality of existence which alone makes him great. A false philosophy sinks the great fact of an ever-ruling God in the operation of secondary causes. A cold indifference turns sullenly away from God's truth to the ambitions of the world. A pleasure-

seeking worldliness acts as if time were longer than eternity, and earth fairer and brighter than heaven. A false superstition clouds the great truths of a free gospel with human works, and boldly usurps the very attributes and prerogatives of the Deity. On the other side is the sword of the Spirit, the conquering word of God, instinct with the Holy Ghost, and mighty to "convince of sin, and righteousness, and judgment." On every side of us sounds the call, "Who is on the Lord's side—who?" Shall the Christian stand aloof from this battle, with which the contest in his own soul is inextricably blended? Can he do so, if he loves the Lord Jesus Christ, and is jealous for the honour of the Saviour by whom he is redeemed? No; he cannot stand aloof. "He must come to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty." The first-fruits of his time, his labour, his wealth, must all be here; and here his prayer, as with deep desire he breathes upward the daily supplication, "Thy kingdom come."

Now all these gifts, which the apostle thus illustrates, are, let it be remembered, assistances to our conflict. They cannot be used for us, so as to accomplish the victory without our effort. The girdle, which is thrown on one side; the breastplate, which is unworn; the preparation of the gospel of peace, which is not buckled on the feet; the shield of faith, which lies unused; the helmet of salvation, which is borne only in name; and the sword of the Spirit, that lies idly in its scabbard—will not profit the soul aught. There must be life in the soul itself, communicated by the Spirit, and this life, with all its powers, earnestly bent in zeal and prayer, and holy

diligence, to the great work of the heavenly war. From the same cause it arises, that as the soul grows in grace, it will gain, as the body does by exercise, new vigour to wield, and new dexterity and skill rightly to use, its weapons. Let, then, the believer, who is young in experience, especially note this, that if he seems ever to come short of the victory which he has anticipated, and if the strife is prolonged with varied fortune—now sin the conqueror, now grace—the fault is not in any insufficiency of the Divine help, but is in the flagging zeal and fainting love of the soul which uses it. Let not, therefore, the heart be discouraged, like some timid coward, who throws down his weapons in the first turmoil of the fight; but rather let it be stirred up into new earnestness; let it press on through good report and ill report; and wait with constant confidence the perfect accomplishment of the promise, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”¹

The believer thus armed has no cause to fear the strength of his sins, or the multitude of his temptations. It is not after all the force, but it is the fraud of hell, against which we need to watch. We may walk triumphantly in the grace of God, through all the snares with which Satan fills the world around us, if we can only shut out his influence from the world within us. We cannot bar against his entrance the door of our silent closet, but, God helping us, we can bar against him the door of our hearts, and if he gains no entrance there, all is safe. Then let us fill our souls with God. It is the empty house that invites the coming of the tempter. Let God reign

¹ Jam. iv. 7.

within it, and beneath the shelter of His throne we shall be quiet "even from the fear of evil."

Remember, that the final victory of Christ over all his spiritual enemies is certain as the word of God. It is not His glory which is really at stake, but our own salvation. In spite of all opposition He will take to him His power, and reign in the fulness of His time with all His ancient gloriousness. It depends upon ourselves, that our victory may be blended with the certainty of His. Let us prove ourselves His faithful soldiers and servants here on earth, and we shall be made co-partners of His kingdom hereafter in heaven. Then, when the number of His elect shall be accomplished, and the kingdom of glory shall come, and the thrones be set, our voices shall join to swell the proclamation of His triumph, "Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth." "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever."



XIII.

PRESUMPTION WARNED.

“He went out, and wept bitterly.”—*MATT. xxvi. 75.*

DEEP was the mental emotion which this act expressed. Such a violent outburst of grief is only caused by some overwhelming feeling, which breaks down the barriers that self-control and pride set up against an outward exhibition of deep sorrow. Just thus it is that a stream, dammed up at its channel, gradually grows and deepens and enlarges, till, breaking down by its weight the opposing obstacle, it pours over it with a violence and impetuosity which cannot be controlled. This is peculiarly the case with men. Hardened in the rough school of life, they are expected to exercise a more rigid governance over self, and to rise superior to the sudden impulses of feeling. Not that there is anything unmanly in tears, so long as they flow on some occasion adequate to produce them. To be incapable of weeping is not an honour, but a dishonour to a man, since it shows a bluntness of feeling and affection, which is the saddest effect of the world's influence. But, then, tears must flow from causes suited to the manly character and intellect; not, for instance, from any merely personal loss or suffering, but from emotions great and honourable in themselves. We may judge from these considerations, what an uncontrollable burst of passionate feeling it was, under

which Peter wept bitterly. There was a gall and wormwood in his tears, more bitter than in any others that human eyes can shed!

How varied in their nature, and how different in their effects, are the occasions on which tears may be the relief of the overburdened heart! They may spring from an angry grief, that blends sorrow with indignation, and that does but leave the heart harder for its temporary and unusual emotion. Thus Esau, coming in from his hunting, in confident anticipation of his father's blessing, when he found himself supplanted by Jacob, "lifted up his voice, and wept." They may spring from an excess of affectionate joy, which words are too weak to utter, and which, with an irresistible impulse, carries the heart out of itself. Thus Joseph, when he could no longer refrain from making himself known to his brethren, "wept aloud," so that the Egyptians and all the house of Pharaoh heard. Or they may arise from the loss of some one near and dear to us; and in such a sorrow, there is a sort of tender luxury, which finds comfort in the vehemence of its lamentation. Thus it was with David, when he mourned and wept for Absalom, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" They may be produced by violent agony of mind; as when the innocents of Bethlehem were slain by the cruel hands of Herod's soldiers, and the shrieks of the childless mothers rose up like "the voice of Rachel, weeping for her children." Or they may have their origin in a loving penitence, when the heart, touched with the sense of pardoning love, is wholly melted into tender gratitude; a kind of

tears, which are sweet as a spring shower, when the bright sun shines through the falling rain ; as it was with Mary Magdalene, when she “washed the feet of our Lord with her tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.” Or they may spring from a pathetic pity, touched by a lively sense of the sufferings of others and a gentle sympathy with them. Thus it was with our Lord, when those eyes, from which all His own sufferings could not draw a tear, “wept” over the grave of Lazarus ; or when, with His own sufferings full in view, he came near to Jerusalem and wept over the city, saying, “If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace, but now they are hidden from thine eyes.” Lastly, they may flow from an agonized remorse and the pangs of self-reproach, when the thoughts of the past, and the sufferings of the present, and the anticipations of the future, all blend together in one utter agony. Such, in its last and direst form, will be the tears of hell, “the weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Such, in a less intense degree, the heart may experience even here on earth, in some moment of startling conviction. Thus it was with Peter, when, catching the eyes of his Master resting upon him, with mild and loving rebuke, in the moment of his sin, the thought of his treacherous denial, and all the circumstances which clothed it with especial heinousness, flashed at once upon his heart, and he “went out, and wept bitterly.”

Worthy of adoring praise, is the faithfulness with which the word of God has chronicled this great sin. Had the Scriptures been the word of man, it

would probably have been otherwise. Men would have argued, that thus to record the treachery of one of the most eminent apostles of the faith, had been but to throw a needless stumbling-block before the progress of that faith itself. Nor would it have been recorded, had it been the object of the word to aggrandize the honour of any man, or of any set of men. But the end of the inspired Scriptures is greater and more Divine than this; even to exhibit, on the one hand, the deep wants of human nature, and on the other, the sufficiency of Christ to supply them. It therefore presents the men who were made the earthly instruments of the operating Spirit, in colours only too true of all our hearts, as teaching by the example of their virtues, while they warn by the example of their sins. We need grace, to learn the right lesson from the record of Peter's sin; not that it is useless to endeavour to serve God perfectly, but that we should endeavour to do so, not trusting to our own strength, but to that strength of the Holy Ghost which is promised to them that seek it.

Let us note, then, in regard to Peter's tears,—

- I. Their occasion.
- II. Their cause.
- III. Their nature.
- IV. Their lessons.

I. Their occasion. The circumstances of the narrative will be familiar to all students of the Bible. The touching interest thrown around them by a personal sense of that sin for which the Saviour died, is deepened as we grow in grace, and advance into a more perfect knowledge of His love. The immediate occurrence, which opened the fount of Peter's tears,

was the crowing of the cock, which had been foretold as the witness of his sin, conjoined with the glance which our Lord cast upon him. The whole is recorded by St. Luke in these words, "And Peter said, Man, I know not what thou sayest. And immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew. And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he said unto him, Before the cock crow thou shalt deny me thrice."¹ It may be that, had the cock-crowing stood alone, the conviction upon Peter's soul might have been the same, and yet its effect wholly different. It might only have produced, what is no uncommon effect, a greater exasperation of mind, and a sort of desperate hardening of the conscience against the unwelcome admonition. Peter, with his hot and headstrong temper, was just the person on whom this effect might have followed. Full of generous emotion, he was yet by nature intolerant of rebuke; and the increasing violence of language, with which at each repeated step of his sin he increased its enormity, bears out this estimate of his character. But the Lord, who knew what was in man, and who had already sifted the weakness of the apostle's soul, blended with that sound of warning a look of love, full, doubtless, of tender, gentle reproach; but such as told Peter that his Lord loved him still, and amid His own sore trial, had yet a sympathy and care for his soul. That glance pierced deeply and keenly, and beneath its rays Peter's heart melted, as snow melts beneath the sun, or like Horeb's stubborn rock, when, touched by the rod of Moses, it poured from its riven side the flowing

¹ Luke xxii. 60, 61.

stream. Oh! the Saviour's heart would fain have saved His apostle from the agony of that hour. Hence came the warning beforehand, which might have kept him from falling; hence, the look which showed that into the Saviour's heart that denial of Peter had struck with the deepest pang of all; hence, that, after His resurrection, He sent an especial message as token of His pardoning love, "Go, and tell my disciples and Peter." All this was contained in that look, and was conveyed to Peter's mind by the intuition with which we grasp in an instant all the meaning of another.

Nor was it possible but that the circumstances in which our Lord stood, should impress that glance more deeply upon his mind, though at the time he did not understand the object of the shame, and suffering, and death, which were inflicted upon the Holy Lamb of God. Depend upon it, it was written so deeply upon his soul, that it remained there in all its vividness to his dying day. Many and many a time during his after-life we may be sure that it was recalled, at some moment of perilous trial flashing upon the soul as a light from heaven, and kindling a more constant zeal and courage by the remembrance of his former sin. And if it be true that Peter was crucified, at his own request, with his head downwards, as not counting himself worthy to suffer in the same manner as his Lord, can we doubt what thought was present when he uttered the request? His mind, perchance, recalled the scenes of the garden of Gethsemane, and the palace of Caiaphas; the tender warning; the treacherous surprise; the blended feeling, half courage, half

fear, with which he himself had followed to see the end; the perilous accusation; the cowardly denial; the reproachful look; the outbreak of agonized remorse; and the tears of that hour when "he went out, and wept bitterly."

The lesson which is here taught us, is, that the conviction of sin must be blended with an assured sense of the Saviour's love, before it can savingly move the soul. Have none ever known some period of our inward history, when we too have felt the same emotion, and the perverseness of years, and the rebellious thoughts of a life, have all melted into a passion of holy grief? The sense of sin was often felt before, but only seemed to exasperate and harden the heart against God. Are there in this life no warnings, which, like the sign given beforehand to Peter, may well serve as admonitions of our sin? The experience of the world around us; the tokens of mortality which meet us at every step; the disappointment of the soul, when, hoping to enjoy some fascinating pleasure, the fair dream has proved to be an illusion, leaving nothing but bitterness behind; the warning of the word, spoken by the lips of the earthly minister, or dropped, as it seemed casually, by the way-side, or recalled involuntarily from the memory; sickness, which slowly wears out life, and sudden accident, which crushes it in an instant; time swiftly passing on, and tolling every now and then, in our ears, the knell of human life; what are all these things, but so many voices, once, yea, twice and again recalling to the conscience the recognition of its sin? Yet the soul went on adding guilt to guilt, hastening upon its evil course like a traveller,

who, having once placed his unwary foot upon the side of some slippery precipice, is hurried on, faster and faster, into the frightful chasm below.

Why has it been so? Because no glance of a Saviour's love has been there, or rather it has been unfelt. To see our sin without seeing our Saviour; to feel our guilt, without knowing that fountain in which sin may be washed away; to perceive the depravity of the soul, without perceiving, at the same time, the redeeming love of Him who died for it,—is a sight so awful, that it is no wonder that the soul should turn away from the frightful truth. But blend with it the love of the Saviour, and throw over it the rays which shine from the cross of Calvary, and the truth not only becomes tolerable to human hearts, but we are able to glory in our very infirmities, as setting forth the more the beauty and efficiency of the Saviour; just as when some great black cloud that obscures the heavens, and spreads like a curtain of blackness over the earth, catches the rays of the setting sun, and is clothed by it with gorgeous colours, and a beauty not its own.

Surely there has been to the soul many a warning against coming temptation, ominous to the ears as the cock-crowing was to Peter. Have we turned away from the repeated warning, and with a fatal precipitancy rushed on into our sin? Have we shrunk, alarmed, from the remembrance of our transgression, as lacking the courage to face it? Clothe the painful truth with the light which shines from the face of Jesus, no longer as He stands amid His foes, but as He sits crowned and throned and glorified in heaven. See how He smiles upon you—a smile which

to the guilty conscience may seem reproachful in its very tenderness, yet a smile full of willing love; and can you not bear to see your sins with this light shining over them—yea, to see them in all their accumulated enormity? If you have already done this, then you will be able to understand something of the bitterness of Peter's tears; if you have not, then pray that you may do so. How shall the peace of God ever find an entrance, if it be not into the clefts of a broken heart? That day of bitterness was, in truth, the brightest of Peter's life in the true conversion of heart which followed. Those gushing tears were but as the living rivers of the Spirit, springing up into everlasting life.

So it will be with us; and, through all eternity, we shall bless the love that first truly bowed the soul before the cross of Jesus. Let the soul realize that scene, when the Lord was accused before His enemies, and His apostles stood by and looked on. Art thou, too, O soul, standing with the world, and with those wicked men who crucified the Lord of glory? Art thou living in an evil conformity of life and conversation, or united by inconsistency of thought and word, and indulgence of any one sin, with the enemies of thy Lord? or art thou looking on idly, as a mere spectator, as if thou hadst nothing to do with the great contest between Christ and the world? What keeps thee there, bearing His name and hoping for His kingdom, yet amid His foes, instead of suffering at His side? Why dost thou linger, while He that died for thee looks with tender reproach upon thy sin? Go forth heart-stricken as Peter was—go forth and weep; ay, restrain

not thy flowing tears. To gaze upon the bleeding Christ is to gaze upon that which might make an angel weep. To think of Him without emotion, is to be less than man. Go forth into silence and solitude, and commune with thine heart and with thy God ; go forth and weep bitterly.

II. See the cause of Peter's tears. What was the nature of the sin which he had committed ? There is an especial warning in the answer to this question to all that bear the name of Jesus, and to those more peculiarly who, in the first confident flush of their spiritual life, are going forth to the holy war. For the sin committed was the sin of the believer, not the unbeliever—of the professed disciple, not the open enemy. It was not that Peter did not believe. He had been warned before-hand that our Lord should be delivered into the hands of wicked men : and though it may have been that he did not fully understand this, yet, at the moment of his sin, the event of our Lord's trial was as yet too uncertain to have shaken faith. He probably believed at that moment in the Divinity and commission of his Master, as firmly as when he received his Lord's benediction, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven."¹ But his sin was, that he denied while he believed ; all his faith was lost for a moment in a cowardly fear of man, and an unworthy love of life. There was falsehood in the fact of the denial ; there was perjury sealing falsehood ; there was unfaithfulness in shrinking from his Master's side when the time of trial came.

¹ Matt. xvi. 17.

And was this the zealous apostle who was willing even to die with his Lord? This he who stood so confident in his affection, that "though all men should be offended at him, yet would he never be offended?" Was he who was ready to smite with the carnal sword in his Master's cause, unable to suffer aught for His sake? Oh! great and melancholy fall!—to be faithful only in prosperity, and in adversity faithless! Was there not one to stand at their Master's side?

Far harder is it to bear for Christ than to do for Him—to suffer than to contend for Him! How very different is temptation when it really comes, to temptation merely in the anticipation! God grant that we may stand faithful when our evil day arrives; for we, too, have been forewarned that around our path will be gathered many a trial and many a difficulty! We, too, have to die with the dying Jesus; not, indeed, literally—to have the poor flesh pining upon the cross, or scorched by the fire, or smitten by the sword; from these we are safe, but how long we may be safe, God alone knoweth. But we have to die with Christ to our sins, to put off their power, and to become insensible to their allurements, crucifying ourselves unto the world and the world unto us. Is it an easy thing to stand amid the world, unmoved by its pleasures, unterrified by its fears, the steadfast witnesses to a dying Master? Oh no! it is hard to do it. We may well ask whether we have never shrunk from it, and, in some moment of weakness, denied the Lord that bought us?

Perhaps we have followed Christ for years, hearing His word, receiving His ordinances, and professing His discipleship. Ravished with the beauty of His

holiness, and fired with a fervent desire for that rest "which remaineth for the people of God," we have bowed down and worshipped. Many have been our resolutions, and loud our protestations of zeal and love. In the flush of a first faith, we have wondered what could be meant by a temptation to fall back from Christ, and have treated all warnings of our own weakness and of the devil's craft, as well meant, but very needless admonitions. We have been eager to toil and work for our Lord. But, at last, there has come a time when the first heat and fervency of love have passed away, and at the very juncture there has come some sore temptation, such as we never felt before. Some sin, dear to our hearts, and perhaps unsuspected by us, has been found to stand between us and God. Some object of earthly love has needed to be sacrificed—some scheme of human ambition or interest to be renounced. We have found ourselves alone, parted for a time from the friends who would have strengthened our hearts and hands, and have felt in the desolation of our inward struggle, as if even God had quitted us. Have none of us experienced such a time of temptation? Happy are the souls which have not yielded to it; for what would this be but to deny Christ, and to shrink fearfully from His side in the time of trial?

Or we have found ourselves thrown into the company of those who do not love God, and who, in the cold unbelief of the world, look with infinite contempt upon a dying Saviour, and upon those who bear His name. ¹⁶⁶ Perhaps there has been a secret sneer; perhaps a blaspheming jest; perhaps an open denial uttered in our presence; and have we never

been tempted to hold our peace? Have we never feared to confess ourselves the disciples of a crucified Master? And when the taunting question has been asked, "Art thou also of Galilee?" have we never lacked the courage to give a manly answer, and been tempted to reply, either by our silent assent to the sinful folly of the moment, or even in actual words, "I know not the man?" Let us thank God, if we have not yielded to this temptation. But he knows little of his own heart, and has but carelessly watched the inward history of his soul, who cannot understand its existence. There is an evil readiness, with which, as from the prompt whispering of the accursed spirit, the faithless words rush unbidden to our lips, or the courageous avowal of our faith is stopped by some specious excuse, or by an indefinite reluctance which we could not throw away. How spontaneous and easy is all ill, springing forth as from the full fountain of the corrupted heart! What is this but to deny Christ?

And why do we deny Him? Is it because we do not believe? Sad, indeed, and dark, had then been our state. But, worse still is the state of those who believe, and yet deny their belief, and who, in a false alarm or a timorous fear of man, shrink from confessing Him, whom, in the depth of their hearts, they worship all the while as their only hope and Saviour. This is to sin against light, and to make our own faith our condemnation. This is to balance the love of Christ upon the one side, and the love of the world upon the other, and to let the last preponderate. It is to reckon the praise of worldly men, and the gain of worldly interest and the charm of worldly pleasure,

as of more worth than the undying soul, the Holy Saviour, and the everlasting world of endless joys which He has prepared for His people. Oh! shame upon such a service, that will not suffer aught for Him, who suffered all for us! Have any, to whom these words come, been guilty of such a sin? May God look upon you, and enable you to feel in your inmost heart the depth of your guilt, till you stand shocked at your own backsliding! Do not fence away the unwelcome truth, but feel it as Peter felt it, when, beneath its searching conviction, he "went out, and wept bitterly."

III. See the nature of these tears. That there are many degrees and kinds of sorrow in the world, every one knows, even from the melancholy experience of his own heart. It behoves us to see with what tears we weep, and what is the source of our grief. It is common to hear men say that they are sorry for their sins, and yet to see that their sorrow is but superficial, lying lightly upon the conscience, easily expressed and easily forgotten. Such a sorrow produces no uneasiness of conscience, and is like the wave that merely ruffles the surface of the stream. The very facility of such a confession shows how worthless it is; that it has sprung from no deep searching of heart, and implies no conviction more real than an inability to deny, or an indifference which does not take the trouble to deny, a truth about which it is wholly unconcerned. Such a sorrow as this a man may express, and yet, in the very moment of expressing it, repeat the same sin for which he professes to be sorry. Such was not the strong resistless impulse which melted the soul of Peter

into tears. If our grief is no more than this—a transitory shadow that cometh and is gone, a thought which exercises no changing influence upon the mind—we may as wisely build a house upon a treacherous quicksand, as rest our hope upon such a contrition as this. The shallow stream does but betray the rocky heart that lies beneath.

There is another kind of sorrow, somewhat more real and deep than this, and yet well nigh as worthless. There is a sorrow of the world which shrinks from the punishment of sin, while it still loves sin itself; which mourns over the bitter pangs that sin has caused, and yet presses all the closer to its breast the sin that stings it. Such a grief perceives the effects of sin, but not its heinousness; and laments its condemnation, but does not hate its power. It leads to no change of heart, to no turning after God, to no yearning desire for anything better and holier; but only to bitter complaints against God's justice, and daring accusations of His wisdom. This sorrow worketh death, since it does but produce a greater recklessness in sinning; and is like the feeling of a man who, standing upon the top of some tall rock, and gazing over into the precipice below, is led by a strange sort of fascination to plunge madly over, desperate of help and reckless of existence.

There is another sorrow, which sees all the enormity of sin, and yet appears fenced round from hope, shunning the Saviour, who alone can atone for it. Such a state is the very anticipation of hell. The soul confesses all, sees all, mourns over all, and yet hopes for nothing, but is sunk in a terrible consciousness of utter reprobation. Such was the sorrow of

Judas, which made it intolerable to live, and yet awful beyond expression to die; a sorrow so deep and poignant that anything seemed easy compared to the endurance of it, and yet so dark and hopeless that it did but perpetuate despair. Nor is such a sorrow unknown even in this our day. Cases have not been altogether unfrequent, where the dying man has believed, and yet not hoped; tossed with an agitating sense of sin, and yet falling off into eternity with the words, "No hope, no hope!" ringing from the last utterance of the failing tongue. Not such was the sorrow which Peter felt, or else, like Judas, he had perished; neither is it the sorrow which we must feel, on whose ears are sounded the promises of Jesus, calling us to penitence and life.

Our sorrow must be deep, as the stream whose whole waters are in motion, and abiding and constant as our life. It must be a sorrow for sin itself; not for its pangs, nor for its fears, nor for its punishment; but for its guilt and power, for its influence and contaminations. It must be a sorrow that blends with its loathing of self a holy looking unto Jesus, and which, from amidst its tears, can look up hopefully to the dying Saviour. There is comfort in a sorrow like this; and though, like Peter, we may weep bitter tears, like Peter, we shall find a full forgiveness. We may not, indeed, realize it all at once, but may have a period of darkness through which to pass, like those three days which elapsed between the first burst of Peter's grief, and the message of comfort sent to him from his risen Lord. But let not the soul doubt but that its day will come at last, and God's smiling face, from behind the clouds which

have hidden it for a while, cheer the mourning heart, and seal to its experience the fulfilment of the unchanging promise, "Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted."

IV. Look at the precise lessons which Peter's tears should teach us.

1. First is the folly of a presumptuous self-confidence. Had Peter been more conscious of his own weakness, and, in that consciousness, watchful against temptation, he never had contracted the guilt which caused these tears. To rely upon one's own strength, or to feel such a sanguine certainty of victory, as shall lead to a neglect of the means whereby alone victory can be secured, is the sure source of weakness and discomfiture. "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."¹ Presumption consists in an over-estimation of our strength, and an under-estimation of the difficulties which we have to encounter. View it in what aspect you will, it consequently unfits the soul for a successful warfare. It lessens its deep sense of dependence upon God, and weakens that urgency of supplication with which, conscious of its own infirmity, it seeks aid and strength from on high. Let the soul's courage be however high, its hopes however animating, its resolutions however firm and constant, it is no more able to stand in its own strength against the principalities and powers of darkness, than Israel, deprived by Achan's sin of God's protection, was able to stand of old before the mighty men of Ai. If the Holy Ghost be withdrawn, all is lost, and we become as those "who go down into the pit."

¹ Prov. xvi. 18.

If the heart be once filled with a vain self-confidence, not alone does it lose the Divine assistance, but its own strength also is unnerved, its vigilance relaxed, and it falls an easy prey to Satan's snares. Thus have we often read how some great army, strong in numbers and in warlike skill, being filled with an over-confidence of victory, and so despising the foe with whom it had to fight, has fallen into the hidden ambush, or been taken unawares and smitten by an inferior enemy. Thus is it in the heavenly war. If God be on our side, and His strength be made perfect in our weakness, then we need not fear what man or Satan can do against us. But if God turn away His face in displeasure from the proud and confident heart, it will fall as Peter fell, and mourn as Peter mourned.

2. We see how great is the loss which the soul suffers when, in this time of careless weakness, it is betrayed into sin. There is danger lest the very freedom of God's pardoning grace, and the all-effectual sufficiency of the Saviour's atoning blood, should be turned, by the subtlety of the tempter, into a plea for indulged sin. Many and many a precious soul has fallen and perished in this snare. Because forgiveness is freely offered, men argue that they can gain forgiveness when they will, and that they shall not imperil their salvation even by transgression. "Why need I doubt and fear with such an atonement before me?" cries the deluded heart. Depend upon it, that one who so argues is not far from the fatal pit of hell. If the love of God were savingly known, the plea would be impossible. Great and melancholy is the injury which the soul

suffers when it falls, however unconscious and unintentional may have been the processes by which that fall has been produced. It is like some careless wayfarer, who, on a rough and dangerous road, should go heedlessly on, without noticing the pitfalls that lie before his path. Suddenly he stumbles and falls, not destroyed indeed, but wounded, bruised, and shaken. How painfully he now limps upon his road, and drags himself heavily on, where, a short time before, he walked all blithe and joyous. If the soul falls, it is not, indeed, cut off from repentance, or excluded from those offers of pardon which are free and infinite as the grace of God; but with what strong cries and tears, what agony and remorse, is not its recovery accompanied, as it goes softly all its days, and carries to its grave the melancholy reminiscences of its sin! "Be not therefore high-minded, but fear;" "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation."

3. If, after all, through the weakness of the flesh, and the fraud of our subtle adversary, the soul should be betrayed into sin, yet let it not despair. Great is the dishonour which it will have put upon Christ—great the agony which it will have prepared for itself. But there is pardon yet. Though it shall have sinned, as David did of old; though it should have denied the Lord with Peter, or raised its hand against the gospel like persecuting Saul; the open door of grace still stands wide, and the Lord yet holds back in merciful compassion the upraised hand of the retributive angel. Why wilt thou die, O soul! Turn thee from thy transgressions, and live; "for I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the

Lord God." This is still the promise, large and free as the loving heart of God. "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins."¹

Is this thy state? Is there guilt on thee uncleaned and unforgiven? May the Lord look upon thee, and with that glance of love, arouse, ere it be too late, thy slumbering and deluded conscience. See the enormity of thy sin, in the light against which thou hast offended, and the measureless love of the Saviour whom thou hast injured. Doubt Him not even now, nor close thine ears despairingly against His call. Seest thou not His look of love, as from the cross on which He once hung, and from the throne of glory on which now He sits, He mourns over thy backsliding? Go forth, O soul! go forth, and weep.

¹ 1 John ii. 1, 2.



XIV.

CONSTANT SUPPLICATION.

“Pray without ceasing.”—1 THESS. v. 17.

FEW errors depart more widely from the true spirit of the gospel, than that which confines the religious duties of a Christian man to certain stated times and circumstances. The influence of religion ought to pervade our life, and colour with its own holy hues the whole of our conduct. Even our most familiar pleasures ought to be blended with it, and take their character from it. It should sanctify our affections; it should bless our homes; it should consecrate our studies; it should direct and control our daily business and occupation. Certain duties must doubtless have certain times for their observance. Duties are no more than religion in action with reference to given circumstances; and as these circumstances, occurring at certain or at uncertain times, occupy a given portion of our existence, so the discharge of duties must have a like limitation.

Still less is the propriety of setting apart certain days and seasons, and certain portions of the day, for the especial service and worship of the Divine Being to be questioned. Nevertheless this truth may be pushed into a wrong excess, and limit service and worship to these times, and these times alone. There

is no part of life, not excepting the courtesies and mutual duties of society, or its necessary recreations, with which the direct influences of religious truth may not be most legitimately blended.

There is no essential and necessary antagonism between our faith and the world, taking the word "world" in its largest sense of the whole state in which we live. We need, indeed, to watch against a predominant love of any visible thing, and so strictly to subordinate them all to the higher love of God in Christ, that, to use our Lord's expression, we shall hate them in comparison of Him; but there is no opposition between them and our faith. The full discharge of all that is due to the world, and the full enjoyment of all that it can give, are perfectly compatible with the most spiritual influences of the truth, if we have but grace to make them so. Duty to man derives its highest motives and purest consecration from the love of God. Witness the fact, that no relation of life exists between man and man, for which the Spirit has not given in the word the appropriate lesson for our guidance. Husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants, brothers, friends, and companions, may all find here the maxims needed for their guidance. The opposition is between sin and our faith; and it is this, therefore, not the world's affections, nor its labours, nor its duties, nor its recreations, but its sins, which we are called to renounce. Here, indeed, is an unalterable antagonism; they are as irreconcilable with each other as light and darkness. But as all other things, in due subordination, may be possessed in perfect harmony with our faith, so in the hues and

colours of that faith ought they to be steeped. The whole life, from one end to another, thus becomes religious—a great free-will offering of loving service to the God who has redeemed us. It is not enough that it should bear, here and there, the marks of religion, but it must be pervaded with it altogether.

To confine the influence of religious truth to certain stated times, is to make an opposition that God has not made, and to entangle our feet in snares not of His framing. It is to cut off the streams of life, so that they may flow in one channel instead of many. It is as if a man, having a fertilizing stream running through his field, should carefully prevent it from flowing beyond a single channel, instead of parting it into as many rills as possible to water and refreshen every part of his field. No ecstasies, no rapturous devotion, enjoyed at certain times and in certain given services, can compensate for the delight in God which should pervade all our life, any more than, in the foregoing illustration, the luxuriant vegetation on the banks of the stream's solitary channel would compensate for the general barrenness and sterility of the whole.

Here is, doubtless, the reason why many sincere persons derive so little actual happiness from their faith, because they confine it to certain times and services, instead of extending it into life's most ordinary and familiar parts. Happiness is essentially that which belongs to the whole general frame and temper of the mind, and is distinguished from mere joy or pleasure in being permanent and abiding. It is the highest state of elevation which human nature is capable of sustaining, and not a mere occasional

flight upwards, that, like the lark, soars for a time only to sink again. Happiness confined to great and occasional events, excluded from all those minute details which make up the largest sum of human existence, ceases to be happiness at all. The cause must be co-extensive with the effect it is to produce. If religion is to give happiness, and happiness is of necessity bound up with all our life, religion must of necessity be bound up with all our life too; and till this is the case, it will never satisfy the soul with the full riches of its consolation in Christ Jesus. Far, indeed, from the thoughts of the converted child of God, will be any attempt to make such a separation under the idea of limiting religious influence, and against this form of the error he will not need to be warned. But the same effect may be produced by supposing an opposition to exist between certain duties and our faith, and thus either neglecting the duties on the one hand, or marring the consistency of our faith upon the other; instead of extending our faith, rich in all its promises of the gospel and the influences of the Holy Spirit, into our duties; and in all else, not renouncing, but subordinating the outward and visible before the hopes of the world unseen, and the love of a manifested God.

While these remarks are true in regard to life in general, they have an especial reference to that duty of prayer which is the staff of the Christian pilgrimage. We are apt to limit it to certain times and to certain things, and to forget the breadth and universality of the promises on which it rests. Prayer ought to be constant as our dangers, and particular as our wants; and, like a mirror, should reflect the

varied lights and shadows of the soul's daily experience. It thus becomes the refuge from every danger; the fountain which, full as the unsearchable riches of Christ Jesus, supplies every want. To kindle faith, to warm love into a deeper fervency, to brighten hope, to nerve the soul's courage, to cheer its despondency, to check its presumption, to soothe its fears, and alleviate its doubts, are the wondrous objects of prayer. So we have it presented to us in the word, unlimited in its efficacy, and constant in its exercise. "All things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive,"¹ is the pledge of the one; and in the text we have the authority for the other, "Pray without ceasing."

The point of this exhortation is the continued exercise of prayer. But to understand how it is possible to pray without ceasing we must carefully examine what prayer is, and separate its accidents from its essence. This necessity enlarges the compass of the subject, and makes it necessary to examine—

I. The nature of prayer.

II. Its universality.

I. As to prayer itself. Here the theme is so great that the mind knows not whether most to wonder at its Divine suitableness to all the soul's wants, or at its glorious privilege and unspeakable dignity. Prayer is the expression of the soul's desires, presented before God in deep abhorrence of self, and full assurance of the all-sufficient power and willing love of Him to whom we pray. It implies an eye divinely opened, not alone to the danger, but to the heinousness of sin; an implicit faith in all the promises of

¹ Matt. xxi. 22.

the word ; a sense of weakness in ourselves, and sufficiency in our Saviour ; a filial love, blended with a filial trust ; an earnest, vehement desire ; a deep humility, and an animating hope. Take away from the exercise of prayer any of these, and you mar its perfect essence. Not that the praying soul is conscious of what graces it exercises, or stops to philosophise on the work of love which absorbs it, but that all these are unconsciously called into play by it. In short, prayer has a twofold nature, and spans at once, in the energy of grace, both earth and heaven ; earth, in all the humiliation and want of man ; heaven, in all the glorious sufficiency and goodness of God. Thus it will be seen that it is not a rite, not a ceremony, not a cold outward observance ; but an actual intercourse between two parties, one who prays and One who hears. It is a communion between man and God, as real and actual as what passes between two men, when they speak face to face with each other.

That this is the nature of prayer, is proved by various expressions used concerning it in the word. Thus it is described by the vehement accents of one in sudden alarm, "Hear my *cry*, O God !" ¹ "I will *cry* unto God, most high ;" ² or by the address of one, who has a right to the help of another, "Hear me when I *call*, O God of my righteousness." ³ "As for me, I will *call* upon God." ⁴ Again, it is described by the act of admitting a loved friend into our full confidence, "When I remember these things, I *pour out my soul* in me." ⁵ So Hannah declared, "I have poured out my soul before the Lord." ⁶ Again, it is described

¹ Psalm lxi. 1.

² Psalm lvii. 2.

³ Psalm iv. 1.

⁴ Psalm lv. 1.

⁵ Psalm xlii. 4.

⁶ 1 Sam. i. 15.

by the act of moving a load from the shoulders of an overburdened traveller, to one who is adequate to carry it. "*Cast thy burden upon the Lord.*"¹ So St. Peter speaks, "Casting all your care upon him."² And that it is by means of prayer this is to be done, another apostle precisely exclaims, "Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God."³ Nor must we omit the expressions used by our Lord where He terms it "seeking" after an object we desire, "knocking" at a door we wish to enter, and, "asking" for what we need.

The latter expression is so full of meaning, that a further consideration of it will tend to elucidate the true nature of prayer. See what intense reality it expresses; not an outward service, but a fervent, inward desire, finding for itself utterance in the ears of God. If this inward desire is absent, then prayer is absent; and though a man shall have breathed all his life long the words of prayer, he will never have prayed. We cannot ask, unless we desire; and we cannot desire, unless we feel our want.

This, therefore, the word expresses; and still more than this. A man may feel his want of something, and may have a desire for it, and yet may be too proud to ask for it. A wayward child will sometimes hold back in perverseness. Sometimes a man in proud independence will go without assistance which he wants, rather than stoop to the degradation of asking, though he knows that by doing so he may receive all he needs. Between man and man there

¹ Psalm lv. 22.

² 1 Pet. v. 7.

³ Phil. iv. 6.

may be circumstances which justify such a reluctance; but between man and God it never was, and never can be the case. Regard the immeasurable distance between us and Him, and the completeness of that dependence which, in every case, derives absolutely its all from His love and mercy. Consider, also, the infinite willingness of God to give, and the invitations again and again repeated, by which He induces us to ask. The more we ask, the more He, who is rich in mercy, is pleased to give. Though every hour of our life has its wants, and every minute should have its prayer, we shall sooner exhaust our willingness to ask, than His to give. No frowning look, no upbraiding accents, no grudging hand, ever drive from the open throne of grace the anxious suppliant.

Observe, likewise, that the word implies a sort of familiar confidence, a sense of acquaintance between the person asking and the person asked, which gives boldness to the request. We do not use the word, for instance, of any request which we may make to a stranger, or to one between whom and ourselves there is only an official connection. So when we pray whom is it that we ask? A Being of infinite greatness, indeed, and awful majesty, but not a dreaded king, to whom we approach with trembling alarm; not a stranger, from whom we know not whether to expect an answer or no; not a harsh master, who, like Pharaoh of old, may drive us from his presence, and lay upon us the heavier burden for our boldness; but we approach a Father, who watches each soul that loves Him with a tenderness to which the love of an earthly parent is no more to be compared, than

the light of a feeble candle is to be compared to the full blaze of the noontide sun.

“And may I thus approach the awful Jehovah?” asks the soul; “I, who am altogether vile and sinful? May I speak to God, and lay before Him my petty wants, as a child might do to a parent?” Yes, thou mayest, O soul, for Christ has redeemed thee, and on His heart, He, who has gone into the heavens, bears thee before the throne of the Holy One. Here is the promise, “I will be a father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.” And what is it but the faithful acceptance of the promise, which enables us to answer back the blessed words, “Our Father which art in heaven”?

Let us observe, then, that prayer is not the form of attendance upon a place of worship, where others are praying, nor is it the utterance with the lips alone of the words of supplication. Very many deceive themselves upon this subject, who, with their eyes open and their consciences fully awakened to the truth, would flee to the cross aghast at their own state before God. It is an awful truth, that thousands, who would be shocked at the omission of the form of prayer, may have lived a long life and yet have never prayed. Their devotions have consisted in the repetition of a form, and have been no more like the loving service to which God’s promises are given, than the lifeless and fleshless skeleton is like the living man. Remember how the Lord, in a vision to Ananias at Damascus, testified to the sincerity of Saul’s conversion by this, “Behold, he prayeth.”¹ Can we suppose that Saul had never engaged in

¹ Acts ix. 11.

devotion before, or bended his knees in supplication before the throne of grace? For if so, how could he declare of himself in his unconverted state that he was "touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless,"¹ when that law not only commanded prayer in general, but prescribed the specific form in which, at certain times, it was to be presented? Paul had possessed the form of prayer all his life, and yet, till the darkness of those three days at Damascus, he had never prayed. The form of prayer, therefore, is no more prayer, than the cistern which holds the water is the water, or than the sight of a feast is the enjoyment of its dainties.

Yet there is a truth in an exactly opposite direction, of which it is needful to be equally jealous, for the human mind ever oscillates in its weakness between two extremes, and in avoiding one error is prone to run into its opposite. Though the form of prayer is not prayer—meaning by the form, not the exact words used, but the act of their utterance in some way or another—yet prayer can scarcely continue to exist without its form. Prayer arises from a sense of want combined with faith and hope, and yet these in themselves are not prayer till they are expressed before God. They continue to be humility, faith, and hope, till, passing from the heart, they find in some way an utterance in the ears of God: "in some way," because we must not exclude silent and ejaculatory prayer—oftentimes the sweetest of all prayer. But even here prayer is expressed, though not expressed audibly; it finds itself words, though they are not sounded with the voice. Thus it was

¹ Phil. iii. 6.

with pious Hannah, who “spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard.”¹ He who sees into the heart accepts the inward supplication, which the failing lips of the dying man may not have strength to utter. A clear apprehension of this point is essential. Prayer is the expression of want, winged by faith and hope up to heaven; audible or inaudible; with the voice or without the voice; in public or in private; with the service of the bended knee and uplifted hand, if circumstances will admit of them, if not, without them; but still, in all cases the expression of the soul’s deep wants and believing hopes before God.

How great, then, is the dignity of prayer. When the soul prays, the distance between itself and the throne of God seems annihilated. This is the idea conveyed in the expression of St. Paul, “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace.”² To pray, is to *come* to the throne of grace, its exercise bringing us into the very presence of God, as really and truly as if, in the body, we stepped upon the gleaming pavement of heaven, and stood at God’s footstool, and gazed upon the majesty of His appearance. The soul does so stand and gaze, passing from the world of sense to the world of faith. A Divine power is this, which prayer has to convey the soul at once from earth to heaven; to bring the tale of our human sorrows into His immediate audience, who is all-willing to hear, and almighty to answer, and then take back again to earth the comforts of Him who is the God of peace, and the Author of all consolation. It is an awful power which unveils the

¹ 1 Sam. i. 13.

² Heb. iv. 16.

unseen world, and opens to the step of faith the very highways of heaven. "Put thy shoes from off thy feet;" put off thy sins, O praying soul, for "the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." Every spot where we hold communion with the Invisible is sanctified to the loving heart, till it cries with Jacob, "How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

To the dignity of prayer, add the thought of its power. There are mysteries in it as regards the free knowledge and the free sovereignty of God, which we cannot pierce; but it is most certain, that believing prayer has, humanly speaking and in virtue of His own promise, the power to modify the Divine dealings. God had declared that He would destroy Nineveh in three days, and yet, when its inhabitants repented of their sin, He altered His counsel and spared Nineveh. Unless we believe that there is this power in prayer, independently of its internal effect upon the soul itself, we take away half its motives and surely more than half its promises. By the will of the Almighty Himself, prayer has the power to gain for us that which we should not otherwise receive, and remove from us that which we should otherwise suffer. It goes forth from the fainting utterance of some broken and contrite heart, but it sets in motion the armies of heaven, and touches the compassionate heart of that Deity whom they serve.

Whence does it derive this power? It is not from any inherent merit in the soul that prays. It is not, as the Pharisees of our Lord's day supposed; not as the Hindoos, or as the followers of Rome, still believe,

that there is efficacy in the number or length of our prayers, to lay God under a moral obligation to answer them—but it is derived from the promise of the unchangeable Father, and the prevailing merits of the adorable Son of God. Prayer opens heaven, because it pleads the work of Him who hath quenched in the tears of His agony the flaming swords of cherubim who guarded the celestial gate. It moves the heart of God, because it is acceptable through the intercession of God's dear Son. Prayer is not a right which the careless, impenitent, and disobedient soul may think to exercise—forgetting God in the days of his prosperity, and only seeking him when his "fear cometh as desolation, and his destruction as a whirlwind." God forbid that any anxious and alarmed conscience should be discouraged from praying. If the true motions of the Spirit be there, though as yet they faintly struggle through the clinging infirmities of the flesh, let him pray; for God, who gives the desire, will surely hear and answer for His Son's sake. But yet, the specific and pledged promise is given to the believing heart alone. "The eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers."¹

II. This suggests the universality of the duty—"Pray without ceasing." When the true nature of prayer is rightly comprehended, this, too, will follow from the mere instincts of the soul's desire.

The words express, in the first place, constancy and perseverance. The soul must come again and again, and wait patiently yet with fervent supplication upon God, till it pleases Him to answer. The

¹ 1 Pet. iii. 12.

certainty of the answer which He has pledged Himself to give, is wholly independent of the time and mode in which He may see fit to give it. These He keeps in His own hands, to arrange according to His own wisdom and goodness. The experience of God's people will testify that the answer to prayer ordinarily comes in a mode altogether different from our anticipations; while we are looking out for it in one way, it may come in another; and while we are still watching and waiting for it in one direction, it may already have been given in a different.

So, likewise, in regard to the time. He may see fit to delay it for the greater exercise of faith and love. If God does not answer us at once, that delay argues no unwillingness in God to give, but an unfitness in ourselves to receive. Let not the soul, therefore, weary in calling upon God; but press upon Him constantly, like the Syrophenician woman, who, twice repulsed, still persevered and obtained a blessing. Fear not but that, in His good time, Christ will intercede for you; and laying the incense of His righteousness before the throne, will plead His own merits on your behalf. That answer of peace will come, be sure; and when it comes, you must not cease to pray, but only gather, from the mercy past, a fresh motive to constant supplication for mercies yet to come.

Supplication must be constant, as well as persevering. Our daily petitions are but the transcript of our daily wants; and while these last (as last they will till heaven is ours), who that knows his own weakness will ever cease to pray? Not more truly is the body dependent for its life, and health, and

food, upon a constant Providence, than the soul is on the constant gift of grace. To think that the child of God will ever, in this world, be so free from enemies without and from fightings within, as not to need fresh supplies of strength and peace, is but the device of that arch-enemy who lies in wait to lead us into ruin. Never, never, must prayer cease on this side the grave; never till the strife is past, and the temptations ended, and the earthly tempest has sunk to rest. Then, indeed, when the soul's last want is satisfied, and all the hopes of time are swallowed up in the full fruitions of eternity, may prayer cease; but it will only cease that it may break forth into a more Divine energy of praise, and lift its voice amid the rapturous hallelujahs of the redeemed, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing."

But the words convey, not alone the prolongation of prayer through all this mortal life, but the extension of the habit of prayer into every hour, into every minute of our being. This does not detract from the necessity and value of stated times of prayer, the very recurrence of which may stir up the forgetful heart to a duty which it would otherwise omit. These times form so many resting-places on our journey heaven-ward. Our weakness needs them. They stand like rocks amid a troubled sea. Did they not break their violence, its waves would roll on in their unbroken strength, till, submerging in the formidable waters the feeble barriers of the human will, they would sweep away altogether the soul's fainting purposes. These times stand between, to

break the severity of our conflict, and remind us, by their recurrence, of the things unseen. Who would ever lay himself down at night, ignorant whether he ever shall wake again on earth, without first commending his soul to the unseen Creator? Who ever go forth in the morning, to battle with life's dangerous trials, without taking God with him as his ever-present shield and guardian? It would be well and most profitable to the soul, if a certain portion of time, however small, were religiously set apart in the middle of every day, for the purposes of devotion; like Daniel, who prayed three times a day; and like David, who has left on record his own holy purpose, "Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and He shall hear my voice."¹

But, while we retain these stated times, why should we confine ourselves to them? Why should we not pray just when our necessities dictate, and the assaults of our great foe require? We should thus extend the sweets of heavenly communion into all our day, to consecrate its business, to sober its joys, to sweeten its affections, to cheer its trials, and elevate its hopes. If there may be silent as well as spoken prayer—if its essence may remain, independently of the outward act of the bended knee and of the uplifted hands—what hour of the day is there when the believer cannot, or when the believer will not pray? His soul thirsts for the living streams; he would not willingly lose one drop of their consolations. The pining heart waits longingly upon God; and, in the fervency of its spiritual desires, "prays without ceasing."

¹ Psalm iv. 17.

But, once more, if the times of prayer are unlimited, are not its objects unlimited too? There is no want so small as to be beneath, and no necessity so gigantic as to be above, the will and power of God. What is there which He is unable to give? The good things of this lower world are His, for He delegates His sovereignty to no other. Life, and health, and strength, come and go as He wills, whose almighty power is guided by faultless wisdom and prompted by infinite love. His are the fertile earth, and the varied seasons; "fire and hail, snow and vapour, and stormy wind fulfilling his word." All the fine subtle threads, that guide the portion of man below, are in His hands. Grace is His, that can supply all strength; wisdom, that can communicate all knowledge; holiness, that can cleanse all stain of sin; peace and consolation, that can bind up all broken hearts; glory, that can swallow up all pain and weakness in immeasurable bliss; and love, that will hold nothing back; for if God spared not His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

"What shall I ask?" dost thou inquire? Rather inquire what thou shalt not ask! Ask all, and stretch thy desires to the breadth of the promises, and the measureless love of the God who will accomplish them. Yet, we should be watchful over what we ask. In what we seek for the soul, we cannot go wrong; for the Spirit of God Himself has taught us what to ask. But in praying for the body, it will behove us to be very careful what we ask, lest we seek that which may be evil for us, and may interrupt God's purposes of sanctifying grace. How

often do we mistake good for evil, and evil for good. In asking, then, for temporal things, let us add to our petition, "Not our will, but thine be done." In the words of a familiar hymn,

"Not what we wish, but what we want,
O gracious God, supply ;
The good, unask'd, in mercy grant,
The ill, though ask'd, deny."

There arises from all this, one more truth. If prayer is to be without ceasing, constant as the wants which we need to have supplied, it must needs be particular and specific likewise. The wants of one day are not the wants of another, nor the dangers of one day the dangers of another. If the words of prayer remain unaltered, while the wants of prayer vary, prayer must itself become unreal ; for it will no longer express the immediate necessities of the soul. In this respect, public prayer differs largely from private. In proportion as you extend the area of want over which supplication is to reach, the more general must the supplication become, because the mercies, the wants, and the dangers of a body, are less variable than those of an individual ; the necessities of a family are far more uniform from day to day, than those of a single soul, and those of a congregation more uniform than those of a single family. It is, therefore, possible, to comprehend in a common prayer, all the wants of a collective body to a degree in which it is impossible in regard to the wants of an individual soul. If, therefore, prayer is to be a reality, and a source of daily strength and comfort, it must be particular and specific, and, like

a mirror, must reflect all the images of the soul's daily experience.

Here, then, O soul, is the staff that shall support thy steps. Here, the means whereby thou shalt be enabled to defy all thine enemies and go on upon thy race, strong in faith, and firm in hope, and rejoicing with joy unspeakable—"Pray without ceasing."



XV.

CONQUERING FAITH.

“This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.”—
1 JOHN v. 4.

OF all the illustrations used to denote the nature and trials of the Christian life, there is none, perhaps, so thoroughly familiar as that of a soldier. To estimate the happy significance of the image and its entire accordance with all the facts of experience, we should observe our own unconscious use of the same figure, and how it is unintentionally bound up with all our familiar modes of speaking. It is impossible to express the difficulties of the spiritual life, without recurring to it more or less distinctly, and illustrating by its known and sensible facts those struggles in the heart which are fully known to none but to the soul itself, and to its God. But while this state of conflict accompanies the life of the believer, we must be careful not to attribute the cause of it to the life of the believer. Our Lord Himself, in His personal teaching, made this distinction; for while, on the one side, He declares that He came, not to send peace on earth, but a sword;¹ on the other, He left this precious legacy to His Church, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.”²

¹ Matt. x. 34.

² John xiv. 27.

None of the elements of that strife, through which alone the believer enters heaven, arise from the gospel in which he believes, but are wholly inherent in that which the gospel was given to remedy. They all existed in the soul prior to the influence of that grace of God which called it out of darkness into light. Strong cries and tears form part of that repentance through which the soul has to pass; but they originate in the state out of which it comes, not from the state into which it enters. They are produced by putting off sin, not by putting on Christ; by the rending away of Satan's chains, not by entering into the liberty of the sons of God. They belong to the ruined state in which we lay before the Lord of life descended to the rescue, not to the glory of the inheritance given us in Him; to the imperfections of the heart in which grace works, not to any weakness in the grace itself; to the time of trial existing here, not to the recompense of the reward promised us hereafter.

Accordingly, we must not suppose that a state of warfare is peculiar to the Christian. Let the alarms of soul, the pangs of conscience, the strife of uncontrolled passions, the forebodings of death and judgment, the bitterness of worldly disappointments, witness this. War we must have in our hearts in any case. How can it be otherwise, when there are two antagonistic powers stirring in every man that lives? On the one side are the motives of a fallen nature, working in an evil confederacy with the powers of darkness and the snares of a dangerous world; on the other are the cravings of the soul after immortality, the natural light of reason, and the voice of

indignant conscience shaking the inner man with foreshadowings of wrath against the day of wrath. The only question open to us is, on which side shall we war? Shall it be with Satan against God and ourselves? or, shall it be with God against Satan, beneath the banner of a crucified but risen Saviour, and among the glorious throng of prophets, apostles, and martyrs who rest in the bosom of Abraham? There may no doubt be a state of the unconverted heart in which this contest may be stilled into a silent acquiescence with sin and Satan; but this would not be peace. History has often told of a nation, subdued by some stern and powerful emperor, so that beneath his feet even expostulation has been silenced, and complaint has not dared to whisper. There may be a slavery, where the very desire for liberty has been extinguished, and its absence has stamped upon the slave the last brand of an utter degradation. The powers of life may collapse, so that the limbs assume the rigidity, and the vital functions sink into almost the stillness of actual death. When we can believe that such death-like torpor is a sweet sleep, such an utter slavery is freedom, and such a despotism, liberty—then, but not till then, can we call the deep apathy of a reprobate heart, health and peace.

The gospel affects the nature, but not the fact of our warfare. And if a glorious cause, that concentrates in itself all the dearest hopes and highest aspirations of man; if the prospect of a final victory, as assured as it will be perfect; if the possession of weapons, divinely fitted to our necessities, and the strength of the Almighty God to enable us to wield them; if the example of the great Captain of our salvation, and

the throne of glory on which he now sits in heaven—if these can animate the soul, the state of warfare which we have to bear need not depress or discourage us. Ah! when the contest shall all be past, and our souls are safe in heaven, and the last rude sound of strife has died away for ever, the remembrance of all that we have suffered here will but clothe with a sweeter charm the perfect rest hereafter. As we sit by the waters of life and recall the contests of our earthly existence, we shall look back upon them with the same smile with which a man regards the petty trials of his childhood, and celebrate our victory over them with a song of rapturous gratitude and love.

Let us not shrink, then, from the contemplation of this strife and this victory. Both of them are expressed in the text, where incidental allusion is made to them to commend the completeness of the new birth of the soul. "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world; and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."

Conquering faith involves—

I. A power to be overcome.

II. The nature of the victory.

III. The instrument of the conquest.

I. There is a power to be overcome, described by the familiar term of "the world."

Now, in one sense, we may understand by it all this present system of things, the whole world outward and visible with which we are surrounded; the objects, the hopes, the interests, the very affections and duties of the life which now is. There is not, indeed, any necessary antagonism between these and the great hope of our calling, any more than there is

between the road along which the traveller may be walking and the home to which it leads. But suppose that this road, rough and rugged in itself, should be surrounded on either side by beauteous objects and many a means of passing gratification. We can easily conceive that in such a case the traveller may gaze wistfully from his rugged path upon the sunny glades and smiling scenes around, and may be tempted to pause on his journey to pluck a flower here, or gather a fruit there. Perhaps he may linger, and instead of pressing onwards towards his resting-place, may stop in an idle fascination, till the swift hours pass on and night comes down, and he is far from his home, and amid the bewildering darkness the effort to reach it becomes hopeless. This is precisely the danger with which the Christian is beset from the temptations of the world around him. This is not his home; his rest is not here; not even amid its sweetest and dearest affections. He must move on, with his eyes fixed on the Zion of his hopes, not wandering hither and thither, captivated by every passing object that surrounds his way. If he sees them to be fair, he must think how much fairer still is the home to which he is hastening. If he is tempted to pause amid their charms, he must remember that time is short, and the night of death near, and his home perhaps yet distant. If he is refreshed by them, it must only be to press onward with renewed strength and courage, where the living waters and the green pastures and the unclouded sun of heaven wait to reward his toil.

But is there no danger lest faith become weak, and the vision of the unseen world be lost to the eye of

the soul, amid the thousand objects which cluster closely round his path? Is there no danger lest he turn aside, it may be with the intention of pausing only for an instant, and lest the perfume of the flowers and the music of the running waters should lull him into a deadly slumber, ere his toil be done? Stop, stop, O soul! If the straight road once be left, who shall guide thy way? That easy road is not the track that thy Saviour trod, and along which the traces of his footsteps may guide thee to rejoin him. Those flowers, however fair and sweet, will not satisfy thee. Pluck them as you go, but pause not in the race nor lose the precious moments for their sake, nor linger among them till their sweetness unnerve your strength and paralyze your speed.

What soul is there, that has not had melancholy experience of this danger, and that does not need to watch and pray, even over the holiest affections which this life supplies? We dare not permit ourselves to enjoy anything here unlimitedly, or without holding a strict rein upon our desires. Our home is not here, and our affections must not be here either. The pleasures we find must not make us forget that we are strangers in a land of foes, and that we never must cease to watch, till the triumph is won and the soul safe and the warfare ended, and "death swallowed up in victory."

But the term "world" has in Scripture a more precise meaning than this, and denotes not the world in general, but that portion of mankind who are still alienated from God and strangers to the household of faith. It is an awful fact, to be recognised with fear and trembling, but proved alike by the direct

teaching of our Master, and by the irresistible result of a melancholy experience, that to the greater number of mankind the cross of Christ is still foolishness, spiritual religion a stumbling-block, and the people of God but as a light shining in a dark place. It is with reference to the world in this sense that St. James uses the expression, "Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?"¹ It is mere folly to answer that this was true of the apostle's days, but cannot be said of our times, when heathen darkness has been dispersed before the gospel light and we are a nation of nominal Christians. We must deal with things, not names; with practices, not professions; with Christian hearts, not Christian titles. God forbid that we should judge any man, or dare to usurp the prerogative of the All-seeing in pronouncing upon the religious state of individual men; but it is impossible to overlook the fact, that the general principles of men's conduct, the general objects of their pursuit, and the general tone of their lives, are not those of the gospel standard.

Let any man read our Lord's Sermon upon the Mount, and say whether the rules of life laid down in it are those which guide mankind at large, or whether they are not different from them as light from darkness. It is the existence on every side of us and in immediate contact with us of a nominal Christianity, void of the living spirit of the faith, that constitutes the peculiar religious temptation of our age. The insensible contagion of example and opinion is like a tainted atmosphere, whence we inhale with our very breath the poison of a plague,

¹ James iv. 4.

till the seeds of death have penetrated the whole physical being. We may be, perhaps, unconscious of the evil, till the actual pestilence breaks out upon the soul. What with a desire not to give pain, the conformity of personal habits, and the expediency of avoiding offence, many a light is darkened and many a soul lost. The love of the world's approbation ends in the fear of the world's blame, and in regard to that inner circle which constitutes each man's world, leads to disregard of Him whose are the earth and the heavens and the heaven of heavens, and all things that are therein, visible and invisible. Truly there is need for every man to pray, "From all the deceits of the world, good Lord, deliver us."

The apostle, in a preceding chapter of this Epistle, gives the fuller explanation of the term, "All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world."¹ The direct influences of a carnal nature are here described, in those varied forms which fascinate the soul. Glittering and beautiful, they are yet false and deadly. Clothed with a gay excitement while they last, they are short-lived and transient. They do but aggravate the thirst they profess to quench, and mock the soul with a shadowy promise of enjoyment, which vanishes when you try to grasp it. Who shall fully unravel all these snares of the evil one, varying as they do, to suit the varieties of human character and temper—now gross and coarse, now all elegant and graceful; sometimes open and avowed, sometimes subtle and insidious? Here is the one test, by which, as

¹ 1 John ii. 16.

by the touch of an archangel's spear, you can unmask the fraud and call each one to stand before you, in its own hideous nakedness as it stands before God, and as we ourselves shall see it to be by the light of a better world. Does it practically keep the soul back from God? Does it occupy some portion of your heart, so that you cannot lay it all before the cross of Christ? Does it lead you to shrink from the light of truth, and to hide your iniquity, if it were possible, even from the eye of God himself in the recesses of the soul? Then be sure that it is sin! It matters not what may be its name, its form, its beauty; it is your world, and between that world and Christ there can be no union. You must renounce the one or the other, for they cannot co-exist in the same heart. "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him."¹

Great, various, and insidious, are these dangers, not felt by the believer alone, but by the believer alone duly estimated and faithfully conquered. How sore is the strife, and how largely mixed up with all that is melancholy in our experience of the past! Would we rise superior to them all, and make the life that now is to be but the pathway into immortality; let us accept the lesson, "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."

II. The nature of the victory—What is it to overcome the world. Rather, in the first place, what it is not.

It is not to seclude ourselves in the misanthropy of a recluse, or within the gloom of a convent. To avoid the temptation, is not to meet and overcome it.

¹ 1 John ii. 15.

So far from promoting the soul's health, and its close devotional communion with God, it subjects it to new temptations, and these of a kind which it was never intended to endure. Where is the moral nature of faith and hope and love, if the temptations, which can alone test their sincerity, are removed? Not more truly do the limbs of the body require active exercise for their development, than the faculties of the soul need the discipline of trial, before they can attain the maturity of the spiritual manhood. The graces of the soul can only grow by practice, and are not like the sickly exotic, which drags on an unhealthy existence amid artificial heat; but like the vigorous plant, which is watered by the dews from above, and nurtured into sturdy growth by the winds of heaven. God has taught His people to be in the world, but not of the world; and it is worth our notice, that St. Paul refers to this, as to an unanswerable argument, where he exhorts the brethren not to company with fornicators. Then he explains, that he meant, with a brother who is a fornicator, "Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or with extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs *go out of the world.*"¹ To exclude ourselves in an unnatural solitude is no more to overcome the world, than it would be just for a soldier to flee from the noise of battle into the solitude of a forest, and then boast that he has no enemies to resist him.

Neither, again, is this victory to be found in a morbid distaste for the duties, the affections, or the pleasures of life; or in an unnatural stoicism and

¹ 1 Cor. v. 10.

insensibility to its sufferings. Such was not the teaching or the personal example of our great Master, who has consecrated human affections by His own participation of their sympathies, and human sorrows by the tears He shed over the grave of Lazarus and the coming woes of Jerusalem. Test the other side of this question. A man has not two hearts, one for the world and one for God; not two natures, one for earth and one for heaven. The heart that throbs to the pulse of human sympathy, is the self-same heart that burns with the fervency of Divine love and the fire of the sanctifying Spirit. Within the same breast are laid up the hopes of the life here, and all the magnificent visions, all the intense soul-subduing desires, of the life hereafter. If you harden the heart, therefore, you harden it as much against the one as you do against the other. Close up the affections in a cold and severe asceticism to man, and how shall the chilled, deadened, lifeless thing ever rise towards God? Where grace is enthroned in the soul, its effects are to make all its pulses more lively and sensitive. The very immensity of the God to whose love the Spirit has enlarged the compass of its affections, only widens its capacity of love towards its fellow-men. The soul, stern to the blandishments of sin, is soft and yielding to the love of God and man. What gentle, winning sympathies were there in the character of our Lord Himself! See Him tenderly fondling in His arms the helpless infants, and thus expressing in the very freedom of His human love the breadth of His Divine salvation. A hard insensibility of heart is no more like the Christian victory

over the world, than the coldness of the grave is like the warmth and energy of life.

Moreover, such a temper of mind, while it loses the keen sense of suffering, would lose likewise all the beneficial influences which suffering is intended to work. The sanctifying effects of affliction are immediately connected with the pangs of affliction. Did we not feel the wounds which they make, and pine beneath the loss of what they take away, where would be the clefts of the broken heart into which alone can descend the healing balm of Gilead? There would be no good lessons in human disappointments and the afflictions of life, if we did not feel them; in the same way that the wind which ruffles the surface of the stream, blows on the same waters without effect when they are congealed in the icy bands of winter. All this is strikingly expressed in the exhortation by which the apostle St. Paul bids the mourner lift up the "feeble knees and the hands that hang down," by the consideration of the spiritual benefit which the present suffering is to work—"Now 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."¹

But to overcome the world is to accept its affections while we reject its sins, and to fulfil its obligations while we sit loose to its interests. It is to hold it and its dearest hopes subordinate to the world to come. It is to use its precious opportunities as talents for eternity, and to consecrate all its gifts to

¹ Heb. xii. 11.

the honour of the God who loves us. It is to throw over all its shifting scenes that simple trustful confidence, that holy fervent love, which shall clothe its passing events with the glory of the world to come. We must so live, that "life shall be Christ, and death gain." We must pass through all its varying scenes as strangers and pilgrims, who have here "no continuing city," but "desire a better country, that is, an heavenly." We must feel towards life as we would towards a battle-field. There may be a charm in its very dangers, a holy excitement in its heroic conflicts, a glowing animation in its expected victory, and moments of sweet repose between its struggles; but it is a battle-field still, and not a resting-place. For the world is the scene in which, by the grace of God, we are to win our crown and enter, "through the grave and gate of death," "into the rest which remaineth for the people of God." This is the victory that overcometh the world.

III. The instrument of this conquest is faith—the hand that grasps the Saviour, the eye that sees the invisible, the heart which accepts the future.

It is the hand that grasps the Saviour. This is its first and its great work, and from hence alone it derives all its conquering energy. That faith, to which the promises of eternal life are given, is not a general principle of faith, but is a specific faith in Christ. It saves not by the fidelity with which we believe, but by the atoning merits of Him on whom we believe. Its strength is in the exact adaptation and the sufficiency of the Saviour to meet the wants and supply the necessities of the sinner.

On this point is the great practical error of the

Church of Rome. Retaining the promise of salvation by faith, it becomes in her teaching a faith in herself, and not in Christ; an implicit credence of all she teaches, and not a saving reception by the renewed heart of the atoning blood of the Lamb of God. Yet if this were so, and the act of believing saved independently of that on which belief rests, then the Mohammedan, and the Hindoo, and the votary of every other blind superstition that fills the world, provided they do sincerely believe what they profess, are in like state of salvation with the Christian.

But faith is the hand that grasps the Saviour, and that which saves is not the act of grasping, but the nature of that which it grasps. The drowning man will catch at a straw, but the straw will not draw him out of the deep waters; it needs the strong arm of a friend to do this. The believer, as he feels himself sinking beneath his sins, grasps not at anything, but at Christ, with the energy of one who is else lost and perishing, with the simple confidence of a full trust, and the fervent love of a grateful heart. He not only believes with the head, but accepts with all the faculties of a renewed heart His saving righteousness; his all in all is laid up here; his pardon for the past, his comforts for the present, his prospects for the future. Faith thus identifies his every hope with the person of Christ,—the living, suffering, dying, risen, and ascended Christ. Even the soul's love for the dearest thing it has upon earth is subordinated to its constraining love for Him. The believer would gladly leave all to be with Him, and counts it as the happiest moment of his life, when he shall

be "absent from the body, present with the Lord." Thus it loves all that Christ has said, as well as all that Christ has done; and how then can a carnal conformity with the tastes and opinions of the world around be possible? How can the soul enter into treacherous compromise with the foes that resist, and with the sins that dishonour the Saviour, whom it loves dearer than it loves itself? The hands of those who fear not God may "crucify the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame;" but never the hands of those who look to God as their Father, and to Christ as their Saviour, Brother, Guide, and King.

Again, faith is the eye that sees the invisible; and by that vision conquers the allurements and the cares of this world; because it realises into an intense certainty the brighter glories and more fascinating hopes of the world to come. It is only when this perception of the other life is dim and faint, that the trials of the present life can endanger our peace. Have you never been conscious in your past experience of some periods, when faith has almost become sight? In such a state, the presence of God becomes a thing felt by the soul, as it recognises, above and around and within it, His all-pervading majesty and power. Life, with its mingled good and evil, is seen to be but the road along which it is hastening towards its home; death, with its solemn thoughts, but a river flowing between us and it; and all human things whatever, overshadowed by the immensity of eternity, are lost to the soul's eye in its grander interests and cares.

At such a time, the ordinary concerns of life become unimportant; and could faith always act with the same vigour, there would not be a danger which would really hurt the soul. And though, perhaps, we can never expect that our sight of God, and of the world unseen, should be exempted from alternations of strength and weakness, yet there is no doubt that we might have a far clearer and firmer faith than we ordinarily possess. It is the gift of God, and, like all His other gifts, is limited in degree, not by His capacity to give, but by our capacity to receive. Were our desires larger than they are, prayer would be more fervent and unceasing, and praying more, we should receive more. Then, as faith grew strong, the impressions of the world unseen would become permanent upon the heart, and beneath their influence the fairest baits that the whole world can offer would seem worthless to the soul, compared to those mighty hopes whose awful length, and breadth, and depth, and height, unassisted reason is unable to fathom.

Again, faith is the heart that accepts the promise, and looks forward with undoubting assurance to the kingdom of the Redeemer, and the gathering together of all His people, to share His mediatorial glory. There is neither doubtfulness nor indistinctness about this triumph. Though future, it is clothed to the eye of faith with the same vivid reality as if it were already present. Faith seems to see the sign of the Son of man already in the heavens; to hear the archangel's trumpet summoning a world to judgment; to stand at the very gates of the heavenly

Jerusalem, and look into its streets of gold ; to bask beneath the glory of the manifested God, and to catch, adoring, the accents of that voice which shall welcome the souls that have loved him into heaven, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

How can the soul, that beats high with such anticipations, be led away by the outward glitter of the things that perish ? Their seducing pleasures, in all their brightness, seem poor and mean. They lack the immortality for which it craves, and are to it as the toys of a child would be to the taste of a man. It has risen into a hope as superior to them, as heaven is higher than earth. Faith catches, from the very intensity of its gaze, somewhat of Christ's own fulness. And as Moses, when he descended from speaking with God upon Sinai, brought with him a reflection of the glory on which he had been gazing, till, on his unveiled face, the eyes of Israel were not able to look ; just so, faith gazes and adores, till it catches the reflection of the Saviour's likeness, and changes the soul "into the same image, from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord." hateful as the breath of a pestilence does sin become to the soul that bathes its thoughts in the coming glories of the promised kingdom.

Great things are they to which faith gives a daily, hourly influence upon the soul. The sufficiency of the dying Saviour to wash away the soul's guilt, and open to it an entrance into the kingdom of God ; the constant presence of God with the soul as its

unseen, but ever-present Guardian, foreknowing all events, providing for all wants; the bright anticipation of a state of perfect rest and glory in heaven, when Christ the crucified shall be proclaimed and worshipped throughout the world as Christ the King, and His people shall sit down with Him upon His throne, even as also He has sat down upon His Father's throne,—these, in their varied relations to the soul's wants, constitute the great themes of faith, the prevailing thoughts of the believing heart, blended with all its daily comforts and daily struggles. How shall a soul, filled with such thoughts, do otherwise than overcome the world? Trials and difficulties, sorrows and temptations, it may have; but the sense of its mighty inheritance, all signed and sealed to it in the Redeemer's blood, raises it superior to those disturbing influences. Just as we have often experienced in our worldly life, that the pain of a slight loss is altogether forgotten in the triumph of a great gain; so the temporal sufferings of the believer are lost in his eternal weight of glory, swallowed up altogether in the deep boundless ocean of his everlasting joys.

Go forth then to thy warfare in this confidence. Press on manfully upon thine enemies. Strike and spare not, till they are subdued beneath thy feet. In the glow of thy hope look down upon the petty trials of the world, as a man on the top of some tall hill may look down upon the mists beneath his feet. Onward in thy noble warfare, nor rest, till even death, that last enemy, has been stripped of all his power and swallowed up in victory. And when that

conquest is concluded, yea, as from day to day; and hour to hour, thou pressest on towards it, remember by whose strength thou art victorious, whose gift is that faith which overcometh the world; and let the songs of thy victory, as they swell more and more into the chorus of heaven, ascribe the praise to Him to whom alone it belongs. "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give the praise, for thy loving mercy, and for thy truth's sake."



XVI.

PERFECT SERVICE.

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”—Rom. xii. 1.

THE truth presented in these words is the entire dedication of ourselves to God. One knows not at first whether most to admire the jewel of the truth itself, or the setting with which it is surrounded. There is a touching tenderness, a gentle loving pathos about the whole, which comes home with a peculiar power to the heart. It must be remembered, that the text itself contains not a recommendation, but a command, issuing from Him who has a supremo right to all our service, and who is in Himself so glorious that the human eye is unable to gaze upon His presence, and the human ear to receive the accents of His voice. The command, therefore, might justly have come to us with stern authority and irresistible majesty. It is a matter of most thankful adoration that this great Being speaks to us in a manner more gentle, and in accents more full of loving gentleness, than ever human being spoke to human being. The mere force of Divine authority might, indeed, have crushed into submission the awe-struck soul; but then, how vehemently would the soul have risen into resistance against such a power! There is in man a disinclination

to yield to mere authority, and to be swayed by the influence of an arbitrary will. Though it be the will of God Himself, yet if stated in the naked severity of power, the soul, conscious of its own ability to think and feel, would have stood up in opposition against it. As it really is, the command of God is identical with the convictions of the regenerated mind, and duty to Him with the instincts of a generous and spontaneous love.

In the mutual intercourse of man with man, the mind ever feels disposed to resist a command, however just and reasonable, if it is uttered in a harsh and despotic manner, simply because that manner injures our self-respect; and it feels disposed to yield to any command, however unreasonable in itself, if made in a kind and gentle manner that flatters self-love. Perhaps it ought not to be thus, if reason and conscience exercised that predominant sway over the feelings which they did in the constitution of man unfallen; but practically thus it is. We have all the more cause to adore His goodness, who condescends even to our infirmities and so modifies His dealings to our weakness, as not to excite any further opposition against His will than what the unconverted heart ever presents. Harshness is the sign of conscious absence of authority, and none use power so gently as those who have most right to use it. The Almighty Himself, communicating to man commands the most momentous, conveys them in a manner gentle and winning, appealing to all the highest faculties and emotions—reason, conviction, gratitude, and love. Who can resist such a God, speaking thus? Who can oppose such a combination of strength and

gentleness? At least, who can do so without stamping his opposition with especial enormity and perverseness? Was ever command so uttered before as it is here, when the apostle, having unfolded the great counsels of God towards man, founds upon them the touching exhortation of the text?

Let the mind glance rapidly over the contents of this Epistle. The first eight chapters contain a doctrinal explanation of the mode of the sinner's justification, link by link. The one end of the chain is in the dust, but the other reaches into glory. The deep foundations of the whole are laid in man's utter inability to save himself. The Gentile world are shown to be condemned by their own convictions, and that light of natural conscience, the admonitions of which their lives and tempers so strangely contradicted. The Jew is "brought under sin" by the very law, on the mere profession of which he had trusted for everlasting life, but which, as the apostle shows, did but enlarge the responsibility and aggravate the sin of those who, having God's truth, did not act in accordance with it. He confirms this argument by quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures, which, written to them who were under the law, describe in strong terms the depravity of the heart and life of man. Having thus lowered into the dust all the pride of the Gentile and the legal righteousness of the Jew, the apostle proceeds to erect upon the ruins the glorious structure of the believer's hope, explaining step by step the soul's acceptance with God through the representative righteousness of the second Adam; the effect which this state of peace has in cheering the whole world around him; the

high obligations to holiness which rest upon him; the struggle against indwelling corruption by which alone he can fulfil them; and the sure final victory "through Him that loved us," which will make the believer "more than conqueror."

In the three succeeding chapters, the apostle passes on from the hopes of the individual believer to the deep and inscrutable counsels of God towards the world at large. He vindicates the freedom of the Divine sovereignty from those objections to which the doctrines of free grace have given rise in all ages of the world; he declares the immutability of God's covenant with Israel, and the mode in which, during the dark times of Jewish sin, that covenant had still been accomplished "in a remnant according to the election of grace." He describes the objects which it was and is God's will to effect by the temporary rejection of the Jew, and the deposit meanwhile of the precious treasure of God's truth in the hands of the Gentile church. He proclaims the fact that "all Israel shall be saved," and states that the effect of that recovery shall be such a vivification of the spiritual life of the whole church, that it shall be as life from the dead. The magnitude of these counsels, their grandeur of design, and the momentous interests at stake, filled the apostle's heart while he wrote with such wondering praise that he could only exclaim, "Oh the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God; how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

Such, then, are the topics, wide as the interests of the universal world, on which the apostle rests his exhortation, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by

the mercies of God." Add to the wondrous catalogue whatever your own personal experience can supply of the Divine goodness towards yourselves in particular, and gathering them all together into one motive, till they beat like a great pulse of love within your hearts, "present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."

Notice :—

- I. The offering required.
- II. Its acceptableness before God.
- III. Its reasonableness before man.

I. The offering required.

Here one part of man alone is specified as constituting the offering, and that the lowest part of man, "our bodies." It is thus expressed to denote the totality of the offering; not to exclude any part of the believer, but to include all, and to bring down the right of God over us from the thinking, conscious soul to the outward tabernacle of flesh in which it dwells. The flesh and the spirit, the corruptible body and the incorruptible soul, the mere instrument that acts and the will by which it is prompted, the whole wondrous frame of man, the mind that thinks and the heart that desires and the conscience that directs, all are God's. He framed them all, and to Him they belong. He claims them as His right, and there is no part so high and spiritual as to be above His due—no part so mean and carnal as to be below His acceptance.

This offering of the body not only may, but must include the previous offering of the soul. A merely outward service, which includes the body and no

more, is not acceptable before Him. It is with Him as it is with us and the children whom we love. No merely external obedience on a child's part would be agreeable to us, if we knew that no love was given with it, and that it was offered only for the purpose of securing our inheritance. It is affection which the parent craves, and for which nothing else in the whole world can be a substitute. The most elaborate offering would be distasteful without it; with it the smallest gift would be acceptable. No value in the gift itself can compensate for the absence of love in the giver; no poverty of the gift detract from the value of the giver's love. A flower plucked from the hedge-side, given as the proof of a child's love, would be far dearer to a parent's heart than the most costly jewel which was given from an interested motive. Just so God craves our love, and will accept anything that love consecrates; but if this be absent, though we could embrace the wealth of the whole world in one costly gift, it would be worthless in His sight who looks into the heart, and whose is the earth and the fulness thereof. As the ointment upon Aaron's head flowed down to the skirts of his garments and perfumed them with its odour; so a holy love in the heart of a believer sheds its fragrance on every act of the life, and consecrates with the oil of the Holy Spirit every thought and word and work, into a sacrifice well-pleasing to God for His dear Son's sake.

It is important for us to understand, as clearly and definitely as possible, what it is to present our bodies unto God. It is not to separate from the active duties of life, and to seclude ourselves in an idle

solitude, which is neither profitable to man, nor effectual to the glory of God. A person who acts thus, practically says that he knows better than God how to serve Him, and that to be placed amid the relationships of family, and friends, and business, is a mistake which needs to be rectified, by rudely breaking the bonds which knit us to our fellow-men. If he does not say this, the only other language which the act can express is, that the grace promised to the believer is not enough to keep a man from sin amid the world, and that therefore, to make up for the weakness of His grace, he must fly from the temptations which he has not power to subdue.

Neither does the dedication of the body to God consist in scourgings and abstinence—a kind of self-murder, which exhausts in will-worship and voluntary humility, the life, and strength, and health, which God has given as a talent to be used for His own service. This is an error neither uncommon in old times nor in modern times, but which differs nothing in principle from the self-immolation of the Hindoo idolater who throws himself beneath the wheels of the idol's car, thinking that his grim god is pleased with suffering and blood.

But to present our bodies unto God, consists in a subjugation of all bodily lusts and appetites, tempers, and carnal affections; in a cautious and sober use of allowable recreations; and in a careful avoidance of all that may irritate into greater vigour the force of bodily passion. It requires that we should keep under the body, and bring it into subjection, that we may be able to obey the godly motions of the Spirit in righteousness and true holiness. When we have

thus, by the grace of God, mortified and subdued the flesh into an instrument of righteousness, we must use it to His glory. The tongue must tell forth His praise, the eye must recognise His beauty, the hand must do His will, the feet must move with ready zeal to every work and labour of love. In short, it is a spiritual dedication of the whole man to God: "Ye are not your own; for ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."¹

If you would see the necessity of this, and the obligations which lie even upon the dying flesh, think what a body of sin this is which we bear about with us. Observe not alone its corruptibility, its decay, its weakness, its weariness and painfulness; but observe, likewise, those motions of sin which have their seat in the flesh, and from which the Spirit of God applies the term "carnal," or fleshly, even to the heart and to the will. Do we need to be told how largely these work through the body? What means the deep flush that anger calls up into the brow? What means the contracted forehead, and the fierce and sullen eye? What means those tones of suppressed passion, which express more inward strife than the loudest accents could do? What mean those bodily sensations which interrupt the soul's exercise of devotion, and tie down to earth the thoughts that would soar heavenward? They denote that sin has fixed its deep stains upon the body, running over from the corrupted heart in poisonous streams even upon the dying flesh. Ah! yes; not else had these bodies been the vile, perishing things

¹ 1 Cor. vi. 19, 20.

they are. These frail, trembling houses of clay are not the bright and glorious creatures, the forms of grace, beauty, and strength, which God framed. They never had felt an unholy impulse, never had known pain or want, never had sickened and pined and died, had they continued to be as God made them, and had not sin destroyed them with its ruinous corruptions.

Here, then, arises a further motive for giving them to God. Think you that the body will always remain thus? We could not enjoy heaven, if our glorified spirits retained with them bodies such as these are now, nor could the feeble senses of the flesh ever gaze face to face upon God. Oh, no! The triumph which Christ has won for us will reach to the body as well as to the soul, and will include, as its last and completing act, the perfected regeneration of the flesh. If our glory is to extend to the body, so too must our obligations—so too must our holiness. Die, indeed, the flesh will, and sink into the decay and rottenness of the grave; and yet glorious beyond our present knowledge is the future that lies before it. It will rise again from dishonour to glory, from weakness to power, a spiritualized and glorified thing. It will be freed from every lingering stain of that sin which now defiles it. It will have an entrance into the presence of God and the courts of heaven, and there, like a vehicle of bliss—every vein, and nerve, and fibre, a channel of beatific joy—it will communicate, not pain as now, but bliss and glory to the purified soul of the saint.

To these thoughts we must add the remembrance of the sacrifice, by which alone these hopes have been

purchased. We must think, not only of the pangs of our Lord's righteous soul, but of the wounds of His body likewise; for our souls His soul, for our bodies His body, the mighty atonement. He did not withhold from His own experience any of the pangs of flesh and blood. His flesh was as liable to weariness and want, and as sensitive to pain and injury, as our own. His was a life of constant labour and of pinching poverty. He walked upon the earth a houseless wanderer, who at periods had not where to lay His head. We recall the last scenes which crowned with their glory of mysterious suffering His life of toil and shame. Picture to your eyes the worn and emaciated frame, having no form or comeliness, and borne down by the incessant toils of His laborious ministry; the brow, bleeding with the crown of thorns, that awful emblem of human mockery; the hands and feet, pierced with the nails that fastened Him to the accursed tree; the side, shedding, at the blow of the spear, its mingled stream of blood and water, symbols of justice and of love united in His work; the forehead, damp with the death-dew; the spirit, parted from the flesh; the body, laid in the grave; the sepulchre, and the sealed stone; the resurrection, and the ascension, and the presence even now, in heaven, of the self-same body, "with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature."

Think of these topics, and surely you will find them enough to show how largely the benefits of redeeming love include the body as well as the soul, since by the agonies of the body as well as by the anguish of the soul the Son of God has redeemed

us. When, therefore, we are called to present even our bodies unto God, let us think of all this, and let the thought check every hesitating doubt and fear. Entire and unreserved must be the offering which we make, as entire and unreserved has been the love which we have received. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."

II. Look at the acceptableness of the offering before God. This, you will observe, is dependent upon its being first "holy," then "acceptable." There must be a reflection of the character of Christ wrought both upon the body and the soul of the believer. Our Lord was not alone spotlessly pure in thought, desire, and purpose, but was faithful in all His labour of love; while it was called to-day, He fulfilled the whole law, and "went about doing good." So, likewise, there must be in us a mortification of the flesh, and a dedication of all the powers of the living man to the service and the glory of our Redeemer. Yet let us not fancy that our service will be acceptable to God, for the sake of its holiness. There is nothing meritorious in anything man can do. It has been well said, that our very tears need washing and our very repentance to be repented of; and that if God should offer the salvation of all mankind, on condition of finding one single act of one single man perfectly pure from sin, we should all perish, for it never could be found. The stains of long years are not to be washed out at once, nor the corrupted vessel of the flesh rise by a single operation into its perfected regeneration. Nay, even when the soul, led on from

grace to grace, and from strength to strength, shall have attained the fullest manhood of the spiritual life that ever saint reached on earth, how imperfect is its sanctification after all! The history of God's saints upon earth abundantly testifies what infirmities cling yet to the flesh; what weakness and feebleness remain in faith and love; what carnal frailties and inconsistencies mar the perfect beauty of holiness. It is not, therefore, for our own sake that our service is acceptable to God, but for the sake of that dear Saviour by whom we have been redeemed, and as a token of the victory which He has won by the travail of His soul. The Father accepts our zeal, as a sign of the heart which His own grace has converted, and of the love which His own infinite goodness has kindled. He accepts it, not as presented by our sin-stained hands, but as presented by Him who "ever liveth to make intercession for us," and who clothes with the robe of His own righteousness our imperfect and unworthy gifts.

We must, therefore, divest the word "sacrifice," as it is here used, of that idea of atoning efficacy which it bears in the Old Testament Scriptures, and especially where it is applied to the work of our Lord and Master. Yet there will still remain in it the idea of self-denial and painful suffering which it ordinarily bears. Not without many a struggle is the sacrifice before God perfected. There are many things to be given up, which are not indeed to be compared with the glorious delights to be enjoyed in such a service, but things naturally dear to the soul, and on the charms of which the matured manhood of the Christian life alone can look with indifference. There are

tempers to be subdued; there are habits to be broken off; there are indulgences to be given up; there are secret sins to be mortified; and there are many affections, sweet and dear to man, to be brought into rigid subjection to the supremacy of the cross. The man who would give himself wholly unto his Saviour "must not count even his life dear unto him," but must be willing to "suffer the loss of all things, and to count them as dung, that he may win Christ." Shrink not, O soul, from the sacrifice, but "reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."¹

Then observe how peculiar is the expression "living sacrifice." The sacrifice under the old law was the shedding of the blood of a living creature, and the sacrifice of Christ was His agony and bloody sweat, His cross and passion, His death and burial. These were living before they were sacrificed, but as being sacrificed they died. And what is the living sacrifice of the believer, but the slaying of his sins before God? and this is not to be wrought in us without struggling and tears and holy constancy. Has God, then, pleasure in all these? Are cries, and tears, and sufferings acceptable to Him? Has He delight in watching the sore anguish of the soul thus waging the painful contest? No, no. It is not in our suffering that He has pleasure, but in our deliverance from suffering; not in our woe, but in our redemption from woe; not in our tears, but in our fitness for that better world, where "God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes." The sacrifice of the body is pleasing to Him, because

¹ Rom. viii. 18.

by this alone it can be made holy, and by being made holy alone can be made happy, and be a partaker of His own kingdom and glory. When the soul's sins live, the soul itself is dead; when the soul's sins are slain, then the soul itself lives. The sacrifice of all those corrupting appetites which dwell in the body is, therefore, not death but life. Nay, it is not only life to the soul, which lives by the converting influences of the Spirit that slay its sins, but life for the body likewise in that eternal life in heaven of which, for Christ's sake, it becomes an inheritor. That will be life without weariness, without decay, without interruption, without end. That alone is acceptable to God which brings happiness to the soul; and could that happiness be secured without the necessity of a painful sacrifice, be sure that sacrifice in this sense would never have been demanded. It would then remain in the sense only of a grateful offering which the renewed heart delights to pay. Were the soul entire with God, then with a perfect service there would be a perfect bliss. It is the divided heart and the affections that cling earthward, which demand the painful, but necessary strife of the "living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God."

III. See that this service is likewise reasonable before man. The complete, unreserved dedication of ourselves and of all we have and are, is alone reasonable. To serve our God and Saviour with anything less than this, is blind folly and fanaticism. I use these words in order to retort upon the world the charges which it is fond of bringing against the people of God, of an irrational earnestness, and of a zealous devotion not justified by the circumstances. The men of the world think and say, as Festus did

of Paul, that we are beside ourselves, when we talk of giving up everything else, if need be, for the sake of our heavenly inheritance. We assert, on the contrary, that they are beside themselves, when they think that a cold, outward profession, and attendance upon external services, are enough in themselves to support a well-founded hope of eternal life. For must not the means we use be ever proportioned to the end we hope to attain, and the greatness of the emotion we feel to the importance of the circumstances which produce it? Let us try the conduct of the world by these tests.

If a man were to make some prodigious exertion of strength and force, to accomplish a purpose so trivial that the motion of a finger would have been enough to produce it, we should think the man mad; but should we not equally think him mad, if, having to move some prodigious weight—say, a mass of solid rock—he should expect to accomplish it with the same touch of a finger with which he would move a feather? A man would be accounted mad alike in either case, because in either case there would be the same disproportion between the end desired and the means used. We charge this folly upon the men of the world on both sides. We point to the man of business, toiling with anxiety and pain, wearing out both body and mind, depriving himself of daily enjoyments from the fretting cares which draw upon his brow the lines of premature old age, and all to increase a wealth, perchance already more than ample, and to lay up treasure which shall not profit him. We point to the man of pleasure, who pursues what he calls pleasure, till, like the coveted meat in the mouth of the Israelites, it corrupts in the

fruition, and yet, while he loathes it, pursues it still. We point to the man of ambition, who makes it the object of his life to be called master, and to be elevated into pride or dejected into misery by the fickle applause or blame of mankind. The diligent discharge of worldly duty, and the legitimate pursuit of worldly interests, is not to be questioned for a moment ; but surely it runs into extreme, when it becomes the great absorbing thought of the whole man, and the very end we seek is forgotten in the engrossing means we use. Such men toil, but not enjoy, and heap up only that others may possess.

Now, contrast with this the paltry portion of attention and labour which the nominal Christian thinks enough to give to his soul, and to his God. Perhaps he may attend at Divine worship once, it may be twice, on the Sabbath-day. Perhaps he gives a few hurried minutes to the repetition of a prayer in the morning and in the evening, and it may be, reads through the daily portion in some devotional book, and then for the rest of the time forgets his religion as completely as if there were no God above him, no future eternity before him, and no dangers to threaten all round about his path. And is this reasonable? Is it consistent with the strictest conclusions even of the intellect, that so much of care and labour should be given to the fleshly and to the temporal, and so little to the spiritual and eternal? Does not the very amount of toil which is willingly devoted to the promotion of earthly interests, rebuke the paltriness of the service with which men hope to secure their heavenly inheritance? Surely "the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light."

The same thing is true of the disproportioned emotion which men give to the things of time, and to the things of eternity. If a man expends a vast amount of mental excitement on some passing trifle of the moment, do we not take it to be a sign of mental imbecility? And is it not equally so, to refuse deep emotion to that which is infinitely momentous, and which calls forth in the minds of angels and archangels wondering awe and praise? Those who have had the advantage of a cultivated education will best be able to appreciate the folly of applying the same estimate of value to things wholly dissimilar, and of including the paltry painted toy which we hold in our hand, in the same terms of admiration with some grand scene of nature's majestic beauty. If our salvation reached to a part only of our life, and not to the whole, then to seek it with a part only of our life, with a part only of our attention, might be reasonable; but to make things eternal of less consequence than things temporal, and give less care to that which affects body and soul, than to that which affects the body only, is madly unreasonable. The man who is extravagantly affected with a passing vexation, and yet regards with an unmoved insensibility some great calamity of life, has his exact counterpart in the man who is all in a feverish excitement about things temporal, but turns unmoved away from the majesty of a revealed God, the immeasurable interests of the undying soul, and the tremendous realities of death and judgment.

Thus, then, the believer, who gives his whole undivided self to God, steeping earthly cares and duties in the colours of his heavenly hope, does but

discharge a reasonable service. No supererogatory merits are his, but the faithful discharge of a bounden obligation. To this conclusion the soul must come, whether it regards the immensity of the counsels of salvation, the Divine dignity of that Son of God who executed them, the sufferings of body and soul whereby alone even He could discharge the mighty debt of sin, or the completeness of the redemption and the unspeakable greatness of the reward which He has purchased for us. All is wonderful, and the more the soul meditates, the more it finds to admire. As when the eyes gaze upon the midnight heaven, and the longer they gaze, the further they pierce into its depths, and perceive star beyond star, and cluster beyond cluster, which at first they did not see; so the soul, gazing upon the wondrous firmament of the Divine dealings, perceives grace beyond grace, and glory beyond glory, till it is altogether lost in adoration, praise, and wonder.

Thus, then, measure thine obligations, O soul, by the multitude of thy mercies and the dignity of thine hope. Hold nothing back from that Lord, who has given all for thee. Throw thyself altogether into the arms of His love. If in any moment of wavering faith and fainting love thou art tempted to hold dalliance with the world thou hast forsaken, look back to the cross, and rebuke the treacherous desire. Lift up above thy life, as the guiding motto of it all, the exhortation of the text, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."

XVII.

PROGRESSIVE HOLINESS.

“ But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.”—JUDE 20, 21.

THE mode in which warning is mixed up with promise in the word, and the revelation of God's truth and justice blended with that of His tenderness and love, ought to excite our warmest praise and adoration. We shall much mistake the fact, if we suppose that these severer parts of the Divine character are intended for the unbeliever alone, or merely to arouse, by the terror of the Lord, the slumbering conscience from its dangerous repose. They do work these effects, indeed, but they are likewise needed for us all, and are closely united to the sweetest joys and most assured peace of the devout saint of Christ. The revelation of them is needed to complete our knowledge of the character of God, and to set Him before the soul in all the perfections of His Divine nature. For this purpose we must see Him as He is, not in one alone, but in all His attributes. It is most certain that if God were such as the world would describe Him to be, all tenderness alone without any other qualities, it would be impossible for the soul to pay Him either reverence or love.

Measure this, as we can more easily do, in regard

to one of our fellow-men. Suppose a man, whose character consisted of yielding gentleness alone, incapable of forming an independent will or of adhering to that will; unable to feel indignation against what is wrong, or to distinguish in his mode of treatment between good and evil; but exercising to all alike, and under all circumstances, the same undistinguishing good-will; and would not such a character appear to us as a mass of weakness, which we should despise and scorn? Yet just such we should suppose God to be, if we describe Him as all love and mercy, and take away from Him His holiness, truth, and justice. Such a God we could not reverence, and without reverence we could not love. The knowledge of the severer parts of God's character is, therefore, needed to illustrate to us by contrast the glorious beauty of the rest, and to present His kindness, not merely as an unalterable habitude of the Divine mind, but as a free exercise of His will.

This knowledge is further needed to enable the believer to estimate the danger in which he stood before converting grace rescued him; the heinousness of his sin in the sight of God, and the weight of indignation righteously due to it. Without this, we shall not measure half the grateful love we owe to Christ for the salvation purchased by His intolerable sufferings and death. We shall gain no insight without it into the nature of these sufferings, and into the reason why they were necessary, before God could "be just, and yet the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." Here are two twin wonders which claim our adoration; the wonder of the love which gave the Son to die for us, and the wonder of

the justice which did not spare that Son one pang, as He hung upon the cross the voluntary representative of human guilt.

It is further needed to excite in the soul a holy vigilance, that it may make "its calling and election sure," and walk worthily of the inheritance to which it is called. Not to drive God from us, or to grieve that "Holy Spirit whereby we are sealed unto the day of redemption," is the great ruling object of the believing heart. Our estimate of duty will rise or sink according to our estimate of Him to whom it is to be paid. An increasing sense of the justice and holiness of God will be seen in a stricter watch, and a more sensitive jealousy over ourselves and the world. And thus the very attributes of truth and justice in God are connected, link by link, with the sweetest hopes of the soul, and do but make His grace more gracious, and His love more lovely.

Thus it is that St. Jude argues in this short, but stirring Epistle. He first sets before the believer a fearful warning against carnal confidence, and warns him that no height of outward privilege can screen the guilty soul from God's searching severity. Let us not trust in our knowledge of His will, nor in the greatness of our calling, to keep us safe; but in Him who is as gracious to sustain as He is powerful to punish. Let none say, "I am a Christian, and surely God, who has given me so much, will not cast me off after all." If thou lovest Him, He will not; but if thou dost not love Him, be sure that thy privileges will not save thee. Think of the angels, beings higher and mightier than thou art, who once stood near the throne as the radiant messengers of heaven.

Yet, great as they were, God spared them not when they sinned, but smote them headlong down to hell, and there reserves them "in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day." Think of the armies of His ransomed people, whom God brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with a stretched-out arm, working in their behalf signs and wonders upon Pharaoh and all his host. Yet when these men sinned, He afterwards destroyed them that believed not; and their bones were whitening in the wilderness, and another generation had entered into their place, before the promised inheritance was reached. Think of Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, large and populous, rich and powerful. Yet in the day of His anger the Lord smote them for their sin, and hath "set them forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire." If God spared not these, why should He spare us "if we sin after the same example of unbelief"?

Such is the warning which the conscience draws at once, but it is not all which St. Jude derives from it. No; he uses these instances of Divine wrath but as the background of his argument, to throw into the greater prominence the beauty of the love of God and the excellency of the believer's hope. How striking is the change in the persons addressed, when turning from God's wrath towards the wicked he now describes the progress of the believer's inner life and the effectual strength on which he rests. "But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep

yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life."

These words present to us,

I. The thing to be done, "Keep yourselves in the love of God."

II. The means to be used, "Building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost."

III. The result to be expected, "Looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life."

I. Consider the thing to be done. The text calls attention to the stability and continuance of the soul's love to God, as a thing yet more difficult than the first feeling of that love. "Keep yourselves," implies as strongly as an expression can do, the danger of the soul's wandering from it. This itself teaches, that it is not the love of God towards us which is here in question, but our love towards God. God's love towards us never has changed and never can change, and in the darkest times of human sin has remained the same that it was when He first made man in His own image and likeness. No sin of ours can ever cloud with a single shadow the light of that love. It may arm His truth against us, and move us beyond the furthest confines of mercy into those of faithful justice, and yet as concerns the mind of God himself, He still loves the sinner, while He loathes and punishes the sin. Oh, what a thought is this to soften the hard and impenitent heart, and to light up, as with a ray of hope fresh from heaven, the first solemn convictions of converting grace! It is the feeling, that God is our enemy, that closes the heart

against Him, and makes the recognition of our sin intolerable. We judge of Him, as we judge of ourselves, and because we are foes to Him, we think that He is a foe to us, and so we shrink from Him in very fear as if reconciliation were impossible. Yet the difficulty is only in ourselves and not in Him, in that we will not come, not in that God will not receive us. Would the soul but lower its high thoughts, throw away its unjust suspicions, and approach Him as a repentant child, it would find Him infinitely ready to forgive; yea, like the father of the prodigal son, who, when he saw him a long way off, "had compassion, and ran, and fell upon his neck, and kissed him."

There is no fear, then, lest the love of God should change towards us, but only lest our love should change towards God—"Keep yourselves in the love of God." Wonderful this seems, when we compare ourselves and God together, and see what little cause He has to love us, and what infinite cause we have to love Him. There is everything in us to prevent, and nothing to attract, the love of such a being as God. The very fact of our fall and of the confusion which it has introduced into His creation; the deep depravity of a corrupt nature, and its repugnance, both to God himself, and to all that is like God, good and holy; the presumptuous pride and carnal vanity which stand out in dark contrast with the utter moral weaknesses which accompany them—might well drive from us the love of any being who was not infinite in goodness. God alone can see our sin in its full heinousness, and love us nevertheless. "God commendeth his love toward us, in that while we were

yet sinners, Christ died for us.”¹ Turn to the other side, and see what cause we have to love God. There is in Him, infinite perfection to excite admiration, boundless glory to call for worship, radiant majesty to quicken adoring praise, boundless goodness to produce love, benefits unnumbered to kindle gratitude, faithfulness to encourage trust, gentle sympathy to win confidence. What heights of grace and beauty demand our love toward God in Christ! Yet He, who has no cause to love, loves us unchangeably; and we, who have infinite cause to love, soon grow cold and forgetful, and are in danger of losing our love altogether.

“Losing our love,” did I say? losing ourselves I should have rather said. For the expression of the text is not, “keep the love of God in yourselves,” but “keep yourselves in the love of God.” It identifies our very selves with the possession of that love. If we lose it, we lose our all—all that is worth living for, and that can kindle desire in human hearts. If the love of God be absent—whether because it never has been felt, or being felt it has been lost—hope is absent, peace is absent, because God is absent. Existence will, indeed, remain, but it is such an existence of endless woe as will be lived in hell. Such a life as we might have had in reconciliation with God, in the joy of His presence, and the inheritance of His glory, we lose, and lose for ever. Would we retain all this, then, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, let us “keep ourselves in the love of God.”

Now look at some of the causes whence your danger will arise. It would seem as if the bliss of

¹ Rom. v. 8.

loving God would be so great in itself, as to keep the soul from temptation to love another. And so it would be, if our love to God filled all our being. Could we live in a state of constant communion with God, the increasing rapture of devotion, the soul, wholly delighted with that intercourse, had been impenetrable to any other motive. But we are connected in this imperfect state with the interests and duties of earth, and hence arises our danger. We live at present a double life—the one heavenly, the other earthly; the one, our final citizenship not yet attained, the other, our present preparation not yet finished. Here our victory must be won; here our graces acquired. The constant cares and objects of life occupy of necessity a large proportion of our time and thought. The affections of life, sweetening the toil of existence, and cheering the disappointments of this rough world, engage no small share of our hearts. The schemes and plans in which we are engaged here below, whether they be of interest, ambition, or philanthropy, form a tie between our hopes and this present state of trial. From these arises our danger, and in these is gained the discipline of faith and the triumph of the grace which works in us. The love of God and the love of man stand side by side in the soul, and one of the two must be predominant; either the love of man will chill and swallow up the love of God, or the love of God will consecrate and sanctify the love of man. Watch, then, against the danger. Hold a restraining hand even over the purest human affections and the dearest human hopes. Let not the feet slip off little by little from the narrow path. Setting your

eyes steadfastly upon the love of Christ, and the majesty of the things eternal, "hold fast your hope firm unto the end."

But there is another danger from a different quarter. It is comparatively easy to love God, when He smiles upon us. Then we rejoice in the sense of pardoned guilt and the sure hope of a heavenly inheritance; peace is ours, and we taste the "joy in the Holy Ghost." Then, perhaps, the world around us seems bright, and beneath a gracious and watchful Providence our life flows on, like a smooth river, calm and peaceful. While this continues, a grateful sense of mercies received lifts up the heart in praise and thanksgiving to our heavenly Father. But when God begins to deal mysteriously with us; when He seems to take away the light of His face, and in the darkness of our souls we feel after Him and find Him not; when faith is weak and peace is lost and joy forgotten; when, in the world around us, the calm stream of life has become troubled and tempestuous, and for many a long day the bright sun has been dimmed with trial; when misfortune seems to succeed misfortune, and affliction to follow affliction; oh! it is hard to keep ourselves unshaken in the love of God then. It is true that never, perhaps, have we had so much cause to bless Him as in these very times; and when, by the clearer light of heaven, and under the guidance of a happy experience, we shall look back to them, we shall gather thence our most glowing themes of praise, our most rapturous strains of adoring love. God does but deal with us at such times as a father deals with a child whom he reluctantly chastises, and who never shows his love so

much, as when in simple affection he does what is unspeakably painful to himself. It may be that these very chastisements are but an answer to our own prayers. We asked for more grace, for a closer walk with God, for a deeper submission of our will to His, for a larger experience of His grace, and a fuller capacity to know and enjoy His love, without clearly seeing, perhaps, by what means our desires would be accomplished. These chastisements from which we shrink complainingly are but the answer to our petitions; and shall we repine that God gives us that for which we asked?

Most true all this is, and yet it is hard to realize it at the time. It is difficult to bar out doubts and fears which will insinuate themselves, or rather which the devil insinuates. "If God loved me, why does He deal with me thus?" the soul asks. "If I am His converted child, why am I toiling still amid these deep waters, instead of basking in the full sunshine of the happy land? Where are the peace and joy which are the fruits of the Spirit, if the Spirit really be mine; and if I have not the Spirit of Christ, then am I none of His?" Such are the questions which exercise the soul at periods of affliction, and which dim our love to God by doubts of His love and distrusting thoughts of His wisdom. And thus those very occasions of life, which should teach us a more perfect love in enabling us to kiss the rod that chastens us, are often but the means of our falling back from Him, and withholding from a God who chastens, the affections which we gave to a God who blessed. Every soul which has passed through affliction will have had experience of this danger. Is it

not fit that at such a time we should cast a glance at the awfulness of Divine truth, and the deep inscrutable darkness which surrounds as yet the methods of the Divine wisdom? Let others fall back if they will, but let us, beloved, "keep ourselves in the love of God."

II. Consider the means to be employed, "Building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost." Regard these two means as immediately connected with each other, and view them in the order of that connection.

"Building up yourselves on your most holy faith," is the first means to be employed; that is, you must not be content to stand still in your spiritual race, but must press on "toward the mark for the prize of our high calling." There must be a progressive increase in holiness, "growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."¹ It is, in truth, impossible to stand still; for in this war of ours with our ghostly foes, to stand still is to give way, and to cease to conquer is to be vanquished. If we no longer attack our sins, our sins will directly turn round and attack us. There will be an offensive war on one side or the other, and God forbid that we should give up such an advantage as this into the devil's hands. He who fights only to defend, fights at a disadvantage, because he leaves it free to his foe to attack just when and where he likes. If our growth in grace is left incomplete, it is as when an edifice, stopped in the process of erection, is left roofless to suffer all the decaying influences of wind and weather. It is as if the walls of a fortress, reared up

¹ 2 Peter iii. 18

to full height in some places and standing in all their protecting strength, should in others be left incomplete, affording a ready entrance to every invader. Surely this must not be, and we must build up the soul, till over the completed ramparts of faith no wild temptation, though it rush on furiously as an attacking host against a beleaguered city, shall ever gain an entrance. Or, it is as if a soldier should put on half his armour and then stop, instead of completing his whole panoply. He has taken up, perhaps, the breastplate of righteousness, but has not bound it on with the girdle of truth; or he has taken the helmet of salvation, but has left behind the shield of faith, or the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. Should an earthly soldier be attacked in such a state, what but a disastrous issue to his contest could be expected! The believer will find safety in advancing from grace to grace, till he has trodden beneath his feet the strength of his confederate foes. The man of God must go forth into the world, "thoroughly furnished unto all good works,"¹ and must, therefore, give diligence, to add to "faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity."²

Nor is it possible that the soul, truly quickened by converting grace, should stand still and not grow towards a spiritual manhood, any more than a child should not advance stage by stage towards the man. The more the soul receives from the Holy One, the more it will be capable of receiving, in the same way

¹ 2 Tim. iii. 17.

² 2 Peter i. 5—7.

that one lesson in any earthly science is required to fit the mind for the attainment of a higher. The nearer it approaches to that God, who "is light, and in whom is no darkness at all,"¹ the more light it receives from Him, and, with a fuller appreciation of His majestic holiness, gains likewise a fuller appreciation of its own sin. The standard of the Christian life advances, therefore, with advancing holiness, till the eye perceives sins there, where once it thought all to be bright and fair; just as when the morning light slowly and gradually exhibits to the eye the loathsome inhabitants of some dark dungeon, till the noontide radiance fully shows them in all their hateful-ness and horror. Every hour of sweet communion which is enjoyed by the soul does but quicken its relish for God, till it hungers with an intense appetite for larger measures of that righteousness which it has found to be so unutterably sweet. Nay, the longer it waits upon God, the more largely it gathers its blessed experiences of His faithfulness, grace, and beauty, and advances nearer and nearer to the glory around the throne, as it perceives in itself the more certain signs of its adoption in Christ Jesus. If we may not say that it is ever fully completed here on earth, at all events that wondrous process of sanctification is begun through which "perfect love casteth out fear."²

Now let us look at the striking image under which this truth is conveyed, and which is of frequent occurrence, more or less prominently, in the apostolical Epistles. Thus, "To whom coming"—that is, to the Lord Christ—"as unto a living stone, disallowed

¹ 1 John i. 5.

² 1 John iv. 18.

indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house.”¹ Most persons, at some period of their life, will have watched the progress of a great building, rising up little by little from its deep foundations, till the whole edifice stood complete in all its beauty and proportions. Here is a greater house yet, more majestic than ever mind of man imagined. Its deep foundations are laid in the redeeming merits of the incarnate Son of God, the rock of His righteousness bearing up the whole wondrous fabric, sure and immutable for ever. It is reared by the unseen hand of the Almighty Spirit, as it gathers in, one by one, the heirs of glory. The materials of which it is framed, are the undying souls of men; not worthless wood and stone, not gold and silver, nor even the paltry jewels that deck, as with a blaze of light, some Eastern edifice, but jewels precious in the sight of God, and each worth a world; every stone being a soul, endless in its life and infinite in its capacity.

Then we have the building up of the individual souls presented to us. In what state is the stone placed in the human building? It is not brought all rude and rough from the quarry, and so builded in all shapeless and disproportioned. The hand of the cunning workman will first shape and mould it, and chisel it into form. It will then be carefully fitted into its place, and then finally cemented in, an integral part of the mighty fabric. Thus the soul must be “God’s workmanship,” before it is fitted into the spiritual house. First of all, it must be separated by converting grace from the quarry of its natural con-

¹ 1 Peter ii. 4, 5.

dition, broken off, it may be, by some heavy visitation of a chastening hand. Then it must be cleansed from its old sins, and shaped anew after the image of Christ in righteousness and true holiness. Sharp and keen may be the instruments whereby the Holy Ghost cuts away the worldly and inordinate affections, and moulds the desires of the heart into "the beauty of holiness." Oh, what a house is this, where every soul in it, cemented to the great Head by a living faith, is itself a miracle of wisdom, power, and love! Not really so different is the goodly block which the workman's hand has prepared for some earthly edifice, from the unsightly mass of stone that lay in the rough quarry, as the soul of the converted child of God is from the same soul, as it lay dead in trespasses and sins, filled with divers lusts and passions.

Thus souls are cleansed, and the spiritual house is reared as the temple of the living God. At present we do not see half its beauty. It is yet incomplete: the whole number of the elect is not yet gathered in, nor has the topmost stone which shall adorn the whole been added in the perfected kingdom of the crowned Mediator. We see something of the vast design, and stand wondering at its immensity and beauty; but what we see as yet is a part only of what will be completed in the New Jerusalem, whose gates of pearl and streets of gold will be dim to the lustre of that manifested God, who will be its sun and temple.

Moreover, the house is partially concealed from us as yet by the scaffolding which is used for its erection. By the scaffolding I mean the appointed human ministry, the earthly instruments and even the trials

and afflictions, of which the Holy Spirit makes use in building up souls. We are ourselves so closely connected with all these, and so engrossed in the struggles and toils, the hopes and fears, of our spiritual course, that we cannot look as spectators upon the amazing temple of God's glory, which, cemented by the blood of Christ and reared by the wonder-working Spirit, will stand complete in heaven. Let us think that we are all parts of this building, and that every temptation we overcome, every grace we learn, every sin we vanquish, does but rear higher and higher the blessed fabric. Every act we can do for the extension of Christ's kingdom, and for the gathering in of souls into His Gospel, does but hasten its completion against the day of the Lord's triumph. Let not the work stand still. Work, Christian, work! Let every day have its struggle, every day its conquest, every day its reward.

Then, consider the further means by which we are to do this, "praying in the Holy Ghost." Let us not misunderstand the earnest exhortations addressed to us to do this or that, as if our own strength was sufficient to accomplish it. The power must come, and come alone, from the omnipotence of that Spirit whose converting energy can subdue before the cross of the despised Nazarene the most stubborn heart, and can break down beneath the feet of the weakest babe of Christ the mightiest enemies. In His strength the whole work must be done, from its beginning to its end. But let us remark, that we are not only to pray for the Holy Ghost, but to pray in the Holy Ghost. He will teach us how to pray, and impart to our petitions that deep pathetic earnestness, which is

acceptable before God. When words are too weak to express half the craving desires and deep emotions of the praying soul, then He will supply the need, and "make intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."¹ Whence is that agony of prayer, that inward wrestling, that clothes with an intense reality our communion with the Holy One? Whence that holy confidence, which lights up the tearful eye, and lifts from its dust and ashes the prostrate groaning heart? Whence that firm hope, that flushes the cheek of the dying saint, as if it were a reflection of the anticipated heaven? Whence come they, but from "praying in the Holy Ghost"?

III. It yet remains that we should consider the result to be expected, "Looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." I know that, according to the general interpretation put upon these words, they would express rather the source of present assurance, than the object of future expectation. They are generally understood to denote the ground of confidence on which the believer rests his hope, even the sole merits of the adorable Redeemer. And needful indeed is the warning that with all our prayers and labours, our vigilance and zeal, we learn never to regard them as forming the meritorious means of our salvation. How should a foundation, so slight and feeble as this would be, bear up the weight of the spiritual house of God? There could not be a moment's security or one hour of deep sure peace to a soul whose feet rested on the uncertain quicksands of human righteousness. We should be like the man that "built his house upon the sand: and the rain

Rom. viii. 26.

descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house ; and it fell ; and great was the fall of it.”¹ The holy joy of the believing heart is derived from the certainty of its assurance ; and its assurance rests on the infinite and all-effectual merits of Him by whom we are redeemed, “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”

But I think that the text has a further meaning than this. “The mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life,” in the sense of justification by His blood, the believer must already have received before he can build up himself in his most holy faith ; and why should he be so earnestly exhorted to look for that which he has already received ? The exhortation is addressed to those who were converted and dear to the apostle in the bonds of their common faith, but who yet needed to be aroused into greater earnestness of desire, that they might go on “unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”² The words therefore imply, not what is already possessed, but what we still hope for in the future.

Accordingly, the words “look for” imply the act of intent expectation, just as an expectant crowd may look for the approach of some great personage whom they wait to welcome ; or, as the inhabitants of a besieged city may look anxiously out for the sight of the friendly army which is to relieve them. Is not this the attitude of the believer, as he awaits with fervent hope the final accomplishment of all the promises, and the full inheritance of that kingdom of which he already enjoys the earnest ? Whether this

¹ Matt. vii. 26, 27.

² Eph. iv. 13.

hope may be accomplished by the occurrence of our Lord's second advent while he is yet among the living inhabitants of the world, or whether it may be accomplished by his own departure out of the world to God, he knows not. In either case, it will be his entrance into the same glory of his God and Saviour. The very expression of the text is used in this sense by St. Paul, "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."¹ Again, by St. Peter, "Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God."²

But while it implies expectation, it expresses likewise firm assurance. Thus we use the words when we consider that we have a right to expect a certain gift from one, between whom and ourselves there exists some recognised relation. On what grounds, as between man and God, could such an assurance rest, except on the merits of Jesus Christ, clearly apprehended by faith and sealed in the soul itself by the witness of the Spirit? Such is the confidence of the child of God, who stretches his hope to the full breadth of the promises, not because he forgets his own unworthiness of them, but because he remembers the infinite worthiness of Him in whom he is accepted. Great as is the gift, the merits which have purchased it are greater still, and the wonder of the reward is lost in the wonder of the rewarding love.

"The mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life" denotes, therefore, the completed act of that mercy, as the soul in its full regeneration enters into the kingdom. There is scriptural authority for this interpretation. Thus, by the word redemption we

¹ Titus ii. 13.

² 2 Peter iii. 12.

understand the act of grace whereby our Lord purchased back from endless condemnation the souls that were lost in trespasses and sins. Yet the Spirit applies the word not to the act of justification by faith, but to the act of glorification in heaven—that act which will close the work of redeeming love in the work of rewarding love. It is thus used by St. Paul, “Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.”¹ The atoning sacrifice has already been accomplished; the Spirit has already descended to convince the world “of sin, and righteousness, and judgment.” Souls are already effectually called out of darkness into light. There is no doubt, no ambiguity, about our hope; and yet that hope has not yet attained its all. Life has already begun in the soul, but eternal life has not yet come to the body. The motions of sin are not as yet entirely removed. Death is not yet swallowed up in victory; nor the last traces of the earthly warfare lost in the cloudless world of eternal light and love.

Yet these things will be accomplished. There will not finally remain in the devil's hand one trophy of triumph over God's people. Every effect of sin will be washed away from the purified souls and regenerated bodies of the saints. Then will the triumph of our Lord be complete, and the reward of His people perfected, “when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe.”² What will that future state be, but “the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life”?

This, then, is the attitude of the believer. Not “as one who had already attained, or was already perfect.”

¹ Eph. iv. 30.

² 2 Thess. i. 10.

He is like a traveller, who has arrived at last in sight of his home. There may be still a difficult road to tread, foes to vanquish, and a deep river to pass; but he sees Canaan beyond them all: that sight makes all else indifferent to him, as, strong in faith and firm in hope, he sets his face resolutely towards his journey's end. He has received much, and yet he looks with holy hope for still more. Amid his present contests he kindles his strength by the expectation of future glory, and, fascinated with the wondrous prospect, and all on fire with the influences of the Holy Ghost, he presses on "for the prize of his high calling in Christ Jesus." His peace being assured in the blood of Christ and sealed by the writing of the Spirit upon his heart, he stretches his thoughts on to the towers of the heavenly Zion, where, crowned with glory and honour and immortality, the Saviour waits to welcome him. Who then shall separate from the love of God the soul that in this hope and by this strength is hastening upon its way? "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us."¹

Is it thus that thou art advancing in grace, O soul? Is it thus that, with the severity of God behind thee, His love and grace around thee, and heaven full in view before, thou art "building up thyself in thy most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost"? Oh! "keep thyself in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life."

¹ Rom. viii. 35, 37.

XVIII.

THE SURE PROMISE.

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”—2 PETER iii. 9.

THESE words are invested by their context with peculiar importance and significance. As to the time of the great catastrophe which they announce, and the exact position which it will hold among the events accompanying the second advent of our Lord, there may be a difference of opinion among the students of the Divine Word. There are evident reasons why we should acquiesce in a degree of uncertainty on the minor points of unfulfilled prophecy. If we knew all with the same absolute precision which marks our acquaintance with events past, it would assume the characteristics of history, rather than of prophecy. What we may expect to find, is a clear and distinct intimation of events, while the secondary causes which are bringing them to pass, and all the detailed circumstances which will accompany them, remain obscure. It is most consistent with the Divine character and necessary for the training of faith and trust, that some degree of darkness should still hang round that which is to be.

In the whole of this passage, the events predicted

are described with so much precision, as not to leave upon the mind a doubt of their literal and exact accomplishment. It seems that, as the deep taint of sin upon the soul requires a purifying process of trial and affliction, before it can be removed ; as the flesh must needs undergo the corruption of the grave, before it can be raised again into its final beauty and made like to the glorious body of our Master ; so the earth itself, and that planetary system of which it forms a part, needs to undergo a fiery purification. It has been stained by human sin, and made very different from what the beneficent Creator intended it to be. It must pass through a purgation of its own before it can become the new heavens and the new earth, wherein shall dwell righteousness ; as the soul itself, even in its state of partial sanctification here on earth, is still said to be a new creature, so marvellous will be the change which the absence of sin's effects will work upon this lower world. There will be no storms and tempests, no violence and confusion, no discords, decay, and death, to disturb it more ; and in their absence, it will be as a new creation for the habitation of the new creatures, the redeemed people of God. Not without inward struggle and suffering has the spiritual revolution in the soul been brought about, and this purification of the world will be effected by a catastrophe so awful in its nature and so vast in its extent, that it may well occupy a large portion of our wondering expectation.

In this chapter, St. Peter particularizes three things. First, he declares that the earth itself will be burned up, while the heavens above pass away with a great noise, being rolled up like a parched scroll, and that

the elements will melt with fervent heat. Secondly, he states that this event will come upon the world suddenly: "The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night." It will not be ushered in by notes of preparation audible to human ears, nor by those phenomena in heaven and earth which men are apt to consider the natural premonitions of great events. It will come when the world is rolling on its busy course, just as it does at the present moment: "Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed." ¹

When we remember that this catastrophe is to take place, not on some far-off distant globe of which we barely know the existence, but on this familiar earth of ours—this scene of our daily cares, and hopes, and interests—it must needs become a matter of intense interest to us. Nor can we avoid remembering that the instruments of this destruction are already prepared. God has already stored the fires within our globe, smouldering beneath our feet, latent in every stone, breaking forth in volcanic agency, and irradiating the heavens above our head. There is the appointed agent only waiting for the appointed time to do its work. What will be our feelings when we spring from the grave, or are aroused, it may be, by the shrill blast of the archangel's trumpet from our beds, or are arrested in the midst of our daily cares, to witness the vast conflagration? Shall we see all

¹ Luke xvii. 28—30.

that we have loved perishing in the flames, or still retain our hope firm and our treasure safe amid them all? These things may appear to some men idle tales, as they appeared to those in Peter's days, who asked where is the promise of His coming? but yet they are sure as God is true. "For the Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

Note here :

I. The nature of the slackness which accompanies God's promises.

II. That this is but a proof of their certain accomplishment.

III. The practical lessons which the soul should learn from it.

1. The nature of the slackness which accompanies the Divine promises. When the apostle says, "For the Lord is not slack,"—that is, does not delay His promise, as some men count slackness—he intimates that there really is a measured deliberation in the Divine dealings, though it is not of the same nature or owing to the same causes that men may suppose.

Here, then, let us first of all note that the word "promise" is directly referred to the great catastrophe of which he proceeds to speak. Yet that event would appear to us to be rather an act of judgment than of mercy, and to be esteemed as a warning rather than as a promise. Yet there is no ambiguity in the words used, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise." If, indeed, that event be not a topic of joy and thankfulness to us, the fault is

in that guilty conscience which colours with its own fears both God himself and the promised times of God's triumph. But when we speak of God's triumph, let us recall how it is that His glory is bound up at all with any event which affects our world. It is not that human sin can take away aught from His majesty, or can dim one star in His presence, or can silence one note of the everlasting hallelujahs which sound eternally before His throne; but it is that when He undertook to redeem man, He associated by that very act the vindication of His wisdom and power with its successful accomplishment. When at the great day all that now opposes His truth shall finally be subjected beneath the feet of the crowned Jesus, that triumph of God will be indeed the triumph of man likewise, since it is in the salvation of man that God's triumph will have been achieved. That perfected kingdom will be the kingdom of promise for which the saints in all ages have watched and prayed, as for the final completion of their hopes. For judgment has a double aspect, one of reward and one of punishment—to recompense for ever His redeemed people, as well as to banish everlastingly from His presence them that do iniquity.

Look at thine own state, thou saint of the Lord Jesus Christ! Great is thy peace, and bright thy joy, and firm thy faith, and sweet—sweet beyond thought and utterance—thy present possession of the Saviour's love! But is thy full glory come, and thy redemption finally completed? Are there no traces of sin still to be effaced, and no effects by which it has darkened both body and soul still remaining to be swallowed up in victory? What is sorrow in the

mind, what decay and disease in the flesh, but the effects of sin? Is thy reward come, while one of these still remains unremoved? Oh! we have something better to expect than even the deepest joy that ever yet was felt on earth, in that inheritance which is prepared for the people of God in heaven. Why, then, do we not enter into that inheritance now? Why may not the converted soul step at once into its perfected reward? Because we are still absent from the Saviour whom we love. Christ's people cannot be glorified before Christ Himself is. He must come and be exalted in righteousness, and must set up His throne of peace and establish His kingdom, before His saints can be gathered into it. And it is not we alone that look and long for that event, but even the spirits of the just made perfect who rest in Abraham's bosom. They have attained a blessed foretaste of heaven, but have not yet entered into heaven itself. Thus St. Paul teaches us, "These all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."¹

Will not that be a day of triumph, when we enter into our inheritance? Surely it will be a glorious reward, to see the Saviour whom we love coming crowned and throned, and we, with every lingering stain of sin finally removed, welcoming Him at His coming, the holy people of a holy God. "This corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal shall put on immortality." We shall be made like unto the angels, creatures of power and beauty, and shall wing

¹ Heb. xi. 39, 40.

with them our flight from world to world throughout all creation's wonders. This earth, long stained with the melancholy effects of the fall, will be regenerated at last, and made into the bright and spotless world which God intended it to be, the purifying fire searching out all its long corruptions. If there are any to whom such an event will not be glorious, it must be because unrepented sin will cut him off from the time of righteousness and peace which will then be ushered into the world, and will be to him, not the welcome into heaven, but the banishment into eternal darkness. But this is our doing, not God's. It is His love which gives the promise; it is our sin which turns the promise into a threat. It is His love that prepares the world of rest; it is our wilful blindness which will people the world of woe. To Him belong the glory, and the crown, and the reward; to us the alarms of affrighted conscience, and the pangs of merited retribution.

Here, then, is a test of our state before God. With what feelings do we regard this coming kingdom? Do we love to think of it, as what we shall ourselves inherit, and towards which we endeavour in His grace to press manfully on? Is the purifying fire, and the day of visitation, and the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth from which sin shall be for ever banished, a thought of triumphant happiness? or is it a thought of anticipated woe, from which the affrighted conscience shrinks back, as it would do from the very foreshadows of damnation?

Surely, then, beloved, a promise it is—a promise given to mankind more than two thousand years ago, and which still remains unfulfilled. Thus the Spirit

declared by the mouth of Isaiah, "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy."¹ The promise was repeated in the text, while St. Peter still trod, amid the blessed company of the apostles, this world of ours. Yet generations after generations have lived and died, and age after age rolled on, and the promise is yet unaccomplished. The kingdom of Christ is not yet established in acknowledged supremacy. The sore struggle between good and evil still goes on, and Satan contends with God for the mastery. The people of the Lord Jesus are not yet gathered into one, though we seem to catch from the prophetic Scriptures the distant sound of our Lord's coming. Long to human hearts seems the time that the Lord delayeth His advent. How long, O Lord, how long shall the wicked triumph, and the proud speak disdainfully? O Lord, make haste to help us! Come, "come quickly, Lord Jesus!" How comforting is it to know that the time is not far distant! He does but wait that He may gather together the number of His elect, and call a more countless throng of souls to enter into His kingdom, and swell with their notes of praise the songs of His victory. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

II. Let me show that this very delay does but make the final accomplishment of the promise more

¹ Isa. lxv. 17, 18.

sure and certain, since it does but illustrate the all-sufficient power of Him who will bring it to pass.

As an introduction to this, compare for a moment the different admeasurement of time as it is to us, and as it is to the Eternal. To stretch our thoughts over the six thousand years which have well nigh elapsed since the creation, is to stretch them over a chasm which seems to us immense, too vast for us to appreciate it. This is from the short duration of our own life, which appears but a tiny speck in so great an expanse of years. Yet what is this after all to Him whose being has had no beginning, and will have no end; to the great self-existent Spirit of all life, to whom "one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day?"

The only image I can use to express and illustrate this difference in the calculation of time between us and Him, is that of two wheels, differing immensely in size from each other, yet moving upon the same centre, as we often see in some complicated piece of machinery. Suppose the two wheels to have the same motion, yet the smaller will have a speed so much the more rapid as the wheel itself differs in comparative size. The small wheel, which is close to you, revolves so quickly that you cannot follow it with your eye; while the great wheel seems scarcely to move, so solemn and stately is its progress. Thus measure time by the little wheel of your own life, and how much toil and how vast a space of time seem to be included in its track of six thousand years! But look up to God, and try to measure it by the circles of His being who is eternal, and how short and small it seems compared

with His "for ever!" The mighty wheel of His counsels and dealings revolves to our eye with an awful solemnity. Mark then, beloved, that the progress of events whereby God is surely bringing to pass the kingdom of His dear Son, seems to us slow and tardy in comparison with the time occupied in our counsels and dealings: though, if we look beyond ourselves, and regard the immensity of the work to be accomplished in the salvation of a fallen world, it will not seem so to us any longer. But say that it seems slow and tardy, or that it actually is slow and tardy compared to our own being; yet it is not slow compared to God, or the period occupied long to His eternity. But when we draw any argument against the certain fulfilment of the promises from the slowness of their completion, the argument must show that it is slow even before God. If it is slow merely before ourselves, the only effect is not to throw doubt upon His power, but only to show how utterly insignificant we are compared with Him. Look up with wonder to that God, whose unending being is one ever-present "now," and does not appear to move as we move; just in the same way as the insect which crawls across the hand will appear to us to move with a greater speed than the star which is rolling over our heads, and yet in truth the star will have revolved thousands of miles, while the tiny insect has moved a finger's breadth. Let us adore that length of being which we cannot comprehend, and that vastness of power which we are unable to measure or conceive.

Now, observe that haste is the invariable sign of weakness, and deliberateness of strength. Ask

yourselves why it is that, in the accomplishment of our earthly objects we are always in such headlong, eager haste, and give ourselves with such a passionate energy to them. The answer will be, because we are not confident of our power to execute them, and seek to supply the sufficiency of strength by the very impetus and impetuosity of the effort. Look at a man toiling to move some great weight; how he strains every muscle, and strives, and bends to the task all his concentrated strength: why, but because he cannot succeed without it? Had he a giant's strength, and were he able with the single touch of a finger to accomplish all he wishes, you would not see all that effort. Haste is but the resource of conscious weakness, which fears that, if it lose a moment, it will not succeed at all. Why then should there be haste with God, to whose power all things are easy; who does not need instruments at all, for He speaks and it is done, He commands and all things obey?

It is true even of the greatest works of man, that the absence of haste is the accompaniment of strength. Most persons will have watched, at some period of their life, the operation of some ponderous machine, that cuts a bar of solid iron as we would cut a thread. Not the least striking feature of such a machine is, that it does not act with a mighty impetus, accompanying its operations with a crash, and great noise and tumult, but with a quiet, steady, regular motion, which strikingly attests its sufficiency to accomplish the work. If God were weak, or could ever become weak; if the opposing powers of hell could ever grow into a strength formidable to His dominion; if there were a chance, the shadow

of a doubt, the faintest resemblance of a probability that He could not, when and how He likes, bring in His promised kingdom, then God might be in haste as we are; then, all at once, by some immediate exertion of strength He would accomplish His objects before His foes became strong. That He delays, or rather seems to us to delay, does but prove His almighty strength and His conscious ability to subdue hell beneath His feet whenever He sees good, and to "reign with all His saints gloriously."

And this is peculiarly true of a long-suffering patience, such as that which God extends over the world, and in which He is not willing "that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." Suppose, by way of illustration, the case of an earthly king, some of whose subjects have taken arms against his authority, and stand up in open and avowed rebellion. Suppose the king to be a merciful as well as a wise king, who had rather forgive than destroy his enemies. Suppose that the rebels were strong and formidable, and his own forces comparatively weak. Suppose that under these circumstances he saw it to be probable that forbearance would only lead to the strengthening of their power, and to his own inability to crush their rebellion. In such a case, however inclined he might be to forgive, forgiveness would be out of his power, and his very anxiety for the welfare of his kingdom at large would demand, that he should not lose an instant in striking his enemies and bringing them into subjection, before their violence should ravage, or the contagion of their example infect, the other classes of his subjects. But suppose, on the other hand, his forces were so strong

as to preponderate beyond all possible comparison over those of the rebels, this very excess of power would enable him to be tolerant, and to be more tolerant in exact proportion to the excess of power. He would be able to push forbearance to its extreme limits, and would be free to be guided wholly, not by fear of their strength, but by pure compassion for their sin.

Thus it is between God and man. He is perfectly wise, and immeasurably good and merciful. He has denounced final and eternal perdition upon those evil spirits who, from the day of their fall till now, have never ceased to war against His authority. Why does He forbear to smite them? It is because He sees His human creatures bound up by sin in an evil confederacy with these accursed spirits; and that if He smites the one, He must smite the other also. He therefore waits, and, like a gracious Monarch, seeks to win back, by offers of pardon and peace, the misguided souls of men who have been seduced into rebellion. The ages upon ages, during which He has thus waited to be gracious, and, by the ministrations of men and angels, and finally by the mission of His own dear Son, has called men to turn from their transgressions and live, do but illustrate, as by a light from heaven, the omnipotence of the arm and the awfulness of the vengeance which will strike at last. Why stand in obstinate rebellion, sinful and unconverted soul? Why repine over the long forbearance of thy God, believing and regenerate soul? "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to

us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

III. Practical lessons of no little value should be learned from this forbearance of God. The great truth, round which these lessons revolve, is the priceless value of the soul. This is seen, in that God holds back His designs, and retards their progress towards completion, wholly for its sake. A glorious array of souls has already been gathered out of all peoples, and tongues, and nations, and languages, a multitude that no man can number. But that Divine heart still yearns over those who are still ensnared, and is not willing that *any* should perish. He seeks to gather into the kingdom every solitary one. There is not one closed heart at which the Spirit does not stand and knock, and before which He does not bring His solemn admonition.

It is no light matter for God to endure with so much “longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction,” and to delay the fulfilment of His promised recompense to them that love Him. Is it a small thing with God, who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, to permit the world which He made bright and sorrowless to be still polluted with the contaminations of human sin, a globe reeking with corruption before His presence? Is it a small thing that His name should still be dishonoured, His commandments broken, His truth contradicted, and even His very existence denied, and yet that He should still hold back in mercy His avenging arm? Or if we may suppose the Holy One unmoved by the personal dishonour put upon Himself, there is the honour of His

own dear Son at stake, and that mediatorial kingdom promised to Him as the reward of the travailing of His soul, impeded and hindered.

Add the existence of other beings besides those who tread this earth of ours, who are looking on wondering at the solution of the mysterious problem. There are angels and archangels, who desire to look into these things. And are there not inhabitants in other globes than this? It is not, indeed, distinctly taught in the word of God, though it is intimated there, "For thus saith the Lord that created the heavens, God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited."¹ It seems almost impossible that the instinct should be untrue, which makes us shrink from the supposition that all the vastnesses of creation are lone and solitary, except this our petty globe. And if there are races of beings inhabiting other worlds, and if we suppose that they are informed of the great work of God's dear Son, does it not make it yet more wonderful that God should so long forbear the accomplishment of His purposes, and the public vindication of His truth and wisdom? Oh! what must be the value of the soul for which God has done so much, and has forborne so long!

Note, in passing, another striking fact. The higher we advance in the order of creation and the ranks of intelligence, the higher estimate we find to be put upon the soul. Take a man sunk in sinful ignorance, and so low in his moral state as to have no care except for the body; that man has little or no value for the soul. Let the man be taught of God, and the more

¹ Isa. xlv. 18.

he is elevated and sanctified by Divine grace, the higher and higher yet he values it. Raise your thoughts from men to angels, beings of a greater capacity and a more exalted nature than we possess, and we find that they value the soul so much, that it is the very occupation of their being "to minister unto them who shall be heirs of salvation." Raise your thoughts from the created angels to the uncreated and self-existent God, and He who is highest of all values the soul most of all. His infinite, all-embracing mind alone knows its worth, alone measures its full destinies of good or evil.

What, then, does it become the soul to do, but to use wisely and well the opportunity which God's forbearing love affords? He has delayed long, but He will not delay always. "His Spirit will not always strive with man." The longer the ages during which He has waited, the shorter will be the time during which He will still wait. The signs of the times are significant, like the blushing light upon the eastern sky that ushers in the morning. Hast thou come to repentance, O soul? Is thy peace made in the blood of Christ, and sealed in the writing of the Holy Spirit? If not, up and flee; flee to His cross, who is able to save thee from the wrath to come.

But the lesson does not belong to the unconverted only, but speaks loudly and warningly even to the child of God. There are few who do not need to trim their lamps; who have not inconsistencies to correct, graces to learn, and earthly affections to which to sit loose. There are none who do not need to press on towards higher measures of grace, and a greater holiness and spirituality of heart. And if

there be differences of degree in the reward of heaven according to the soul's differing capacities to receive reward, let none be content with what they have attained, but thirst with a holy ambition for deeper, sweeter draughts of the living fountain.

Art thou ready prepared to meet thy God? Is thine house in order, and thine heart longing for the time when thou shalt come to appear in the presence of God above? Look and see, and if thou findest aught of carnal corruption still defiling the temple of God within thee, ask for grace to cleanse it away. Speed thy work; be instant and urgent; for time is short, and the Lord at hand. "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."



XIX.

BRIGHT EXPECTATION.

“Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”—2 TIM. iv. 8.

HOW full of meaning is the word with which this text begins—“henceforth,” standing, as it does, between the past and the future, and uniting the experiences of the one with the hope of the other! “The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness;” and nothing can be conceived more touchingly beautiful than the state of a soul which has finished its course, and is waiting in assured expectation for the moment when it shall exchange this scene of pain and toil for the full vision and perfected enjoyments of its everlasting home. It is no wonder that such a soul should seem to catch beforehand some rays of its coming glory, as it stands at the very gates of heaven, and does but wait for the angelic ministers to waft it gently into Abraham’s bosom. It appears at such a time as if the grosser element of fallen human nature were purged away, and were succeeded by the foreshadowings of that perfect regeneration which it will soon enjoy.

Thus, in the natural world, the gorgeousness of the heavens seems to centre round the setting sun as he

sinks in the west, surrounded with clouds of varied shape and hue, which reflect upon the eye his rays as he sinks upon ourselves to rise upon another hemisphere. What glowing colours! what gorgeous rays of crimson, purple, and gold, radiate over the heavens at such an hour, with a glory which earth can but faintly imitate!

Thus, around the closing hours of the dying Christian, as he retains enough of human sympathies to reflect the glory upon which he is entering, there are gathered all sweet, tender, noble hopes, which even the gospel of the incarnate God can throw over poor human nature. There is the retrospect of the past with its pains, and toils, and tears, softened in the reminiscence, like a landscape which retains to the traveller's eye all its grace and beauty, while the rougher lines of its separate parts are softened in the distance. In such a retrospect, while the painful is lost, the rich experiences of the Divine grace and peace are still there, throwing their light into the future. Then is enjoyed that perfect love which casteth out fear, and that full assurance which does not leave one doubt to agitate the mind.

And then there is the prospect of the future—the future without a pang, without a trial, without a danger, without a fear. What, to such a soul, is the shuddering glance which nature casts at the deep waters? The saint sees beyond them the glistening towers of the heavenly Jerusalem, and the form of the Saviour whom he loves waiting to welcome him into the eternal sunshine of Canaan's happy land. What to him are the coffin and the grave, and the state of decay into which the perishing flesh will

fall? He knows that meanwhile he shall rest amid the "spirits of the just," in happy communion and sweet foretaste of his completed redemption; and that "though worms destroy this body," in the self-same flesh he will see God, when quickened at the archangel's trumpet he will spring into glorious life again. What to him will be the alarms of the future judgment? He is taught that his Saviour will be his Judge, and he knows by experience the tenderness of that heart which beats within the breast of Jesus Christ, "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever." What to him will be the brief pang of dying? That pang will unveil all the wondrous mysteries of the unseen world, and will be but the triumphant pathway along which he will enter into "the inheritance of the saints in light."

Thus, the past and the future can throw their influences around the closing hours of a Christian's life, till they become the sweetest of human existence below, half earth and half heaven. Thus it was that "Paul the aged" felt, as he wrote this letter to his son Timothy. What full assurance, what a tone of confidence and peacefulness is there in these words, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing!"

The words describe,

I. The reward.

II. The Person rewarding.

III. The persons rewarded.

I. The reward. By the expression, "the crown of righteousness," there can be no doubt that the apostle intended to denote the state of blessedness beyond the grave, for which he was looking. But why use the name of an object to denote a state? We shall best answer this by observing the senses in which we ourselves use the word "crown."

Sometimes we mean by it a final state, to which all that has preceded is but the preparation. Thus, the last of a series of acts we call a crowning act, or the completion of the whole. This sense we probably derive from the use of a crown as the ornament of the head or highest part of man. Suppose a suppliant lying at the feet of a monarch, and lifting his eyes from the ground to the person of the king. His eyes would be carried gradually upward, till they rest at last upon the symbol of kingly dignity that decks the head.

In this sense, heaven may be regarded as the crowning state of the believer's life. For this state all his progress in grace, all his conquests over sin, all his sore strife, all his hopes and aspirations, will have been but the preparation. None can tell but they who know it by a happy experience, what joy, what rapture, what inward fruitions the believing heart possesses even here on earth! Place on the one side all the pleasures of the world and of the senses, the greatest rewards of ambition, even the sweetest moments of human love; and place upon the other the hours when God has been clearly seen and sensibly felt—those seasons of Divine love, during which the soul has reposed on the Saviour's breast, and has been cradled in the everlasting arms above the fears

and wants of life; and I say, that such hours will outweigh in the balance all the joys of life besides. Yet these are but glimpses of the dawn of heaven; but foretastes of what the soul will possess everlastingly above, when its bliss shall be crowned with the "fruition of the glorious Godhead," and the pleasures that are at His right hand for evermore.

All the soul's progress on earth is strictly its preparation for heaven—the storing up, as it were, of the elements of eternal happiness. What heaven will be we do not know as yet. All its sights and sounds, all its length and breadth and depth and height of blessedness are not revealed, because we could not understand them from our present want of any corresponding experience. But the essence of heaven has been revealed to us—that great central fount from which will spring eternally the rivers of undying joy. This essence of heaven will be the clear vision and the everlasting possession of God himself. Thus St. Paul briefly sums up the glory of the heavenly kingdom in this, that "God shall be all in all."¹ There can, therefore, be no pleasure in heaven unless there is pleasure in God, if heaven will be "God revealed." Ask the Christian why it is that he prolongs prayer and loves to dwell in meditation on the word; he will answer, that to do so is to be with God, and to be with God is the profoundest joy of his heart. This desire is, therefore, the very capacity for, and the very foretaste and beginning of heaven. Thus, all the believer's state on earth is strictly that of preparation, and the future glory but the crown to the present grace.

¹ 1 Cor. xv. 28.

Another idea conveyed in the word "crown," is that of reward. In old times, strength or skill of body, or genius, was rewarded by a crown of laurel or parsley, whose fading wreath did but represent the fleeting nature of all human glory. So heaven is described by a crown, because the saints who inherit it will first have struggled, and fought, and wrestled here below, in sore conflict with the enemies of the soul's peace. Ay, and that will be a crown, not fading as human honours, but eternal as the heavenly life; "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away." Yet from this reward we must carefully separate that idea of merit which is attached to it in all human recompenses. The strength by which the Christian fights is not his own. It constitutes therefore a gift to be adoringly acknowledged, not a merit to be confidently pleaded. Oh, wondrous love of God, that first strengthens the soul to run its race, and then rewards for that which itself has given! Think of the soul first redeemed, then converted, then sanctified, then rewarded—all free, rich, abundant as the fountain of immeasurable grace from which the gifts have flowed.

While we dwell upon the idea of reward, the last and most familiar meaning of the word "crown" occurs naturally to the mind. It is the visible emblem of royal power. The crown belongs to a king; and shall we think that it is used without a purpose to denote the soul's eternal reward in heaven? No! it expresses the infiniteness, unknown and incomprehensible to us as yet, of that reward. It is so wonderfully vast that the soul, even while it keeps in view that wondrous work of the incarnate God by

which it has been purchased, cannot think of it without awe; so strangely great and wonderful seems the reward, contrasted with the sinful frailties of the creatures to be rewarded. Reigning in heaven is the figure by which the glory of the saint is described. Thus the apostles were assured that they should hereafter "sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."¹ The same dignity is ascribed to believers in general. Of Christ it is said, he "hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father."² Again, still more specifically, St. Paul affirms, "If we be dead with him, we shall also live with him; if we suffer, we shall also reign with him."³ And our Lord Himself, in His message to the church of Laodicea, seals the hope with this promise, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."⁴

It is not for us, indeed, to understand as yet how this will be, or what will be the order and nature of the kingdom which the saints will enjoy; but there must be some real actual sense in which it is true, or it never had thus been repeated over and over again in the Word. We shall be kings hereafter. What a difference to our suffering state here! Not literally in the sense of an outward ornament, but in that of the condition we shall hold, we shall have crowns in heaven.

Then follows the description of this crown; not a crown of power, or magnificence, but a crown of righteousness. All other good and glorious things

¹ Matt. xix. 28.

² Rev. i. 6.

³ 2 Tim. ii. 11, 12.

⁴ Rev. iii. 21.

are included in the regeneration of the soul after the perfect image of the holy Creator. We do not, and, perhaps, cannot fully understand this as yet, because the bliss of a perfect sinlessness is unknown by us, and therefore incomprehensible to us ; and because a large portion of our experience is of joys blended with the corruption of fallen nature.

But why is God infinitely happy, if not because He is infinitely holy? What was the only period of this world's existence, when there was no suffering in it, but that in which there was no sin? Sin came, and with it came shame, sorrow, pain, strife, want, death. The bitter flood has swept over all this our world, and has not left one spot in it undefiled. Why is it even now that the saints of God do not enjoy a perfect happiness here, but because they do not enjoy a perfect sanctification? You may as well expect to set some substantial object before the blaze of a morning sun, and that it shall not throw its shadow behind it, as to expect to separate sorrow from sin. He who came to remedy this world's ruin had His great title proclaimed to be "Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins." It was the only way possible, even to his Omnipotence, to save them from their sorrow. What a bright world would this become, if sin were once removed from it! It would be as the very court of heaven, as the very house of God. When righteousness shall be perfected in us, happiness will be perfected in us likewise.

Or we may regard righteousness itself, rather than happiness, which is but its effect, as constituting the crown of the saint with a glory fresh from the Holy One. Every such saint will stand in heaven as an

everlasting miracle, in the blood which has cleansed so deep a sinner, and the almightiness of grace which has changed such earthly elements into vessels of righteousness. See the blessed army around the throne, with every garment made white in the blood of the Lamb, and every hand holding the palm branch in token of victory. How gloriously changed from what they were in their militant condition on earth! Could the history of each saint be unfolded, what a tale of Divine forbearance, and grace long wrestling with sin, of inward conflict and deep-searching of heart, of keen convictions and mysterious dealings of a loving Providence, would there be laid open to us! This one was an open blasphemer; another, a hardened reprobate; a third, a careless formalist: all were lost and dead in sins; but now, cleansed and glorified, they stand before the throne, the living trophies of redeeming love.

Can we wonder that the apostle should have yearned for the time when this reward, long prepared and laid up in the counsels of God, should be finally possessed, and he, passing from this atmosphere of sin and sorrow into the pure air of heaven, should receive the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, should give him in that day?

II. The person rewarding must also be considered: "The Lord, the righteous Judge." The whole passage is so full of instruction, that the mind scarcely knows which truth to gather first. Think what holy joy there is in the very union of the words, for our Lord and our righteous Judge is the same. The conviction of a judgment to come is deeply seated in the conscience of every man who lives. Not even

the unbeliever will deny the suitability of such an act, to rectify the contradictions and anomalies which exist in this world of ours. Who will deny that moral virtue and temporal reward would be justly united, and moral vice with temporal chastisement, good with good, and evil with evil? Yet we see every day, that they are often disunited, that the ungodly prosper and the wicked speak disdainfully, while the true children of God are passing on through much tribulation into the kingdom.

The word of God has, indeed, unravelled to us this mystery, by making known the fact that this life is not our final state, but a period of trial and probation. Of this truth, judgment, which shall separate for ever the just from the unjust, is an essential part; and with such a judgment, the mind of necessity unites those ideas of revealed power and awful magnificence, which Scripture declares shall indeed accompany the appearance of the Judge. Before the brightness of His coming the heavens and the earth shall flee away, and there shall be no place found for them; and before Him will be gathered the dead, small and great, not one absent of all the countless millions whose busy feet have trodden this earth; and around Him the armies of the angels, ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands. The very greatness of such an event, apart from any personal grounds of fear, must needs invest it to our minds with reverent solemnity and awe. "Who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth?"

To whom could this great act be intrusted so suitably as to the second Person of the ever-blessed

Trinity, God the Son? "The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son."¹ "We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ."² Had it been God the Father in all His glory that should judge us, might not the guilty soul, perchance, have pleaded, that He who judged had Himself no actual experience of the trials of those whom He judged, and therefore could not make allowance for their temptations? The heart is ever ready by any plea, however groundless and false, to shift from its own shoulders the acknowledgment of its guilt; and the all-seeing knowledge of God, however infinitely minute and complete, would not have appeared the same to it as an actual personal participation of our trials. But God the Son knows them all, having been "tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin."³ All the infirmities of the flesh, and of the mind—poverty, hunger, cold, and nakedness to the one; joy, sorrow, sympathy, disappointment to the other—were borne by Him as fully as they have been by ourselves. Hence came His ability to succour them that are tempted; an ability, not of power alone, but also of experience, which can adapt to the soul's exact wants the precise help it needs. Hence is derived His ability to judge the world, because as God He can measure the whole length and breadth of the sin, and as man the whole length and breadth of the temptation. In such a Judge, moreover, we have, signed and sealed with His own blood, the pledge of a tender and compassionate consideration. He will not act in the mere severity of all-scrutinizing justice, but will blend the promptings of

¹ John v. 22.² Rom. xiv. 10.³ Heb. iv. 15.

His love with the conclusions of His truth. His own glory is bound up in the salvation of His people, and every soul gathered into heaven will be a fresh star in His mediatorial crown. Who, then, so divinely fit to judge as He who has proved His love by dying for us, and who, amid His glory in heaven, retains the same gracious human heart, which had a sympathy for every want and a tear for every grief, during His life on earth ?

And again, there is a further suitability in His discharge of this office in regard to His own kingdom. The same earth that once saw His shame, shall witness His exaltation ; and the same creatures who once despised and slew Him, shall yet bow awe-stricken before His Majesty. That God's dear Son should have submitted to the ignominy and suffering which our Lord bore upon earth, and should not likewise be presented visibly before the eyes of men in the blaze of glory to which He has ascended in heaven, would be abhorrent to our human conceptions. The word of God accordingly declares, that there shall be a display of His power as conspicuous as was the display of His humiliation. It will be the same Saviour that was nailed to the cross and pierced with the spear, and yet how changed ! Then He was an outcast wanderer, despised and rejected of men ; now " on His head are many crowns," and the sceptre of almighty sovereignty is in His hand, and the title by which He proclaims Himself is, " I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty." Then He was poor, despised, and destitute ; now there are around Him the riches of the Godhead, and the

armies of glorified beings who accompany Him humbly bow with awe at His presence. Then "He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." Now He is girt with light and life; darkness flies before Him, and round about His throne are glory and bliss unspeakable. Then He spake "as never man spake," and yet few cared to hear Him. Now there is silence in heaven and silence in earth, and all creatures hold their breath in suspense to hear from His lips the final award of good or evil. "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."¹

Once more, there is a suitability in it as regards those who shall be judged. Will it not strike a new and just alarm into the soul of the unconverted sinner, as he starts up from his grave, to see the Saviour whom he has rejected sitting as his Judge, till, in the agony of torturing conviction, he shall say "to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne?" Will it not invest the reward of the saint with a new sweetness, to receive it from the outstretched hand of the Lord he loves? This will wholly take away the awful fear, without which it would not otherwise be possible for man to stand in that tremendous day—to see upon the great white throne, and amid the light intolerable, the human features of Jesus radiant with smiling love. The crown itself will derive a fresh beauty from Him who will place it upon our brows.

¹ Matt. xxv. 34, 41.

The hand that saves, and the hand that rewards, will be one. Fear not that revealed King, O my soul! it will be no stranger unknown to thee, but one whom thou hast served and loved—thine own faithful and gentle Saviour, now reigning for thee as once he died for thee, thy Ransom, thy Friend, thy Brother, thy God, thy strength and portion for ever.

The apostle further says, that this crown will be "given." It will not be purchased by our strength or righteousness, our own fasting and penances, but it will be a free gift, purchased for us by the cries and tears and agonies of the dying Saviour. From this, the natural pride of the human heart shrinks back offended, because the idea of a gift implies our utter impotency to procure it otherwise, and thus empties, at the foot of the cross, the vain imaginations of man's own independence. Yet there is not a truth in the whole word, so full of comfort and assurance as this. If the crown were to be won by our own exertions, what soul could ever feel the assurance which the apostle expresses in the text? Our hope would be doubtful as our resolutions, inconstant as our purposes. But now that it is a gift, it is certain as the infinite merits of Christ, and the unalterable promise of the covenant-keeping God.

Then observe the expression, "at that day." The apostle had spoken of this in the first verse of the chapter: "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom." Yet no absolute mention of time is made in these words, and between them and the text many verses intervene which do not contain the slightest allusion to

any day. Still, with confident brevity, St. Paul speaks of "that day," as if conscious that his meaning could not be mistaken, and that there was one day only to which should be turned the thoughts and heart of every man that lives. Does not this mode of speaking strikingly teach the exceeding awfulness of that judgment-time, and the predominant importance which it ought to have to us? It should be foremost in our thoughts, as it is in the counsels of God; and so constantly present as to need no specific description to tell us what "that day" means. That day! when the secrets of thousands of years shall be revealed, and the long array of human sins made known. That day! when God will wind up His dispensation with man, and close for ever the opportunities of time in the recompenses of eternity. That day! in which all are alike concerned, and which will centre in itself the eternal destinies of those countless millions of undying souls who have breathed this earthly atmosphere of sin. Let us ask, whether we are prepared for that day, and whether we have a well-founded hope that we shall receive that crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to all them that love His appearing.

III. The persons to be rewarded must not be forgotten.

Note first of all, how the heart of the apostle could not rejoice in his own glory, without associating with himself in the same inheritance all the people of his Master. We must learn to throw away the selfishness which is frequently attached even to our idea of heaven, and sanctify the thought of our personal glory by the remembrance of those great events, in which

it will be included. The time of our perfected inheritance will not arrive, till all the people of God shall be gathered together in one, and the kingdom of the Redeemer be established in righteousness and peace. How can there be full fruition to Christ's people while His Gospel is still militant, and the din of the great battle between good and evil rises up even toward heaven? How shall any one of God's children finally put on his crown, till God has "accomplished the number of His elect," and revealed Himself in His promised kingdom, as "a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of His people Israel."

The final happiness of Christ's people will be identical with the final exaltation of Christ Himself; and must not the heart that loves Christ find a new theme of rapturous praise in the removal for ever of all those things that now do dishonour to His name, and despite unto His grace? Is there no holy jealousy for His honour, and no fervent indignation against those words and deeds of sin, the deep profanity of which compels us to cry out with the Psalmist, "Sorrow hath seized hold of me for the wicked, which forsake thy law"? Then all these things will be finally removed, when the crowned Jesus shall be worshipped as Lord of all, and His Church, cleansed from her manifold pollutions and clothed in garments made white in the blood of the Lamb, shall sit down with Him at the marriage supper above. The glory of an individual saint would be impossible, unless his Lord and the people of his Lord are glorified together with him. Heaven will be no lone and thinly-peopled city, but on every side will be gathered round the

regenerated saint the fellow-heirs of glory, each giving, each communicating bliss, each reflecting the brightness of the manifested God, and catching up and echoing back in rapturous unison the ceaseless songs of praise and adoration.

It is impossible for a soul to love Christ without loving Christ's appearing. And though that "appearing" in all its completed glory may not be immediately at hand, yet the time cannot be far off when we at all events shall go to Christ, even if Christ comes not as yet to us. This is the one inspiring thought which will hallow even death, and make the valley of the grave radiant with anticipated happiness, that we shall meet again the Master that we love. Press on, O young man, with fervent zeal upon thy race; for think how much has to be done, and what a toilsome wilderness to be crossed, ere thou canst rejoin for ever thy Lord! Slack not thine hand, nor let thine heart sink, O strong man, who art now bearing the heat and burden of the day, but look where thy Master is gone before to prepare a place in which thou shalt dwell with Him for ever! Shrink not, thou old man, from that lesson of mortality which thy gray hairs, and tottering limbs, and failing senses, teach thee! Thy warfare is well nigh past and thy race ended, and the haven is near to thee now, "where the wicked cease from troubling, and where the weary be at rest." Is it, then, for this that we are looking, content to live, but happiest then when we shall be "absent from the body, and present with the Lord"? Do we love the Lord's appearing?

Let us look back to that word, "henceforth," and

seek to place ourselves in the position of the apostle. Life's slow sands have now run out. The busy fever of life has subsided into the feeble pulses which soon will cease to beat on earth. The quick sensations and joys of the flesh are passed away, and before the senses, the solemn faces of those who are gathered round our dying bed are becoming faint and dim. The cares and interests of life have sunk into the distance, like objects before the departing traveller's eye. From beneath the feet the last hold on earth is slipping fast away. A few moments more, and all that is on this side the grave will be gone for ever. Try to realize to yourselves this moment, which as surely as we live will come, and may come soon to us all ; and then ask, what is the nature of the "henceforth" that lies before you? Is it dark, with fearful alarms of conscience, and terrible misgivings as to our fitness to die? Or is it radiant as the gates of heaven? Happy, indeed, the soul, which with the apostle's assurance can repeat the apostle's words, "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day ; and not to me only, but to all those also that love his appearing."



XX.

PATIENT WAITING.

“Not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.”—2 Cor. v. 4.

ST. PAUL has been speaking in the preceding chapter of the confidence which upheld him and his fellow-apostles under the worst conjunctures of human affairs, and the most grievous calamities which flesh and blood can endure. Neither the sufferings of life, nor the approach of death, could for a moment shake the serenity of their hope. The sufferings of life they regarded as the sign of that apostleship in which they were to follow the steps of their Divine Master, alike in the cross on earth and in the crown in heaven, and as the means whereby their faith might be trained into the vigorous manhood of the life of God. Death itself they regarded as an advantage, since it was not the end nor even the temporary cessation of their essential life, but only a change of scene and condition, glorious and blessed beyond the power of mind to conceive and tongue to utter. It was but the transit, painful but brief, into another life; it was but the putting on of their crown; but their investiture in the robes of immortality; but the re-union in glory with the beloved Master, whom they sought to serve on earth, and

hoped to enjoy in heaven. Thus the very darkest of human events became changed to their eyes almost into objects of desire from the aspect in which they regarded them; just as in some fair landscape the very ruggedness of nature, the barren rock, the precipitous cliff, the tangled wild, become beautiful in the colours of the whole, and in the shifting lights and shadows with which they are clothed.

The apostle pursues this theme in the present chapter, and in the first verses traces out yet more particularly the Christian's hope in regard to the body. It is not that this lower part of man occupies the highest longings of the saints, or that their eyes look to the regeneration of the decaying flesh rather than to the glory of the spiritualized soul; but that the Divine completeness of the work of Christ is seen in including this also in the Gospel blessing. In short, the body forms in this place the theme of the apostle's triumph, not by way of opposition to the soul's higher hopes, but by way of amplification of them. He would show that there was no part of their whole being which would not partake of immortality. If, with the throes and agonies of the flesh and with the denial of his natural desires, the Christian is called to perform the will of God upon earth, it will be likewise with the pleasures of the flesh, with an undecaying youth and unwearied strength, a perfect beauty and an immortal joy, that he will inherit the kingdom of God in heaven. Had we to calculate for the welfare of the body alone, the infinite rewards of eternity would repay beyond all expression the utmost sufferings and self-denials of time. Nor can the mind help stretching the argu-

ment further, by a process so natural as to be almost involuntary. If the flesh will be crowned with so exceeding a reward, and made the vehicle of so surpassing a bliss, what will be the glory of man's higher part, of the thinking, feeling, reasoning, conscious soul!

If we would form even the faintest conception of what the final state will be, we must first separate from the state of the inner man all the imperfections, weaknesses, and corruptions which now impede its happiness, and conceive it wholly cleansed from every impurity, and every vexatious influence. Then we must suppose every active power increased into one intense vigour. Conceive the senses, by the greater activity of the spirit which acts through the body as its instrument, strengthened to gaze upon sights which would paralyze the feebleness of our earthly powers by their intolerable radiance. Conceive the intellect, infinitely enlarged in capacity, set free to look delightedly into all the wonders of God's works, and of God Himself. Conceive the will moving in entire conformity with that of God, its pulses beating as it were with the very motions of the Divine mind. Conceive the affections, wholly absorbed in an ecstasy of love with the beatific vision of the Holy One, taken into intimate communion with, and catching ever fresh light and bliss from, God Himself. Conceive this going on for ever, and that every cycle of eternity as it rolls onward will but bring new wonders, new glories, new capacities to possess them; and yet, after all, our conceptions of the soul's imaginable bliss will be wholly mean and unworthy of the great truth.

say, that "in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven;" for "we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened," alike with the pains which are the heirloom of flesh and blood, and with the passions and vile instincts of the body which war against the law of the Spirit. Deep and intense is the desire with which the saint, whose perfect love has cast out fear, longs for the time of his removal and the days of his completed redemption.

The complete removal of all the weaknesses of the flesh is conveyed in the expression, "that mortality shall be swallowed up of life." Thus Isaiah, foretelling the triumph of the Messiah's kingdom, declared that death shall be swallowed up in victory.¹ As when some heavy object is thrown into the water and descends out of sight into the lowest depths, or as when the sea closes round a sinking ship, so mortality shall be swallowed up in the risen Saviour's triumph.

Think what death is and what are its effects, and thus estimate the greatness of the victory. In what body does it not plant its seeds of disease and dissolution, working, it may be, amid youth and health and strength, then, growing with growing years, crippling the limbs, and darkening the senses, till it breaks up the fleshly tabernacle into a thing for worms and corruption; or if not so, lying unsuspected, till some outward accident crushes at once the feeble tenement, or checks in a moment the current of life into the coldness and stagnation of the grave! What pains does it not cause! What household does it not darken, changing the merry laugh into the cry of

¹ Isa. xxv. 8.

stricken grief, and the voice of gladness into the sobs and tears of the bereaved mourner! What hearts does it not touch, sooner or later, tearing asunder dear friends, taking the child from the mother's breast, and the mother from the helpless children, and the husband from the wife of his bosom, and crushing all the bright hopes of our earthly life! All this springs from our mortality; and what a change will it make to remove all this absolutely, perfectly, for ever! What a state will that be, when not only shall they not die, but where there shall be no death at all,—the dread shadow absorbed, forgotten, in the eternal pulses of a boundless, cloudless, sorrowless life!

With these hopes in view, the fear of death is entirely taken away from the child of God. Something of awe remains indeed; but it is awe that is brightened with hope, not darkened with alarm. Death is but the gateway of heaven. In this assurance, the believer can commend his soul to Christ and fall asleep calmly as a child that slumbers on his mother's breast. So completely is this the case, that the apostle thought it necessary to guard against the abuse of this feeling, and to explain that he meant not an impatience of this life—"Not that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life."

Yet there are some persons to be found, eminent in grace and far advanced towards Christian maturity, who are never able to bear the thoughts of death, or to reconcile their minds to dwell calmly and fearlessly upon the great change. Whether it be from any peculiarity of the mental constitution, from anything

in the physical temperament, or whether it be the result of some association of horror impressed upon the mind during early years, or whether it be a lingering weakness that clouds a perfect sanctification, I presume not to say. But the fact is so, and should teach us how cautiously we need to apply to peculiarities of individual souls any standard of general experience.

But one distinction ought to be clearly borne in mind upon this point, and that is, the difference between a fear of death and a fear of dying. The first implies the great change itself, from earth to heaven, and from time to eternity; the second, the circumstances which may surround the last hours of departed life. What is thought to be a fear of the first, may be after all but a fear of the second. A lively imagination may depict beforehand all the circumstances with an intensity intolerable to a sensitive mind—the darkened chamber; the awe-struck silence; the solemn faces that surround the death-bed; the sinking powers and failing senses; and even the very pangs of departing life. Yet surely it is no part of Christian duty to realize these beforehand. We should rather leave them all to Him, who will supply the needful strength when the time arrives, and cheer such an hour with bright glimpses of heaven and thoughts of more than human sweetness. To agitate ourselves with the question, how we shall meet such things, is to distrust the goodness and faithfulness of God. But to fear this process of dying, is a very different thing from fearing death. This latter should be driven out by the strong assurance of faith. The great change itself ought to be a theme of holy glad-

ness. Songs of praise should accompany us, as we go down into the dark valley, strong in the Saviour who has trodden it before us. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."¹

II. Yet in the presence of this grand hope all impatience is repudiated. The apostle seems to have been conscious that his deep desire for the time of his departure might be misunderstood by hearts less spiritual and experienced than his own, and therefore he adds the words of the text, that no thoughts of repining discontent, no impatience of the Divine will, no forgetfulness of present mercies, might be supposed to be mingled with the strong desires of faith and love. The believer is taught to look upon his earthly life as a preparation for his heavenly. He must argue, not that his state on earth is grievous and intolerable, and that heaven is precious as a blessed change from what now afflicts us; but if the presence of God is sweet to the soul now, what will it be then? If, in spite of human sins, sufferings, and temptations, the gospel upon earth be peace and joy in believing, what will be the bliss of the gospel perfected above, when the struggles of the spiritual warfare will be past, and the Church shall put on her white robes of beauty as the spotless bride of the Lamb?

There is a contrast, but not an opposition between the two worlds. An earnest desire for the one by no means unfits us for the duties of the other, just as a

¹ 1 Cor. xv. 55—57.

weariness of this life by no means proves that we are prepared for a better. Because men find sorrow here, they flatter themselves into the delusion that they shall necessarily have peace hereafter; as if the sorrows of life were a sort of purgatorial fire to cleanse the soul and fit it for a purer state. There is no wish, which fills the thinking man with deeper searchings of heart, than a wish for death. How often does the expression, "Would that I were dead!" proceed from lips which have never breathed a prayer. Very different is the feeling of the true child of God, who, however he may long for his rest, never repines at his labours, nor wishes to hurry that wisdom, which regulates the times and seasons with a most perfect love, and a most unerring wisdom.

Let us look at the most prominent reasons which should lead the believer not impatiently to wish for death:—

(1.) Because of the submission of his will to the will of God, which is the very sign of the Spirit's work in the soul. The strength of the God whom we serve is seen, not more wonderfully in the greatness, than in the minuteness of his operations. If His providential care is so exact, that even "the hairs of our head are all numbered," how much more must we conclude that an event so great, as the calling of an immortal soul from its time of trial, does not take place without an exact arrangement of the time and mode of the call! The chastening dispensations of God have for their object one of two purposes—the one, "to try patience for the example of others, and that faith may be found in the day of the Lord, laudable, glorious, and honourable, to the increase of glory

and endless felicity ;” the other, personal to the soul itself, “to correct and amend whatsoever doth offend the eyes of our heavenly Father.”¹ As to the latter, we can trace much of the method of God’s dealings from the experience of our own hearts ; but as to the former, we know not what He may be pleased to work by us in the hearts of others. Never till the great judgment day shall we know the extent, or adequately estimate the influences which have flowed from us, either for good or evil ; perhaps from our most casual words, perhaps from the mero silent tenor of our life and conduct. At all events, whether we know them or not, of this we are sure, that God has reasons wise and sufficient for all His dealings. Sooner may we doubt our own existence, and question the evidence of our own senses, than doubt for an instant that our life and our death are alike ordered by Him. How, then, if the conformity of the will to the will of God be the perfection of the Spirit’s work within us, can the believer wish to hasten God’s times and seasons even by a single hour ?

(2.) Whatever may be uppermost in the thoughts of a worldly man, the Christian sets his face towards eternity, and clothes his daily life below with its awful interests. When he remembers that into the city of heaven nothing shall enter that defileth or worketh abomination—when he thinks of the innumerable company of angels, of the general assembly and church of the first-born, and of the spirits of just men made perfect, who constitute the inhabitants of that world—when he recalls the nature of that God who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity—he

¹ See Service for the Visitation of the Sick.

cannot but be exercised with a jealous fear as to his fitness for such a state, and the ripeness of his soul for such an inheritance. He believes that God continues the life of His people here, till His purposes in them and by them have alike been accomplished. He knows that the time of preparation will cease on this side the grave, and is far from wishing to shorten the time, in proportion to his sense of the immeasurable importance of judgment and eternity.

There is another truth, too little remembered by us, but which, when remembered, cannot fail to exercise an influence over the feelings of the man of God in this matter—the degrees of reward in the future world. There will be an overflowing happiness in all the saints, but the capacity for happiness may not be the same in all, as a variety of cups may all overflow and yet not contain all alike. No soul can drink of the living waters of the Spirit without thirsting for a more abundant measure, or being filled with a holy ambition to stand near the throne in heaven. As this greater capacity for future glory can only be acquired on earth, every moment of life must needs be precious to us, as a talent which, rightly used, may bring a more abundant recompense of reward in the day when the Lord “maketh up his jewels.”

(3.) God has bestowed upon us certain practical powers, which we cannot but desire to exercise to the glory of Him who gave them. The love of Christ, by a most sweet but constraining power, compels the soul to labour for Christ; and there cannot be a man truly “born of God,” who does not fervently desire to promote the glory of the Saviour, “who hath

called him out of darkness into his marvellous light." The very relish the soul has acquired for things Divine on the one hand, and the horror it feels for wickedness on the other, alike urge it into action. Whatever, therefore, may be the saint's eagerness for his own inheritance, it cannot but be modified by the delight of labouring for his Master's cause. As an earthly soldier becomes so fired with the heat and excitement of battle, that no weariness or wounds, short of actual inability, will compel him to quit its dangers, just so the soldier of Christ finds his heart bound up in the spiritual conflict. One can almost imagine, that even as angels waft him to his rest, he may still find his heart turning back to the interests of souls perishing, and of the militant kingdom of Christ. If the souls in Abraham's bosom have cognizance of earthly things, alike the memory of their past and the interests of their future must fix their eyes upon this little globe, to watch the completed triumph of the conquering Redeemer.

(4.) Let it likewise be remembered that this life is not to the Christian a life of unmingled sorrow. Even amid the labours and privations which the great apostle underwent, there were, beyond a doubt, many sources of comfort. It may be confidently believed, that there is more happiness in the world than misery, if we are the true children of God. Even in the way of human calculation God gives to all men joys and affections enough, not to draw away the heart from our better inheritance hereafter, but to check a fretful impatience under life's burden here. If we receive evil at the hand of the Lord, do we not also receive good? The peace and joy of the gospel shed

light enough to make even a sadder world than this tolerable and even enjoyable, as we pass through it with hearts beating high with the hopes of our inheritance beyond.

There are thus ample reasons, why the desire for a better state should not be united with any repining discontent at our present condition. "It is a beautiful world after all," as it has been well said, and it is only our sins that mar it. The right Christian temper is neither a morbid indifference to life's pleasures, nor an impatient disgust at its trials, but a cheerful willingness either to live or die; to live, that we may know and do God's will; to die, that we may inherit God's kingdom. We earnestly desire, indeed, "a building of God, eternal in the heavens;" but "not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life."

III. Personal identity will be preserved. The apostle's previous words might have led to the supposition, that the change for which he longed was to be an entire alteration of his existing nature, a new building wholly diverse from the tabernacle in which the soul dwells on earth. This possible error he therefore corrects, by stating that the change which shall pass upon the bodies of the saints at the resurrection will consist, not in the putting off the present constitution of our being, but in the putting on of something further—new powers and capacities, new organs and elements; in short, not in "being unclothed, but clothed upon." Its mortality will indeed entirely pass away from it, but this not by a violent change, but absorbed in a new and pervading power

of life. But in other things the body will be the same; not perhaps in its actual atoms, but in the identity and consciousness of its earthly existence. As Moses and Elias appeared visibly in their human bodies upon the Mount of Transfiguration, not moulded into a common shape, but distinguishable from each other; as the body of our Lord and Master Himself was recognised by the eyes of His disciples after His resurrection; so, no doubt, in the future world there will be a recognition of those we have loved on earth, neither the body nor the mind losing in their renewed beauty their personal characteristics. This truth St. Paul makes the direct topic of comfort to those who mourn for departed friends; for if you take away this truth, the point of his argument is altogether lost. "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."¹ There are about this view certain difficulties which it is not in the power of our present knowledge altogether to remove, but these cannot stand in opposition to the clear teaching of the word of God, and the deep instincts of our own hearts.

But the question has been asked, if we know in heaven those whom we have loved on earth, will not the absence of those who are lost introduce grief and imperfection into our happiness? Without entering into much which might be said upon this point, the example of God Himself is enough to set the objection

¹ 1 Thess. iv. 13, 14.

at rest. For God loves all His creatures ; He “ so loved the world ; ” yet how many of His creatures will perish ! Can we conceive for an instant that their loss will interfere with the Divine happiness, or introduce the disturbance which we call grief into the Divine mind ? That which is possible in God is possible in God's creatures, though it may not be within the reach of our philosophy to explain the mode.

See how sweetly the recognition in heaven of those with whom on earth we have enjoyed a community of Christian love, meets the feelings of the heart. Our human souls are made for the exercise of particular affections, and anything that should change this would be the remodelling of a new constitution, not the glorification of an old one. Imagine a saint entering heaven, guided and upheld by ministering spirits, as he advances awe-stricken and adoring before the throne. Doubtless his first impressions of bliss will be an absorbing concentration of every faculty, thought, and feeling upon the revealed God. As beneath the blaze of that glorious beauty the attending spirits bear up the soul, neither probably will his ear catch the sounds of the seraphic harmonies, nor his eyes recognise the radiant forms that crowd its floors of light, till that one beatific vision of God has penetrated to his very inmost being, carrying throughout the whole regenerated man the gladness of an immortal life.

But we can well imagine the soul, when the first ecstasy has subsided into an abiding bliss, turning its eyes to the forms with which it is surrounded. What joy will it be to the saint to recognise in them those he loved on earth, and over whose souls per-

chance he had watched and prayed with many a fervent supplication, and many an hour of travailing anxiety! Here he sees the wife of his bosom; there the babes, that hung around his knees and over whom he mourned at what seemed their untimely end; here some dear friend, the helper of his joy and the confidant of his sorrow; now they surround him radiant with glorious beauty, every eye kindling with light and love, and every heart, as they watch his ecstasy, catching a deeper thrill of joy. Who would deprive himself of the hope of such a meeting? Who lose the delight that springs from the contrast of the two states of the one identical body, when we shall be "not unclothed, but clothed upon?"

There yet remains another point to be noticed. Great is the glory which belongs even to the body of the saint, and sure is the hope that supports the fainting flesh in triumphant expectation through all the trials of the world. Thus even his fleshly tabernacle becomes dignified in our eyes, and clothed with an admiring interest. When we think of the changes through which it has to pass, and of the immense exertion of almighty power of which it will be the subject, it must needs seem wonderful to our eyes even in its degradation. Yet, after all, it is but the casket to the jewel of the undying soul—but the house of clay in which the essential spirit dwells and through which it acts. This the apostle strongly marks in all his expressions, speaking of it as something belonging to us, but no essential part of ourselves—"our earthly house," "*we* that are in this tabernacle." We are, indeed, so closely bound up with them, that we suffer in their suffering and

rejoice in the elastic buoyancy of their gladness; yet they are not our real selves, and no greater error can be committed, than that of tying down to the wants and weaknesses of the flesh the cravings of the undying spirit.

Most true it is that God has provided in the gospel so richly even for the flesh, that the man who should choose the pleasures of sin for a season, rather than the reward offered to the righteous after death, would be guilty of as great a folly as the child who sets his heart upon the plaything of a moment, or as a madman who mistakes a crown of straw for a coronet of gems. But we must not omit from our reckoning the effect, which the promised glory of the saint throws upon the mind even now. What matter, though the fleshly building should sink into decay, if the spiritual man lives before God, and from that full fountain flow ceaselessly the streams of heavenly peace and joy, as from a "well of water springing up into everlasting life"? Hence must spring our happiness, if happiness we enjoy at all. When all around has been dark, there has been light within the soul itself, the world's outward terrors being too superficial to ruffle its inward peace, or drown, with their tumult, the still sweet voice within which has witnessed of Christ, and happiness, and heaven.

Thus, then, we see the blessed harmony of the everlasting gospel. We speak of it as being the salvation of the soul, and as marking out the part of man in which the deep disease of sin is seated. We speak correctly. But the phrase does not contain all the truth, for the gospel is the salvation of the body likewise, embracing in its amplitude all human ne-

cessities, from the lowest want of the flesh to the loftiest craving of the Spirit. As the soul is made to share the lot of the body in the world that now is, so the body will share the lot of the soul, either for happiness or misery, in the world that is to be. It would be an anomaly indeed, and a contradiction to God's invariable dealings, if sin were good for any interest of man. But it is not so; the whole man has been redeemed by a common ransom, and shares a common fortune. Behold the man of pleasure, the delicate voluptuary, the hardened profligate, the man of ease. They have had, not a life of pleasure (for that is not in their power), but a few fleeting hours of feverish and excited enjoyment, scattered up and down a life of pain and sorrow. But how will it end with them beyond this life? What is called the silent grave, rings with the cries of their torment; and what is called the peaceful grave, is a tumult of despair, and an agony of fear. Behold the martyr, who has testified with his blood to the sincerity of his faith. Behold the faithful soldier of Christ, who has daily denied his lusts and passions, and taking up his cross has followed in his Saviour's footsteps. Behold the wretched Lazarus, starving and friendless and full of sores, who has been taught amid the sufferings of a wretched life to set his affections on a better inheritance above. They rest even now in Abraham's bosom, enjoying a fore-taste of their final state, till the full harvest of souls having been gathered, their perfected glory shall be revealed.

Ought not the child of God to derive from this a motive to "keep under his body and bring it into

subjection" ? Heed not the self-denials by which alone this can be accomplished, nor shrink from any sacrifices of worldly pleasure and interest which it may require ; they are not worthy of your consideration, compared with the exceeding weight of glory hereafter to be revealed. They are but like the pang of a moment to the happiness of a life ; they may jar harshly upon the will, but they are no more than the tuning of the harp-strings, which the life-giving Spirit prepares to sound in perpetual praise above.

Happy the soul which is thus brought into the temper of fervent desire, united with willing submission, which St. Paul expresses in this place. We are called to let our light shine before men, that they may praise our Father which is in heaven for the beauty of holiness with which He clothes His people. We must show the world that the mighty hopes which animate our hearts are, indeed, the hopes of soberness and truth, and that while they take away the ills of life, they do but the better fit us for its duties. Let us show them that the sober enjoyment of life is compatible with a preparation for death, and that an earnest longing for heaven by no means implies a morbid impatience and dislike of earth. "We that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened, not that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life."

With what dignity and honour is the true Christian invested ! He may be poor in worldly circumstances and low in common esteem ; he may be mean in station, feeble in intellect, and in education untutored. But if the work of the Spirit be really accomplished

in his heart, he stands before God and His angels the noblest work of Divine grace which this world contains. All the long catalogues of human greatness can furnish none comparable to him. Within him is implanted a life new and heavenly; he is "born again from above." In his heart works the almightiness of the Spirit, and in the loving soul, as in the temple of their presence, dwell both the Father and the Son. He walks victorious over the world, and treads beneath the feet of his conquering faith, principalities and powers of darkness. Around him watch the armies of the ministering angels. Beneath him are the everlasting arms of the love of God. Before him, as before the eyes of martyred Stephen, heaven is opened, and the Son of Man revealed in His majesty and power. What does the world contain so great and noble as He? His progress is like the dawning of a bright day which has no evening, but which, when it has risen to its meridian, grows for ever into a brighter and intenser radiance. "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."¹

O happy soul, that hast finished thy warfare, and hast accomplished thy race! Happy soul, which hast advanced beneath the Spirit's teaching from grace to grace, and from strength to strength, higher and higher yet, nearer and nearer God! What a wondrous mystic ladder is this on which thou hast climbed up to heaven! Its foot is in the dust; its

¹ 1 John iii. 2.

top by the throne of the Holy One. . Step by step, now painfully, now joyfully, but ever surely, thou hast risen to thine inheritance. There has been many a link between the cross and the crown ; but they are united inseparably still. All are but parts of the same work, commenced in penitent conviction, matured in experience, and perfected in glory.



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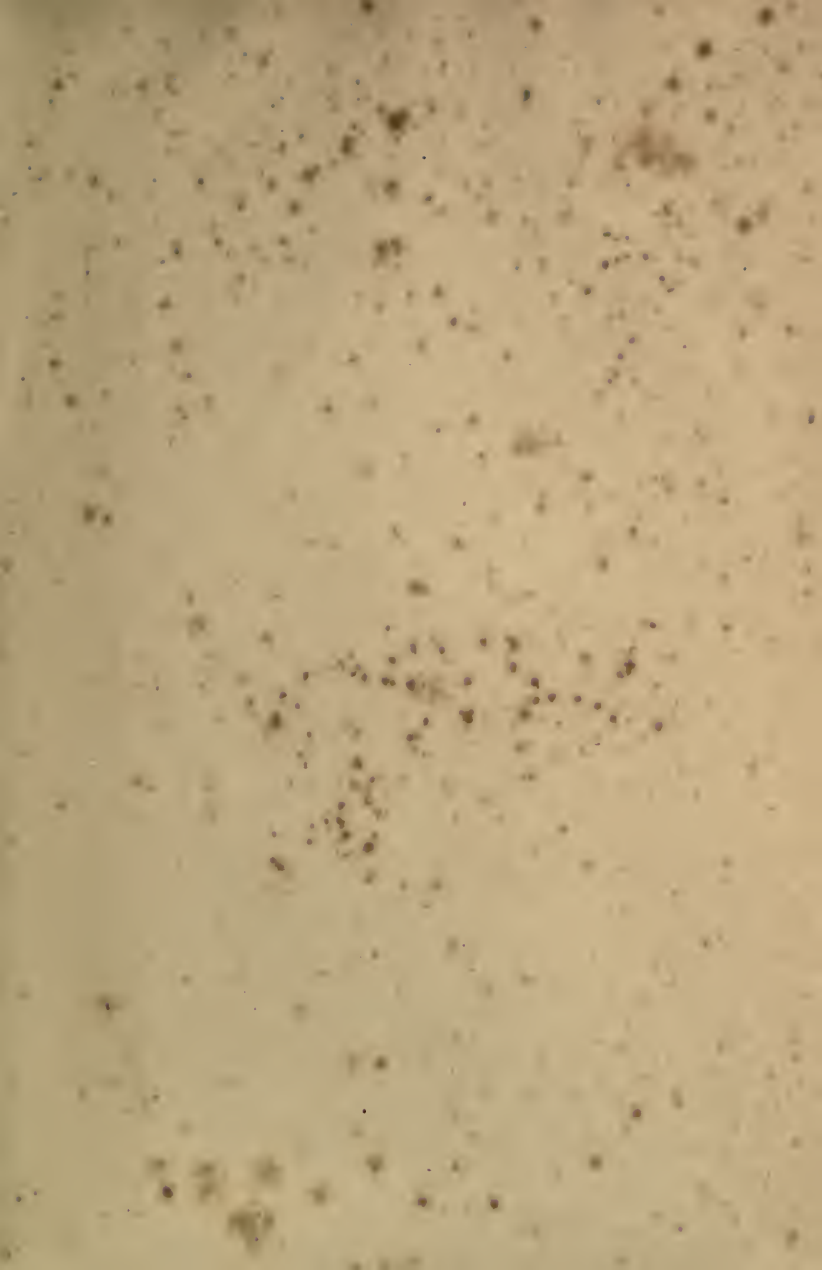
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