

Alexander Maclaren

Expositions of Holy Scripture



Expositions of Holy Scripture Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets. St Matthew Chapters I to VIII

Alexander Maclaren

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Minden jog fenntartva!

THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

CHAMBERS OF IMAGERY

'Then said He unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery!'—EZEKIEL viii. 12.

This is part of a vision which came to the prophet in his captivity. He is carried away in imagination from his home amongst the exiles in the East to the Temple of Jerusalem. There he sees in one dreadful series representations of all the forms of idolatry to which the handful that were left in the land were cleaving. There meets him on the threshold of the court 'the image of jealousy,' the generalised expression for the aggregate of idolatries which had stirred the anger of the divine husband of the nation. Then he sees within the Temple three groups representing the idolatries of three different lands. First, those with whom my text is concerned, who, in some underground room, vaulted and windowless, were bowing down before painted animal forms upon the walls. Probably they were the representatives of Egyptian worship, for the description of their temple might have been taken out of any book of travels in Egypt in the present day. It is only an ideal picture that is represented to Ezekiel, and not a real fact. It is not at all probable that all these various forms of idolatry were found at any time within the Temple itself. And the whole cast of the vision suggests that it is an ideal picture, and not reality, with which we have to do. Hence the number of these idolaters was seventy—the successors of the seventy whom Moses led up to Sinai to see the God of Israel! And now here they are grovelling before brute forms painted on the walls in a hole in the dark. Their leader bears a name which might have startled them in their apostasy, and choked their prayers in their throats, for Jaazan-iah means 'the Lord hears.' Each man has a censer in his hand—self-consecrated priests of self-chosen deities. Shrouded in obscurity, they pleased themselves with the ancient lie, 'The Lord sees not; He hath forsaken the earth.' And then, into that Sanhedrim of apostates there comes, all unknown to them, the light of God's presence; and the eye of the prophet marks their evil.

I have nothing to do here with the other groups which Ezekiel saw in his vision. The next set were the representatives of the women of Israel, who, false at once to their womanhood and to their God, were taking part in the nameless obscenities and abominations of the worship of the Syrian Adonis. And the next, who from their numbers seem to be intended to stand for the representatives of the priesthood, as the former were of the whole people, represent the worshippers who had fallen under the fascinations of a widespread Eastern idolatry, and with their backs to the house of the Lord were bowing before the rising sun.

All these false faiths got on very well together. Their worshippers had no quarrel with each other. Polytheism, by its very nature and the necessity of its being, is tolerant. All its rabble of gods have a mutual understanding, and are banded together against the only One that says, 'Thou shalt have none other gods beside Me.'

But now, I take this vision in a meaning which the prophet had no intention to put on it. I do not often do that with my texts, and when I do I like to confess frankly that I am doing it. So I take the words now as a kind of symbol which may help to put into a picturesque and more striking form some very familiar and homely truths. Look at that dark-painted chamber that we have all of us got in our hearts; at the idolatries that go on there, and at the flashing of the sudden light of God who marks, into the midst of the idolatry, 'Hast thou seen what the ancients of the children of Israel do in the dark, each man in the chambers of his imagery?'

I. Think of the dark and painted chamber which we all of us carry in our hearts.

Every man is a mystery to himself as to his fellows. With reverence, we may say of each other as we say of God—'Clouds and darkness are round about Him.' After all the manifestations of a life, we remain enigmas to one another and mysteries to ourselves. For every man is no fixed somewhat, but a growing personality, with dormant possibilities of good and evil lying in him, which up to the very last moment of his life may flame up into altogether unexpected and astonishing developments. Therefore we have all to feel that after all self-examination there lie awful depths within us which we have not fathomed; and after all our knowledge of one another we yet do see but the surface, and each soul dwells alone.

There is in every heart a dark chamber. Oh, brethren! there are very, very few of us that dare tell all our thoughts and show our inmost selves to our dearest ones. The most silvery lake that lies sleeping amidst beauty, itself the very fairest spot of all, when drained off shows ugly ooze and filthy mud, and all manner of creeping abominations in the slime. I wonder what we should see if our hearts were, so to speak, drained off, and the very bottom layer of every thing brought into the light. Do you think you could stand it? Well, then, go to God and ask Him to keep you from unconscious sins. Go to Him and ask Him to root out of you the mischiefs that you do not know are there, and live humbly and self-distrustfully, and feel that your only strength is: 'Hold Thou me up, and I shall be saved.' 'Hast thou seen what they do in the *dark*?'

Still further, we may take another part of this description with possibly permissible violence as a symbol of another characteristic of our inward nature. The walls of that chamber were all painted with animal forms, to which these men were bowing down. By our memory, and by that marvellous faculty that people call the imagination, and by our desires, we are for ever painting the walls of the inmost chambers of our hearts with such pictures. That is an awful power which we possess, and, alas! too often use for foul idolatries.

I do not dwell upon that, but I wish to drop one very earnest caution and beseeching entreaty, especially to the younger members of my congregation now. You, young men and women, especially you young men, mind what you paint upon those mystic walls! Foul things, as my text says, 'creeping things and abominable beasts,' only too many of you are tracing there. Take care, for these figures are ineffaceable. No repentance will obliterate them. I do not know whether even Heaven can blot them out. What you love, what you desire, what you think about, you are photographing on the walls of your immortal soul. And just as to-day, thousands of years after the artists have been gathered to the dust, we may go into Egyptian temples and see the figures on their walls, in all the freshness of their first colouring, as if the painter had but laid down his pencil a moment ago; so, on your hearts, youthful evils, the sins of your boyhood, the prurientes of your earliest days, may live in ugly shapes, that no tears and no repentance will ever wipe out. Nothing can do away with 'the marks of that

which once hath been.' What are you painting on the chambers of imagery in your hearts? Obscenity, foul things, mean things, low things? Is that mystic shrine within you painted with such figures as were laid bare in some chambers in Pompeii, where the excavators had to cover up the pictures because they were so foul? Or, is it like the cells in the convent of San Marco at Florence, where Fra Angelico's holy and sweet genius has left on the bare walls, to be looked at, as he fancied, only by one devout brother in each cell, angel imaginings, and noble, pure celestial faces that calm and hallow those who gaze upon them? What are you doing, my brother, in the dark, in your chambers of imagery?

II. Now look with me briefly at the second thought that I draw from this symbol,—the idolatries of the dark chamber.

All these seventy grey-bearded elders that were bowing there before the bestial gods which they had portrayed, had, no doubt, often stood in the courts of the Temple and there made prayers to the God of Israel, with broad phylacteries, to be seen of men. Their true worship was their worship in the dark. The other was conscious or unconscious hypocrisy. And the very chamber in which they were gathered, according to the ideal representation of our text, was a chamber in, and therefore partaking of the consecration of, the Temple. So their worship was doubly criminal, in that it was sacrilege as well as idolatry. Both things are true about us.

A man's true worship is not the worship which he performs in the public temple, but that which he offers down in that little private chapel, where nobody goes but himself. Worship is the attribution of supreme excellence to, and the entire dependence of the heart upon, a certain person. And the people or the things to which a man attributes the highest excellence, and on which he hangs his happiness and well-being, these be his gods, no matter what his outward profession is. You can find out what these are for you, if you will ask yourself, and honestly answer, one or two questions. What is that I want most? What is it which makes my ideal of happiness? What is that which I feel that I should be desperate without? What do I think about most naturally and spontaneously, when the spring is taken off, and my thoughts are allowed to go as they will? And if the answer to none of these questions is 'God!' then I do not know why you should call yourself a worshipper of God. It is of no avail that we pray in the temple, if we have a dark underground shrine where our true adoration is rendered.

Oh, dear brethren! I am afraid there are a great many of us nominal Christians, connected with Christian Churches, posing before men as orthodox religionists, who keep this private chapel where we do our devotion to an idol and not to God. If our real gods could be made visible, what a pantheon they would make! All the foul forms painted on that cell of this vision would be paralleled in the creeping things, which crawl along the low earth and never soar nor even stand erect, and in the vile, bestial forms of passion to which some of us really bow down. Honour, wealth, literary or other distinction, the sweet sanctities of human love dishonoured and profaned by being exalted to the place which divine love should hold, ease, family, animal appetites, lust, drink—these are the gods of some of us. Bear with my poor words and ask yourselves, not whom do you worship before the eye of men, but who is the God to whom in your inmost heart you bow down? What do you do in the dark? That is the question. Whom do you worship there? Your other worship is not worship at all.

Do not forget that all such diversion of supreme love and dependence from God alone is like the sin of these men in our text, in that it is sacrilege. They had taken a chamber in the very Temple, and turned it into a temple of the false gods. Whom is your heart made to enshrine? Why! every stone, if I may so say, of the fabric of our being bears marked upon it that it was laid in order to make a dwelling-place for God. Whom are you meant to worship, by the witness of the very constitution of your nature and make of your spirits? Is there anybody but One who is worthy to receive the priceless gift of human love absolute and entire? Is there any but One to whom it is aught but

degradation and blasphemy for a man to bow down? Is there any being but One that can still the tumult of my spirit, and satisfy the immortal yearnings of my soul? We were made for God, and whensoever we turn the hopes, the desires, the affections, the obedience, and that which is the root of them all, the confidence that ought to fix and fasten upon Him, to other creatures, we are guilty not only of idolatry but of sacrilege. We commit the sin of which that wild reveller in Babylon was guilty, when, at his great feast, in the very madness of his presumption he bade them bring forth the sacred vessels from the Temple at Jerusalem; 'and the king and his princes and his concubines drank in them and praised the gods.' So we take the sacred chalice of the human heart, on which there is marked the sign manual of Heaven, claiming it for God's, and fill it with the spiced and drugged draught of our own sensualities and evils, and pour out libations to vain and false gods. Brethren! Render unto Him that which is His; and see even upon the walls scrabbled all over with the deformities that we have painted there, lingering traces, like those of some dropping fresco in a roofless Italian church, which suggest the serene and perfect beauty of the image of the One whose likeness was originally traced there, and for whose worship it was all built.

III. And now, lastly, look at the sudden crashing in upon the cowering worshippers of the revealing light.

Apparently the picture of my text suggests that these elders knew not the eyes that were looking upon them. They were hugging themselves in the conceit, 'the Lord seeth not; the Lord hath forsaken the earth.' And all the while, all unknown, God and His prophet stand in the doorway and see it all. Not a finger is lifted, not a sign to the foolish worshippers of His presence and inspection, but in stern silence He records and remembers.

And does that need much bending to make it an impressive form of putting a solemn truth? There are plenty of us—alas! alas! that it should be so—to whom it is the least welcome of all thoughts that there in the doorway stand God and His Word. Why should it be, my brother, that the properly blessed thought of a divine eye resting upon you should be to you like the thought of a policeman's bull's-eye to a thief? Why should it not be rather the sweetest and the most calming and strength-giving of all convictions—'Thou God seest me'? The little child runs about the lawn perfectly happy as long as she knows that her mother is watching her from the window. And it ought to be sweet and blessed to each of us to know that there is no darkness where a Father's eye comes not. But oh! to the men that stand before bestial idols and have turned their backs on the beauty of the one true God, the only possibility of composure is that they shall hug themselves in the vain delusion:—'The Lord seeth not.'

I beseech you, dear friends, do not think of His eye as the prisoner in a cell thinks of the pin-hole somewhere in the wall, through which a jailer's jealous inspection may at any moment be glaring in upon him, but think of Him your Brother, who 'knew what was in man,' and who knows each man, and see in Christ the all-knowing Godhood that loves yet better than it knows, and beholds the hidden evils of men's hearts, in order that it may cleanse and forgive all which it beholds.

One day a light will flash in upon all the dark cells. We must all be manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ. Do you like that thought? Can you stand it? Are you ready for it? My friend! let Jesus Christ come to you with His light. Let Him come into the dark corners of your hearts. Cast all your sinfulness, known and unknown, upon Him that died on the Cross for every soul of man, and He will come; and His light, streaming into your hearts, like the sunbeam upon foul garments, will cleanse and bleach them white by its shining upon them. Let Him come into your hearts by your lowly penitence, by your humble faith, and all these vile shapes that you have painted on its walls will, like phosphorescent pictures in the daytime, pale and disappear when the 'Sun of Righteousness, with healing in His beams, floods your soul, leaving no part dark, and turning all into a temple of the living God.'

A COMMON MISTAKE AND LAME EXCUSE

'... He prophesieth of the times that are far off.'—EZEKIEL xii. 27.

Human nature was very much the same in the exiles that listened to Ezekiel on the banks of the Chebar and in Manchester to-day. The same neglect of God's message was grounded then on the same misapprehension of its bearings which profoundly operates in the case of many people now. Ezekiel had been proclaiming the fall of Jerusalem to the exiles whose captivity preceded it by a few years; and he was confronted by the incredulity which fancied that it had a great many facts to support it, and so it generalised God's long-suffering delay in sending the threatened punishment into a scoffing proverb which said, 'The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth.' To translate it into plain English, the prophets had cried 'Wolf! wolf!' so long that their alarms were disbelieved altogether.

Even the people that did not go the length of utter unbelief in the prophetic threatening took the comfortable conclusion that these threatenings had reference to a future date, and they need not trouble themselves about them. And so they said, according to my text, 'They of the house of Israel say, The vision that he sees is for many days to come, and he prophesieth of the times that are far off.' 'It may be all quite true, but it lies away in the distant future there; and things will last our time, so we do not need to bother ourselves about what he says.'

So the imagined distance of fulfilment turned the edge of the plainest denunciations, and was like wool stuffed in the people's ears to deaden the reverberations of the thunder.

I wonder if there is anybody here now whom that fits, who meets the preaching of the gospel with a shrug, and with this saying, 'He prophesies of the times that are far off.' I fancy that there are a few; and I wish to say a word or two about this ground on which the widespread disregard of the divine message is based.

I. First, then, notice that the saying of my text—in the application which I now seek to make of it—is a truth, but it is only half a truth.

Of course, Ezekiel was speaking simply about the destruction of Jerusalem. If it had been true, as his hearers assumed, that that was not going to happen for a good many years yet, the chances were that it had no bearing upon them, and they were right enough in neglecting the teaching. And, of course, when I apply such a word as this in the direction in which I wish to do now, we do bring in a different set of thoughts; but the main idea remains the same. The neglect of God's solemn message by a great many people is based, more or less consciously, upon the notion that the message of Christianity—or, if you like to call it so, of the gospel; or, if you like to call it more vaguely, religion—has to do mainly with blessings and woes beyond the grave, and that there is plenty of time to attend to it when we get nearer the end.

Now is it true that 'he prophesies of times that are far off'? Yes! and No! Yes! it is true, and it is the great glory of Christianity that it shifts the centre of gravity, so to speak, from this poor, transient, contemptible present, and sets it away out yonder in an august and infinite future. It brings to us not only knowledge of the future, but certitude, and takes the conception of another life out of the region of perhapses, possibilities, dreads, or hopes, as the case may be, and sets it in the sunlight of certainty. There is no more mist. Other faiths, even when they have risen to the height of some contemplation of a future, have always seen it wrapped in nebulous clouds of possibilities, but Christianity sets it clear, definite, solid, as certain as yesterday, as certain as to-day.

It not only gives us the knowledge and the certitude of the times that are afar off, and that are not

times but eternities, but it gives us, as the all-important element in that future, that its ruling characteristic is retribution. It 'brings life and immortality to light,' and just because it does, it brings the dark orb which, like some of the double stars in the heavens, is knit to the radiant sphere by a necessary band. It brings to light, with life and immortality, death and woe. It is true—'he prophesies of times that are far off' and it is the glory of the gospel of Christ's revelation, and of the religion that is based thereon, that its centre is beyond the grave, and that its eye is so often turned to the clearly discerned facts that lie there.

But is that all that we have to say about Christianity? Many representations of it, I am free to confess, from pulpits and books and elsewhere, do talk as if that was all, as if it was a magnificent thing to have when you came to die. As the play has it, 'I said to him that I hoped there was no need that he should think about God yet,' because he was not going to die. But I urge you to remember, dear brethren, that all that prophesying of times that are far off has the closest bearing upon this transient, throbbing moment, because, for one thing, one solemn part of the Christian revelation about the future is that Time is the parent of Eternity, and that, in like manner as in our earthly course 'the child is father of the man,' so the man as he has made himself is the author of himself as he will be through the infinite spaces that lie beyond the grave. Therefore, when a Christian preacher prophesies of times that are afar off, he is prophesying of present time, between which and the most distant eternity there is an iron nexus—a band which cannot be broken.

Nor is that all. Not only is the truth in my text but a half truth, if it is supposed that the main business of the gospel is to talk to us about heaven and hell, and not about the earth on which we secure and procure the one or the other; but also it is a half truth because, large and transcendent, eternal in their duration, and blessed beyond all thought in their sweetness as are the possibilities, the certainties that are opened by the risen and ascended Christ, and tremendous beyond all words that men can speak as are the alternative possibilities, yet these are not all the contents of the gospel message; but those blessings and penalties, joys and miseries, exaltations and degradations, which attend upon righteousness and sin, godliness and irreligion to-day are a large part of its theme and of its effects. Therefore, whilst on the one hand it is true, blessed be Christ's name! that 'he prophesies of times that are far off'; on the other hand it is an altogether inadequate description of the gospel message and of the Christian body of truth to say that the future is its realm, and not the present.

II. So, then, in the second place, my text gives a very good reason for prizing and attending to the prophecy.

If it is true that God, speaking through the facts of Christ's death and Resurrection and Ascension, has given to us the sure and certain hope of immortality, and has declared to us plainly the conditions upon which that immortality may be ours, and the woful loss and eclipse into the shadow of which we shall stumble darkling if it is not ours, then surely that is a reason for prizing and laying to heart, and living by the revelation so mercifully made. People do not usually kick over their telescopes, and neglect to look through them, because they are so powerful that they show them the craters in the moon and turn faint specks into blazing suns. People do not usually neglect a word of warning or guidance in reference to the ordering of their earthly lives because it is so comprehensive, and covers so large a ground, and is so certain and absolutely true. Surely there can be no greater sign of divine loving-kindness, of a Saviour's tenderness and care for us, than that He should come to each of us, as He does come, and say to each of us, 'Thou art to live for ever; and if thou wilt take Me for thy Life, thou shalt live for ever, blessed, calm, and pure.' And we listen, and say, 'He prophesies of times that are far off!' Oh! is that not rather a reason for coming very close to, and for grappling to our hearts and living always by the power of, that great revelation? Surely to announce the consequences of evil, and to announce them so long beforehand that there is plenty of

time to avoid them and to falsify the prediction, is the token of love.

Now I wish to lay it on the hearts of you people who call yourselves Christians, and who are so in some imperfect degree, whether we do at all adequately regard, remember, and live by this great mercy of God, that He *should* have prophesied to us 'of the times that are far off.' Perhaps I am wrong, but I cannot help feeling that, for this generation, the glories of the future rest with God have been somewhat paled, and the terrors of the future unrest away from God have been somewhat lightened. I hope I am wrong, but I do not think that the modern average Christian thinks as much about heaven as his father did. And I believe that his religion has lost something of its buoyancy, of its power, of its restraining and stimulating energy, because, from a variety of reasons, the bias of this generation is rather to dwell upon, and to realise, the present social blessings of Christianity than to project itself into that august future. The reaction may be good. I have no doubt it was needed, but I think it has gone rather too far, and I would beseech Christian men and women to try and deserve more the sarcasm that is flung at us that we live for another world. Would God it were true—truer than it is! We should see better work done in this world if it were. So I say, that 'he prophesieth of times that are far off' is a good reason for prizing and obeying the prophet.

III. Lastly, this is a very common and a very bad reason for neglecting the prophecy.

It does operate as a reason for giving little heed to the prophet, as I have been saying. In the old men-of-war, when an engagement was impending, they used to bring up the hammocks from the bunks and pile them into the nettings at the side of the ship, to defend it from boarders and bullets. And then, after these had served their purpose of repelling, they were taken down again and the crew went to sleep upon them. That is exactly what some of my friends do with that misconception of the genius of Christianity which supposes that it is concerned mainly with another world. They put it up as a screen between them and God, between them and what they know to be their duty—viz., the acceptance of Christ as their Saviour. It is their hammock that they put between the bullets and themselves; and many a good sleep they get upon it!

Now, that strange capacity that men have of ignoring a certain future is seen at work all round about us in every region of life. I wonder how many young men there are in Manchester to-day that have begun to put their foot upon the wrong road, and who know just as well as I do that the end of it is disease, blasted reputation, ruined prospects, perhaps an early death. Why! there is not a drunkard in the city that does not know that. Every man that takes opium knows it. Every unclean, unchaste liver knows it; and yet he can hide the thought from himself, and go straight on as if there was nothing at all of the sort within the horizon of possibility. It is one of the most marvellous things that men have that power; only beaten by the marvel that, having it, they should be such fools as to choose to exercise it. The peasants on the slopes of Vesuvius live very careless lives, and they have their little vineyards and their olives. Yes, and every morning when they come out, they can look up and see the thin wreath of smoke going up in the dazzling blue, and they know that some time or other there will be a roar and a rush, and down will come the lava. But 'a short life and a merry one' is the creed of a good many of us, though we do not like to confess it. Some of you will remember the strange way in which ordinary habits survived in prisons in the dreadful times of the French Revolution, and how ladies and gentlemen, who were going to have their heads chopped off next morning, danced and flirted, and sat at entertainments, just as if there was no such thing in the world as the public prosecutor and the tumbril, and the gaoler going about with a bit of chalk to mark each door where were the condemned for next day.

That same strange power of ignoring a known future, which works so widely and so disastrously round about us, is especially manifested in regard to religion. The great bulk of English men and women who are not Christians, and the little sample of such that I have in my audience now, as a rule believe as fully as we do the truths which they agree to neglect. Let me speak to them

individually. You believe that death will introduce you into a world of two halves—that if you have been a good, religious man, you will dwell in blessedness; that if you have not, you will not—yet you never did a single thing, nor refrained from a single thing, because of that belief. And when I, and men of my profession, come and plead with you and try to get through that strange web of insensibility that you have spun round you, you listen, and then you say, with a shrug, 'He prophesies of things that are far off.' and you turn with relief to the trivialities of the day. Need I ask you whether that is a wise thing or not?

Surely it is not wise for a man to ignore a future that is certain simply because it is distant. So long as it is certain, what in the name of common-sense has the time when it begins to be a present to do with our wisdom in regard to it? It is the uncertainty in future anticipations which makes it unwise to regulate life largely by them, and if you can eliminate that element of uncertainty—which you can do if you believe in Jesus Christ—then the question is not when is the prophecy going to be fulfilled, but is it true and trustworthy? The man is a fool who, because it is far off, thinks he can neglect it.

Surely it is not wise to ignore a future which is so incomparably greater than this present, and which also is so connected with this present as that life here is only intelligible as the vestibule and preparation for that great world beyond.

Surely it is not wise to ignore a future because you fancy it is far away, when it may burst upon you at any time. These exiles to whom Ezekiel spoke hugged themselves in the idea that his words were not to be fulfilled for many days to come; but they were mistaken, and the crash of the fall of Jerusalem stunned them before many months had passed by. We have to look forward to a future which must be very near to some of us, which may be nearer to others than they think, which at the remotest is but a little way from us, and which must come to us all. Oh, dear friends, surely it is not wise to ignore as far off that which for some of us may be here before this day closes, which will probably be ours in some cases before the fresh young leaves now upon the trees have dropped yellow in the autumn frosts, which at the most distant must be very near us, and which waits for us all.

What would you think of the crew and passengers of some ship lying in harbour, waiting for its sailing orders, who had got leave on shore, and did not know but that at any moment the blue-peter might be flying at the fore—the signal to weigh anchor—if they behaved themselves in the port as if they were never going to embark, and made no preparations for the voyage? Let me beseech you to rid yourselves of that most unreasonable of all reasons for neglecting the gospel, that its most solemn revelations refer to the eternity beyond the grave.

There are many proofs that man on the whole is a very foolish creature, but there is not one more tragical than the fact that believing, as many of you do, that 'the wages of sin is death, and the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ,' you stand aloof from accepting the gift, and risk the death.

The 'times far off' have long since come near enough to those scoffers. The most distant future will be present to you before you are ready for it, unless you accept Jesus Christ as your All, for time and for eternity. If you do, the time that is near will be pure and calm, and the times that are far off will be radiant with unfading bliss.

THE HOLY NATION

'Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. 26. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put

within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. 27. And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes, and ye shall keep My judgments, and do them. 28. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be My people, and I will be your God. 29. I will also save you from all your uncleannesses: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you. 30. And I will multiply the fruit of the tree, and the increase of the field, that ye shall receive no more reproach of famine among the heathen. 31. Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations. 32. Not for your sakes do I this, saith the Lord God, be it known unto you: be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel. 33. Thus saith the Lord God; In the day that I shall have cleansed you from all your iniquities I will also cause you to dwell in the cities, and the wastes shall be builded. 34. And the desolate land shall be tilled, whereat; it lay desolate in the sight of all that passed by. 35. And they shall say, This land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are become fenced, and are inhabited. 36. Then the heathen that are left round about you shall know that I the Lord build the ruined places, and plant that that was desolate: I the Lord have spoken it, and I will do it. 37. Thus saith the Lord God; I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them; I will increase them with men like a flock. 38. As the holy flock, as the flock of Jerusalem in her solemn feasts; so shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of men: and they shall know that I am the Lord.'—EZEKIEL xxxvi. 25-38.

This great prophecy had but a partial fulfilment, though a real one, in the restored Israel. The land was given back, the nation *was* multiplied, fertility again blessed the smiling fields and vineyards, and, best of all, the people *were* cleansed 'from all their idols' by the furnace of affliction. Nothing is more remarkable than the transformation effected by the captivity, in regard to the idolatrous propensities of the people. Whereas before it they were always hankering after the gods of the nations, they came back from Babylon the resolute champions of monotheism, and never thereafter showed the smallest inclination for what had before been so irresistible.

But the fulness of Ezekiel's prophecy is not realised until Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant is brought to pass. Nor does the state of the militant church on earth exhaust it. Future glories gleam through the words. They have a 'springing accomplishment' in the Israel of the restoration, a fuller in the New Testament church, and their ultimate realisation in the New Jerusalem, which shall yet descend to be the bride, the Lamb's wife. The principles involved in the prophecy belong to the region of purely spiritual religion, and are worth pondering, apart from any question of the place and manner of fulfilment.

First comes the great truth that the foundation, so far as concerns the history of a soul or of a community, of all other good is divine forgiveness (v. 25). Ezekiel, the priest, casts the promise into ceremonial form, and points to the sprinklings of the polluted under the law, or to the ritual of consecration to the priesthood. That cleansing is the removal of already contracted defilement, especially of the guilt of idolatry. It is clearly distinguished from the operation on the inward nature which follows; that is to say, it is the promise of forgiveness, or of justification, not of sanctification.

From what deep fountains in the divine nature that 'clean water' was to flow, Ezekiel does not know; but we have learned that a more precious fluid than water is needed, and have to think of Him 'who came not by water only, but by water and blood,' in whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of our sins. But the central idea of this first promise is that it must be God's hand which sprinkles from an evil conscience. Forgiveness is a divine prerogative. He only can, and He will, cleanse from all filthiness. His pardon is universal. The most ingrained sins cannot be too black to melt away from the soul. The dye-stuffs of sin are very strong, but there is one solvent which they cannot resist. There are no 'fast colours' which God's 'clean water' cannot move. This

cleansing of pardon underlies all the rest of the blessings. It is ever the first thing needful when a soul returns to God.

Then follows an equally exclusively divine act, the impartation of a new nature, which shall secure future obedience (vs. 26, 27). Who can thrust his hand into the depths of man's being, and withdraw one life-principle and enshrine another, while yet the individuality of the man remains untouched? God only. How profound the consciousness of universal obstinacy and insensibility which regards human nature, apart from such renewal, as possessing but a 'heart of stone'! There are no sentimental illusions about the grim facts of humanity here. Superficial views of sin and rose-tinted fancies about human nature will not admit the truth of the Scripture doctrine of sinfulness, alienation from God. They diagnose the disease superficially, and therefore do not know how to cure it. The Bible can venture to give full weight to the gravity of the sickness, because it knows the remedy. No surgery but God's can perform that operation of extracting the stony heart and inserting a heart of flesh. No system which cannot do that can do what men want. The gospel alone deals thoroughly with man's ills.

And how does it effect that great miracle? 'I will put My Spirit within you.' The new life-principle is the effluence of the Spirit of God. The promise does not merely offer the influence of a divine spirit, working on men as from without, or coming down upon them as an *afflatus*, but the actual planting of God's Spirit in the deep places of theirs. We fail to apprehend the most characteristic blessing of the gospel if we do not give full prominence to that great gift of an indwelling Spirit, the life of our lives. Cleansing is much, but is incomplete without a new life-principle which shall keep us clean; and that can only be God's Spirit, enshrined and operative within us; for only thus shall we 'walk in His statutes, and keep His judgments.' When the Lawgiver dwells in our hearts, the law will be our delight; and keeping it will be the natural outcome and expression of our life, which is His life.

Then follows the picture of the blessed effects of obedience (vs. 28-30). These are cast into the form appropriate to the immediate purpose of the prophecy, and received fulfilment in the actual restoration to the land, which fulfilment, however, was imperfect, inasmuch as the obedience and renewal of the people's hearts were incomplete. These can only be complete under the gospel, and, in the fullest sense, only in another order than the present. When men fully keep God's judgments, they shall dwell permanently in a good land. Israel's hold on its country was its obedience, not its prowess. Our real hold on even earthly good is the choosing of God for our supreme good. In the measure in which we can say 'Thy law is within my heart,' all things are ours; and we may possess all things while having nothing in the vulgar world's sense of having. Similarly that obedience, which is the fruit of the new life of God's Spirit in our spirits, is the condition of close mutual possession in the blessed reciprocity of trust and faithfulness, love bestowing and love receiving, by which the quiet heart knows that God is its, and it is God's. If stains and interruptions still sometimes break the perfectness of obedience and continuity of reciprocal ownership, there will be a further cleansing for such sins. 'If we walk in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin' (v. 29).

The lovely picture of the blessed dwellers in their good land is closed by the promise of abundant harvests from corn and fruit-tree; that is, all that nourishes or delights. The deepest truth taught thereby is that he who lives in God has no unsatisfied desires, but finds in Him all that can sustain, strengthen, and minister to growth, and all that can give gladness and delight. If we make God our heritage, we dwell secure in a good land; and 'the dust of that land is gold,' and its harvests ever plenteous.

Very profoundly and beautifully does Ezekiel put as the last trait in his picture, and as the upshot of all this cornucopia of blessings, the penitent remembrance of past evils. Undeserved mercies steal into the heart like the breath of the south wind, and melt the ice. The more we advance in holiness and consequent blessed communion with God, the more clearly shall we see the evil of our past.

Forgiven sin looks far blacker because it is forgiven. When we are not afraid of sin's consequences, we see more plainly its sinfulness. When we have tasted God's sweetness, we think with more shame of our ingratitude and folly. If God forgets, the more reason for us to remember our transgressions. The man who 'has forgotten that he was purged from his old sins' is in danger of finding out that he is not purged from them. There is no gnawing of conscience, nor any fearful looking for of judgment in such remembrance, but a wholesome humility passing into thankful wonder that such sin is pardoned, and such a sinner made God's friend.

The deep foundation of all the blessedness is finally laid bare (v. 32) as being God's undeserved mercy. 'For Mine holy name' (v. 22) is God's reason. He is His own motive, and He wills that the world should know His name,—that is, His manifested character,—and understand how loving and long-suffering He is. So He wills, not because such knowledge adds to His glory, but because it satisfies His love, since it will make the men who know His name blessed. The truth that God's motive is His own name's sake may be so put as to be hideous and repellent; but it really proclaims that He is love, and that His motive is His poor creatures' blessing.

To this great outline of the blessings of the restored nations are appended two subsidiary prophecies, marked by the recurring 'Thus saith the Lord.' The former of these (vs. 33-36) deals principally with the new beauty that was to clothe the land. The day in which the inhabitants were cleansed from their sins was to be the day in which the land was to be raised from its ruin. Cities are to be rebuilt, the ground that had lain fallow and tangled with briers and thorns is to be tilled, and to bloom like Eden, a restored paradise. How far the fulfilment has halted behind the promise, the melancholy condition of Palestine to-day may remind us. Whether the literal fulfilment is to be anticipated or no seems less important than to note that the experience of forgiveness (and of the consequent blessings described above) is the precursor of this fair picture. Therefore, the Church's condition of growth and prosperity is its realisation in the persons of its individual members, of pardon, the renewal of the inner man by the indwelling Spirit, faithful obedience, communion with God, and lowly remembrance of past sins. Where churches are marked by such characteristics, they will grow. If they are not, all their 'evangelistic efforts' will be as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

The second appended prophecy (vs. 37, 38) is that of increase of population. The picture of the flocks of sheep for sacrifice, which thronged Jerusalem at the feasts, is given as a likeness of the swarms of inhabitants in the 'waste cities.' The point of comparison is chiefly the number. One knows how closely a flock huddles and seems to fill the road in endless procession. But the destination as well as the number comes into view. All these patient creatures, crowding the ways, are meant for sacrifices. So the inhabitants of the land then shall all yield themselves to God, living sacrifices. The first words of our text point to the priesthood of all believers; the last words point to the sacrifice of themselves which they have to offer.

'For this moreover will I be inquired of by the house of Israel.' The blessings promised do not depend on our merits, as we have heard, but yet they will not be given without our co-operation in prayer. God promises, and that promise is not a reason for our not asking the gifts from Him, but for our asking. Faith keeps within the lines of God's promise, and prayers which do not foot themselves on a promise are the offspring of presumption, not of faith. God 'lets Himself be inquired of' for that which is in accordance with His will; and, accordant with His will though it be, He will not 'do it for them,' unless His flock ask of Him the accomplishment of His own word.

THE DRY BONES AND THE SPIRIT OF LIFE

1. The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me

down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, 2. And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry. 3. And He said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, Thou knowest. 4. Again He said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: 6. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I *am* the Lord. 7. So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone. 8. And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them. 9. Then said He unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. 10. So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army. 11. Then He said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts. 12. Therefore prophecy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O My people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. 13. And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up out of your graves. 14. And shall put My spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord.'—EZEKIEL xxxvii. 1-14.

This great vision apparently took its form from a despairing saying, which had become a proverb among the exiles, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost: we are clean cut off' (v. 11). Ezekiel lays hold of the metaphor, which had been taken to express the hopeless destruction of Israel's national existence, and even from it wrings a message of hope. Faith has the prerogative of seeing possibilities of life in what looks to sense hopeless death. We may look at the vision from three points of view, considering its bearing on Israel, on the world, and on the resurrection of the body.

I. The saying, already referred to, puts the hopelessness of the mass of the exiles in a forcible fashion. The only sense in which living men could say that their bones were dried up, and they cut off, is a figurative one, and obviously it is the national existence which they regarded as irretrievably ended. The saying gives us a glimpse into the despair which had settled down on the exiles, and against which Ezekiel had to contend, as he had also to contend against its apparently opposite and yet kindred feeling of presumptuous, misplaced hope. We observe that he begins by accepting fully the facts which bred despair, and even accentuating them. The true prophet never makes light of the miseries of which he knows the cure, and does not try to comfort by minimising the gravity of the evil. The bones *are* very many, and they *are* very dry. As far as outward resources are concerned, despair was rational, and hope as absurd as it would have been to expect that men, dead so long that their bones had been bleached by years of exposure to the weather, should live again.

But while Ezekiel saw the facts of Israel's powerlessness as plainly as the most despondent, he did not therefore despair. The question which rose in his mind was God's question, and the very raising it let a gleam of hope in. So he answered with that noble utterance of faith and submission, 'O Lord God, Thou knowest.' 'With God all things are possible.' Presumption would have said 'Yes'; Unbelief would have said 'No'; Faith says, 'Thou knowest.'

The grand description of the process of resurrection follows the analogy of the order in the creation of man, giving, first, the shaping of the body, and afterwards the breathing into it of the breath which is life. Both stages are wholly God's work. The prophet's part was to prophesy to the bones first; and his word, in a sense, brought about the effect which it foretold, since his ministry

was the most potent means of rekindling dying hopes, and bringing the *disjecta membra* of the nation together again. The vivid and gigantic imagination of the prophet gives a picture of the rushing together of the bones, which has no superior in any literature. He hears a noise, and sees a 'shaking' (by which is meant the motion of the bones to each other, rather than an 'earthquake,' as the Revised Version has it, which inserts a quite irrelevant detail), and the result of all is that the skeletons are complete. Then follows the gradual clothing with flesh. There they lie, a host of corpses.

The second stage is the quickening of these bodies with life, and here again Ezekiel, as God's messenger, has power to bring about what he announces; for, at his command, the breath, or wind, or spirit, comes, and the stiff corpses spring to their feet, a mighty army. The explanation in the last verses of the text somewhat departs from the tenor of the vision by speaking of Israel as buried, but keeps to its substance, and point the despairing exiles to God as the source of national resurrection. But we must not force deeper meaning on Ezekiel's words than they properly bear. The spirit promised in them is simply the source of life,—literally, of physical life; metaphorically, of national life. However that national restoration was connected with holiness, that does not enter into the prophet's vision. Israel's restoration to its land is all that Ezekiel meant by it. True, that restoration was to lead to clearer recognition by Israel of the name of Jehovah, and of all that it implied in him and demanded from them. But the proper scope of the vision is to assure despairing Israelites that God would quicken the apparently slain national life, and replace them in the land.

II. We may extend the application of the vision to the condition of humanity and the divine intervention which communicates life to a dead world, but must remember that no such meaning was in Ezekiel's thoughts. The valley full of dry bones is but too correct a description of the aspect which a world 'dead in trespasses and sins' bears, when seen from the mountain-top by pure and heavenly eyes. The activities of godless lives mask the real spiritual death, which is the condition of every soul that is separate from God. Galvanised corpses may have muscular movements, but they are dead, notwithstanding their twitching. They that live without God are dead while they live.

Again, we may learn from the vision the preparation needful for the prophet, who is to be the instrument of imparting divine life to a dead world. The sorrowful sense of the widespread deadness must enter into a man's spirit, and be ever present to him, in order to fit him for his work. A dead world is not to be quickened on easy terms. We must see mankind in some measure as God sees them if we are to do God's work among them. So-called Christian teachers, who do not believe that the race is dead in sin, or who, believing it, do not feel the tragedy of the fact, and the power lodged in their hands to bring the true life, may prophesy to the dry bones for ever, and there will be no shaking among them.

The great work of the gospel is to communicate divine life. The details of the process in the vision are not applicable in this respect. As we have pointed out, they are shaped after the pattern of the creation of Adam, but the essential point is that what the world needs is the impartation from God of His Spirit. We know more than Ezekiel did as to the way by which that Spirit is given to men, and as to the kind of life which it imparts, and as to the connection between that life and holiness. It is a diviner voice than Ezekiel's which speaks to us in the name of God, and says to us with deeper meaning than the prophet of the Exile dreamed of, 'I will put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live.'

But we may note that it is possible to have the outward form of a living body, and yet to have no life. Churches and individuals may be perfectly organised and perfectly dead. Creeds may be articulated most correctly, every bone in its place, and yet have no vitality in them. Forms of worship may be punctiliously proper, and have no breath of life in them. Religion must have a body, but often the body is not so much the organ as the sepulchre of the spirit. We have to take heed that the externals do not kill the inward life.

Again, we note that this great act of life-giving is God's revelation of His name,—that is, of His character so far as men can know it. 'Ye shall know that I am the Lord' (vs. 13, 14). God makes Himself known in His divinest glory when He quickens dead souls. The world may learn what He is therefrom, but they who have experienced the change, and have, as it were, been raised from the grave to new life, have personal experience of His power and faithfulness so sure and sweet that henceforward they cannot doubt Him nor forget His grace.

III. As to the bearing of the vision on the doctrine of the resurrection little need be said. It does not necessarily presuppose the people's acquaintance with that doctrine, for it would be quite conceivable that the vision had revealed to the prophet the thought of a resurrection, which had not been in his beliefs before. The vision is so entirely figurative, that it cannot be employed as evidence that the idea of the resurrection of the dead was part of the Jewish beliefs at this date. It does, however, seem most natural to suppose that the exiles were familiar with the idea, though the vision cannot be taken as a revelation of a literal resurrection of dead men. For clear expectations of such a resurrection we must turn to such scriptures as Daniel xii. 2, 13.

THE RIVER OF LIFE

Waters issued out from under the threshold of the house ... EZEKIEL xlvii. 1.

Unlike most great cities, Jerusalem was not situated on a great river. True, the inconsiderable waters of Siloam—'which flow softly' because they were so inconsiderable—rose from a crevice in the Temple rock, and beneath that rock stretched the valley of the Kedron, dry and bleached in the summer, and a rainy torrent during the rainy seasons; but that was all. So, many of the prophets, who looked forward to the better times to come, laid their finger upon that one defect, and prophesied that it should be cured. Thus we read in a psalm: 'There is a river, the divisions whereof make glad the City of our God.' Faith saw what sense saw not. Again, Isaiah says: 'There'—that is to say, in the new Jerusalem—'the glorious Lord shall be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams.' And so, this prophet casts his anticipations of the abundant outpouring of blessing that shall come when God in very deed dwells among men, into this figure of a river pouring out from beneath the Temple-door, and spreading life and fertility wherever its waters come. I need not remind you how our Lord Himself uses the same figure, and modifies it, by saying that whosoever believeth on Him, 'out of him shall flow rivers of living waters'; or how, in the very last words of the Apocalyptic seer, we hear again the music of the ripples of the great stream, 'the river of the water of life proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb.' So then, all through Scripture, we may say that we hear the murmur of the stream, and can catch the line of verdure upon its banks. My object now is not only to deal with the words that I have read as a starting-point, but rather to seek to draw out the wonderful significance of this great prophetic parable.

I. I notice, first, the source from which the river conies.

I have already anticipated that in pointing out that it flows from the very Temple itself. The Prophet sees it coming out of the house—that is to say, the Sanctuary. It flows across the outer court of the house, passes the altar, comes out under the threshold, and then pours itself down on to the plain beneath. This is the symbolical dress of the thought that all spiritual blessings, and every conceivable form of human good, take their rise in the fact of God's dwelling with men. From beneath the Temple threshold comes the water of life; and wherever it is true that in any heart—or in any community—God dwells, there will be heard the tinkling of its ripples, and freshness and fertility will come from the stream. The dwelling of God with a man, like the dwelling of God in humanity in the Incarnation of His own dear Son, is, as it were, the opening of the fountain that it may pour out into the world. So, if we desire to have the blessings that are possible for us, we must

comply with the conditions, and let God dwell in our hearts, and make them His temples; and then from beneath the threshold of that temple, too, will pour out, according to Christ's own promise, rivers of living water which will be first for ourselves to drink of and be blessed by, and then will refresh and gladden others.

Another thought connected with this source of the river of life is that all the blessings which, massed together, are included in that one word 'salvation'—which is a kind of nebula made up of many unresolved stars—take their rise from nothing else than the deep heart of God Himself. This river rose in the House of the Lord, and amidst the mysteries of the Divine Presence; it took its rise, one might say, from beneath the Mercy-seat where the brooding Cherubim sat in silence and poured itself into a world that had not asked for it, that did not expect it, that in many of its members did not desire it and would not have it. The river that rose in the secret place of God symbolises for us the great thought which is put into plainer words by the last of the apostles when he says, 'We love Him because He first loved us.' All the blessings of salvation rise from the unmotivated, self-impelled, self-fed divine love and purpose. Nothing moves Him to communicate Himself but His own delight in giving Himself to His poor creatures; and it is all of grace that it might be all through faith.

Still further, another thought that may be suggested in connection with the source of this river is, that that which is to bless the world must necessarily take its rise above the world. Ezekiel has sketched, in the last portion of his prophecy, an entirely ideal topography of the Holy Land. He has swept away mountains and valleys, and levelled all out into a great plain, in the midst of which rises the mountain of the Lord's House, far higher than the Temple hill. In reality, opposite it rose the Mount of Olives, and between the two there was the deep gorge of the Valley of the Kedron. The Prophet smooths it all out into one great plain, and high above all towers the Temple-mount, and from it there rushes down on to the low levels the fertilising, life-giving flood.

That imaginary geography tells us this, that what is to bless the world must come from above the world. There needs a waterfall to generate electricity; the power which is to come into humanity and deal with its miseries must have its source high above the objects of its energy and its compassion, and in proportion to the height from which it falls will be the force of its impact and its power to generate the quickening impulse. All merely human efforts at social reform, rivers that do not rise in the Temple, are like the rivers in Mongolia, that run for a few miles and then get sucked up by the hot sands and are lost and nobody sees them any more. Only the perennial stream, that comes out from beneath the Temple threshold, can sustain itself in the desert, to say nothing of transforming the desert into a Garden of Eden. So moral and social and intellectual and political reformers may well go to Ezekiel, and learn that the 'river of the water of life,' which is to heal the barren and refresh the thirsty land, must come from below the Temple threshold.

II. Note the rapid increase of the stream.

The Prophet describes how his companion, the interpreter, measured down the stream a thousand cubits—about a quarter of a mile—and the waters were ankle-deep another thousand, making half a mile from the start, and the water was knee-deep. Another thousand—or three-quarters of a mile—and the water was waist-deep; another thousand—about a mile in all—and the water was unfordable, 'waters to swim in, a river that could not be passed over.' Where did the increase come from? There were no tributaries. We do not hear of any side-stream flowing into the main body. Where did the increase come from? It came from the abundant welling-up in the sanctuary. The fountain was the mother of the river—that is to say, God's ideal for the world, for the Church, for the individual Christian, is rapid increase in their experience of the depth and the force of the stream of blessings which together make up salvation. So we come to a very sharp testing question. Will anybody tell me that the rate at which Christianity has grown for these nineteen centuries corresponds with Ezekiel's vision—which is God's ideal? Will any Christian man say, 'My

own growth in grace, and increase in the depth and fulness of the flow of the river through my spirit and my life correspond to that ideal'? A mile from the source the river is unfordable. How many miles from the source of *our* first experience do we stand? How many of us, instead of having 'a river that could not be passed over, waters to swim in,' have but a poor and all but stagnant feeble trickle, as shallow as or shallower than it was at first?

I was speaking a minute ago about Mongolian rivers. Australian rivers are more like some men's lives. A chain of ponds in the dry season—nay! not even a chain, but a series, with no connecting channel of water between them. That is like a great many Christian people; they have isolated times when they feel the voice of Christ's love, and yield themselves to the powers of the world to come, and then there are long intervals, when they feel neither the one nor the other. But the picture that ought to be realised by each of us is God's ideal, which there is power in the gospel to make real in the case of every one of us, the rapid and continuous increase in the depth and in the scour of 'the river of the water of life,' that flows through our lives. Luther used to say, 'If you want to clean out a dunghill, turn the Elbe into it.' If you desire to have your hearts cleansed of all their foulness, turn the river into it. But it needs to be a progressively deepening river, or there will be no scour in the feeble trickle, and we shall not be a bit the holier or the purer for our potential and imperfect Christianity.

III. Lastly, note the effects of the stream.

These are threefold: fertility, healing, life. Fertility. In the East one condition of fertility is water. Irrigate the desert, and you make it a garden. Break down the aqueduct, and you make the granary of the world into a waste. The traveller as he goes along can tell where there is a stream of water, by the verdure along its banks. You travel along a plateau, and it is all baked and barren. You plunge into a wâdy, and immediately the ground is clothed with under-growth and shrubs, and the birds of the air sing among the branches. And so, says Ezekiel, wherever the river comes there springs up, as if by magic, fair trees 'on the banks thereof, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed.'

Fertility comes second, the reception of the fertilising agent comes first. It is wasted time to tinker at our characters unless we have begun with getting into our hearts the grace of God, and the new spirit that will be wrought out by diligent effort into all beauty of life and character. Ezekiel seems to be copying the first psalm, or vice versa, the Psalmist is copying Ezekiel. At any rate, there is a verbal similarity between them, in that both dwell upon the unfading leaf of the tree that grows planted by rivers of water. And our text goes further, and speaks about perennial fruitfulness month by month, all the year round. In some tropical countries you will find blossoms, buds in their earliest stage, and ripened fruit all hanging upon one laden branch. Such ought to be the Christian life—continuously fruitful because dependent upon continual drawing into itself, by means of its roots and suckers, of the water of life by which we are fructified.

There is yet another effect of the waters—healing. As we said, Ezekiel takes great liberties with the geography of the Holy Land, levelling it all, so his stream makes nothing of the Mount of Olives, but flows due east until it comes to the smitten gorge of the Jordan, and then turns south, down into the dull, leaden waters of the Dead Sea, which it heals. We all know how these are charged with poison. Dip up a glassful anywhere, and you find it full of deleterious matter. They are the symbol of humanity, with the sin that is in solution all through it. No chemist can eliminate it, but there is One who can. 'He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.' The pure river of the water of life will cast out from humanity the malignant components that are there, and will sweeten it all. Ay, all, and yet not all, for very solemnly the Prophet's optimism pauses, and he says that the salt marshes by the side of the sea are not healed. They are by the side of it. The healing is perfectly available for them, but they are not

healed. It is possible for men to reject the influences that make for the destruction of sin and the establishment of righteousness. And although the waters are healed, there still remain the obstinate marshes with the white crystals efflorescing on their surface, and bringing salt and barrenness. You can put away the healing and remain tainted with the poison.

And then the last thought is the life-giving influence of the river. Everything lived whithersoever it went. Contrast Christendom with heathendom. Admit all the hollowness and mere nominal Christianity of large tracts of life in so-called Christian countries, and yet why is it that on the one side you find stagnation and death, and on the other side mental and manifold activity and progressiveness? I believe that the difference between 'the people that *sit* in darkness' and 'the people that *walk* in the light' is that one has the light and the other has not, and activity befits the light as torpor befits the darkness.

But there is a far deeper truth than that in the figure, a truth that I would fain lay upon the hearts of all my hearers, that unless we our own selves have this water of life which comes from the Sanctuary and is brought to us by Jesus Christ, 'we are dead in trespasses and sins.' The only true life is in Christ. 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

YOUTHFUL CONFESSORS

'But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. 9. Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs. 10. And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink; for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king. 11. Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, 12. Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. 13. Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat; and as thou seest, deal with thy servants. 14. So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days. 15. And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat. 16. Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse. 17. As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. 18. Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. 19. And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore stood they before the king. 20. And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm. 21. And Daniel continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus.'—DANIEL i. 8-21.

Daniel was but a boy at the date of the Captivity, and little more at the time of the attempt to make a Chaldean of him. The last verse says that he 'continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus,' the date given elsewhere as the close of the Captivity (2 Chron. xxxvi. 22; Ezra i. 1; vi. 3). From Daniel x. 1 we learn that he lived on till Cyrus's third year, if not later; but the date in i. 21 is probably given in order to suggest that Daniel's career covered the whole period of the Captivity, and burned like a star of hope for the exiles. The incident in our passage is a noble example of

religious principle applied to small details of daily life, and shows how God crowns such conscientious self-restraint with success. The lessons which it contains are best gathered by following the narrative.

I. The heroic determination of the boyish confessor is first set forth. The plan of taking leading young men from the newly captured nation and turning them into Babylonians was a stroke of policy as heartless and high-handed as might be expected from a great conqueror. In some measure, the same thing has been done by all nations who have built up a world-wide dominion. The new names given to the youths, the attaching of them to the court, their education in Babylonish fashion, all were meant for the same purpose,—to denationalise them, and strip them of their religion, and thus to make them tools for more easily governing their countrymen.

Most men would yield to the influences, and be so lapped in the comforts of their new position as to become pliable as wax in the conqueror's hands; but here and there he would come across a bit of stiffer stuff, which would break rather than bend. Such an obstinate piece of humanity was found in the Hebrew youth, of some fifteen years, whose Hebrew name ('God is my judge') expressed a truth that ruled him, when the name was exchanged for one that invoked Bel. It took some firmness for a captive lad, without friends or influence, to take Daniel's stand; for the motive of his desire to be excused from taking the fare provided can only have been religious. He was determined, in his brave young heart, not to 'defile' himself with the king's meat. The phrase points to the pollution incurred by eating things offered to idols, and does not imply scrupulousness like that of Pharisaic times, nor necessarily suggest a late date for the book. Probably there had been some kind of religious consecration of the food to Babylonian gods, and Daniel, in his solitary faithfulness, was carrying out the same principles which Paul afterwards laid down for Corinthian Christians as to partaking of things offered to idols. Similar difficulties are sure to emerge in analogous cases, and do so, on many mission fields.

The motive here, then, is distinctly religious. Common life was so woven in with idolatrous worship that every meal was in some sense a sacrifice. Therefore 'Touch not, taste not, handle not,' was the inevitable dictate for a devout heart. Daniel seems to have been the moving spirit; but as is generally the case, he was able to infuse his own strong convictions into his companions, and the four of them held together in their protest. The great lesson from the incident is that religion should regulate the smallest details of life, and that it is not narrow over-scrupulousness, but fidelity to the highest duty, when a man sets his foot down about any small matter, and says, 'No, I dare not do it, little as it is, and pleasant as it might be to sense, because I should thereby be mixed up in a practical denial of my God.' 'So did not I, because of the fear of God' (Neh. v. 15), is a motto which will require from many a young man abstinence from many things which it would be much easier to accept.

II. This young confessor was as prudent as he was brave; and the story goes on to show how wisely he played his part, and how willing he was to accept all working compromises which might smooth his way. He did not at all want to pose as a martyr, and had no pleasure in making a noise. The favour which he had won with the high officer who looked after the lads before their formal examination (graduation we might call it), is set down in the narrative to the divine favour; but that favour worked by means, and no doubt the lad had done his part to win the important good opinion of his superior. The more firm is our determination to take no step beyond the line of duty, the more conciliatory we should be. But many people seem to think that heroism is shown by rudeness, and that if we are afraid that we shall some time have to say 'No' very emphatically, we should prepare for it by a great many preliminary and unnecessary negatives. The very stern need for parting company, when conscience points one way and companions another, is a reason for keeping cordially together whenever we can.

'The prince of the eunuchs' made a very reasonable objection. He had been appointed to see after the health of the lads, and had ample means at his disposal; and if they lost their health in this chase after what he could only think a superstitious fad, the despot whom he served would think nothing of making him answer with his head. His fear gives a striking side-light as to the conditions of service in such a court, where no man's head was firm between his shoulders. Why should the prince of the eunuchs have supposed that the diet asked for would not nourish the lads? It was that of the bulk of men everywhere, and he had only to go out into the streets or the nearest barrack in Babylon to see what thews and muscles could be nurtured on vegetable diet and water. But whatever the want of ground in his objection, it was enough that he made it. Note that he puts it entirely on possible harmful results to himself, and that silences Daniel, who had no right to ask another to run his head into the noose, into which he was ready to put his own, if necessary. Martyrs by proxy, who have such strong convictions that they think it somebody else's duty to run risk for them, are by no means unknown.

This boy was made of other metal. So, apparently he gives up the prince of the eunuchs, and turns to another of the friends whom he had made in his short captivity—the person in whose more immediate charge he and his three friends were. He is named Melzar in the Authorised Version; but the Revised Version more accurately takes that to be a name of office, and translates it as 'steward.' He did the catering for them, and was sufficiently friendly to listen to Daniel's reasonable proposal to try the vegetable diet for 'ten days'—probably meaning an indefinite period, sufficiently long to test results, which a literal ten days would perhaps scarcely be. So the good-natured steward let the lads have their way, much wondering in his soul, no doubt, why they should take as much trouble to avoid good living as most youths would have taken to get it.

III. The success of the experiment comes next. We do not need to suppose a miracle as either wrought or suggested by the narrative. The issue might have taught the steward a wholesome lesson in dietetics, which he and a great many of us much need. 'A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth,' and his bodily life consisteth not in the abundance and variety of the things that he eateth. The teaching of this lesson is, not that vegetarianism or total abstinence is obligatory, for diet is here regarded only as part of idolatrous worship; but certainly a secondary conclusion, fairly drawn from the story, is that vigorous health is best kept up on very simple fare. Many dinner-tables, over which God's blessing is formally asked, are spread in such a fashion as it is hard to suppose deserves His blessing. The simpler the fare, the fewer the wants: the fewer the wants, the greater the riches; the freer the life, the more leisure for higher pursuits, and the more sound the bodily health.

But the rosy faces and vigorous health of Daniel and his friends may illustrate, by a picturesque example, a large truth—that God suffers no man to be a loser by faithfulness, and more than makes up all that is surrendered for His sake. The blessing of God on small means makes them fountains of truer joy than large ones unblest. No man hath left anything for Christ's sake but he receives a hundred-fold in this life, if not in the actual blessings surrendered, at all events in the peace and joy of heart of which they were supposed to be bearers. God fills places emptied by Himself, and those emptied by us for His sake.

IV. The conscientious abstinence of Daniel had limits. The learning of the 'Chaldeans' was largely ritualistic, and magic, incantations, divination, and mythology constituted a most important part of it. Did not the conscience, which could not swallow idolatrous food, resent being forced to assimilate idolatrous learning? No; for all that learning could be acquired by a faithful monotheist, and could be used against the system which gave it birth. Like Moses, or like the young Pharisee Saul, these Jewish boys nurtured their faith by knowledge of their enemies' belief, and used their childhood's lessons as weapons in fighting for God's truth. It is not every man's duty to become familiar with

error, or to master anti-Christian systems. But if it become ours, we are not to turn away from the task, nor to doubt that God will keep His own truth alight in our minds, if we realise the danger of the position, and seek to cling to Him.

V. So we have the last scene in the youths' appearance before Nebuchadnezzar. A three years' curriculum was considered necessary to turn a Jewish boy into a Chaldean expert, fit to be a traitor to his nation, an apostate from his God, and a tool of the tyrant. So far as knowledge of the priestly and astronomical science went, the four Hebrews came out at the top of the lists. The great king himself, with that personal interference in all departments which makes a despot's life so burdensome, put them through their paces, and was satisfied. His object had been to get instruments with which he could work on the Captivity, and, no doubt, also to secure servants who had no links with anybody in Babylon. Foreigners, 'kinless loons,' are favourites with despots, for plain reasons. But Nebuchadnezzar could not fathom the hearts of the lads. An incarnation of unbridled will would find it difficult to understand a life guided by conscience, and religious scruples would have sounded as an unknown tongue to him. But yet, as he and they stood face to face, who was stronger, the conqueror or the youths who feared God, and none besides? They were in their right place at the head of the examination lists. They had not said, 'We do not believe in all this rubbish, and we are not going to trouble ourselves to master it,' but they had set themselves determinedly to work, and been all the more persevering because of their objection to the diet. If a young man has to be singular by reason of his religion, let him be singularly diligent in his work, and seek to be first, not merely for his own glory, but for the sake of the religion which he professes.

'Plain living and high thinking' ought to go together. England and America have many names carved high on their annals, and written deep on their citizens' hearts, who have nourished a sublime, studious youth in poverty, 'cultivating literature on a little oatmeal,' and who all their lives have 'scorned delights and lived laborious days.' It is the temper which is most likely to succeed, but which, whether it succeeds or not, brings the best blessings to those who cultivate it. Such a youth will generally be followed by an honoured manhood like Daniel's, but will, at all events, be its own reward, and have God's blessing.

'Daniel continued unto the first year of king Cyrus.' These simple words contain volumes. During all the troubles of the nation, from the king's insanity, and the murders of his successors, amidst whirling intrigues, envies, plots, and persecutions, this one man stood firm, like a pillar amid blowing sands. So God keeps the steadfast soul which is fixed on Him; and while the world passeth away, and the fashion thereof, he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

THE IMAGE AND THE STONE

'This is the dream; and we will tell the interpretation thereof before the king. 37. Thou, O king, art a king of kings: for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory. 38. And wheresoever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heaven hath He given into thine hand, and hath made thee ruler over them all. Thou art this head of gold. 39. And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee, and another third kingdom of brass, which shall bear rule over all the earth. 40. And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise. 41. And whereas thou sawest the feet and toes, part of potters' clay, and part of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; but there shall be in it of the strength of the iron, forasmuch as thou sawest the iron mixed with miry clay. 42. And as the toes of the feet were part of iron, and part of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong, and partly broken. 43. And whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men: but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay. 44. And in the days of these

kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. 45. Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure. 46. Then the king Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face, and worshipped Daniel, and commanded that they should offer an oblation and sweet odours unto him. 47. The king answered unto Daniel, and said, Of a truth it is, that your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, seeing thou couldest reveal this secret. 48. Then the king made Daniel a great man, and gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon. 49. Then Daniel requested of the king, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, over the affairs of the province of Babylon: but Daniel sat in the gate of the king.'—DANIEL ii. 36-49.

The colossal image, seen by Nebuchadnezzar in his dream, was a reproduction of those which met his waking eyes, and still remain for our wonder in our museums. The mingled materials are paralleled in ancient art. The substance of the dream is no less natural than its form. The one is suggested by familiar sights; the other, by pressing anxieties. What more likely than that, 'in the second year of his reign' (v. 1), waking thoughts of the future of his monarchy should trouble the warrior-king, scarcely yet firm on his throne, and should repeat themselves in nightly visions? God spoke through the dream, and He is not wont to answer questions before they are asked, nor to give revelations to men on points which they have not sought to solve. We may be sure that Nebuchadnezzar's dream met his need.

The unreasonable demand that the 'Chaldeans' should show the dream as well as interpret it, fits the character of the king, as an imperious despot, intolerant of obstacles to his will, and holding human life very cheap. Daniel's knowledge of the dream and of its meaning is given to him in a vision by night, which is the method of divine illumination throughout the book, and may be regarded as a lower stage thereof than the communications to prophets of 'the word of the Lord.'

The passage falls into two parts: the image and the stone.

I. The Image.

It was a human form of strangely mingled materials, of giant size no doubt, and of majestic aspect. Barbarous enough it would have looked beside the marble lovelinesses of Greece, but it was quite like the coarser art which sought for impressiveness through size and costliness. Other people than Babylonian sculptors think that bigness is greatness, and dearness preciousness.

This image embodied what is now called a philosophy of history. It set forth the fruitful idea of a succession and unity in the rise and fall of conquerors and kingdoms. The four empires represented by it are diverse, and yet parts of a whole, and each following on the other. So the truth is taught that history is an organic whole, however unrelated its events may appear to a superficial eye. The writer of this book had learned lessons far in advance of his age, and not yet fully grasped by many so-called historians.

But, further, the human figure of the image sets forth all these kingdoms as being purely the work of men. Not that the overruling divine providence is ignored, but that the play of human passions, the lust of conquest and the like, and the use of human means, such as armies, are emphasised.

Again, the kingdoms are seen in their brilliancy, as they would naturally appear to the thoughts of a conqueror, whose highest notion of glory was earthly dominion, and who was indifferent to the

suffering and blood through which he waded to a throne. When the same kingdoms are shown to Daniel in chapter vii. they are represented by beasts. Their cruelty and the destruction of life which they caused were uppermost in a prophet's view; their vulgar splendour dazzled a king's sleeping eyes, because it had intoxicated his waking thoughts. Much worldly glory and many of its aims appear as precious metal to dreamers, but are seen by an illuminated sight to be bestial and destructive.

Once more there is a steady process of deterioration in the four kingdoms. Gold is followed by silver, and that by brass, and that by the strange combination of iron and clay. This may simply refer to the diminution of worldly glory, but it may also mean deterioration, morally and otherwise. Is it not the teaching of Scripture that, unless God interpose, society will steadily slide downwards? And has not the fact been so, wherever the brake and lever of revelation have not arrested the decline and effected elevation? We are told nowadays of evolution, as if the progress of humanity were upwards; but if you withdraw the influence of supernatural revelation, the evidence of power in manhood to work itself clear of limitations and lower forms is very ambiguous at the best—in reference to morals, at all events. Evil is capable of development, as well as good; and perhaps Nebuchadnezzar's colossus is a truer representation of the course of humanity than the dreams of modern thinkers who see manhood becoming steadily better by its own effort, and think that the clay and iron have inherent power to pass into fine gold.

The question of the identification of these successive monarchies does not fall to be discussed here. But I may observe that the definite statement of verse 44 ('in the days of these kings') seems to date the rise of the everlasting kingdom of God in the period of the last of the four, and therefore that the old interpretation of the fourth kingdom as the Roman seems the most natural. The force of that remark may, no doubt, be weakened by the consideration that the Old Testament prophets' perspective of the future brought the coming of Messiah into immediate juxtaposition with the limits of their own vision; but still it has force.

The allocation of each part of the symbol is of less importance for us than the lessons to be drawn from it as a whole. But the singular amalgam of iron and clay in the fourth kingdom is worth notice. No sculptor or metallurgist could make a strong unity out of such materials, of which the combination could only be apparent and superficial. The fact to which it points is the artificial unity into which the great conquering empires of old crushed their unfortunate subject peoples, who were hammered, not fused, together. 'They shall mingle themselves with the seed of men' (ver. 43), may either refer to the attempts to bring about unity by marriages among different races, or to other vain efforts to the same end. To obliterate nationalities has always been the conquering despot's effort, from Nebuchadnezzar to the Czar of Russia, and it always fails. This is the weakness of these huge empires of antiquity, which have no internal cohesion, and tumble to pieces as soon as some external bond is loosened. There is only one kingdom which has no disintegrating forces lodged in it, because it unites men individually to its king, and so binds them to one another; and that is the kingdom which Nebuchadnezzar saw in its destructive aspect.

II. So we have now to think of the stone cut out without hands.

Three things are specified with regard to it: its origin, its duration, and its destructive energy. The origin is heavenly, in sharp contrast to the human origin of the kingdoms symbolised in the colossal man. That idea is twice expressed: once in plain words, 'the God of heaven shall set up a kingdom'; and once figuratively as being cut out of the mountain without hands. By the mountain we are probably to understand Zion, from which, according to many a prophecy, the Messiah King was to rule the earth (Ps. ii.; Isa. ii. 3).

The fulfilment of this prediction is found, not only in the supernatural birth of Jesus Christ, but in

the spread of the gospel without any of the weapons and aids of human power. Twelve poor men spoke, and the world was shaken and the kingdoms remoulded. The seer had learned the omnipotence of ideas and the weakness of outward force. A thought from God is stronger than all armies, and outconquers conquerors. By the mystery of Christ's Incarnation, by the power of weakness in the preachers of the Cross, by the energies of the transforming Spirit, the God of heaven has set up the kingdom. 'It shall never be destroyed.' Its divine origin guarantees its perpetual duration. The kingdoms of man's founding, whether they be in the realm of thought or of outward dominion, 'have their day, and cease to be,' but the kingdom of Christ lasts as long as the eternal life of its King. He cannot die any more, and He cannot live discrowned. Other forms of human association perish, as new conditions come into play which antiquate them; but the kingdom of Jesus is as flexible as it is firm, and has power to adapt to itself all conditions in which men can live. It will outlast earth, it will fill eternity; for when He 'shall have delivered up the kingdom to His Father,' the kingdom, which the God of heaven set up, will still continue.

It 'shall not be left to other people.' By that, seems to be meant that this kingdom will not be like those of human origin, in which dominion passes from one race to another, but that Israel shall ever be the happy subjects and the dominant race. We must interpret the words of the spiritual Israel, and remember how to be Christ's subject is to belong to a nation who are kings and priests.

The destructive power is graphically represented. The stone, detached from the mountain, and apparently self-moved, dashes against the heterogeneous mass of iron and clay on which the colossus insecurely stands, and down it comes with a crash, breaking into a thousand fragments as it falls. 'Like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors' (Daniel ii. 35) is the débris, which is whirled out of sight by the wind. Christ and His kingdom have reshaped the world. These ancient, hideous kingdoms of blood and misery are impossible now. Christ and His gospel shattered the Roman empire, and cast Europe into another mould. They have destructive work to do yet, and as surely as the sun rises daily, will do it. The things that can be shaken will be shaken till they fall, and human society will never obtain its stable form till it is moulded throughout after the pattern of the kingdom of Christ.

The vision of our passage has no reference to the quickening power of the kingdom; but the best way in which it destroys is by transformation. It slays the old and lower forms of society by substituting the purer which flow from possession of the one Spirit. That highest glory of the work of Christ is but partially represented here, but there is a hint in Daniel ii. 35, which tells that the stone has a strange vitality, and can grow, and does grow, till it becomes an earth-filling mountain.

That issue is not reached yet; but 'the dream is certain.' The kingdom is concentrated in its King, and the life of Jesus, diffused through His servants, works to the increase of the empire, and will not cease till the kingdoms of the world are the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ. That stone has vital power, and if we build on it we receive, by wonderful impartation, a kindred derived life, and become 'living stones.' It is laid for a sure foundation. If a man stumble over it while it lies there to be built upon, he will lame and maim himself. But it will one day have motion given to it, and, falling from the height of heaven, when He comes to judge the world which He rules and has redeemed, it will grind to powder all who reject the rule of the everlasting King of men.

HARMLESS FIRES

'Then Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. Then they brought these men before the king. 14. Nebuchadnezzar spake and said unto them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? 15. Now if ye be ready that at what time ye hear the sound of the

cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the image which I have made; well: but if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands? 16. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. 17. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. 18. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. 19. Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated. 20. And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. 21. Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. 22. Therefore because the king's commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. 23. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. 24. Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonied, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king. 25. He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.'—DANIEL iii. 13-25.

The way in which the 'Chaldeans' describe the three recusants, betrays their motive in accusing them. 'Certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon' could not but be envied and hated, since their promotion wounded both national pride and professional jealousy. The form of the accusation was skilfully calculated to rouse a despot's rage. 'They have not regarded thee' is the head and front of their offending. The inflammable temper of the king blazed up according to expectation, as is the way with tyrants. His passion of rage is twice mentioned (vs. 13, 19), and in one of the instances, is noted as distorting his features. What a picture of ungoverned fury as of one who had never been thwarted! It is the true portrait of an Eastern despot.

Where was Daniel in this hour of danger? His absence is not accounted for, and conjecture is useless; but the fact that he has no share in the incident seems to raise a presumption in favour of the disputed historical character of the Book, which, if it had been fiction, could scarcely have left its hero out of so brilliant an instance of faithfulness to Jehovah.

Nebuchadnezzar's vehement address to the three culprits is very characteristic and instructive. Fixed determination to enforce his mandate, anger which breaks into threats that were by no means idle, and a certain wish to build a bridge for the escape of servants who had done their work well, are curiously mingled in it. His question, best rendered as in the Revised Version, 'Is it of purpose ... that ye' do so and so? seems meant to suggest that they may repair their fault by pleading inadvertence, accident, or the like, and that He will accept the transparent excuse. The renewed offer of an opportunity of worship does not say what will happen should they obey; and the omission makes the clause more emphatic, as insisting on the act, and slurring over the self-evident result.

On the other hand, in the next clause the act is slightly touched ('if ye worship not'); and all the stress comes on the grim description of the consequence. This monarch, who has been accustomed to bend men's wills like reeds, tries to shake these three obstinate rebels by terror, and opens the door of the furnace, as it were, to let them hear it roar. He finishes with a flash of insolence which, if not blasphemy, at least betrays his belief that he was stronger than any god of his conquered subject peoples.

But the main point to notice in this speech is the unconscious revelation of his real motive in demanding the act of worship. The crime of the three was not that they worshipped wrongly, but that they disobeyed Nebuchadnezzar. He speaks of 'my gods', and of the 'image which I have set up.' Probably it was an image of the god of the Babylonian pantheon whom he took for his special patron, and was erected in commemoration of some victorious campaign.

At all events, the worship required was an act of obedience to him, and to refuse it was rebellion. Idolatry is tolerant of any private opinions about gods, and intolerant of any refusal to obey authority in worship. So the early Christians were thrown to the lions, not because they worshipped Jesus, but because they would not sacrifice at the Emperor's command. It is not only heathen rulers who have confounded the spheres of civil and religious obedience. Nonconformity in England was long identified with disloyalty; and in many so-called Christian countries to-day a man may think what he likes, and worship as he pleases in his chamber, if only he will decently comply with authority and pretend to unite in religious ceremonies, which those who appoint and practise them observe with tongue in cheek.

But we may draw another lesson from this truculent apostle of his god. He is not the only instance of apparent religious zeal which is at bottom nothing but masterfulness. 'You shall worship my god, not because he is God, but because he is mine.' That is the real meaning of a great deal which calls itself 'zeal for the Lord.' The zealot's own will, opinions, fancies, are crammed down other people's throats, and the insult in not thinking or worshipping as he does, is worse in his eyes than the offence against God.

The kind of furnace in which recusants are roasted has changed since Nebuchadnezzar's time, and what is called persecution for religion is out of fashion now. But every advance in the application of Christian principle to social and civil life brings a real martyrdom on its advocates. Every audacious refusal to bow to the habits or opinions of the majority, is visited by consequences which only the martyr spirit will endure. Despots have no monopoly of imperious intolerance. A democracy is more cruel and more impatient of singularity, and especially of religious singularity, than any despot.

England and America have no need to fear the old forms of religious persecution. In both, a man may profess and proclaim any kind of religion or of no religion. But in both, the advance guard of the Christian Church, which seeks to apply Christ's teachings more rigidly to individual and social life, has to face obloquy, ostracism, misrepresentation, from the world and the fossil church, for not serving their gods, nor worshipping the golden image which they have set up. Martyrs will be needed and persecutors will exist till the world is Christian.

How did the three confessors meet this rumble of thunder about their ears? The quiet determination of their reply is very striking and beautiful. It is perfectly loyal, and perfectly unshaken. 'We have no need to answer thee' (Revised Version). 'It is ill sitting at Rome and striving with the Pope.' Nebuchadnezzar's palace was not precisely the place to dispute with Nebuchadnezzar; and as his logic was only 'Do as I bid you, or burn,' the sole reply possible was, 'We will not do as you bid, and we will burn.' The 'If' which is immediately spoken is already in the minds of the speakers, when they say that *they* do not need to answer. They think that God will take up the taunt which ended the king's tirade. Beautifully they are silent, and refer the blusterer to God, whose voice they believe that He will hear in His deed. 'But Thou shalt answer, Lord, for me,' is the true temper of humble faith, dumb before power as a sheep before her shearers, and yet confident that the meek will not be left unvindicated. Let us leave ourselves in God's hands; and when conscience accuses, or the world maligns or threatens, let us be still, and feel that we have One to speak for us, and so we may hold our peace.

The rendering of verse 17 is doubtful, but the general meaning is clear. The brave speakers have hope that God will rebuke the king's taunt, and will prove Himself to be able to deliver out of his hand. So they repeat his very words with singular boldness, and contradict him to his face. They have no absolute certainty of deliverance, but whether it comes or not will make no manner of difference to them. They have absolute certainty as to duty; and so they look the furious tyrant right in the eyes, and quietly say, 'We will not serve thy gods.' Nothing like that had ever been heard in those halls.

Duty is sovereign. The obligation to resist all temptations to go against conscience is unaffected by consequences. There may be hope that God will not suffer us to be harmed, but whether He does or not should make no difference to our fixed resolve. That temper of lowly faith and inflexible faithfulness which these Hebrews showed in the supreme moment, when they took their lives in their hands, may be as nobly illustrated in the small difficulties of our peaceful lives. The same laws shape the curves of the tiny ripples in a basin and of the Atlantic rollers. No man who cannot say 'I will not' in the face of frowns and dangers, be they what they may, and stick to it, will do his part. He who has conquered regard for personal consequences, and does not let them deflect his course a hairsbreadth, is lord of the world.

How small Nebuchadnezzar was by the side of his three victims! How empty his threats to men who cared nothing whether they burned or not, so long as they did not apostatise! What can the world do against a man who says, 'It is all one to me whether I live or die; I will not worship at your shrines?' The fire of the furnace is but painted flames to such an one.

The savage punishment intended for the audacious rebels is abundantly confirmed as common in Babylon by the inscriptions, which may be seen quoted by many commentators. The narrative is exceedingly graphic. We see the furious king, with features inflamed with passion. We hear his hoarse, angry orders to heat the furnace seven times hotter, which he forgot would be a mercy, as shortening the victims' agonies. We see the swift execution of the commands, and the unresisting martyrs bound as they stood, and dragged away by the soldiers to the near furnace, the king following. Its shape is a matter of doubt. Probably the three were thrown in from above, and so the soldiers were caught by the flames.

'And these three men ... fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace' Their helplessness and desperate condition are pathetically suggested by that picture, which might well be supposed to be the last of them that mortal eyes would see. Down into the glowing mass, like chips of wood into Vesuvius, they sank. The king sitting watching, to glut his fury by the sight of their end, had some way of looking into the core of the flames.

The story shifts its point of view with very picturesque abruptness after verse 23. The vaunting king shall tell what he saw, and thereby convict himself of insolent folly in challenging 'any god' to deliver out of his hand. He alone seems to have seen the sight, which he tells to his courtiers. The bonds were gone, and the men walking free in the fire, as if it had been their element. Three went in bound, four walk there at large; and the fourth is 'like a son of the gods,' by which expression Nebuchadnezzar can have meant nothing more than he had learned from his religion; namely, that the gods had offspring of superhuman dignity. He calls the same person an angel in Daniel iii. 28. He speaks there as the three would have spoken, and here as Babylonian mythology spoke.

But the great lesson to be gathered from this miracle of deliverance is simply that men who sacrifice themselves for God find in the sacrifice abundant blessing. They may, or may not, be delivered from the external danger. Peter was brought out of prison the night before his intended martyrdom; James, the brother of John, was slain with the sword, but God was equally near to both, and both were equally delivered from 'Herod and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.'

The disposal of the outward event is in His hands, and is a comparatively small matter. But no furnace into which a man goes because he will be true to God, and will not yield up his conscience, is a tenth part so hot as it seems, and it will do no real harm. The fire burns bonds, but not Christ's servants, consuming many things that entangled, and setting them free. 'I will walk at liberty: for I seek Thy precepts'—even if we have to walk in the furnace. No trials faced in obedience to God will be borne alone. 'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; ... when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned.'

The form which Nebuchadnezzar saw amid the flame, as invested with more than human majesty, may have been but one of the ministering spirits sent forth to minister to the martyrs—the embodiment of the divine power which kept the flames from kindling upon them. But we have Jesus for our Companion in all trials, and His presence makes it possible for us to pass over hot ploughshares with unblistered feet; to bathe our hands in fire and not feel the pain; to accept the sorest consequences of fidelity to Him, and count them as 'not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed,' and is made more glorious through these light afflictions. A present Christ will never fail His servants, and will make the furnace cool even when its fire is fiercest.

MENE, TEKEL, PERES

'Then Daniel answered and said before the king, Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another: yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation. 18. O thou king, the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar thy father a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honour: 19. And for the majesty that he gave him, all people, nations, and languages, trembled and feared before him: whom he would he slew; and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he set up; and whom he would he put down. 20. But when his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him: 21. And he was driven from the sons of men; and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild asses: they fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven; till he knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men, and that he appointeth over it whomsoever he will. 22. And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this: 23. But hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of Heaven: and they have brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them; and thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know: and the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified: 24. Then was the part of the hand sent from him; and this writing was written. 25. And this is the writing that was written, 'MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.' 26. This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. 27. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. 28. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians. 29. Then commanded Belshazzar, and they clothed Daniel with scarlet, and put a chain of gold about his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. 30. In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. 31. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old.'—DANIEL v. 17-31.

Belshazzar is now conceded to have been a historical personage, the son of the last monarch of Babylon, and the other name in the narrative which has been treated as erroneous—namely, Darius—has not been found to be mentioned elsewhere, but is not thereby proved to be a blunder. For why should it not be possible for Scripture to preserve a name that secular history has not yet been ascertained to record, and why must it always be assumed that, if Scripture and cuneiform or other documents differ, it is Scripture that must go to the wall?

We do not deal with the grim picture of the drunken orgy, turned into abject terror as 'the fingers of a man's hand' came forth out of empty air, and in the full blaze of 'the candlestick' wrote the illegible signs. There is something blood-curdling in the visibility of but a part of the hand and its busy writing. Whose was the body, and where was it? No wonder if the riotous mirth was frozen into awe, and the wine lost flavour. Nor need we do more than note the craven-hearted flattery addressed to Daniel by the king, who apparently had never heard of him till the queen spoke of him just before. We have to deal with the indictment, the sentence, and the execution.

I. The indictment. Daniel's tone is noticeably stern. He has no reverential preface, no softening of his message. His words are as if cut with steel on the rock. He brushes aside the promises of vulgar decorations and honours with undisguised contempt, and goes straight to his work of rousing a torpid conscience.

Babylon was the embodiment and type of the godless world-power, and Belshazzar was the incarnation of the spirit which made Babylon. So Daniel's indictment gathers together the main forms of sin, which cleave to every godless national or individual life. And he begins with that feather-brained frivolity which will learn nothing by example. Nebuchadnezzar's fate might have taught his successors what came of God-forgetting arrogance, and attributing success to oneself; and his restoration might have been an object-lesson to teach that devout recognition of the Most High as sovereign was the beginning of a king's prosperity and sanity. But Belshazzar knew all this, and ignored it all. Was he singular in that? Is not the world full of instances of the ruin that attends godlessness, which yet do not check one godless man in his career? The wrecks lie thick on the shore, but their broken sides and gaunt skeletons are not warnings sufficient to keep a thousand other ships from steering right on to the shoals. Of these godless lives it is true, 'This their way is their folly; yet their posterity approve their sayings,' and their doings, and say and do them over again. Incapacity to learn by example is a mark of godless lives.

Further, Belshazzar 'lifted up' himself 'against the Lord of heaven,' and 'glorified not Him in whose hand was his breath and whose were all his ways.' The very essence of all sin is that assertion of self as Lord, as sufficient, as the director of one's path. To make myself my centre, to depend on myself, to enthrone my own will as sovereign, is to fly in the face of nature and fact, and is the mother of all sin. To live to self is to die while we live; to live to God is to live even while we die. Nations and individuals are ever tempted thus to ignore God, and rebelliously to say, 'Who is Lord over us?' or presumptuously to think themselves architects of their own fortunes, and sufficient for their own defence. Whoever yields to that temptation has let the 'prince of the devils' in, and the inferior evil spirits will follow. Positive acts are not needed; the negative omission to 'glorify' the God of our life binds sin on us.

Further, Belshazzar, the type of godlessness, had desecrated the sacrificial vessels by using them for his drunken carouse, and therein had done just what we do when we take the powers of heart and mind and will, which are meant to be filled with affections, thoughts, and purposes, that are 'an odour of a sweet smell, well-pleasing to God,' and desecrate them by pouring from them libations before creatures. Is not love profaned when it is lavished on men or women without one reference to God? Is not the intellect desecrated when its force is spent on finite objects of thought, and never a glance towards God? Is not the will prostituted from its high vocation when it is used to drive the wheels of a God-ignoring life?

The coin bears the image and superscription of the true king. It is treason to God to render it to any paltry 'Cæsar' of our own coronation. Belshazzar was an avowed idolater, but many of us are worshipping gods 'which see not, nor hear, nor know' as really as he did. We cannot but do so, if we are not worshipping God; for men must have some person or thing which they regard as their supreme good, to which the current of their being sets, which, possessed, makes them blessed; and

that is our god, whether we call it so or not.

Further, Belshazzar was carousing while the Medes and Persians were ringing Babylon round, and his hand should have been grasping a sword, not a wine-cup. Drunkenness and lust, which sap manhood, are notoriously stimulated by peril, as many a shipwreck tells when desperate men break open the spirit casks, and go down to their death intoxicated, and as many an epidemic shows when morality is flung aside, and mad vice rules and reels in the streets before it sinks down to die. A nation or a man that has shaken off God will not long keep sobriety or purity.

II. After the stern catalogue of sins comes the tremendous sentence. Daniel speaks like an embodied conscience, or like an avenging angel, with no word of pity, and no effort to soften or dilute the awful truth. The day for wrapping up grim facts in muffled words was past. Now the only thing to be done was to bare the sword, and let its sharp edge cut. The inscription, as given in verse 25, is simply 'Numbered, numbered, weighed and breakings.' The variation in verse 28 (Peres) is the singular of the noun used in the plural in verse 25, with the omission of 'U,' which is merely the copulative 'and.' The disjointed brevity adds to the force of the words. Apparently, they were not written in a character which 'the king's wise men' could read, and probably were in Aramaic letters as well as language, which would be familiar to Daniel. Of course, a play on the word 'Peres' suggests the *Persian* as the agent of the *breaking*. Daniel simply supplied the personal application of the oracular writing. He fits the cap on the king's head. 'God hath numbered *thy* kingdom ... *thou* art weighed ... *thy* kingdom is divided' (broken).

These three fatal words carry in them the summing up of all divine judgment, and will be rung in the ears of all who bring it on themselves. Belshazzar is a type of the end of every godless world-power and of every such individual life. 'Numbered'—for God allows to each his definite time, and when its sum is complete, down falls the knife that cuts the threads. 'Weighed'—for 'after death the judgment,' and a godless life, when laid in the balance which His hand holds, is 'altogether lighter than vanity.' 'Breakings'—for not only will the godless life be torn away from its possessions with much laceration of heart and spirit, but the man himself will be broken like some earthen vessel coming into sharp collision with an express engine. Belshazzar saw the handwriting on the same night in which it was carried out in act; we see it long before, and we can read it. But some of us are mad enough to sit unconcerned at the table, and go on with the orgy, though the legible letters are gleaming plain on the wall.

III. The execution of the sentence need not occupy us long. Belshazzar so little realised the facts, that he issued his order to deck out Daniel in the tawdry pomp he had promised him, as if a man with such a message would be delighted with purple robes and gold chains, and made him third ruler of the kingdom which he had just declared was numbered and ended by God. The force of folly could no further go. No wonder that the hardy invaders swept such an Imbecile from his throne without a struggle! His blood was red among the lees of the wine-cups, and the ominous writing could scarcely have faded from the wall when the shouts of the assailants were heard, the palace gates forced, and the half-drunken king, alarmed too late, put to the sword. 'He that, being often reproved, hardeneth his neck shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.'

A TRIBUTE FROM ENEMIES

Then said these men, We shall not find any occasion against this
Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his
God.'—DANIEL vi. 5.

Daniel was somewhere about ninety years old when he was cast to the lions. He had been for

many years the real governor of the whole empire; and, of course, in such a position had incurred much hatred and jealousy. He was a foreigner and a worshipper of another God, and therefore was all the more unpopular, as a Brahmin would be in England if he were a Cabinet Minister. He was capable and honest, and therefore all the incompetent and all the knavish officials would recognise in him their natural enemy. So, hostile intrigues, which grow quickly in courts, especially in Eastern courts, sprung up round him, and his subordinates laid their heads together in order to ruin him. They say, in the words of my text, 'We cannot find any holes to pick. There is only one way to put him into antagonism to the law, and that is by making a law which shall be in antagonism to God's law.' And so they scheme to have the mad regulation enacted, which, in the sequel of the story, we find was enforced.

These intriguers say, 'We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God.'

Now, then, if we look at that confession, wrung from the lips of malicious observers, we may, I think, get two or three lessons.

I. First, note the very unfavourable soil in which a character of singular beauty and devout consecration may be rooted and grow.

What sort of a place was that court where Daniel was? Half shambles and half pigsty. Luxury, sensuality, lust, self-seeking, idolatry, ruthless cruelty, and the like were the environment of this man. And in the middle of these there grew up that fair flower of a character, pure and stainless, by the acknowledgment of enemies, and in which not even accusers could find a speck or a spot. There are no circumstances in which a man must have his garments spotted by the world. However deep the filth through which he has to wade, if God sent him there, and if he keeps hold of God's hand, his purity will be more stainless by reason of the impurity round him. There were saints in Cæsar's household, and depend upon it, they were more saintly saints just because they were in Cæsar's household. You will always find that people who have any goodness in them, and who live in conditions unusually opposed to goodness, have a clearer faith, and a firmer grasp of their Master, and a higher ideal of Christian life, just because of the foulness in which they have to live. It may sound a paradox, but it is a deep truth that unfavourable circumstances are the most favourable for the development of Christian character. For that development comes, not by what we draw from the things around, but by what we draw from the soil in which we are rooted, even God Himself, in whom the roots find both anchorage and nutriment. And the more we are thrown back upon Him, and the less we find food for our best selves in the things about us, the more likely is our religion to be robust and thorough-going, and conscious ever of His presence. Resistance strengthens muscles, and the more there is need for that in our Christian lives, the manlier and the stronger and the better shall we probably be. Let no man or woman say, 'If only circumstances were more favourable, oh, what a saint I could be; but how can I be one, with all these unfavourable conditions? How can a man keep the purity of his Christian life and the fervour of his Christian communion amidst the tricks and chicanery and small things of Manchester business? How can a woman find time to hold fellowship with God, when all day long she is distracted in her nursery with all these children hanging on her to look after? How can we, in our actual circumstances, reach the ideal of Christian character?'

Ah, brother, if the ideal's being realised depends on circumstances, it is a poor affair. It depends on you, and he that has vitality enough within him to keep hold of Jesus Christ, has thereby power enough within him to turn enemies into friends, and unfavourable circumstances into helps instead of hindrances. Your ship can sail wonderfully near to the wind if you trim the sails rightly, and keep a good, strong grip on the helm, and the blasts that blow all but in your face, may be made to carry you triumphantly into the haven of your desire. Remember Daniel, in that godless court reeking with

lust and cruelty, and learn that purity and holiness and communion with God do not depend on environment, but upon the inmost will of the man.

II. Notice the keen critics that all good men have to face.

In this man's case, of course, their eyesight was mended by the microscope of envy and malice. That is no doubt the case with some of us too. But whether that be so or no, however unobtrusive and quiet a Christian person's life may be, there will be some people standing close by who, if not actually watching for his fall, are at least by no means indisposed to make the worst of a slip, and to rejoice over an inconsistency.

We do not need to complain of that. It is perfectly reasonable and perfectly right. There will always be a tendency to judge men, who by any means profess that they are living by the highest law, with a judgment that has very little charity in it. And it is perfectly right that it should be so. Christian people need to be trained to be indifferent to men's opinions, but they also need to be reminded that they are bound, as the Apostle says, to 'provide things honest in the sight of all men.' It is a reasonable and right requirement that they should 'have a good report of them that are without.' Be content to be tried by a high standard, and do not wonder, and do not forget that there are keen eyes watching your conduct, in your home, in your relations to your friends, in your business, in your public life, which would weep no tears, but might gleam with malicious satisfaction, if they saw inconsistencies in you. Remember it, and shape your lives so that they may be disappointed.

If a minister falls into any kind of inconsistency or sin, if a professing Christian makes a bad failure in Manchester, what a talk there is, and what a pointing of fingers! We sometimes think it is hard; it is all right. It is just what should be meted out to us. Let us remember that unslumbering tribunal which sits in judgment upon all our professions, and is very ready to condemn, and very slow to acquit.

III. Notice, again, the unblemished record.

These men could find no fault, 'forasmuch as Daniel was faithful.' Neither was there any error—of judgment, that is,—'or fault'—dereliction of duty, that is,—'found in him.' They were very poor judges of his religion, and they did not try to judge that; but they were very good judges of his conduct as prime minister, and they did judge that. The world is a very poor critic of my Christianity, but it is a very sufficient one of my conduct. It may not know much about the inward emotions of the Christian life, and the experiences in which the Christian heart expatiates and loves to dwell, but it knows what short lengths, and light weights, and bad tempers, and dishonesty, and selfishness are. And it is by our conduct, in the things that they and we do together, that worldly men judge what we are in the solitary depths where we dwell in communion with God. It is useless for Christians to be talking, as so many of them are fond of doing, about their spiritual experiences and their religious joy, and all the other sweet and sacred things which belong to the silent life of the spirit in God, unless, side by side with these, there is the doing of the common deeds which the world is actually able to appraise in such a fashion as to extort, even from them, the confession, 'We find no occasion against this man.'

You remember the pregnant, quaint old saying, 'If a Christian man is a shoeblack, he ought to be the best shoeblack in the parish.' If we call ourselves Christians, we are bound, by the very name, to live in such a fashion as that men shall have no doubt of the reality of our profession and of the depth of our fellowship with Christ. It is by our common conduct that they judge us. And the 'Christian Endeavourer' needs to remember, whether he or she be old or young, that the best sign of the reality of the endeavour is the doing of common things with absolute rightness, because they are

done wholly for Christ's sake.

It is a sharp test, and I wonder how many of us would like to go out into the world, and say to all the irreligious people who know us, 'Now come and tell me what the faults are that you have seen in me.' There would be a considerable response to the invitation, and perhaps some of us would learn to know ourselves rather better than we have been able to do. 'We shall not find any occasion in *this* Daniel'—I wonder if they would find it in *that* Daniel—'except we find it concerning the law of his God.' There is a record for a man!

IV. Lastly, note obedient disobedience.

The plot goes on the calculation that, whatever happens, this man may be trusted to do what his God tells him, no matter who tells him not to do it. And so on that calculation the law, surely as mad a one as any Eastern despot ever hatched, is passed that, for a given space of time, nobody within the dominions of this king, Darius, is to make any petition or request of any man or god, save of the king only. It was one of the long series of laws that have been passed in order to be broken, and being broken, might be an instrument to destroy the men that broke it. It was passed with no intention of getting obedience, but only with the intention of slaying one faithful man, and the plot worked according to calculation.

What did it matter to Daniel what was forbidden or commanded? He needed to pray to God, and nothing shall hinder him from doing that. And so, obediently disobedient, he brushes the preposterous law of the poor, shadowy Darius on one side, in order that he may keep the law of his God.

Now I do not need to remind you how obedience to God has in the past often had to be maintained by disobedience to law. I need not speak of martyrs, nor of the great principle laid down so clearly by the apostle Peter, 'We ought to obey God rather than man.' Nor need I remind you that if a man, for conscience sake, refuses to render active obedience to an unrighteous law, and unresistingly accepts the appointed penalty, he is not properly regarded as a law-breaker.

If earthly authorities command what is clearly contrary to God's law, a Christian is absolved from obedience, and cannot be loyal unless he is a rebel. That is how our forefathers read constitutional obligations. That is how the noble men on the other side of the Atlantic, fifty years ago, read their constitutional obligations in reference to that devilish institution of slavery. And in the last resort—God forbid that we should need to act on the principle—Christian men are set free from allegiance when the authority over them commands what is contrary to the will and the law of God.