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A PROPHET OF GRACE

A
PROPHET OF GRACE

AN EXPOSITORY & DEVOTIONAL
STUDY OF THE LIFE OF
ELISHA

BY THE
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PREFACE

THE following pages deal with a portion of the Old Testament Scriptures which can scarcely be supposed to offer any special attraction to the modern mind, and which therefore, as a matter of fact, is to a great extent neglected alike by preachers and by writers on Bible themes. It is indeed not too much to say that in many quarters to-day the claim that the recorded events of the life of Elisha should be regarded as serious history would be dismissed with a derisive smile as the survival of a discredited doctrine of Scripture. This attitude is of course due to the miraculous element which occupies so large a place in the narrative. In an age when a daring challenge is being offered to the miracles of Jesus Christ Himself, it is hardly to be expected that the marvels associated with a shadowy figure which looms out from the mists of a much more distant past should be accepted as literal historical happenings. In those far-off days, we are told, men's minds were more credulous than they are in this scientific age ; they were accordingly disposed to invest with supernatural significance every phenomenon of the natural world which they were unable to understand ; and in this way a fertile soil was provided for the propagation of myth and legend. While recognising quite clearly the prevalence of this view, I have ventured in the present volume to treat the story of Elisha as a narrative of fact which on various grounds can lay claim to the dignity of History.

There are many of course who maintain with Matthew Arnold that "miracles do not happen." The laws of nature, they remind us, are uniform in their operation, and any disturbance of this uniformity, such as a miracle is supposed to involve, is simply incredible. With the

supporters of this view I do not argue here and now : a Preface, indeed, is scarcely the place for argument of any kind ; and to attempt a general defence of miracle within such limits, even if one were competent for the task, would be plainly ridiculous. But a single observation on this form of objection may be permitted in passing. Assuming on the one hand the uniformity of Nature, and on the other the existence of a living and personal God who created the heavens and the earth, is it conceivable that this God should be so fettered by the laws of His own universe as that it is impossible for Him to interpose in the affairs of the world by ways and means that transcend the ordinary processes of Nature ? Are we to believe that His resources are so imprisoned within those ancient decrees and ordinances of His will whereby He " preserves the stars from wrong," as that He cannot, for reasons which approve themselves to His wisdom, interfere in the natural order of the world for the furtherance of His moral and spiritual purposes ? Surely in this matter, as in many others of a similar kind, it is the unbelieving view that should be described as incredible.

There are others, however, who do not absolutely deny the possibility of miracle, but who nevertheless have difficulty in accepting the particular miracles ascribed to Elisha. A miracle, they rightly hold, should be ethically justifiable on such grounds as the urgency of the circumstances which call for its performance and the importance of the end which it is designed to serve. But examined by this test the miracles of Elisha fail to commend themselves to their judgment. Some of them, such as the causing of an axe-head to swim, seem too trivial to warrant the exercise of supernatural powers. The very profusion of these miraculous achievements also, and the almost incidental nature of their appearance in the narrative, seem out of keeping with that severe economy in the use of supernatural resources which is characteristic of the Divine procedure. Regarded as a whole, therefore, the miracles of Elisha,

it is alleged, do not appear to be sufficiently self-attested by the qualities of moral dignity and loftiness of purpose.

To this objection I have endeavoured to give an answer in the Introduction which follows. For one thing, the ministry of Elisha constituted an epoch in the spiritual development of the chosen people, and it is at such fresh starting-points of history that the miracles of the Bible usually appear. For another thing, it was a ministry of prophetic action rather than of prophetic speech; for both Elijah and Elisha conveyed the message of God to men not so much by their words as by their deeds. That being so, we are justified in expecting that their public actions shall be charged in an unusual degree with religious significance, and that indeed they shall be a kind of concrete and sensuous medium of conveying spiritual truth. And this in point of fact is exactly what we do find. Elisha's miracles had a symbolical character. Like the miracles of Christ, they were parables in action; and accordingly, when examined from this point of view, they will be found to have a purpose which is serious enough and lofty enough to constitute their ethical justification. Through the local and material vesture in which the prophet clothed his message, we can discern rich and spacious meanings,

“And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of Eternity.”

We have high authority for the view that, regarded as a whole, “History is Philosophy teaching by examples.” And if Philosophy is warranted in using the concrete illustrations which can be gathered on the field of life for the purpose of illuminating its systems and expounding its principles, why should not Religion use the same effective method of unfolding its loftier and more mysterious truths?

In the history of Elisha, therefore, we see Religion teaching by examples. The prophet's miracles were pictorial unveilings of Divine truth which were specially adapted to the circumstances of the Church of God

during that period of its religious pupillage. Once this fact is realised, the record becomes luminous with spiritual significance. If a personal testimony may be pardoned, the present writer at least has risen from the study of these Old Testament stories with a deeper conviction than ever, not only of their literary beauty and ethical value, but also of their fidelity to historical truth—a conviction which for the most part is based on their own internal qualities, and especially on their entire congruity with the great religious purposes which he believes they were intended to fulfil.

It may be stated here that, for reasons which I have endeavoured to set forth in the Introduction, the estimate of Elisha's personality and work which is given in this book is somewhat higher than that which generally finds acceptance among modern writers on the subject. This may look like presumption, but at least it represents an honest personal judgment.

I need only add that the following chapters originally took the form of Addresses which were delivered in the course of the ordinary ministrations of the pulpit. In their present more extended form they are given to the public in the hope that through the blessing of God they may bring a word of strengthening to the heart of some fellow-struggler in the way, and may serve at the same time to awaken fresh interest in the life and work of an honoured "man of God" who was pre-eminently a Prophet of Grace.

A. S.

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A PROPHET OF GRACE

INTRODUCTION

ELIJAH AND ELISHA

“And after the fire a still small voice.”—1 KINGS xix. 12.

THE times of Elisha were somewhat less cloudy and perilous than those in which his great predecessor Elijah ran his fiery course. The Tishbite carried out his mission for the most part in the reign of Ahab; and the reign of Ahab embraces one of the darkest periods in the history of Israel. The man who married Jezebel, and yielded himself to be the instrument of her imperious will, sounded an even lower depth of infamy than Jeroboam the son of Nebat, whose name bears so indelible a stain of dishonour in the sacred record.¹ Jeroboam established in the land “the corruption of worship,” but Ahab—to borrow a just and memorable antithesis—exceeded this impiety by introducing “the worship of corruption.”

The radical mistake of Ahab's life was his marriage with a heathen princess, the daughter of Ethbaal, King of the Sidonians. The hour of that alliance was the beginning of sorrows for Israel. Jezebel was a woman of tremendous force of character, savage, vindictive, unscrupulous, indomitable. To the energy of a proud and insatiable nature she united the zeal of a religious fanatic. Her father combined with his royal office the position of priest of the goddess Astarte, and Jezebel adhered with

¹ The view expressed by Robertson Smith (*The Prophets of Israel*, p. 76), that in setting up the worship of Baal in Israel, Ahab did “no more than Solomon had done without exciting much opposition on the part of his people,” appears to rest on an inadequate perception of the gravity of Ahab's transgression, and ignores the plain testimony of Scripture regarding his pre-eminence in wickedness.

a passionate loyalty to her ancestral faith. Whether she came to Israel with her plans already matured, or whether, as seems more probable, it was only after she saw the opportunity presented by the lack of religious unity and conviction prevailing within the land, that her purpose took definite shape, this at least is certain, that in course of time one aim took possession of her mind, and that was to win her husband's dominions for the worship of Baal.

Ahab became a mere tool in her resourceful hands. He was a man of weak and pliable character, with scarcely enough of native resolution to excel even in wickedness, and with intervals of sober reflection, in which he yielded to the promptings of his better judgment. But it is just such facile natures as his that become most prolific of tragedy when pressed into the service of evil through the influence of a stronger will. Ahab was powerless to resist the vehemence and the witchery with which his consort commended her designs. Like the Thane of Cawdor under similar pressure, he found himself ere long committed to courses from whose baseness and violence his own nobler instincts must have revolted. Soon the altar of Baal became the centre of the national religion, and the foul orgies associated with the worship of Astarte were practised under the sanction of the royal decree. The prophets of these heathen deities infested the land. As many as eight hundred and fifty of them sat at Jezebel's table. No half measures would satisfy the fierce ardour that, behind the throne, shaped the policy of Ahab. The worship of Jehovah was no longer tolerated. A determined effort was made to have it rooted out of the land altogether. Israel had its own "Killing Time" during those troublous years. The prophets of the living God were cut off without mercy. Those of them who escaped the edge of the sword had to hide in dens and caves of the earth. Others of the faithful fled into the land of Judah. On every hand the new order of things secured at least an outward submission. The supremacy of the God of Israel seemed to have been

completely overthrown. The cause of Baal, for the time being, appeared to have triumphed.

I

It was at this juncture in the national history that Elijah entered upon his stupendous task. The undertaking which confronted him was one that might well have overwhelmed a less intrepid spirit. But his was not the heart to shrink from difficulties, or to quail in the hour of danger. Nurtured amid the wild uplands of Gilead, his character partook of the ruggedness and the strength of his native hills. The figure of Elijah is indeed one of the grandest in the records of the Kingdom of God. No more heroic soul than his ever toiled or suffered for righteousness in the world. Swift and mysterious in his appearances upon the field of conflict, he wielded the weapons of his warfare with terrific energy, and when at length his work on earth was accomplished, he departed from the scene of his labours in circumstances of majestic triumph. Were it not, indeed, for a single hour of weakness, when the assurance of success had given place to sudden disappointment, and

“As high as he had mounted in delight,
In his dejection did he sink as low,”

we should almost be ready to conclude that “this glorious eremite” of the Old Covenant was clothed with attributes of more than human splendour. But he was a man subject to like passions with ourselves, and his strength was the outcome of his faith in God.

Elijah's mission was to vindicate the supremacy of Jehovah, and to bring back the land of Israel to its former allegiance to Him. His work indeed was proclaimed by his name, for Elijah means, “Jehovah is God”; and to burn this one truth into the heart and conscience of the nation was the supreme end for which the Tishbite put forth his strength. He strove to convince the unfaithful people of the evil of their apostasy,

in order that they might be constrained to throw off the yoke of Jezebel, and to forsake the worship of Baal. It was, in short, to be the reformer of his country from religious corruption, and, at the same time, to be its deliverer from civil oppression, that Elijah was summoned from the solitudes of Gilead to speak the Word of the Lord to kings.

And it was no gentle measures that he adopted to attain his end. The disease was desperate, and called for a desperate remedy. The authority of the true God had been disowned; His majesty had been insulted; the claims of His Covenant had been denied. It was necessary that His honour should be vindicated, however severe the cost. It was necessary that the nation should be brought to realise its guilt, however sore the discipline. Elijah had to stand alone against a tremendous combination of forces. No sweet persuasiveness would enable him to accomplish his Herculean task. He had therefore to rely upon the argument of the strong hand. Beyond all else, he was a stern messenger of judgment, a vehement and fearless preacher of righteousness. His mind was possessed with the thought of the holiness and majesty of Jehovah, and his conception of the Divine character coloured his reforming methods. The God of Elijah was a consuming fire in His wrath against sin and in His zeal for the glory of His own Name. And because the prophet himself was very jealous for the honour of his Lord he was no reluctant instrument of the Divine displeasure. By means of the prayer of faith he summoned to his aid the might of Heaven, and met the devices of his enemies with the terrors of the Lord. At his word the rains and the dews were withheld throughout the region in which the claims of Jehovah had been rejected, and the blight of barrenness fell upon the fields. And when this first stroke failed, save in a limited degree, to accomplish its purpose, he unsheathed the sword, and the blood of the prophets of Baal reddened the waters of the brook Kishon. By such awful measures he hoped to overwhelm the people into submission, and to restore

the worship of Jehovah to its rightful supremacy within the land.

But his efforts were only partially successful. Something more than the influence of fear or the pressure of outward compulsion is needed to bring men to true repentance or to effect a genuine reformation. The cause of Baal, indeed, had been publicly discredited, and his prophets had for ever ceased from troubling. The people, too, had been constrained to render to Jehovah at least the outward homage of the lips. But the conflict was not yet over. The spirit of Jezebel was still unsubdued, and the heart of the nation was still of doubtful loyalty. Elijah himself was tempted for one dark hour to believe that he had laboured in vain, and spent his strength in vain and for nought. When in the very moment of his triumph he received the grim and furious message of Jezebel, his courage suddenly deserted him, and "he arose and went for his life." In the loneliness of the wilderness into which he fled, he yielded to utter despondency, and prayed the Lord to take away his life. There was no more energy left in him. His cry was the cry of a weary, disappointed man, who was giving up the struggle in despair. He had made a supreme effort, and it seemed as if he had completely failed. Therefore his heart was sick with disappointment, and he had retired from the field.

He made his way to Horeb, the mount of God, that holy region

"Where all around on mountain, sand, and sky,
God's chariot wheels have left distinctest trace."

The associations of the place with the Law and the Covenant and the awful majesty of Jehovah must always have made a powerful appeal to his ardent spirit, and the stern gloom of its rocky fastnesses was no doubt in special harmony with his present mood. Here he sought out for himself a congenial retreat, where, secure from the wrath of Jezebel, he might brood in silence on his own and his country's woes. But the Word of the Lord

found him out, and he was called upon to give an explanation of his flight from the post of duty. Elijah told the sad story of his baffled effort; and then, through the medium of symbols, furnished for the most part by the forces of Nature, he received from the Lord an impressive revelation, which, while it rebuked his unbelief and humbled still further his heart, was designed at the same time to enlighten his mind, and to restore his vanished courage. There passed before him in succession a mighty wind, and an earthquake, and a fire; but, notwithstanding the destructive energy revealed through them all, the Lord was not in any of them. Last of all, in the tense silence that followed upon those convulsions of Nature, there fell upon Elijah's ear a still small voice; and the voice moved his soul to its depths, and he hid his face in his mantle.

Once more, in the light of the message conveyed by the conquering voice, Elijah was asked to account for his presence in Horeb, a place so far removed from the scene of his appointed labours; and once more the prophet repeated the faltering words that expressed the desolation of his heart. Then the Lord sent him back to his work in Israel, under the stimulus of a threefold encouragement; and in the terms of his renewed commission Elijah could find the interpretation of the dark sayings that had just been addressed to his soul through the voice of Nature.

First of all he was commanded to anoint Hazael to be King over Syria, and Jehu to be King over Israel, with the explicit assurance in both cases that they were to be instruments of unsparing vengeance upon the enemies of the Lord. This was a guarantee that the work that had been specially entrusted to his own hands was not to be allowed to fall to the ground. Next he was instructed to anoint Elisha, the son of Shaphat, to be his own successor in the prophetic office. This was a pledge that the nation, in spite of its unfaithfulness, was not to be abandoned to its apostasy. Last of all, he was informed that there were still in Israel seven thousand faithful souls who had not bowed the knee to Baal. This was an

assurance that the struggle with the forces of iniquity was not so hopeless as he had been tempted to conclude. It was with a sense of unspeakable relief, therefore, that he made his way toward the wilderness of Damascus, to find the man who was to inherit his mantle and to carry on the Lord's work in the land.

II

The ministry of Elisha marks an epoch in the religious history of Israel. As distinct from the work of Elijah, whose efforts were mainly associated with the Law, it was pre-eminently a ministry of Grace. The relation which the mission of the earlier prophet bears to that of his successor is strikingly set forth in the great scene at Horeb, to which attention has already been directed. The work of Elijah was symbolised by the wind, and the earthquake, and the fire. Its outstanding characteristic was force, a force that, for the most part, had been exercised with desolating effect. The wind rent the mountains and shattered the rocks; the earthquake, as in a former day, caused Sinai itself to tremble before the Lord; the fire devoured everything that came within its reach. This tremendous upheaval was intended to mirror to the prophet his own reforming methods. With the same turbulent energy, he had swept through the land as a messenger of judgment from the Lord of Hosts. His work was magnificent in its vindication of the supremacy of Jehovah as the moral Governor of Israel. But it failed to win the allegiance of the nation. The Lord was not in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire.

After the fire, however, came the still small voice, and the gentler method of communication represented the mission of Elisha. God was henceforth to fulfil Himself in a different way among His disloyal people. He was to meet their unworthiness with the riches of His Grace. Instead of seeking to crush them into subjection by the strokes of His judgment, He was to heal their backsliding through the gentle and renewing influences of His Spirit.

They were to be conquered by kindness. Instead of being driven by fear, they were to be drawn by love. This was to be the distinctive character of Elisha's ministry. He was to be, above all, a messenger of grace, as Elijah had specially been a messenger of judgment. And the mission of the later prophet was to be largely successful. The Lord *was* in the still small voice. The quieter and less imposing form of influence was made the vehicle of the Divine power. Elijah's soul was moved by the voice as it had not been by all the impressiveness of Nature's fury, and he hid his face in his mantle as one who realised that he was face to face with the glory of God. In the same manner the heart of the nation was to respond in some measure of contrite obedience to "the soft persuading way" that was to be so distinguishing a feature of the ministry of Elisha. The warmth of the sunshine, as in the homely old fable, was to prove more effective than the violence of the wind.

Elijah's efforts, however, had not been unavailing. The Lord had not been in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire; but these awe-inspiring forces had nevertheless served a useful purpose. They had prepared the prophet's heart for the still small voice that succeeded them. The silence which followed the crash of the tempest and the roll of the earthquake was all the more impressive because of the commotion which went before. In that overpowering stillness the voice whispered its message into the prophet's soul with a clearness and a power that touched the very springs of being. In the same way, the severe and strenuous ministry of Elijah had achieved its end. It had prepared the heart of the nation for the gracious mission of his successor. The fallow ground had been broken up, and was waiting for the seed. The conscience of the people had been touched, and they were ready for the message of reconciliation. Elijah had not, therefore, laboured in vain. In the desolate wilderness he had prepared the way of the Lord. Before Elisha could have sown the seeds of grace, Elijah must have ploughed the fields in judgment.

The contrast between the two prophets, which found supreme expression in their public ministry, comes to light in almost every detail recorded of their life and character. Elijah was a true son of the desert, with the appearance and habits of a solitary ascetic. His rough cloak, leathern girdle, and shaggy locks, combined with the swiftness of his movements and the boldness of his speech, lent a suggestion of wildness to the undoubted majesty of his demeanour. Elisha, on the other hand, dwelt among his fellows, and shared in their social and political life. We first see him quietly guiding the plough among the meadows of Abel-meholah, and in after days he carried on his work, not in the lonely wilderness, but "in the crowded thoroughfares of Samaria, in the gardens of Damascus, by the rushing waters of Jordan." He wore the usual dress of his country, and discarded even the flowing hair of his predecessor. His personality is altogether more gentle and gracious than that of the lion-hearted Tishbite.

Elijah's first miracle, again, set forth the character of his work. It was a miracle of judgment which meant barrenness and death throughout the borders of Israel. Elisha's first miracle also was representative of his life work. But it was a miracle of gracious healing, which meant the removal of barrenness from the community in which it was performed. The very name of the later prophet bears witness to the distinctive nature of his vocation. Elisha means "God is salvation"; and the son of Shaphat, like the Son of Man, whose work is not obscurely foreshadowed in his ministry, came not to destroy men's lives, but to save them. He was pre-eminently a messenger of salvation, and one main element in the mission of Elijah was to prepare the nation for his coming.

III

It is plain that the work of both prophets was largely symbolical in its character. It stood for more than appeared on the surface, and was a sign and a promise of

higher things. Beneath the outward and tangible fact there was imbedded a rich store of spiritual truth. Through the life of those two mighty men of God, the nation was receiving a revelation of the Divine purpose that was suited to its capacity. Elijah and his successor taught their message by means of deeds rather than words. It was indeed through their works that their message can at all be said to have been distinctly prophetic in its character. This was the special characteristic of the age in which they lived : it was the age of prophetic action rather than of prophetic speech. Israel was not yet ready for an Isaiah or a Micah, with their pregnant and far-reaching messages, and God therefore spoke to them in a language they were able to understand. The doors of their spiritual perception were lowly, and truth had to be "embodied in a tale," or presented through a sensuous medium, in order to find an entrance. The result is that this portion of the history of Israel is as rich in spiritual suggestiveness as any part of the Bible. At every step we find ourselves confronted with occurrences that lend themselves to symbolical interpretation. On every hand we find ourselves in a field that, to the devout and diligent gleaner, yields a harvest of vital truth.

Elijah was the Old Testament John the Baptist. In the epoch of the nation's history in which he played his strenuous part, he prefigured the forerunner of Christ. Even if this connection between the two men had not been plainly affirmed by our Lord Himself, no careful reader of the Scriptures could fail to be struck with the resemblance between the Tishbite and the Baptist. The strong stern voice that called men to repentance in the wilderness of Judea during the days of Herod the tetrach, seemed but a long-lingering echo of that which, in the same region, during the days of Ahab many generations before, had proclaimed the judgments of the Lord against an apostate nation. Both men had nourished their youth through fellowship with God in the loneliness of the desert. Both fulfilled a mission of which a distinguishing feature was its preparatory character. Both were preachers of

righteousness, and urged upon their hearers to repent and turn unto the Lord. Both were dressed in a garb, and lived upon a fare, whose severe simplicity reinforced the message which it was the business of their life to unfold. Both manifested a wonderfully strong and active faith, yet gave way to a single fit of despondency and unbelief—Elijah, under the juniper-tree in the solitude of the wilderness, and John in the still more depressing solitude of the Castle of Machærus. Both had to contend with kings, and had to suffer for their faithfulness to duty. And if Elijah had to measure his strength with a Jezebel, whose influence was more sinister and whose ferocity was more terrible than anything of which Ahab was capable, John had to reckon with a Herodias whose personality was more forceful than that of Herod, and whose hatred at length deprived the faithful preacher of his life. John fulfilled his ministry in the spirit and power of Elias. He *was* to his own generation the Elias that “*was to come.*”

And Elisha—of whom was he a figure? Shall we say that he was a type of Christ? There are many who, without hesitation, assign to him this position, and their view can be supported by a variety of weighty arguments. The Scriptures are silent on the point, although they ascribe a typical character to some Old Testament figures whose history appears to coincide less strikingly with that of our Lord. Of this at least there can be no doubt: the ministry of Elisha was a type of the Gospel dispensation. It was a ministry of gracious power, following upon an experience of searching and consuming judgments, and so formed an appropriate figure of the blessings of the age of Grace. The work whose quiet and winsome character was signified by the still small voice, and whose renewing efficacy was illustrated by the healing of the waters of Jericho, foreshadowed very plainly the noiseless but all-conquering agency of the Holy Spirit. Elijah’s mission represented the arresting and convicting office of the Law. Elisha’s mission stood for the winning and transforming power of the Gospel. The one finds its fitting symbol in Mount Sinai, with its terrifying darkness and its raging

tempests ; the other in Mount Zion, with its gladdening sunshine and its refreshing dews.

IV

The question of the relative greatness of the two prophets has often been discussed, and, in nearly every instance, has been decided in favour of Elijah. Dean Stanley, who certainly is not the least discerning among those who have given judgment in the case, has gone the length of saying that Elisha was but "the faint reflection of his predecessor."¹ Nearly all modern commentators agree with this view. And beyond question, in the natural force of his character, in the consuming energy of his zeal for the Lord of Hosts, and in the dramatic impressiveness of his appearances upon the stage of public action, Elijah is entitled to an easy pre-eminence. But it may be doubted whether it is such features as these that constitute real greatness in the Kingdom of God. The earthquake that shook the steadfastness of Horeb no doubt seemed more impressive than the still small voice that followed it. The wind that broke in pieces the rocks appeared a far mightier force than the whisper that afterwards scarcely broke the silence of the hills. But it was the gentler medium that conveyed the resistless power of the Lord. It is even conceivable that, to some hasty observers in a later day, the rugged force of speech and character manifested by John the Baptist may have appeared to reflect a greater splendour than the unobtrusive meekness of Him concerning whom it had been written in the volume of the Book, "He shall not strive nor cry, neither shall any man hear His voice in the streets." But in the Kingdom of God such external qualities are of little account as a gauge of eminence.

In this connection it is of importance to determine the meaning of the passage which records the request made by Elisha for "a double portion" of Elijah's spirit. Nearly all modern expositors are agreed that

¹ *History of the Jewish Church*, vol. ii. p. 279.

these words contain an allusion to the right of the first-born in Israel to a double portion of his father's inheritance, and are not to be understood in any literal sense. Elisha, they say, was simply claiming the usual privilege of sonship, in virtue of his official relation to Elijah as his immediate successor; and the double portion which he received simply marked his pre-eminence over his brethren among the sons of the prophets, and not his superiority to his master in the possession of spiritual endowments. This is undoubtedly an ingenious explanation, but it is not altogether satisfactory. It fails to do justice to all the facts, and its popularity appears to rest upon an erroneous conception of the character and purpose of Elisha's ministry.

It is indeed the case that the words used by Elisha to express his petition are the same as those used in Deuteronomy xxi. 17, regarding the portion of the first-born in Israel. It is also a fact that the phrase employed, and rendered in each case "a double portion," is a singular form of words—literally, "a mouth of two," a double mouthful—occurring only in these two passages. But it does not follow from this that the expression was so wedded to the thought of the first-born's portion that it could not be used in the more general sense. The phrase is in short a Hebrew idiom, and there is no evidence to show that it does not represent the regular method of expressing a double portion, whatever the special reference of the "double." The verbal argument, therefore, is, at the best, inconclusive.

In addition to this consideration, however, there are two main reasons of a general character which are usually advanced for the rejection of the literal interpretation of the prophet's request. The first is that "Elisha's modesty would prevent him from asking so much."¹ This is strange reasoning. Surely it is the man who has a modest opinion of his own attainments in comparison with others, that realises his need of grace to make up for his original disadvantages, and that

¹ Canon Rawlinson in *The Pulpit Commentary*, *in loc.*

therefore is constrained to ask for a larger share of spiritual blessings to supply his natural shortcomings. Those who take a more complacent view of their personal merits are less likely to become supplicants for Divine help. It was because Elisha realised how far short he fell of the greatness of his predecessor that he asked for a double portion of his spirit to enable him effectively to carry on his work. "To equal a predecessor," it has been shrewdly observed, "one must have twice his worth."

But apart from this, the view that it betokens a lack of humility to ask great things from the Lord in order to the worthier accomplishment of His own purposes is one that rests upon a radical misunderstanding alike of the nature of faith and of the character of God. Where faith in God and zeal for His glory go hand in hand, they sometimes rise to a noble shamelessness of supplication. Jacob at Peniel wrestling with the "Traveller unknown" for a blessing, and Moses interceding for Israel at Horeb after the episode of the golden calf, are examples of this spacious and unquenchable importunity. And God takes delight in answering such amplitude of entreaty. It is honouring to His glory, because it reveals a just perception of the liberality of His character, the splendour of His resources, and the stability of His promises. "Open thy mouth wide"—it is His own gracious encouragement—"and I will fill it."

But the main reason for supporting this view is the assumption that in point of fact Elisha did not receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit. "He did not," says Ewald, "possess any such intensity of spiritual power as his master."¹ "Elisha," repeats Dr Maclaren, "was by no means so great a prophet as Elijah. . . . No such lofty and large influence had been granted to him as had been given to the fiery Tishbite to wield, nor did he leave his mark so deep upon the history of the times, or upon the memory of succeeding generations."² "Elijah's character and the work he performed in Israel,"

¹ *History of Israel*, vol. iv. p. 82.

² *Expositions*, 2 Kings, p. 336.

says Dr C. H. H. Wright, "towers in most respects far above that of Elisha."¹ "It is only," adds Keil, "a quite external and superficial view of the career of Elisha that can see in it a proof that double the spirit of Elijah rested upon him."²

With all becoming deference to so formidable a body of opinion, one ventures to suggest that these pronouncements are too hasty and too sweeping. What, after all, if it should be the "external and superficial view" of the facts that relegates Elisha to this subordinate position? The life of both prophets indeed must be regarded in its ministerial aspect even more than in its personal and outward features. The place of each must be determined mainly from the view-point of the work he was chosen to accomplish, and of the truths of which his life was the practical embodiment. Elisha's ministry accordingly is not to be regarded in any isolated or independent setting, nor is its importance to be estimated by any external reckoning of the number or individual impressiveness of its incidents and circumstances. It must be considered in the light of the position which it occupied in the supreme purpose of God with reference to the world, and of the end which it accordingly served in the enlightenment of the race through the unfolding of "the grace of God which bringeth salvation."

For it must be borne in mind that throughout those successive ages of the Kingdom of God there ran "one increasing purpose." All the complicated movements of Providence, and all the "divers manners" of revelation which it pleased the wisdom of Heaven to adopt, converged with undeviating tread upon "one far-off Divine event," and that was the incarnation and redemptive work of the Son of God. The various epochs of the Old Testament economy were intended, each in its own way, and according to the measure of its effectiveness, to cast light upon this grand consummation of the Divine Plan. It is therefore the man and the

¹ *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 131.

² *Commentary on Kings*, in *loc.*

work that were most conspicuously used for unfolding, by ways and means appropriate to their own time, the riches of Grace to be revealed in Jesus Christ that stand highest in God's scale of greatness.

Now the ministry of Elisha, as has already been pointed out, marked a new departure in the Lord's discipline of the chosen people. It inaugurated a new era of spiritual privilege. It was the ministry of the still small voice as distinct from that of the tempest and the earthquake; the ministry, that is, of gracious power, as distinct from that of external force. It prefigured the grace of the Gospel; and just as the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than the Baptist, because John, with all the grandeur of his personal qualities, belonged to the older and less favoured dispensation, so the humble son of Shaphat may be regarded as standing upon a loftier eminence than Elijah because of the higher honour belonging to the office which he held. Regarded in this light, Elisha stands nearer to Christ—and this is the supreme test of greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven—by wellnigh the breadth of a whole dispensation, than did his predecessor. If the palm therefore must be awarded to Elijah for personal majesty, the advantage lies with Elisha in point of ministerial distinction.

It is here maintained then, that, as a matter of simple fact, Elisha did receive a double portion of his master's spirit,¹ and that his ministry was therefore a ministry of more intense, if quieter and less imposing, spiritual power. It may be pointed out in passing that Elijah's reply to the petition of his anxious disciple, indicating the "hardness" of his request, and the only possible means of its fulfilment, lends distinct confirmation to this view. Elijah indeed did many mighty works, but

¹ I do not of course contend that the "double" is to be understood in a strictly arithmetical sense. The absurdity of regarding words spoken under such circumstances as having been employed with literal precision is illustrated in the view of Dean Stanley, who—following Ewald—gravely maintains that Elisha asked for a portion amounting to two-thirds of his master's spirit!

“greater works than these” were performed by Elisha. Not only were the miracles of the later prophet more numerous than those of his predecessor—although it is not without significance that even from this point of view the test of the “double portion” strikingly applies—they also belong on the whole to a higher order of spiritual manifestation. Like the works of our Lord Himself, whose graciousness they were intended to represent, they were almost without exception of a beneficent character. They had in them a double portion of the spirit of the Gospel.

And Elisha’s ministry was also more effective in its influence. In one sense, his was a more difficult undertaking even than that which called forth the fiery energies of the Tishbite. For it was a more public ministry, carried on to a great extent under a nation’s eyes, and with a more or less definite relation to the various currents that affected the national life. Experience has proved that it is in such circumstances as these that a double portion of the Spirit is usually required. In mingling with the world and handling its affairs in everyday intercourse, a special measure of Divine Grace is needed to maintain the freshness of our spiritual life and the effectiveness of our public influence. Elisha’s work was carried on under such testing conditions. And it emerged from the ordeal with complete success.¹ There is reason to believe that the quiet and gentle influence which he wielded in the course of his long and varied career had a far deeper and more lasting effect in moulding the life of the nation, and in leading back the disobedient people into the righteous ways of the Lord, than was achieved by the stormier methods adopted by Elijah. The “sound of gentle stillness” was more effective than all the turbulence of the elements.

¹ Robertson Smith’s assertion that, in order to secure the downfall of Ahab, Elisha entered “the sphere of ordinary political intrigue” (*The Prophets of Israel*, p. 208) is a charge that is unsupported by the facts.

V

Many a time in the history of our own land has this conquering power of the still small voice been illustrated. Let two examples for the present suffice. The first missionary sent out from Iona to Northumbria, at the request of Oswald, its Christian King, was Corman, an austere and ungenial man, whose method was that of the earthquake and the tempest. He met with little success and soon returned, declaring that on a people so rude and stubborn it was impossible to make any impression. "Was it their stubbornness or your severity?" asked a gentle voice from among those that sat by; "did you forget God's word to give them the milk first and then the meat?" All eyes were turned to the speaker, and with one voice the brethren declared that the gracious and tender-hearted Aidan—for it was he who had uttered the mild reproof—was the right man to go to the pagans of Northumbria.

Aidan gladly accepted the mission, and soon reached the field where his predecessor had failed. He laboured in the spirit of Elisha; and the power of Elisha seems to have attended his efforts, for his work was crowned with remarkable success. As he journeyed hither and thither into the prevailing darkness with the lamp of the Gospel, he enjoyed the help of Oswald himself, the king interpreting while the missionary preached. "The mission," says Professor Macewen, "assumed a character to which history presents few parallels, king and priest being absolutely at one to promote Christianity."¹ In Lindisfarne he planted a renowned "school of the prophets," from which there poured forth for many generations a stream of earnest and laborious preachers of the Gospel. Gradually the stubbornness which had filled with despair the heart of Corman yielded to the power of the truth, and the wilderness of Northumbria began to rejoice and blossom as the rose. For the mighty social

¹ *History of the Church in Scotland*, p. 78.

and religious revolution which, ere long, transformed the character of that wide community, the chief credit under God is due to this warm-hearted and gentle missionary of Iona. "Of all Christian missions to England," says a high authority,¹ "that of Aidan seems to have taken the firmest root. The ministry of the "still small voice" once more gave proof of its effectiveness.

A yet more notable figure who walked in the footsteps of Elisha in a later day was Anselm, the gentle scholar of Bec, who, at a critical hour in the history of England, became Archbishop of Canterbury. He, too, swayed his fellow-men through the power of a tender and gracious personality. "He had grown to manhood," says one historian,² "in the quiet solitude of his native valley, a tender-hearted poet-dreamer, with a soul pure as the Alpine snows above him, and an intelligence keen and clear as the mountain air." In all the varying enterprises of his eventful life he threw into his work the spirit of love. In the early "laborious days" of study and discipline in Bec, he ruled his pupils through kindness. "Did you ever see," he exclaimed to a fellow-teacher who had relied on the method of stern compulsion, "did you ever see a craftsman fashioning a fair image out of a golden plate by blows alone? Does he not now gently press it and stroke it with his tools, now with wise art yet more gently raise and shape it?"

And when he left this quiet home of his adoption to take up the tremendous burden thrust upon him in England, he did not lay aside the graciousness of his nature. Still in his right hand he carried "gentle peace to silence envious tongues." He had to contend with kings for the liberties of the Church he represented; with unflinching courage he withstood William Rufus and Henry Beauclerk to the face; but he continued to walk on the same high plane of Christian meekness, sincerity, and conviction. It is the lofty but apparently well-founded claim put forth on his behalf by one of the

¹ Hill Burton's *History of Scotland*, vol. i. p. 297.

² J. R. Green's *Short History of the English People*, p. 73.

latest of his biographers,¹ that, "not only did he, so far as he understood them, seek the things of Christ; he used, in order that he might attain them, the methods of Christ." And again the influence of the still small voice revealed its supremacy. The worst natures softened before the tenderness and patience of this Elisha of the eleventh century. Even the Conqueror himself was conquered in turn by Anselm. Though "stark" and unbending to others, he became another man, gracious and mild of speech, before the gentle prelate whose character reflected so clearly the Spirit of his Master.

¹ Professor A. C. Welch's *Anselm and his Work*, p. 247.

I

THE CALL TO OFFICE

“ And Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him. . . . Then he arose, and went up after Elijah, and ministered unto him.”—1 KINGS xix. 19-21.

IN accordance with the commission he had received at Horeb, Elijah made his way northward along the valley of the Jordan in the direction of Damascus. From the bleak wilderness in which he had lately sojourned he passed into a region of great fertility and beauty. The long drought had come to an end, and the rains had renewed the face of the earth. On every hand there had been a new birth of hope and effort. The grass was springing up “ by clear shining after rain ” ; the ridges were made “ soft with showers ” ; the ploughmen were busy in the fields preparing the soil for the seed. And this outward transformation was a fitting symbol of the change that had taken place within the prophet’s own soul. There too the shadow of death had been turned into the morning ; and as Elijah covered the weary leagues that lay between Horeb and his destination, the light of hope was on his face and the energy of renewed life in his step. In the upper region of the Jordan Valley he came to the village of Abel-meholah. Here the first part of his mission was accomplished. For in one of the rich, well-watered meadows from which the place derived its name he found Elisha, the son of Shaphat, engaged in the humble occupation of ploughing his father’s fields.

Of the early home of the man who was to be Elijah’s successor very little is known. Not more than twice do we find any reference to it in the Scriptures. The former of these allusions, however, connects it with one of the

most inspiring victories in the history of Israel. It was on the "lip" of Abel-meholah that the host of the Midianites, fleeing before the onset of Gideon and his gallant little band, were met by a fresh combination of the tribes of Israel, and completely overthrown. No doubt the recollection of this and similar exploits of a former day would have stirred the heart of the son of Shaphat as he meditated among the fields that lay about his home, and would have strengthened his hope in God during the cloudy and dark days in which his own youth had been passed. The sacred narrative is completely silent with regard to the parents of the future prophet. All we are expressly told is that they were alive at the time. But there can be no doubt that they feared the Lord, and that the family of Shaphat were among the seven thousand who had refused to bow the knee to Baal.

On the day on which he first appears to view in the national history Elisha was engaged as usual in the labours of his farm. Eleven other workmen—servants no doubt—were ploughing along with him, Elisha being the last of the company, a position which enabled him to take the oversight of the rest. As they were applying themselves to their task, a stranger was seen making his way up the valley with rapid, vigorous steps. As he approached nearer, his rough mantle, leathern girdle, and long flowing hair proclaimed him to be Elijah the Tishbite, the fearless prophet of Jehovah with whose fame the whole land was ringing. Straight towards the toilers the imposing figure strode. Not a word did he speak; but as he came to Elisha he detached from his own shoulder his prophet's mantle, and cast it upon the son of Shaphat. Then he passed on without breaking the silence. Elisha understood what had taken place. He had been formally called to be the colleague and successor of Elijah in the prophetic office.

I. THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF ELISHA'S CALL ARE PROFOUNDLY INSTRUCTIVE.—There can be no doubt that he was a man of God before this time. An effort indeed has been made to prove that some of the incidents recorded

in his life, particularly those associated with his visits to Shunem, preceded in chronological order his call to office. This, however, is little more than a conjecture, and is far from probable. But that Elisha was a man who feared the Lord before this memorable visit of Elijah to Abel-meholah is a view that scarcely admits of dispute. No doubt, in common with the other occupants of the peaceful home in the valley of the Jordan, he had long mourned over the abominations that had caused the glory to depart from Israel. No doubt his heart had burned within him as he heard of the persecution that laid waste the heritage of the Lord. No doubt he had cried unto Heaven for deliverance, and had longed to devote his energies to the service of his country and his God. It is quite evident that a process of gracious discipline lay behind the swift, unhesitating response which he gave to the Divine call. The seed manifestly fell upon prepared soil.

But it is equally clear that Elisha had waited patiently for the heavenly vision that was needed to thrust him forth into the field. He would not run without being sent. He would not take unto himself the honours of office apart from the clear call of the Lord. There is a rash ardour which sometimes anticipates the Divine purpose. It is possible even for men of sincere hearts and upright motives to "go before the Lord" in uncalculating, misdirected zeal. They may fail to apprehend His plan of campaign, and so begin operations according to the dictates of their own wisdom. They may become impatient of the slowness with which He appears to move towards the accomplishment of His designs, and so essay to do His work by a swifter and more effective method. This was the method adopted, for example, by Moses in his first attempt at delivering his countrymen from the bondage of Egypt. Elisha, however, waited for a sign.

How did he pass the years of waiting? In attending to the common tasks of his father's farm. "Elijah found him," quaintly observes Bishop Hall, "not in the study, but in the fields, not with a book in his hand, but the

plough !” Like that noble Roman who was found ploughing his fields by the messengers who came to tell him that he had been chosen by the Senate for the high office of Dictator, he applied his strength to the humblest duties. He was no idle dreamer with his head in the clouds. He had no scorn in his heart for the ordinary tasks of life. Rather did he devote himself with diligence to the duty that lay nearest him. And here indeed is revealed the greatness of the man. His heroism was called into exercise as surely on the unromantic fields of Abel-meholah as amid the stirring scenes in which afterwards he was the central figure. For the hero is not the man who waits for some grand opportunity to display the greatness of his qualities, and, until that moment arrives, sits still, and does nothing. Far more of the heroic spirit does he manifest who, meanwhile, faces with patient courage the monotony of life’s daily routine, and yokes his energies to common tasks. No doubt Elisha realised more or less clearly that he was born for high achievement, but no dreams of future greatness unfitted him for the practical demands of everyday life.

“ His heart

The lowliest duties on itself did lay.”

For this also was work for God ; and when Elisha put his hand to the plough, he ploughed with all the energy of his nature. John Newton, in his own direct and simple way, has reminded us that if a Christian happens to be a shoebblack he ought to be the best shoebblack in the community. Elisha’s furrow would have been among the straightest in Abel-meholah, because he feared the Lord. He did his ploughing as for God’s laws ; and this “ makes drudgery divine.”

Do we not need in these modern days to be reminded once more of the dignity of honest labour ? If we cannot go altogether as far as Carlyle has gone in glorifying it into a panacea for human ills, we can at least agree with him in maintaining that in all true work “ there is a perennial nobleness and even sacredness.” We live in

an age of widespread social unrest, when among the rank and file of the people there is an impatience of restraint and an ominous disposition to shirk the burdens of common life. There are multitudes who are in revolt against the divine order of human society, and appear to dream of a social system in which men shall no longer be under the necessity of earning their bread by the sweat of their brow.

Of course there is a dissatisfaction with one's condition which is healthy, and a desire for betterment which is laudable. With these legitimate aspirations of the human heart every reasonable person must be in perfect sympathy. But there is reason to fear that in too many cases the present discontent is divorced from loftiness of aim, and is utterly sordid in character. In too many homes and hearts the only altar that can be found is reared to that inglorious divinity which Ruskin has termed "the goddess of getting on." Beyond question there is to-day an urgent need on every hand that men should lay to heart the lessons of Elisha's ploughing. Let us never forget that God can be glorified in the common walks of life as certainly, if not as richly, as in the highest offices of the religious vocation. The goal to which Christ is moving in His kingdom on earth is that the leaven of Christian principle should permeate the whole body of society from the top to the bottom; that in every walk of life men should fear God and work hard; and that "Holiness to the Lord" should be inscribed upon the bells of the horses as surely as upon the vessels of the sanctuary.

II. THE TRIAL INVOLVED IN ELISHA'S CALL WAS PECULIARLY SEARCHING.—It was no easy undertaking to which his energies were summoned, and it is apparent that he was under no misapprehension as to what obedience implied. Three elements of difficulty can be observed in his path at the outset.

To begin with, he was called upon to surrender his earthly possessions. It is plain that this first step meant no small sacrifice. Elisha lived in circumstances

of undoubted comfort, and probably was a man of considerable wealth. So much is clear from the number of workmen who were engaged along with him in ploughing the fields. In *The Land and the Book*, indeed, Thomson suggests that these assistants represented a gathering of Shaphat's neighbours, according to the custom of co-operation which still prevails for such purposes in the East. But this is not a likely supposition. We find that before the day is done Elisha takes some of the oxen and slays them as his own ; and the whole narrative suggests that the eleven other workmen were the ordinary farm-hands, and that Shaphat and his son were accordingly men of extensive possessions.

And in exchange for this fair inheritance Elisha was required, at the commencement of his new career at any rate, to share the lot of the Tishbite, with all its hardships and dangers. No tempting fare prepared by loving hands would henceforth await his nightly homecoming ; no soft pillow would invite him to repose ; no kindly welcome would cause him to forget the weariness of his labours. He was to be the companion and fellow-worker of a man who for the most part had not where to lay his head among his fellows, and whose very life was overshadowed by the furious threat of Jezebel. Here, indeed, was a trial that would have daunted a less earnest spirit. The scribe to whom Christ in the days of His flesh gave a glimpse of the path of discipleship, and the young ruler whom He directed to surrender his possessions in order to obtain eternal life, are instances of men who, when laid in the same balances as now tested the soul of Elisha, were found wanting, and " made the great refusal."

Again, Elisha was called upon to take up the burden of a great responsibility. Well might the young husbandman have hesitated before assuming Elijah's mantle. The task to which it summoned him was one that demanded the very highest qualities of heart and mind ; courage, especially, and wisdom and patience, in no ordinary degree. He was to be the representative of

the living God before a disloyal people. He was to be the successor in office of a giant in the religious life. He would have to grapple with the difficulties inseparable from a mighty work of reformation. It was beyond question a high and onerous position to occupy; and Elisha no doubt had enough of the prevision of the seer to realise its responsibilities. Who could be sufficient for such an undertaking? What strength had he to carry so tremendous a load?

Many a time the sense of personal insufficiency has caused the bravest spirits to falter on the verge of such an enterprise. Moses, for example, when at length the Lord summoned him to the great work of his life, held back at the beginning, and with many excuses tried to evade the task. Who was he that he should be selected for so tremendous an undertaking? He had no resources, he urged, and no eloquence. The experience gained during the long sojourn in the wilderness had opened his eyes, and the old forwardness was gone. And in a less remote age we read of the fear and trembling with which our own Scottish Elijah put his hand at first to the Lord's work. John Knox had refused repeated invitations to preach in the Castle of St Andrews. He would not run, he said, when God had not called him. And when at length one day John Rough, with an insistence which did not altogether belie his name, publicly laid before him, in the name of God and with the consent of the people, a definite call to the preacher's office, the strong man "burst forth in most abundant tears, and retired to his chamber." For many days the gloom of his countenance testified to the trouble of his soul. The incident is one of the most moving in the great reformer's career. It was not that he was reluctant to devote himself to the Lord's service. His distress, rather, marked the instinctive shrinking of a great soul, endowed with prophetic sensibilities and insight, from assuming the burden of a high and holy trust for God. It was such a burden that now confronted the son of Shaphat.

Last of all, Elisha's call involved the severing of tender domestic ties. If there is anything that is clear from the narrative of his life, it is that he was a man of warm affections, who loved his fellows and valued their sympathy and companionship. He was no stern recluse, upon whose spirit the dew of brotherly kindness never fell. He had none of that unhealthy contempt for merely human feeling which, for example, was manifested under somewhat similar circumstances by Francis Xavier. When the famous Jesuit missionary received in Rome his call to labour for Christ in India, and made his way across the Pyrenees to the port of embarkation, he refused to turn aside for one moment to bid farewell to the fond mother who had watched with tenderest solicitude over his early years. "He had not one hour to waste," says Sir James Stephen, "nor one parting tear to bestow on those whom he best loved and most revered, and whom, in this life, he could never hope to meet again." Elisha had no faith in this lofty repression of natural affection. In his heart there was a deep well of tenderness, and he delighted in the simple joys of home.

But the sign of Elijah's mantle meant that he must leave his own people and his father's house, and go forth into the loneliness which in a greater or less degree is the experience of all God's servants.

"Such ties are not
For those who are called to the high destinies
Which purify corrupted commonwealths."

How keenly he felt the parting may be gathered from the narrative. His one request to Elijah was that, before entering on his new vocation, he might be permitted to go home and kiss his father and his mother. The answer given by the Tishbite is enigmatic, and has given rise to some diversity of construction. "Go back again," he said, "for what have I done to thee?" He may have been testing the quality of the new disciple's response by an affectation of gruffness, but the more probable interpretation of his parable is that he readily

acquiesced in Elisha's design. "What have I done to thee," he appears to say, "to hinder so commendable an expression of filial tenderness? The call of God does not dry up the springs of natural affection." At any rate, Elisha went home to bid his friends farewell.

Elisha's petition naturally recalls the case of the disciple who made a similar request to Jesus during His ministry on earth. The circumstances of the two men appear to be exactly similar; but, while Elisha was allowed to carry out his purpose, the later workman was forbidden; and the refusal was couched in terms which warned him of the serious danger that lurked in his proposal. "No man," said Christ—and His words appear to contain an allusion to this incident in the life of Elisha—"No man having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God." The difference of treatment in the two cases is deeply suggestive. It shows us that a course of action which may be followed by one man without any detriment to his highest wellbeing, may to another, under precisely similar outward conditions, be fraught with deadly peril of soul. The opposite results must of course be traced to the inward attitude. In the case of the labourer whom Christ was engaging for the service of His Kingdom, the heart was not wholly yielded to the Lord. The man was looking back after dedicating himself to the work of the Gospel; and the looking back, unless arrested in time, was likely to pass over into going back. He stood, in short, at the parting of the ways, and his mind was wavering and irresolute, until Christ spoke the word in season which cut the cords that bound him to his past. In Elisha's case, on the other hand, the request for leave to return home was the direct outcome of his decision to obey the Divine Call. In Matthew Henry's pithy words, he went back, "not to ask leave, but only to take leave."

III. THE RESPONSE GIVEN BY ELISHA TO THE CALL WAS SINGULARLY PROMPT AND WHOLEHEARTED.—It does not appear likely that he lingered long over his farewells. The brevity of the narrative suggests rapidity of move-

ment. Like the Psalmist in a preceding age, Elisha "made haste and delayed not," for the urgency of the Divine Call was making itself felt within his soul. No objection to his departure seems to have been raised by his father or mother. The veiled faces of Shaphat and his spouse can indeed only be dimly discerned in the background of this moving scene. No doubt their hearts were sore enough at the parting; but through the mist of their tears there would have gleamed the light of a great joy, because their son had been chosen of the Lord for so splendid a distinction. All honour to such unremembered heroes of the religious life. All honour to the fathers and mothers in every age who gladly yield up their sons and daughters to the missionary cause, with all its pain of separation, its trials, and its dangers. Surely in the tribulations of the gospel they bear an honourable share, and assuredly when the day of acknowledgment comes, they shall receive the reward of their devotion. As their part is who go down to the battle, so shall their part be who remain at home in obscurity, and offer up their daily sacrifice with a quiet mind.

Without any loss of time Elisha made ready a feast at which he and his friends might sit down for the last time together. Taking a yoke of oxen—a team which no doubt he himself in former days had been wont to "drive afield"—he slew them, and boiled their flesh for his guests, using the "instruments of the oxen," including the plough and the goad, as fuel for the fire. There can be no doubt that this feast, prepared under such circumstances, and composed of such elements, had a profound religious meaning. It was an observance which invested Elisha's leave-taking with a kind of sacramental significance. It was the sign of his complete renunciation of his former life; it visibly represented his dedication of himself to the Lord's work; and it was a token of the gladness of heart with which the transition was effected.

The oxen and their instruments may be regarded as the symbols of Elisha's previous manner of life. They were now finally consumed—the oxen boiled, and

the implements of the ploughing burned—to show that the former things had passed away. The old forms of occupation had come to an end, and had given place to a nobler order of service. The son of Shaphat had put his hand to another plough; and the burning of the old one was a pledge that there was to be no turning back. The renunciation was absolute. The break with the past was complete. The destruction of the instruments of the oxen was in this case as clear a sign of the impossibility of retreat as was the burning of Cæsar's boats in a later day.

It was indeed with a whole-hearted consecration that Elisha gave himself to the work of the Lord. One thing henceforth was to command his strength. There was to be no mixing up of the old interests with the new. The plough of the Kingdom of Heaven would demand the fulness of his energies; and in the farewell feast he formally separated himself unto that holy undertaking. Right gladly, too, did he turn his face toward the new horizon. Some "sadness of farewell" there must indeed have been, as the tender associations of the past were finally broken; but gladness prevailed over grief, for the sense of gain was immeasurably stronger than that of loss. The parting accordingly took the form of a feast; and it was amid these outward indications of rejoicing that Elisha bade farewell to his old home in Abel-meholah, and turned his feet into that hard but glorious path along which the mantle of Elijah summoned him.

The abiding lessons of this parable in action are obvious. Whatever be the nature of the Divine Call which reaches us, we should ever be ready to make the surrender which obedience involves. The call to repent and believe the gospel, for example, is one that demands renunciation. "The instruments of the oxen," whatever form they take, must be burned. The "conversation in times past, according to the course of this world," must be abandoned. The practices of the old life that were contrary to the will of Christ; every form of sinful habit; every species of unlawful possession; every

variety of hurtful association, must be definitely given up. There must be an unreserved surrender to the will of the Lord before we can receive His blessing. We cannot drink the cup of Salvation while we continue to quaff the cup of sinful indulgence. We cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven until we have bidden farewell to the far country.

And if there falls upon us the mantle which involves a special responsibility in Christ's service there is need for a similar thoroughness of dedication. If we are to labour with any success in the interests of His Kingdom, our hearts must be disentangled from other aims. The Lord's work cannot be rightly performed with a divided mind. There must be singleness of eye, and concentration of effort. The plough of worldly ends and ambitions should be destroyed, when the hand is set to the plough of the Gospel. There must be no attempt at emulating the agility of those who seek to retain their hold upon both.

But beyond question if we get a vision of the splendour of God's calling, we shall make our renunciation with an ungrudging heart. It is indeed only when our sacrifice is the outcome of a willing mind that it rises into the region of moral excellence. But when the constraints of the Lord are felt by the soul, the loss we suffer will appear very trivial in comparison with the greatness of our gain. The rest which is found in the assumption of Christ's yoke will prove to us of itself an abounding recompense. And so in our case also, as in the experience of Elisha, the farewell to the surrendered possessions will be an occasion of feasting rather than of grief of soul.

II

THE EQUIPMENT FOR THE WORK

“ And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the Lord God of Elijah ? And when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over.”—2 KINGS ii. 14.

FOR several years, probably as many as eight or ten, Elijah and Elisha were associated in the prophetic office, the younger man assuming the position of a kind of personal attendant to the elder, as Joshua had ministered to Moses in a former age. The scene of their joint labours and the method of operation which they followed are alike uncertain ; but it is a reasonable conjecture that during those closing years of his ministry Elijah would have adopted the gentler form of effort whose superior efficacy had been revealed to him at Horeb. Of one thing at least there can be no doubt ; those quiet years of fellowship were of incalculable benefit to Elisha. They secured for him a training which meant a lifelong gain. They would have been years of diligent observation, of quiet reflection, and of steady growth, issuing in the deepening of his character and the widening of his vision. But they were not to continue. The time at length arrived when Elijah's work on earth was finished, and he must pass into the upper glory.

He himself realised that the hour of his departure had come: the Lord no doubt had somehow intimated to His servant the impending change. At any rate, we find the two prophets taking a long last journey together, each realising more or less clearly that the end of their fellowship was at hand. From Gilgal they went to Bethel, from Bethel to Jericho, and from Jericho to Jordan,

most of those centres having "a school of the prophets" which the Tishbite was naturally anxious to visit before his removal. At the outset of their walk, and at each halting-place on the way, Elijah besought his companion to remain behind, and leave him to complete the further stages of the journey alone. It is possible that he really desired to pass the remaining hours of his sojourn on earth in lonely communion with God. Such a longing for privacy in the closing moments of life is by no means unusual among men, and would have been specially in harmony with the character of one whose days had been almost wholly passed in solitary retirement from his fellows. Or it may be that Elijah simply wished to apply a final test to the devotion of his disciple. But whatever the purpose of the request, Elisha refused to yield to it. On the occasion of each appeal he protested with the most solemn vehemence that he would not forsake his master.

On coming to the Jordan, Elijah divided the waters with his mantle, and the two passed over into the plain from which, long before, Moses had gone up to Mount Pisgah. Then the Tishbite desired his friend to ask of him one last boon, the granting of which might be a satisfaction to both in parting. And Elisha, thinking of the demands of the task that awaited him, asked for a double portion of his master's spirit. "It is an hard thing that thou hast asked," said Elijah, but he did not declare it to be impossible; instead of that, he proceeded to set before Elisha the conditions on which he might be expected to have the desire of his heart fulfilled. "And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven."

Elisha's heart was filled with a sense of irreparable loss. He felt like one who had been left an orphan; and realising, besides, that the cause of the living God had been shorn of its greatest earthly defence and glory, he mourned for Elijah, not only as his "father," but as "the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof." He

rent his clothes in two pieces, in token of his feeling alike of personal bereavement and of public calamity. But he did not give way to despondency. With a brave heart he took up Elijah's mantle, and by the same act, and with the same courage, formally assumed the burden of Elijah's work. Turning back to the Jordan he repeated, by means of the inherited mantle, the miracle which had been the closing act of the Tishbite's career. In this symbolical fashion he linked on his own ministry to that of his predecessor. There was no interruption in the carrying out of the divine purpose. The workman indeed had been changed, but the work itself was maintained without a moment's cessation.

One or two elements which contributed to Elisha's equipment for the demands of his great undertaking are worthy of notice.

I. HE DEPENDED ON ELIJAH'S GOD.—This is the meaning of his exclamation as he smote the waters of Jordan with the mantle. "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" is not the despairing utterance of unbelief, but a cry for help from a soul that looked upward from God's altar stairs. In the beginning of his work Elisha called upon the Name of the Lord. He had full confidence in the might of that Name; and as he took up for the first time the task that Elijah had laid down, he invoked its resources to his aid. Elijah had been translated to a higher sphere of service, but the God of Elijah had not left the world. This was the hope that sustained Elisha's soul. The mission on which he was entering was the cause of the Living God. On Him therefore rested the final responsibility for its success. The son of Shaphat was conscious of his own unfitness for the undertaking; but his trust was in the Lord. At the very outset he wished to enter into an alliance with Him, and to receive a visible token of His favour. His cry must accordingly be understood as, above all, an acknowledgment of dependence upon the Lord.

We also, in our own generation, may well take up Elisha's cry for ourselves. For on us, as surely as on him,

there lies a responsibility with reference to the furtherance of the Kingdom of God in the world. We have inherited noble traditions, and are the trustees of splendid privileges. It may be that we have been called to a position of special trust in Christ's service. We are the successors, perhaps, of eminent witnesses for God, and can recall, among those who once wore the mantle that has now fallen to us, many names that are crowned with honour in the records of the Gospel. These have all gone to their reward. The fathers are not always with us, and the prophets do not live for ever. We are conscious of our unworthiness to occupy their place. How can we dare seek enrolment in that illustrious fellowship? How shall we maintain the high traditions of character and service that they have handed on to us? We feel as if their mantle were much too big for our degenerate spiritual frame.

Yet we must not bate a jot of heart or hope, but place our confidence, like Elisha, in the Name of the Lord. He is the One who remains, while "the many change and pass." Throughout the generations He has been carrying out His purposes; and the works whereby He has given effect to His will have shown no abatement of power and no impoverishment of grace. There are countless deliverances that we can recall for the encouragement of our souls. The years of the Lord's right hand are rich with the spoils of a thousand victories. And what He has done in the past He is able to repeat in the present and in the future. The God of Elijah is our God also. His character knows no change. His resources are unfailing. He is the God of Paul, of Luther, and of Knox; the God of Whitefield, of Chalmers, and of Spurgeon. Above all, He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; and the revelation of the Cross is the final and immovable foundation of our trust. We may therefore call upon His Name with the confidence that, if our hearts are loyal to His glory, He will not fail us in our time of need. Our feebleness will be no barrier to the exercise of His power. It

may rather prove an element in our fitness for His work.

II. HE RECEIVED ELIJAH'S SPIRIT. — Elijah disappeared from view, but he left his mantle behind for the use of his successor. That mantle was the symbol of the spiritual power with which Elisha was now endowed. To possess this power is the first condition of usefulness in the service of God. Without the anointing of the Holy Ghost we cannot be vessels of honour, meet for the Master's use. Several facts are brought before us in the narrative as to the circumstances in which Elisha received this equipment ; and, as these may be regarded as the unchanging conditions of spiritual power, it is of the utmost importance that we should grasp their significance. Let us therefore try to extricate from the symbolism of the incident its abiding lessons for ourselves. What were the circumstances under which Elisha was endowed with the spirit of his office as the successor of Elijah ?

First of all, he received it on the path of attested fidelity. This was surely the meaning of that last long walk from Gilgal to Jordan by the way of Bethel and Jericho. Elisha was being tested as to his trustworthiness. At almost every step of the journey he was confronted with associations which recalled the difficulties of the task that was to be committed to his hands, and at each new halting-place on the way he was given the opportunity of going back if he felt so disposed. It was a searching ordeal. He knew that his master was to be taken "away from his head," and that henceforth he must occupy his post alone. Was his courage equal to the demands of the undertaking ? Was his heart so wedded to the work that no amount of hardships or discouragements would daunt his spirit or turn him back ? He had, indeed, burned the instruments of the oxen when first called to follow Elijah ; but this was a new stage in the enterprise, and called for a fresh manifestation of faith and loyalty. In the intervening years he had made himself acquainted with the actual conditions of the prophetic life, and the

ardour of young enthusiasm had had time to cool. Now that the period of his probation was over, and his "father" in the sacred office was to be removed from his side, was he still disposed to persevere in the work? Was he willing to take upon his own shoulders the burden of trial and responsibility which it involved? At this decisive stage in his history was he prepared to take the oath of allegiance unto God, and, even unto the Jordan of death, to pledge his fidelity? And it was surely with all the solemn emphasis of an oath of fealty that Elisha once and again replied to his master's challenge, "As the Lord liveth and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee." Not, then, until he had given so striking a proof of his loyalty did the prophet receive the gracious endowment which specially fitted him for the duties of his office.

This may be regarded as the fundamental condition of spiritual power. In the work of His Kingdom God makes use of right-hearted men. The gifts which qualify for service are given only to those who are worthy to receive them, those, namely, who are of a steadfast spirit, because they are attached to their Lord with the ties of personal love and loyalty. "Unto him that hath" such dependable qualities "shall be given" further endowments of power. Those, on the other hand, who are unstable in purpose, and are ready to turn back at every whisper of difficulty, are not fit for the Kingdom of God. It is the men of keen and resolute spirit, who, like Elisha, march breast forward against every variety and combination of adverse circumstances, that the Lord is wont to single out for His commissions. Many are the ways in which our fidelity may be tested. Gideon's followers were diminished by two successive siftings before the three hundred chosen warriors were separated from their less intrepid and single-minded associates. Their heartiness and their readiness were both put to the proof. We too may be prepared for the same heavenly scrutiny. And it is when our loyalty has received the stamp of the Master's approval that we may expect to be honoured

with that further spiritual anointing which secures effective service in His Kingdom on earth.

Further, he received it in answer to his own supreme request. Reference has already been made to this episode in the memorable parting scene between the two men on the banks of the Jordan. The offer of a gift, the nature of which was left to his own choice, subjected Elisha to a searching trial. The answer to such an appeal could not but prove a revelation of character. Like Solomon under a similar ordeal in a preceding generation, the prophet was being tested as to the chief desire of his soul ; he was being probed as to the secret workings of his mind with reference to his mission at the commencement of his public career. And what he prayed for was a double portion of his master's spirit. The precise meaning to be attached to Elisha's words need not detain us here : the point to be emphasised is that the endowment which he received was granted in answer to his own special petition. He asked for a rich measure of the Spirit's power in order to the effective discharge of his prophetic duties ; and according to the desire of his heart it was given unto him.

Here we are confronted with a great law of the Kingdom of Heaven which is of permanent operation in the distribution of spiritual gifts. The Holy Ghost is given in answer to prayer. Christ's own assurance on this point is so definite as to leave no room for doubt : He promises the "good gift" of the Holy Ghost "to them that ask Him." As in Ezekiel's vision, the breath from the four winds, with its quickening energy, came in answer to the prophet's cry, so the Spirit is still wont to come in response to the supplication of faith. The conditions of attainment are not hard. The richest of all God's blessings are to be had for the asking. Why then, it may be asked, is our spiritual life so sickly and poor—our resources so feeble, our fruitfulness so meagre, our service so unproductive ? The chief answer, unquestionably, is that we do not ask of God to have our needs supplied. More than anything else, our

prayerlessness is the cause of our spiritual poverty. Too soon the fervour of our early love abates, and the hands of prayer begin to hang down. Perhaps the world is too much with us, and its concerns so engross our thoughts and exhaust our strength that the devotional element is wellnigh crushed out of our life. Perhaps there is some secret disloyalty to Christ, which like a canker is destroying our spiritual health. Perhaps the "cold mists of doubt and icy questionings" creep round us like a nightmare, and we pass through

" A hopeless hour,
When all the voices of the soul are dumb,
When o'er the tossing seas
No light may come."

Or it may be that we pass into a condition of Laodicean self-complacency, and imagine that we "have need of nothing." In any case the life of prayer suffers neglect and the result is a woeful impoverishment of soul.

And even when we do pray, it often happens that the blessing does not come, because we ask amiss. From the old story which we are considering there are two things we may carry with us for our own admonition and guidance in prayer. The one is that in our requests to God for spiritual power, the boon we crave with our lips must be the chief desire of our hearts. No formal, perfunctory offering up of petitions will avail, unless our souls hunger for the blessing sought. We cannot expect to be enriched with spiritual possessions if our affections are most longingly fixed on material things. Like Elisha, we must make the gift of the Spirit the supreme object of our choice. The other lesson is that we must ask those endowments for the ends of public usefulness. God will not bestow upon us His grace that we may consume it upon our lusts. He will not adorn us with the beauties of holiness simply that our comeliness may be the cynosure of neighbouring eyes ; He will not lavish upon us His gifts in order that by

means of them we may secure the praises of men ; He will not invest us with power for purposes of spectacular effect or of personal exaltation. Like Elisha, we must ask for power in order to minister more fruitfully. But no man ever coveted earnestly those best gifts of God for the ends of efficient service who was left empty of the blessing he craved.

Once more, he received it in connection with a vision of the glory of the Lord. Elijah pointed out the "hardness" of his colleague's request, and proceeded to set forth the one condition on which it could be granted. That was, that Elisha should behold the circumstances of his master's departure. This was no arbitrary or meaningless stipulation. It meant the opening of direct intercourse with the unseen, and so involved a revelation of the Divine Glory. Such a visible token of the reality of the spiritual world could not but prove an experience of immense value to Elisha, issuing of necessity in a mighty enlargement of soul—the expansion of all his powers, the strengthening of his faith and courage, and the general enrichment of his spiritual being. And when the supreme moment arrived, the necessary vision was not withheld. The eyes of the solitary watcher on the Jordan Plain may, indeed, have been dim with natural sorrow, but they were graciously enlightened to perceive the opened heavens and the "bright-harnessed angels" that came to bear Elijah to glory ; and as Elisha gazed heavenwards the mantle of his master descended from above, and the gift of which it was the figure became his own.

So, in one form or another, it always happens. Spiritual power is a gift which no man can communicate to his brother. It is too "hard" a boon for human hands to bestow. There are many things we can do for one another : we can teach, and comfort, and encourage, and strengthen ; but we cannot command the sacred Fire that burns on God's Altar. The Holy Ghost comes down from heaven. And the giving of the Holy Ghost is more or less directly associated with a vision of the

glory of the Lord. God shines in the heart, and the anointed eyes are enabled to pierce the veil of sense. The vision does not, indeed, always come in the same way ; the operations of infinite Wisdom reveal on every hand an endless diversity ; but, whatever the mode of manifestation, the chariots of the Lord become a reality to all who are called to service in the Kingdom of Heaven. Those who are entrusted with special tasks are favoured with special revelations. Moses is confronted with the Burning Bush in the desert of Horeb before he becomes the leader of the Exodus. Isaiah is brought near to the glorious high Throne of Israel's true King before he is sent to proclaim the judgments of Heaven against his unfaithful countrymen. Saul of Tarsus beholds that Face whose brightness outshines the noonday sun before he receives his commission to become the Apostle of the Gentiles. And so on ; the record might be indefinitely extended. On the humbler plane of common Christian life, the revelation may be less phenomenal ; but the effect is the same. Upon the wondering soul there flashes a glory from the invisible world, a radiance from the Face of the Lord, which transcends all earthly splendour, and which becomes "the master-light of all its seeing." This is the secret of the unquenchable zeal and courage and devotion which in one generation after another have made the servants of Christ in so many instances the wonder of the world.

Last of all, he received it as a result of personal watchfulness. "If thou see me when I am taken from thee," said Elijah, "it shall be so unto thee ; but if not, it shall not be so." The words do indeed connect the granting of the petition with a supernatural revelation ; but at the same time they impose upon the suppliant a personal responsibility ; and so the fulfilment of Elisha's desire was in a certain sense suspended upon his own diligence. He must watch with unceasing care lest he should miss the heavenly vision. His eyes must be turned continually toward the skies. He must maintain an attitude of unceasing vigilance, and wait till the expected sign

should appear. For if he failed to watch, and his eyes were turned downwards and fixed upon the things of earth, the chariots of the Lord might come and go unnoticed, and his opportunity would be lost for ever.

This is another fixed law of the Kingdom of Heaven. There are conditions on which the Lord suspends His gracious Presence, and therefore there is need for unceasing watchfulness. "Eternal vigilance" is said to be "the price of liberty," in the sphere of national life; it is unquestionably a condition of power within the spiritual domain. The character of our own heart, for one thing, renders such an attitude imperative. Too frequently the heart manifests its disloyalty, and departs from the Living God. Unless jealously guarded, its affections are ready to settle too exclusively upon earthly things, and even to wander into the forbidden paths of sin. And when sin gets a place in the regard of the heart, the Holy Spirit is grieved, and withholds the comforting and strengthening influences of His Presence.

The dangers that threaten the soul from without also demand the exercise of watchfulness. God's children are engaged in a stern warfare with enemies who never suspend hostilities, and never retire into winter-quarters. But, above all, the peculiar circumstances of the Church's position on earth in relation to the Lover of her soul in heaven call for a wakeful and expectant attitude. He has ascended on high, with a more triumphant glory than Elijah, and the eyes of His servants should ever be turned towards those skies beyond whose remotest blue He has passed. All the more should this be the case when He has promised to come again, and to come at an hour of which He has given no precise disclosure. More wistfully, therefore, than they who watch for the morning light should believers wait for their Lord. They should seek to win for themselves the character of those faithful souls who "love His appearing," and "look for a city" beyond the stars.

“ For as a cloud received Him from their sight,
 So with a cloud will He return ere long :
 Therefore they stand on guard by day, by night,
 Strenuous and strong.”

Such patient watchers of the skies shall in no wise lose their reward. For sometimes, when their eyes are ready to fail with looking upwards, they behold through the opened heavens a light which tells that the King is there ; and the glory of that vision becomes the strength of their heart and the inspiration of their life.

III. HE MANIFESTED ELIJAH'S POWER.—Elisha lost no time in putting to the proof the endowment which he had received. Following the example of Elijah, he turned to the Jordan, and smote its waters with the mantle of which he had been left the heir. And in his hand also the thing became an instrument of power : the waters divided before him, and he passed “ through the flood on foot.” In this way did Elisha receive a sign that his request had been granted. The prophet's mantle was no barren inheritance, but a symbol of resistless power. The God of Elijah had answered to His name, and had manifested His purpose to abide with His toiling servant on earth. “ Through the dear might of Him ” whose will the winds and the waves obey, Elisha too became a conqueror.

It is this same anointing of the Holy Spirit that enables the children of God in every age to obtain the victory. Out of weakness they become strong, and their efforts to stem the current of the river of death are not in vain. In the domain of personal religion they attain unto the liberty of sons. Pride no longer rules their will, and the tyranny of self is ended. Yielding themselves in unreserved surrender to God, they lay their own will upon His altar, and take the Master's will as the law of their whole life. Over corruption also they manifest a similar supremacy. No longer does sin have dominion over them, casting them down and maltreating them, in cruel and insolent oppression. They have the

Spirit of Christ within them, and the reign of death is over. No longer are they like reeds shaken with every wind of temptation; they are built upon the Rock of Ages, and more and more their own character partakes of the Rock's unyielding strength. No longer are they heartsick with the memory of broken resolutions and unredeemed promises, of shameful defeats and disabling falls; the mighty Lord dwells in the power of His Resurrection within them, and through His grace they win their path upward and prevail.

In the sphere of public usefulness also the anointing of the Spirit enables them in some measure to fulfil the end of their calling. God's servants are engaged in a great warfare in the earth. They seek to arrest the mighty stream of death that is carrying destruction through the world. Against them are ranged all the forces that death can command—all the powers of darkness, all the might of corruption, all the enmity and degradation and spiritual impotence that have their home in the unregenerate heart of man. Their aim is to divide those rushing waters, and to prepare a way through their depths for the God of Salvation. They seek, in a word, to win for the Lord a world over which death holds dominion. And who is sufficient for this undertaking? Who is able to work such miracles of deliverance? Who can roll back the flowing tide of death, and snatch the prey from its devouring depths? The history of Elisha furnishes the answer. Through the anointing of the eternal Spirit we can obtain the victory even in this tremendous conflict. The treasure is indeed in the earthen vessel. The resources of man seem hopelessly inadequate for the task. But it is through the weakness of human effort that God delights to reveal the excellency of His power.

III

THE QUEST OF THE STRONG MEN

“And they said unto him, Behold now, there be with thy servants fifty strong men; let them go, we pray thee, and seek thy master; lest peradventure the Spirit of the Lord hath taken him up, and cast him upon some mountain, or into some valley.”—2 KINGS ii. 16.

WHEN Elijah smote the Jordan with his mantle and made a passage for Elisha and himself through its waters, the sons of the prophets, we are told, were far-off spectators of the scene. They knew that some great crisis, involving the removal of the Tishbite, was at hand; and from an elevated position which commanded a view of the lower Jordan Valley, they watched with eager eyes the movements of the two prophets. It is not likely that they witnessed the actual ascension of Elijah; that was a privilege that seems to have been reserved for the eyes of Elisha alone; but one fact at least there was no possibility of doubting—their master had suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. Two men had crossed to the eastern side of the Jordan; one man only returned.

But the man who returned had possession of Elijah's mantle, and repeated Elijah's miracle. Elisha also divided the waters, and passed through the Jordan dryshod—this was the second outstanding fact that arrested the attention of the gazing prophets. And from this circumstance they were not slow to draw the conclusion to which it was designed to lead. “The spirit of Elijah,” said they, “doth rest on Elisha”; and when the son of Shaphat drew near, they hastened to show him becoming reverence. That the Elisha who now returned to Jericho was a different man from the Elisha who,

some hours before, had passed through their midst on his way to the Jordan along with Elijah, was abundantly plain. His very countenance would no doubt have borne evidence of the change that had taken place; but apart from this there was the twofold sign of the mantle and the divided waters. Clearly Elisha had become heir to those marvellous powers which for long years had invested the figure of Elijah with an awful impressiveness.

But Elijah himself—what had become of him? He had vanished out of sight; of that there could be no doubt; but what had happened to him? Already the sons of the prophets had their theory of the mysterious event which had taken place on the Jordan plain. God had removed Elijah; this they admitted; but the removal was only for a season. On some lonely mountain-top, or in some dark valley among the hills, the Spirit who directed the whirlwind had laid him down. Perhaps he was still alive, and so might yet be restored to their head; but whether dead or alive it was at least possible to find him and bring him back. Already too they had a plan prepared with reference to the action which in these circumstances appeared to them to be necessary. They had sought out and got ready a band of fifty strong men—men specially fitted for the arduous work of hill-climbing—who were to form a search-party, and devote their strength to the task of finding the missing prophet. Full of enthusiasm for their project, they now approached Elisha, and begged of him to give it his sanction. Elisha of course knew the truth, and so had only one answer to give to such a request. “Ye shall not send,” he said. So definite a judgment upon the case should have been conclusive. It was the verdict of knowledge and experience, and it declared, with an emphasis which lost nothing because of the prophet’s economy of words, that the theory advanced was wrong, and that therefore the search proposed would be futile.

But with the boundless confidence of youth in its own opinions the sons of the prophets persisted in their appeal. They were persuaded that they knew better

than Elisha what had taken place, and refused to accept dismissal. To do them justice, it is not unlikely that affection for their master lent courage to their importunity; in any case they kept asking until at length the prophet "was ashamed." Realising that the only cure for their obstinacy was the disillusionment of experience, he withdrew his opposition, and suffered them to carry out their design. And then the strong men went out on their amazing quest. For three days they searched among the valleys and the hills, leaving no likely place unexplored. But they searched in vain. Nowhere did they find a trace of Elijah. Then the sons of the prophets returned to Elisha, and acknowledged the failure of their efforts. And Elisha simply put them in remembrance of his own former attitude in the matter. He considered it right to emphasise anew the fact that he had not shared their delusion—not so much, let us believe, in order to proclaim a personal victory, as to remind them that there was another explanation of Elijah's disappearance, and that on that point his own convictions had all along remained clear and unwavering. There are times when in the interests of truth it is right for men to draw attention to the vindication which their conduct may have received from the facts of experience.

The abiding value of this remarkable little story is found mainly in the attitude of the sons of the prophets towards the removal of Elijah. That attitude has often been reproduced in the world since then in relation to revealed truth in general, and particularly in relation to the questions connected with the Christian doctrine of immortality. There are two points of view from which the matter may be regarded.

I

In the first place, it is possible to place upon the conduct of these young students of Jericho a not altogether unfavourable construction. Of course, their

action at the best is open to adverse comment. They refused to listen to the voice of authority ; they had no eyes for the evidence which stared them in the face ; they displayed the rashness and the arrogance which are so often the mark of youthful inexperience. But for all that, there are things to be set down on the other side. To begin with, they were not absolutely antagonistic to the truth ; that is something to bear in mind from the outset. They had not seen with their own eyes the shining chariots which bore Elijah to glory, and so eager had they been to proclaim their own views, that Elisha does not seem to have had time to acquaint them with the real facts of the case.

They were not, then, hostile to the truth ; much less were they indifferent. But they had formed a theory of their own as to their master's disappearance, and that theory had taken such a hold of their minds as to become almost an obsession. Even with regard to this belief itself, fantastic though it undoubtedly was, it is well to consider all the facts before passing judgment. Let us bear in mind that the event with which the sons of the prophets were confronted was in reality one that was simply unparalleled in the demands which it made upon faith and imagination. The nearest approach to it that their minds could recall—leaving out of account the translation of Enoch as a more remote and probably less public occurrence—was the disappearance of Moses upon the lonely summit of Mount Nebo ; and it was the disappearance of Moses that in all likelihood gave rise to their explanation of the removal of Elijah. In any case, the actual truth was so overwhelming in its splendour that we must not condemn the sons of the prophets too severely if their hypothesis fell short of the reality.

But whatever opinion may be held of their theory, it must be admitted that the disciples of Elijah showed a commendable readiness to subject their views to the test of direct investigation. They were eager to know the truth, and were unable to satisfy their hearts with

unverified conjectures. They craved for evidence of a kind that would put an end to all uncertainty—the evidence of immediate and personal observation. If they failed to rise to the height of the real situation, they at least refused to let speculation take the place of truth. So they sent out the strong men on their weary search among the hills. And whatever else may be said of that search, it is impossible to deny to it the credit of sincerity of purpose.

There is a type of mind, by no means uncommon in our own time, in the workings of which may be traced a family likeness to this attitude of the sons of the prophets. It is a type of mind which finds it difficult to believe, and which, therefore, as a rule arrives at the truth only after a long and toilsome search. Not that it is inhospitable to the Christian facts; on the contrary it is sincerely anxious to receive them; but for various reasons it is unable to find a direct road to peace. There are happy souls who seem to glide smoothly and quickly into the desired haven. They have little experience of inward conflict; vision and joy come to them as with a flash; they light upon the treasure suddenly. Without any painful gropings or stumbings in the dark, they emerge upon the uplands, and pass into

“A life that leads melodious days.”

The class we are considering, however, do not come by their faith so easily. They reach the place of rest through much toil and storm.

Their difficulties are no doubt largely due to constitutional causes. They are naturally sceptical, and perhaps have a strain of melancholy in their temperament. Like Mr Fearing, they have a kind of Slough of Despond in their mind, and so are bound to pass through a struggle ere they reach the unyielding Rock. This natural tendency, again, is accentuated by the atmosphere created by modern conditions of thought. That atmosphere is not favourable to a simple, childlike acceptance of the

truths of revelation. For one thing it is permeated with a materialistic spirit which is disposed to set a mark of interrogation against the claims of the supernatural. It throws out its challenges, and is ready with its opposing theories. And when these influences operate upon a mind that is inherently predisposed to scepticism, they tend to create formidable obstacles in the way of belief. There are a multitude of questions that must be answered, and a multitude of claims that must be sifted. The testimony of others is not enough to allay the inward tumult. The processes of verification must be personal; knowledge in order to mean power must be first-hand. So there are fifty strong men within the soul that must go out on their laborious quest among the hills and the valleys. There are doubts that must be fought, and spectres of the mind that must be faced and made an end of, before the storm within the heart is changed into a calm.

And however devious and costly such a process is, it is no doubt the best road for the travellings of this particular class of enquirer. There is little use in seeking to turn such persons from their own course, or to reason them into a sounder or more settled condition of mind. There is little use in setting before them our own experience as a light unto their path. However emphatically we say unto them, "Ye shall not send," they will not be persuaded. Slowly and painfully, step by step, they must work their way unto conviction. And, indeed, we can hardly wish that it should be otherwise. Far better, this, at any rate, than an easy appropriation of second-hand beliefs. The faith which thus lightly comes, there is reason to fear, will as lightly go. Like the house built on the sand, it falls in the day of tempest, and its fall is unto hopeless ruin.

There was wisdom therefore in Elisha's final permission to the young prophets to carry out their purpose. He was dealing with them as a sensible father deals with headstrong children—letting them have their way for a time, in order that in the hard school of experience,

through the humbling enlightenment of disappointment and failure, they might at length arrive at the truth. The lessons learned in this school are not soon forgotten. One good result at least the quest of the strong men of Jericho achieved: it put an end for ever to the "mountain-or-valley" theory. Never again would the sons of the prophets be so obstinately self-confident in their demeanour. Never again would they question the fact of Elijah's ascension. And there are similar advantages that always attend the experiences of the longer path. The gains that are made are solid and enduring. The inquirer has fought his doubts and tested his beliefs. And each new victory he achieves means for him a fresh accession of strength. The dark valley has yielded its secrets; the frowning mountain has lost its fears. His heart is now at rest. His soul has fixed its anchor in the steadfast Rock.

II

The Apostle Thomas is perhaps the best example available of the type of mind now being considered. Thomas's attitude to the Resurrection of his Lord has often been misjudged, and many hard things have been said against him. One Roman Catholic Cardinal gravely advances Thomas's unbelief as a reason why the Bible should not be placed in the hands of the laity! Even so judicious and discerning an expositor as Bishop Ryle declares that "if he had been cast out of the company of disciples we could not have said his excommunication was undeserved." Newman refers with manifest scorn to

"The niggard course

Of Thomas, who must see ere he would trust."

"Thomas the Twin," says Papini, with the arrogance which mars a good deal of his eloquent *Story of Christ*, "is the patron saint of modernity as Thomas Aquinas was the patron saint of the Middle Ages. He is the orthodox protector of Spinoza and of all those others

who deny the possibility of resurrection; the man who is not satisfied with the testimony of his own eyes, but will have that of his hands as well."

This, however, is not well-considered blame. No one, of course, will maintain that Thomas's conduct was free from reproach. He ought certainly to have been prepared for the Resurrection by Christ's own teaching. In addition to that, and all the more readily on account of that, he ought to have accepted at once the testimony of his fellow-disciples. All this admits of no dispute. But when the effort is made to depreciate Thomas by contrasting his unbelief with the unhesitating faith of the rest of the disciples, it is necessary to utter a word of protest. Thomas in truth asked for no more than his ten brethren had already received. His unbelief differed only in degree and not in kind from the attitude of the whole body of the disciples to the testimony of the women regarding the empty sepulchre: "their words seemed unto them as idle tales and they believed them not." He had not been present when Jesus first appeared to His little company of followers—we are not told what detained him, and condemnation is unreasonable until we know that his absence was culpable—and all he asked for was evidence of the same direct and personal character as they had been favoured with. He needed indeed the evidence of his senses; but so also did Peter and James and John. In this connection it may here be further noted that when Christ in His memorable interview with Thomas used the words, "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed," the contrast intended is not between the "niggard course" of Thomas and a nobler order of belief manifested by his fellow-disciples, but between the faith which rests on the evidence of the senses—a condition, of course, which Thomas's faith shared with that of the other ten—and the spiritual apprehension of subsequent believers, who receive and rest upon an unseen Lord.

The truth is that Thomas's attitude was largely the outcome of temperament. His character as a whole

has been well described by Dean Stanley as "that of a man, slow to believe, seeing all the difficulties of a case, subject to despondency, viewing things on the darker side, and yet full of ardent love for his Master." His mind was not really hostile to the supernatural in general, or to the Resurrection in particular. He was far from making the absence of a sign an excuse for continuing in unbelief. He longed most earnestly to believe; there is truth indeed in the view that it was his excessive anxiety to believe that gave rise to his doubt; for he realised quite clearly the magnitude of the issues, and not John himself loved his Master with a more sincere and intense devotion. But the facts of the Crucifixion had been too indelibly imprinted upon his heart; the scenes he had witnessed, acting upon a nature inherently heavy and despondent, overwhelmed him in abysmal depths of gloom; and it needed influences of the most immediate and compelling kind to lift the shadow of death from his soul. So when the other disciples hastened to say to him, "We have seen the Lord," Thomas refused to believe the good news, and after the manner of his kind, was rather disposed to hug his misery. His reference to the prints of the nails and the spear-wound need not be taken too literally; the words are plainly the language of extreme dejection, and are simply a strong way of declaring that nothing but first-hand evidence could satisfy his soul. The testimony of the disciples was not sufficient. Not that Thomas doubted their word; but in a matter of such tremendous importance nothing short of absolute certainty was enough; and for that he needed vision and illumination for himself. Thomas had his own "strong men," who must carry out their search, and bring back their report, before conviction came.

And it was not long until the Lord in His loving condescension furnished Thomas with the very evidence which his soul desired. Gently chiding him for the tardiness of his faith, Christ asked him to satisfy himself in the precise manner which on the week before he had

declared to be the indispensable condition of his believing. There is no evidence that Thomas literally responded to that reproof challenge. The circumstances point altogether in the opposite direction. His soul leaped forth in swift and adoring recognition of his Master's glory, and what need had he then of the crudities of physical demonstration? And how magnificent were the heights to which he rose in that hour of his deliverance! "My Lord and my God," he exclaimed; and faith has never uttered a nobler word. Thomas therein laid bare the quality of his soul. He had been no shallow and dishonest gainsayer, but all along a deep and conscientious disciple. And the joy which now flooded his heart was all the deeper because of the intensity of the preceding conflict. The light of the morning was all the more glorious because of the blackness of the night which went before.

III

The sincerity of the sons of the prophets need not be questioned. However foolish and reprehensible in some respects their conduct was, we may readily concede that it was prompted by a spirit of honest enquiry. But it is clear at the same time that their position was fraught with dangerous possibilities. Alike in their reasonings and in their actings they might readily be mistaken for the advocates of views of a much more sinister character than those which they actually held. Their attitude indeed might easily pass over into a spirit of proud and calculated hostility to all supernatural facts.

The pretensions of Rationalism are very familiar in these modern days. This convenient system has its own explanation for every kind of phenomenon, its own solution for every mystery. Miracles it seeks to account for on natural grounds—even the miracles recorded in the New Testament. The light of revelation it ascribes to the gradual development of the human spirit. Man's supreme rule of duty, it declares, is within himself.

Viewing all things through the medium of a secular atmosphere, it is frankly out of sympathy with the claims of the spiritual. It examines all the facts of experience by a rationalistic standard, and meets every assertion of God's special intervention in the affairs of the universe with a scornful incredulity.

And of course the advocates of this system have their own company of "strong men" whose achievements they are never tired of extolling. These are the natural powers of man, the senses and the intellect. Within their own domain, indeed, the exploits of these sons of strength are worthy of the highest praise. Many a dark valley they have penetrated, and many a lofty mountain they have climbed. Day by day they are extending the frontiers of human knowledge. Day by day they are placing fresh triumphs to the credit of the race. Even religion herself is their debtor; for they have done much to liberate her from the shackles of superstition and unwarranted custom.

But the operations of these strong men are not confined to their appropriate territory; they are brought forward as competent explorers of the entire Kingdom of God. And it is when they enter this domain that their claims are most pretentious and their arrogance most repellent. They make all experience their province, and pronounce their judgments with a finality which puts the dogmatism of theology in the shade. There is no difficulty for which they have not a solution, no dim shadowing forth of the elusive and the impalpable which they are unable to classify, no unveiling of the eternal within the confines of time for which they have not the appropriate formula. Of the loftiest truths of religion they proclaim themselves the prophets; of its most sacred mysteries they constitute themselves the priests. And they lord it over men of simple faith with loud-voiced insolence. Belief in the supernatural they deride as superstition, and they recognise as established truth only such things as lie within their own ken. And as a result of their efforts they boast that the idea of the miraculous in Christianity

—and here let me quote the arresting words of Lecky—
 “has been driven from almost all its entrenchments,
 and now quivers faintly and feebly through the mists of
 nineteen hundred years.”

With regard to the Resurrection, for example, to which the ascension of Elijah furnishes the closest analogy, and of which, indeed, it may be regarded as a figure and a prophecy, the “strong men” have been set to work, and their labours have led to explanations of the same terrestrial character as were pressed upon Elisha with reference to the earlier event. In its general form the underlying assumption on which these explanations are based is expressed in the melodious verse of a Victorian poet :

“Far-off He lies
 In the lorn Syrian town,
 And on His grave with shining eyes
 The Syrian stars look down.”

This is almost the exact counterpart of the “mountain-or-valley” conclusion reached by the sons of the prophets. Reduced to the definiteness of prose this theory assumes a variety of forms. One is that Jesus never died ; He had simply swooned, and His supposed Resurrection was nothing more than a recovery from unconsciousness. Another is that His body had been stolen by His disciples, who then practised an imposition upon the world. Yet another is that the disciples were under a delusion, occasioned by the excitement naturally arising from the circumstances in which they were placed. And perhaps the most extraordinary view of all is that Jesus made communications of a spiritualistic character to His disciples from the realm of the dead. All this is gravely advanced in the name of enlightenment and scientific investigation.

It is not difficult to show the absurdity of these conclusions. What they chiefly disclose is an utter lack of capacity to appreciate the facts. The truth of the matter is that the “strong men” of the intellect are not qualified to explore the realm of the spiritual. The

instruments of their research—their sciences and philosophies—are radically unfitted for such a task, and must be reserved for their appropriate functions—*ne sutor supra crepidam*. There are facts of religion, not less real than the plainest physical phenomena, which belong to the region of the unseen and the eternal, and therefore lie beyond the range of the clearest natural vision. There are experiences of the Christian life which, in their illuminating and transforming effects, transcend all earthly influence. Or, to adopt the Apostle's emphatic words with regard to "the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him": *Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard*—this excludes the operation of the senses; *neither have entered into the heart of man*—this extends the restriction to the intellectual powers; *but God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit*—this bring us directly to a supernatural agency.

Religion has its own "strong men" who are qualified to search out the remotest bounds of its territory. Their names are Faith, Hope, and Love. These nobler sons of strength, like David's immortal heroes long ago, break through all the encircling limitations of sense, and bring back the living water from the well of Bethlehem. Through their instrumentality the believer holds intercourse with an unseen Lord. He looks upon the face of Jesus, and listens to His voice; so he has the witness in himself, and is really independent of external evidences.

" And not for signs in heaven above,
Or earth below they look,
Who know with John His smile of love,
With Peter His rebuke."

Foolish, however, and preposterous as are the theories of the rationalist, it is generally useless to try to argue him into faith. Just as the sons of the prophets were not restrained from their purpose by the disapproving words of Elisha, so the opponents of the supernatural are seldom convinced by verbal disputations. It is

better to let them put forth their strength to the utmost, if haply they may learn wisdom in the end through the experience of failure. Sometimes, indeed, as in the case of Lord Lyttleton and Gilbert West, they set out to scoff, but came back to pray.

In any case, there is little doubt that the clearest evidence of Christianity is after all the nearest; it is the sign of the living and ever-present fact. Was there no evidence at all with reference to the ascension of Elijah that should have sufficed for the sons of the prophets? Unquestionably there was; out of their own mouth we can condemn them. "The spirit of Elijah," they said, "doth rest upon Elisha." The evidence that Elijah had gone up into glory was simply Elisha. The power which Elisha wielded was a sign of the truth of his testimony. Similarly the first Apostles of the Resurrection were themselves the unanswerable proof of the fact which they proclaimed. The Spirit of the risen Christ descended upon them in wonder-working power, and Easter was attested by Pentecost. And so the enduring sign of Christianity as a religion of supernatural power is the Christian. On him also the Spirit of Jesus rests, and he bears the fruits of a risen and transfigured life. "Instead of the thorn" there has "come up the fir-tree," "and instead of the brier" there has "come up the myrtle-tree"; and this mighty transformation is "to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

IV

THE HEALING OF THE WATERS

“ And he went forth unto the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there, and said, Thus saith the Lord, I have healed these waters ; there shall not be from thence any more death or barren land.”—2 KINGS ii. 21.

ELISHA, to begin with, took up his abode at Jericho, and it was there that he performed the first miracle of his public ministry. The City of Jericho occupied a situation of remarkable natural beauty. It stood in the midst of a broad plain, some five or six miles west of the Jordan, and commanded a noble and extensive prospect. In the background on the west rose the broad-based Quarantana Mountain, while far off to the east stretched the white hills of Moab. The soil was unexampled for fertility ; palms of various kinds flourished in abundance ; and the air was filled with the fragrance of numerous aromatic shrubs. There was only one drawback to the pleasantness of the situation, but that was a fatal one. The water supply was defective. The fountain on which the town and its neighbourhood depended for health and fruitfulness was somehow vitiated, and its waters, instead of being a source of life and refreshing to the community, carried death and barrenness whithersoever they flowed. The earth ceased to yield her increase ; and the words of the narrative suggest that even the life of man and beast may have suffered through the prevailing corruption. To this extent the curse that long ago, through the lips of Joshua, had been pronounced against Jericho still lingered.

The loftiness of Elisha's character soon made a

profound impression upon the people among whom he dwelt. So completely did he gain their confidence that, in their distress at the desolation wrought by the tainted waters, they instinctively turned to him for help. They laid before him the trouble which clouded their happiness, and left the facts of their need to make their own appeal to his heart. The prophet readily responded to this call upon his newly acquired resources. He earned the lasting gratitude of Jericho by healing the waters which had exercised so disastrous an influence upon its life.

Under such circumstances did Elisha enter upon his long career of gracious and beneficent ministry. His first miracle summed up within itself the character of his whole mission. It may also, as we have already noticed, be regarded as a symbol of the healing efficacy of the Gospel of Christ.

I

THE CONDITION OF JERICHO REPRESENTS A STATE OF NEED WHICH IS STILL PREVALENT THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.—That condition is described in the words used by the men of the city in setting their case before Elisha. "The situation of this city," said they, "is pleasant, as my lord seeth; but the water is naught, and the ground barren." Here we have a tragic combination of circumstances, the reality of which in the case of Jericho has already been indicated. A delightful landscape watered by the streams of death; a charming outward appearance with corruption at the seat of life: this was the crucial fact in the problem that was presented to Elisha. It is a combination which unhappily is still found in many spheres of life.

We find it in every instance in which natural beauty is the mask of spiritual death. The world around us, for example, is full of glory. On every hand a thousand beauties meet the observant eye. Earth and sky, hill and plain, meadow, grove, and stream—each has its

distinctive loveliness. From "the splendour of the grass" to the glory of the starry heavens; from the painting of the lily to the sovereign majesty of the hills; from the glint of the dewdrop to the shimmering expanse of ocean, God's handiwork is everywhere fair to look upon.

"The rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the rose;
The moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare;
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair."

Beyond doubt "the situation is pleasant." Everything seems designed to minister to the comfort and delight of man. But there is another side to this outward attractiveness. It is not necessary to refer to the sanguinary strife that is continually being waged beneath the sunshine, although that is a fact that has staggered not a few sensitive minds. John Stuart Mill indeed goes so far as to allege that "nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another are Nature's everyday performances"; but this is an exaggerated indictment. It is a still more overwhelming fact that in the midst of such boundless wealth of natural beauty we are confronted on every hand with the blight of sin. Throughout the length and breadth of the pleasing prospect there flow the desolating streams of moral evil. Man, the crown of God's handiwork, is defiled in soul. The spring of human life is tainted, and so the fruits of human conduct are corrupt. "The water is naught, and the ground is barren."

In daily life, again, we sometimes meet with people who possess a great deal of charm. It may be the winsomeness of physical beauty, or it may be the deeper attraction of an amiable character. They are bright and cheerful in disposition, loyal to their obligations, generous in their judgments, and, altogether, appear to cherish a lofty ideal of life. "The situation" is un-

deniably "pleasant." They win a high place in our regard, and sometimes their radiance is so diffusive that the sunshine seems to come with them when they come, and to go with them when they go. But one thing is lacking. Their heart has never been won for Jesus Christ. They are strangers to the power of religion. They themselves, perhaps, would be the first to acknowledge that their life has no conscious reference to the will of God. The Spirit of Christ is not within them as a living fountain. They are destitute of that inward power which is the spring of all right conduct, and so the fruits of their life are not unto the glory of God. "The water is naught, and the ground is barren."

We find the same combination, again, wherever there is civilisation without the power of true religion. Civilisation, beyond question, brings a great many advantages in its train. It brings commercial prosperity and secures the diffusion of knowledge. It produces gentler manners and milder laws. It brings to men the priceless boon of freedom. It begets those courtesies and refinements, those graces and accomplishments, which lend a charm to social life. "The situation," assuredly, "is pleasant." But civilisation has its dangers as well as its benefits. The only thing that in any circumstance will keep the heart of a nation clean is the power of a pure religion. In a highly cultured community this preservative is specially needed, and when it is lacking the body politic too frequently becomes a prey to corruption. The spread of wealth opens the door for innumerable forms of self-indulgence. The hardy virtues of a primitive state give place to the extravagances of luxury, and life too readily resolves itself into a pursuit of pleasure and amusement. There are vices which are peculiar to advanced stages of civilisation. It is possible to be "in wickedness refined." "A languid epicureanism," says Lecky, "is the normal condition of nations which have attained a high intellectual or social civilisation, but which, through political causes, have no adequate

sphere for the exertion of their energies," or which, let it be added, are lacking in the safeguards of religious principle.

The classic examples of such inward decadence in the midst of the highest outward development are found, of course, in the history of ancient Greece and Rome. But to these familiar examples of antiquity there must now be added another, not less remarkable, belonging to our own time. The Great War has proved to us that modern "culture" may be accompanied by a disregard of moral obligations, a falsity in word and a cruelty in deed, such as have seldom been paralleled in the history of the world. The proof of this is recorded for ever in the sad pages of French and Belgian story. And what the smoking homes, the wasted fields, the ruined Cathedrals and Universities, and the slaughtered women and children of Belgium testify to is a tragic unsoundness at the heart of an otherwise enlightened and progressive people. The water of a once pure and virile faith has come to be "naught," and therefore the ground is "barren."

And is there not a loud call to us in these days, and in view of these facts, to look into our own national condition? In certain respects it is not well with us; there are features of our case indeed that furnish a parallel to the circumstances of Jericho long ago. Our social life for example is, from some points of view, undeniably "pleasant"; but there are elements beneath the surface which cannot be viewed without grave misgivings. The light and graceful sketches of Mr G. W. E. Russell—to select an authority whose testimony is all the more convincing because he does not write with a deliberately serious purpose—revealed to us not so long ago the utterly irreligious condition of what is known as "Society" as a whole, while the daily newspaper furnishes ample proof that the lack of religion is followed to an appalling extent by its natural fruit of moral corruption.

Of course it is easy to take too dark a view of the situation. The War undoubtedly brought to light

qualities in our national life which to a great extent rebuked our despondency and relieved our fears. The patriotism of our people, the courage and endurance of our men, the unshrinking devotion to duty which found expression among all ranks and classes of the community, the loyalty of the national conscience to the obligations of truth and honour—these are things that are worthy of our noblest traditions; they are things that have won the admiration of the world, and that have been a surprise even to ourselves. But notwithstanding all this, there are still many disquieting elements in the situation. One of these is that the disease which used to find its prey mainly among the leisured classes, has extended its ravages throughout all ranks of the people. The chief characteristic of that disease is forgetfulness of God. On every hand there is a weakening of faith in the unseen. On every hand we find the neglect of religion and the blight of materialism, a frank abandonment to pleasure and a fierce impatience of restraint. And the experiences of the War have not yet cured us. God is calling our land to repentance and renewed allegiance; but our pride and worldliness are still far from being subdued. Not yet have we come as a nation to the feet of Christ. And so long as the water thus continues to be "naught," the ground will also continue to be "barren."

Once more, the combination found in Jericho is illustrated wherever there is Religion without life. There may be a great deal that is pleasant in connection with one's religion, while, at the same time, there is an utter lack of spiritual power. The outward appearance may be comely, while the inward condition is fatally wrong. And what is true in the domain of the individual soul is not less applicable within the wider sphere of our corporate religious life. It will be granted that a general feature of present-day Christianity is the endeavour to make religion a thing of pleasantness. The end in view is obvious, and in itself is entitled to be regarded with sympathy. It is to win for the Church the multitudes

who are disposed to fly the sermon, and who regard with indifference the concerns of the other world. In order to draw such as these into the House of God, and to arouse if possible their interest in spiritual things, the services of the Sanctuary, it is held, must enter into competition with the attractions of worldly entertainment. Hence in our public worship there is a disposition to sacrifice almost everything to brightness. The sermon is reduced to an affair of some fifteen minutes, and its pleasing qualities are its outstanding characteristic. The "service" is "the thing," if not to "catch the conscience" of the sinner, at least to fill the pews of the church. In connection with our congregational life there are innumerable gatherings of a social character, in which the element of pleasantness is unmistakable, although the religious element is sometimes hard to discover. There is a deliberate attempt to eliminate from religion, in its aspects alike of doctrine and of worship, everything that is repellent to the natural man. And the result is that we have succeeded to a great extent in earning for our religious life the description applied in those far-off days to the condition of Jericho—"the situation," above everything else, "is pleasant."

But what in the end of the day is the result of these well-meant efforts? Have our bright services in any real sense been proved to be a success? Have they been attended by the miracle of conversion? Have they helped to make saints? Do we find them to be a medium of saving power, as well as a source of pleasant entertainment? Is Christ being crowned with glory and honour in the return of the penitent, or in the homage of the consecrated soul? These are questions that leave us dumb with perplexity and shame. For is it not our daily cry, whatever be the form in which our complaint becomes articulate, that notwithstanding the readiness of the Church to accommodate the requirements of religion to the tastes of the world, her efforts are productive of very little appreciable good? The

situation indeed is "pleasant," but the ground continues woefully "barren."

And the reason for this comparative failure—is it far to seek? Are we not emasculating the Gospel in our endeavours to make religion popular? It is a recreant pulpit that tones down or ignores the severer aspects of the counsel of God, and it can scarcely hope to be a channel of converting or sanctifying power. Of the streams that proceed from it must we not say that, instead of being vital and healing, they are "naught"? There is a danger that we are degrading the majesty of the Evangel by our trim and dainty sermonettes. There is a danger that we are profaning the Sanctuary by services in which carnality finds itself at home, and the slumbers of the guilty conscience are seldom disturbed. We are hurting and not helping the Kingdom of Christ when we lower the standard of discipleship. We are both wronging the souls of others and depriving ourselves of one of our mightiest spiritual dynamics when we represent Christianity as a religion without a Cross. And the gravest danger of all is that through our lack of confidence in the preaching of the Gospel we are grieving the Holy Spirit of God.

II

THE REMEDY APPLIED TO THE NEED OF JERICHO MAY BE VIEWED AS A FIGURE OF THE GOSPEL PROVISION.—There are three things that call for notice in Elisha's work of healing.

First of all, he used unlikely means. The saucerful of salt with which he made his way to the unwholesome fountain was far from promising. For one thing, the salt in itself might be regarded as more likely to cause barrenness than to cure it, the Salt Sea being a standing witness in support of this view; while the unfavourable impression produced by the smallness of the cruse could scarcely have been counteracted by the fact of its newness. Had there been any sceptical onlookers in

Jericho as the prophet set off with his unpretentious remedy to the source of the corruption they would no doubt have regarded his project as an excellent theme for merriment. It seemed so utterly futile an expedient—a handful of salt to cleanse a fountain that supplied a city and a countryside! Was it not too preposterous to be treated seriously?

Is not Elisha's cure for the waters of Jericho suggestive of the Divine remedy for a sin-polluted world? God also uses unlikely means to accomplish His mighty work of healing. The salt in the cruse corresponds to the evangelical treasure in the earthen vessel. The men to whom He commits the ministry of reconciliation may be as unimposing to the outward view as Elisha's cruse. They may have no great depth of understanding, and no great breadth of erudition. Their natural capacities from every point of view may obviously be of limited range. They wear no insignia to mark their exalted office. They bear no symbol to confirm their heavenly authority. They too are often despised and rejected of men. But in one further particular they also resemble the prophet's cruse: they are clean vessels. Do not overlook the significance of the fact that Elisha demanded for his purpose a new cruse. Do not forget that this circumstance illustrates the more momentous fact that God is wont to use converted men, men who have been made new creatures in Christ Jesus, as the instruments of His saving work. The vessel is plainly a vessel of earth; it is not made of silver or of gold; there is nothing in its outward appearance on which the eye is likely to linger; but one indispensable condition of its being accepted as a vessel of honour, meet for the Master's use, is that it be a new vessel, fresh and clean from the hand of the Potter.

And if the messengers often incur in the judgment of the world the reproach of weakness, does not the message itself appear from the same point of view to be altogether inadequate for its purpose? It is by "the foolishness of preaching" that it has pleased God to save the world.

How utterly hopeless a method it seems! That the proclamation of a simple message, the quiet unfolding of the story of the Cross, and the issuing thereupon of a call to repent and believe the good news contained in that story, should be the means of regenerating the world, of cleansing its corruption, and of healing its barrenness—it seems wildly impossible! How readily might the unbeliever, whose eyes had never beheld the glory of the Lord, have scoffed at the commission given by Christ to His apostles on the eve of His departure from the earth: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." What a parallel it provided, of course on a vastly wider scale, to the method of Elisha at Jericho! It was no doubt magnificent; even the sceptic must have admitted that; but was it not magnificent folly? But the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. Christ crucified has been proved throughout the ages to be the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.

In the second place, the prophet went to the source of the trouble. He did not try to operate upon the impure streams, but went direct to "the spring of the waters," and cast the salt in there. It would have done little good to apply his remedy to the overflow, while the fountain itself remained corrupt. Elisha grappled with the evil at its source.

This is also God's method in all His cleansing operations. He goes to the root of the evil. Whenever He begins a work of healing, He casts His salt into the infecting spring. In saving the individual, for example, He begins by regenerating the heart. The heart is the seat of corruption, and it is its overflow "that defileth the man." Christ spoke with great plainness about the streams of death that proceed from this poisoned spring. So long as the heart remains unrenewed, there cannot be the fruits of a holy life. There may indeed be some measure of outward reformation. There may be a wrestling with evil habits and a striving against depraved

inclinations. But there cannot be a victorious life. Sin in unsubdued in the heart, and will therefore continue to assert its supremacy in the life. The fountain is polluted, and it is hopeless work to keep filtering at the streams.

What every sinful man and women supremely needs is a change of heart ; and the only thing that will change the heart, with a change that is vital and saving, is the salt of the grace of God. But the transformation wrought by the introduction of this purifying leaven falls nothing short of miraculous. Grace is ever a conquering and regnant thing. Through its influence old things pass away, and all things become new. New desires and aspirations take possession of the heart ; new aims and motives govern the life. The love of sin is cast out through "the expulsive power of a new affection." The fountain is cleansed, and gives forth, not the old polluted streams, but "rivers of living water." The salt has accomplished its healing work.

Not otherwise is the case when the cleansing process is carried out on a more extensive scale. Whatever be the sphere in which corruption manifests itself, the remedy, in order to be really effective, must be applied to the root of the disease. The efforts which do not touch "the spring of the waters" are only superficial, and the good effects are never lasting. If the malady takes the form of barrenness within the Church, the cure must be radical and pervasive. The outward impoverishment is symptomatic of inward declension, and the hidden springs of life require to be cleansed and replenished. The only thing to turn the wilderness into a fruitful field is a true spiritual revival. The perfecting of the external mechanism may be necessary ; but outward organisation is a poor substitute for the quickening energy of the Holy Ghost. When God revives His Church, He casts His salt into the secret reservoir, and the remedy operates from within. Men see the glory of the Kingdom with the clearness of anointed eyes ; their hearts are cleansed ; their zeal

is revived; their efforts become effective. The pulpit regains its authority, and religion is restored to its rightful place as the governing influence in human life.

So must it also be with regard to the troubles that disturb the nation. At the present hour our own land is passing through an experience of widespread unrest. Within various departments of our corporate life there are recurrent eruptions which must be regarded as the sign of ominous forces working beneath the surface. The old feud between Capital and Labour is still unsettled. The problem of poverty almost as urgently as ever clamours for solution. Intemperance, vice, and crime are still the reproach of our streets. For these crying evils various remedies are proposed. The schemes of the Socialist are advanced as a panacea for our national troubles. Legislation undoubtedly has accomplished much, and should yet accomplish more. Philanthropic effort has also in various directions proved a healing force. But these alleviations, after all, are nothing more than a filtering of the unclean streams. The real cure will only come when the salt of Divine grace is brought to bear upon "the spring of the waters." What too many schemes of Social reform appear to leave out of account is the inherent corruption of the human heart. The hearts of men must be regenerated through the power of the gospel before the ideals of social unity and brotherhood can be realised. It is when the love of Christ is operative in the soul that our natural selfishness is overcome, and we truly recognise the claims of others. Then only will streams of healthy influence flow through every department of our public life. The rod of the oppressor will cease; the laws of the country will reflect the mind of Christ; and men shall dwell together in unity as brethren in the Lord.

Once more, Elisha ascribed all the glory of the work to God. His words, as he cast the salt into the fountain, were, "Thus saith the Lord, I have healed these waters." He did not claim any of the credit for himself. He was only the humble channel of the healing power of God.

It was in dependence upon the might of the Lord that he confronted his task, and for that reason he did not stagger at the seeming futility of the remedy. One reason, indeed, why so weak a medium was chosen for so great a work was that the glory of the unseen power which rendered it effectual might thereby be the more clearly revealed. Elisha accordingly was careful to direct the thoughts of the men of Jericho to their real Benefactor.

The messengers of the gospel must always maintain a similar attitude of self-effacement toward their Master and His work. The success of their mission depends in the last resort, not upon their own efforts, but upon the might of their Lord, and at the best they are but unprofitable servants. To the conquering might of Christ, therefore, they must ever point their hearers, and to Him they must ascribe the praise of all their work. Of some eminent preachers of a former generation in Scotland it was said that men could not see Christ over their heads. This, if it was at all true, was an unintentional obscuring of the Master; but even such an unwitting injustice the servant of Christ must be at pains to avoid. The toil of the sower has its own place, but it is God that giveth the increase. The treasure is put in the earthen vessel that the excellency of the power may be seen to be of God. The message may seem foolish, and the messenger may be really weak; but infinite wisdom and power are with Him who said, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."

III

LAST OF ALL, THE SUCCESS OF ELISHA'S REMEDY ILLUSTRATES THE EFFECTS OF THE GOSPEL IN HUMAN LIFE.—The salt fulfilled its purpose. The fountain was at once and for ever healed, and no longer proved a source of death and barrenness to the community. Its pure streams now diffused a blessing throughout the neighbourhood, and Jericho again rejoiced and blossomed

as the rose. The palms once more revived ; the fields yielded their appropriate fruits ; and the pleasantness of the situation was matched by the productiveness of the land.

This mighty transformation is a symbol of the fruits of the gospel within the moral and spiritual domain. Once the heart is cleansed through the regenerating power of the Spirit of Christ there is no more death or barren land. There remains indeed a conflict, but the victory of the believer is sure. The curse is for ever removed from his soul, and grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.

V

THE JUDGMENT OF BETHEL

“ And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord.—2 KINGS ii. 24.

How long Elisha remained in Jericho we do not know. Of one thing, however, we may be tolerably certain; when he left the place it would have been amid the regrets of the whole city. For he had rendered a great and lasting service to the community, and his presence in Jericho would have been regarded as a pledge of the Divine favour. But, for the time being, the prophet's work in the city of palm-trees was done, and we next find him making his way along the steep and rugged ascent that led to Bethel, in the uplands of Benjamin.

There is little doubt that his fame preceded him; so notable an achievement as the healing of the waters of Jericho would naturally have been noised abroad. It would be reasonable therefore to suppose that his coming to this other city would have been hailed with delight. In Bethel, too, there was, no doubt, room for a work of healing; and the visit of a prophet who was known to wield such marvellous and beneficent powers might be expected to have given rise to feelings of joyful anticipation. But it was no kindly reception that awaited Elisha when he appeared. His approach was not, indeed, viewed with indifference. He was met, as he drew near, by certain representatives of the city; but it was not words of welcome that they addressed to him, but coarse jests and biting profanities. And the prophet did not meekly endure this insulting treatment. He retaliated with what, in the circumstances, looks

like undue resentment. The whole incident is at first sight one of the most perplexing in Elisha's career.

I

For one thing it is an incident about which the enemies of the Bible have sometimes said hard things. They have used it as a weapon with which to attack the religion of Elisha, and, in the end, of Elisha's God. How harsh and unfeeling, say they, must have been the heart of the man who could curse a band of little children for making fun of his looks in an hour of thoughtless merriment. How unlovely is the religion which could lend its sanction to such an atrocity. Even the friends of the Bible have been troubled in trying to account for the conduct of the prophet in some satisfactory way. Some of them have endeavoured to get rid of the difficulty by explaining away, with varying degrees of ingenuity, the she-bears. It is not necessary, however, to resort to such questionable devices in order to find an explanation of the incident that will commend itself to right-thinking minds. When once the facts are rightly understood, the features of the case that seem repellent entirely disappear.

To begin with, it seems clear that it was not a company of "little children" that met Elisha at all, but a band of youths. The word used in the Hebrew often means "young men." "It is the same word which in other portions of the Old Testament is applied to Isaac on Mount Moriah, to Joseph when he was seventeen years of age, to Solomon when he was twenty, and to the prophet Jeremiah at the period when he was called upon to assume the sacred office." To apprehend this single fact is to invest the occurrence with a new significance. The stroke of judgment fell, not on thoughtless little children, but on lads who at least had arrived at years of responsibility.

But had the attack of these lads upon Elisha any deeper and more sinister meaning than lies on the

surface? Is their rudeness to be ascribed merely to an excess of animal spirits? Was it simply an instance of that irresponsible jocularity which is so often manifested by youthful spirits, especially when banded together in considerable numbers? There can be no doubt as to the answer which these questions should receive. The hostility shown to Elisha was no unpremeditated frolic, but a deliberate and organised attempt to bring discredit upon the prophet of Jehovah, and so to render ineffective his mission to Bethel. For Bethel, we must remember, was not at this time true to its name. It was no longer the House of God; it had come to be Bethaven, the House of Vanity. It was a centre of the rival system of worship established in the land by Jeroboam. The people of Bethel worshipped a golden calf, and had priests who led them in the ways of idolatry. To what extent this original defection was influenced by the new apostasy introduced by Jezebel it is impossible to determine. But in any case the glory had departed from Bethel. It was the stronghold of a false religion, which, it need not be said, was in deadly conflict with the old and true religion of Israel.

Bearing this fact in mind, we may without much difficulty reconstruct the occurrences which issued in this tragic encounter. It became known in Bethel that Elisha, the mighty prophet of the Lord, was coming to pay a visit to the city. His fame, of course, had travelled before him. It would have been noised throughout the land how Elijah had been seen ascending to heaven in a fiery chariot, and how Elisha was carrying on his mission, and doing the same mighty works. And the idol-worshippers of Bethel resolved to do their utmost to prevent this strange dealer in miracles from disturbing their peace and comfort. The priests would have been keenly sensible of the menace to their own authority which Elisha's presence in the community would involve. Their craft would be in danger, and their god might be dethroned. Accordingly they proceeded to organise a hostile demonstration, with a

view to bringing the prophet and his work into public contempt before he had time to make his influence felt in the place. Gathering together a band of young lads, to whom their project only too warmly commended itself, they sent them forth to meet Elisha on his way, in order that they might openly insult himself and his religion. And these youthful champions loyally fulfilled their commission. They let loose upon the prophet the venom of their ribald tongues, and did their utmost to cover him with ridicule. Their attack had reference not merely to Elisha himself, whose personal appearance was made the subject of offensive comment; it was also directed against the cause which he represented. The "go up" of their invective plainly alludes to the ascension of Elijah, and the prophet is challenged to prove the reality of that alleged event by a display of similar miraculous powers.

This appears to be the true significance of the incident. The scene that was witnessed that day on the outskirts of Bethel was really a conflict between two religions. It was indeed an engagement in the age-long warfare which is being waged between darkness and light, between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, between Satan and the Living God. In Bethel Satan had his seat, and behind the opposition of priests and people lay the subtlety and malice of the arch-enemy. The attack upon Elisha accordingly was a kind of public challenge to the religion of Jehovah on the part of the forces of darkness. The strength of the one religion was measured against that of the other. It was necessary, therefore, that the majesty and authority of the God of Israel should be vindicated. It was no mere personal discourtesy that Elisha resented. It was no conflict involving simply his own honour and reputation in which he was engaged. The Cause of the Living God was on its trial, and it became imperative that it should openly prevail.

Elisha looked at his young assailants before he smote them. The meaning of that look we can only con-

jecture. Did it convey a mute appeal to their better nature? Was it a silent attempt to bring them to their right mind? If it was, it failed of its purpose. The scoffers persisted in their scorning; and then the arm of judgment was raised; and the proud young spirits that had dared to touch the Lord's anointed and to do His prophet harm were crushed beneath its stroke. At Jericho the curse had been lifted; at Bethel it was made to fall. And across the gulf of the centuries there comes to us still the warning voice, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked."

One cannot fail to recognise the parallel to this unwelcome experience of Elisha's which is found in the earthly life of our Lord. Christ's first miracle in Cana of Galilee corresponded to Elisha's work of healing in Jericho. He turned the water into wine. And that gracious work of His, like the first public act of Elisha, was a symbol of His whole mission into the world. He came to change the weak and beggarly elements of the old economy into the rich and gladdening wine of the Kingdom of Heaven, the water of weak, sinful, human nature into the wine of a more abundant life.

But after Cana came Nazareth. Jesus ere long made His way to the little town where the silent years of His life had been passed. The fame of His recent works had preceded Him. On the Sabbath day He entered the Synagogue, as His custom in former days had been, and there made known His mission, and unfolded His claims. But the men of Nazareth did not rejoice in the light which had come to shine upon them. They resented the lofty note of authority with which the Preacher spoke. And their hostility found expression in exactly the same channels as did that of the scoffers of Bethel toward Elisha. First of all there was the attempt at personal disparagement. Was not this Joseph's son—the village carpenter whom they had all known from His earliest years? What amazing claims were these He was advancing on His own behalf? Soon the eyes which at first had been so intently fixed upon Him, began "to

glow with the malignant light of jealousy and hatred," and the voices which had been hushed into wondering silence began to make themselves heard in mutterings of resentment. Then, as had happened in the case of the Old Testament prophet, there was the demand—answered, indeed, by our Lord, and dismissed, before it had time to become articulate—that He should make good His claims by a miracle, as they had heard He had done in Capernaum. But He refused to gratify their curiosity, and justified His action by an appeal to the ministry of Elijah and Elisha—the allusion is profoundly suggestive—as affording instances of a similar exclusiveness in the exercise of miraculous powers. Then the wrath of His audience overleaped all restraints. They "rose up and thrust Him out of the city, and led Him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast Him down headlong." And on Nazareth also, as upon Bethel, the stroke of judgment fell. There was not, indeed, in their case any visible manifestation of the Divine displeasure. But Jesus, "passing through the midst of them, went His way." That was the form of their punishment. Their season of opportunity passed away for ever. Never again, so far as we can learn, did the Sun of Righteousness arise upon Nazareth.

II

Elisha's first miracle was a work of healing, and it represented the character of his ministry as a whole, and at the same time foreshadowed the grace of the gospel. But the fact that the second occasion on which he wielded his supernatural powers was to inflict a stroke of judgment has also its typical significance. And the parable is not hard to interpret. The incident of Bethel reminds us that the gospel, which is primarily a revelation of grace, has also its side of judgment. To some it is a savour of life unto life; to others it is a savour of death unto death. The work of judgment is going on continually. Christ's fan is never out of His

hand. Wherever the message of the gospel is proclaimed, its hearers are being judged according to the reception which they give to it. The two sides of the truth must receive their appropriate emphasis. The side of grace and mercy is, of course, the aspect which imparts its characteristic complexion to the evangel; but we dare not overlook the stern and awful element. The ambassador of Christ is charged with the duty of binding as well as of loosing. He proclaims, first of all, the conditions of the Divine forgiveness; but with the same authority he unfolds the consequences of the sinner's impenitence. Repent or perish is a formula which may be said to sum up the tremendous alternatives of the word of Christ. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life"—that is the one side; "and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him"—that is the other side.

Did it not seem altogether unlike Elisha to have manifested so severe and terrible a spirit—Elisha who was so gentle and compassionate in personal character, and so gracious and helpful in his public actions? It was indeed a "strange work" for such a man to execute, but the stern necessities of the case compelled him, for the time being, to become an instrument of judgment. So is it also with a greater than Elisha, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is infinitely kind, and tender, and pitiful. A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench. He came not to destroy men's lives, but to save them. His hands—those hands that for us men and our salvation were nailed to the accursed tree—are stretched out toward sinners in ceaseless entreaty and invitation. But Christ is a Judge as well as a Saviour; in the Lamb there is wrath as well as meekness. Sometimes during the days of His flesh, there flashed forth from the placid depths of that meekness the white flame of His indignation against wrong. Even now in this present world He is exercising His judicial function. And one day He shall sit on the Throne of Judgment, and before Him shall be gathered

all nations : and He shall separate them one from another as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats. In that day—

“ When mysteries shall be revealed ;
All secrets be unsealed ;
When things of night, when things of shame,
Shall find at last a name,
Pealed for a hissing and a curse
Throughout the universe ”—

the terribleness of the judgment shall be made manifest.

Do we not need in these easy times to be reminded of the element of sternness which runs through the true evangelical message ? We live in days when, to a large extent, the attitude of the pulpit has become deferential and even obsequious. Its tone is too apologetic. It is so afraid of giving offence that its teaching has become almost toothless. Too seldom does the preacher find a place in his message for the “ judgment to come ” ; is it any wonder therefore that men’s consciences are not often startled ? The picture is flooded with sunshine, and even in the background the shadow of the Day of the Lord is scarcely allowed to fall. Beyond question there is need for a more arresting presentation of the Christian verities.

“ The Gospel,” says Dr Maclaren, “ has a rough side, and is by no means a ‘ soothing syrup ’ merely.” It has a judicial aspect which must receive its appropriate place in the declaration of the whole counsel of God. It sets forth the Divine remedy for the sinner’s need ; but it also takes into account the consequences of the sinner’s impenitence. It speaks of life on the one hand, and of death on the other. It seeks to move the heart, with its proclamation of the unsearchable riches of Christ as the sinner’s Friend, but it also aims at impressing the conscience with its disclosure of the awful authority of Christ as the sinner’s Judge. In the heart of its message stands the redeeming Cross ; but there is also a place for the great White Throne.

The servant of Christ accordingly has sometimes to

speak with a stern voice. He is not always to be a preacher of smooth things. His mission is not solely "to soothe and bless." He must thunder forth the terrors of the judgment as well as unfold the consolations of Christ. Necessity is laid upon him to give its due place to every aspect of his message, whether his utterances are in every case palatable to his hearers or not. Sometimes indeed his loyalty to truth may compel him to use a directness of expression which verges upon rudeness. One remembers Knox before Queen Mary, and Andrew Melville in the presence of James VI. But in such cases it would not have suited the circumstances to use milder terms. Among the weightiest words ever penned by Carlyle are those in which he defends the Scottish Reformer against the charge of coarseness so often laid against him in connection with his speeches to the young Queen. "It was unfortunately not possible," he declares, "to be polite with the Queen of Scotland unless one proved untrue to the Nation and Cause of Scotland." The cause of truth often requires a similar plainness of speech.

III

There are one or two lessons that we should carry away with us from the study of this incident. One is that if our religion has any reality in it, if it asserts itself as a practical force in the world, we may expect to meet with opposition. This is an experience which our Lord promised to His followers; and in a greater or less degree it has been the lot of the true Church of God in every age. The days in which religion is the supreme thing in the life of men, when they live nearest to God, when their convictions are deepest, and their loyalty is strongest, are often, if not invariably, days of tribulation and reproach. Elisha's religion had proved itself to be a thing of power, and the forces of darkness set themselves in array against it almost without delay. If we have fallen on a less troublous time, it is not

because the character of the world has improved, but, we have reason to fear, because the quality of our religion has deteriorated. Be this as it may, it is an undoubted fact that in the measure in which Christianity has continued throughout the generations to be the luminous and pervasive thing which turned the world upside down in the days of the Apostles, the followers of Christ have had to endure hardness on many a strenuous field. The reproach of the Cross has not ceased. The enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, between the posterity of Ishmael and the true seed of Abraham, has not yet been slain. The banner of the Cross moves on its conquering way "through fire and water." The disciples of Jesus drink, in some measure, of the cup of their Lord. And the more closely they are conformed to His likeness, the more fully do they share His experience. The more vital and aggressive their religion is, the more emphatically is the godlessness of the world rebuked, and the more intensely therefore is its enmity aroused. Let us not be discouraged, accordingly, if our relations with the unbelieving world are not always of the most harmonious character. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his Master, and the servant as his Lord.

It is to the young, however, that the special message of the "strange work" of Bethel is addressed. The assailants of Elisha, as we have seen, were young men, and it was upon them that the stroke of judgment fell. The warning of the incident may well be laid to heart, therefore, by the youth of every age. When we examine the methods by which the attack upon the prophet was carried out, we find that they were of a kind that often finds favour with young men, and that enjoys an extensive popularity in our own twentieth century. Two elements, indeed, emerge in the attack which was directed against Elisha.

The first is Scepticism.¹ The reference of the "go up," which occupies so prominent a place in the assault, has already been indicated. The words allude to the

ascension of Elijah, and are designed to show the scorn of young Bethel for so fantastic a concoction. The prophet had to face a storm of contemptuous incredulity. The followers of the religion of Bethel refused to believe that Elijah had gone up in the way which his disciple described. They cast the thing up to Elisha now as a kind of joke. Let him give some proof of a story so marvellous. He is the successor of Elijah: let him follow his example, and "go up" himself, and so give a sign of the reality of his religion.

Now, there are few things in the world that are finer than when a young man uses his powers, and the freshness of his zeal, on the side of Christ; there are few things sadder than when he puts forth his strength as an enemy of religion. In our own time beyond question there is among young people a great deal of open contempt for sacred things. Many influences are at work to produce this result. On every hand men are seen casting away their religious ideals, and adopting views that are avowedly of the earth earthy. Infidel literature has its own unsettling effect. There is a considerable amount also of loud speaking in the name of Science. Many whose scientific attainments are confined to a few phrases and catch-words are among the loudest in proclaiming the overthrow of religious beliefs. There is even a boldness which is claimed in the interests of truth itself. There are those who with the cry of liberty and reason on their lips rush in where angels fear to tread. Nothing is too high for the reach of their powers, nothing too holy to abash their prying curiosity. Of their order is the man who will

"Peep and botanise
Upon his mother's grave."

And with all this confused noise and confidence of assertion young people are ready to conclude that if they are to be thought clever, they must sneer at religion, and speak of sacred things with disdain.

The other weapon used by the scoffers of Bethel was

Irreverence. They laughed at the prophet's personal appearance, making his shorn locks the theme of their coarse jests. There was no respect for his age, no regard for his character or record of useful work. Nothing was too sacred for the shafts of their ridicule. This is a fault to which young people are specially prone. It is an outcome of the other condition that has just been described. The decay of religious belief always means the growth of irreverence.

Young men and women, seek to learn the habit of reverence in your early years. Never forget that this is the attitude of mind that is due to holy things. When you think of God, let your soul delight itself in the remembrance of His Goodness and His Mercy, but do not lose sight of His Holiness and His Majesty. Bear in mind the sacredness of the Word of God. Read it, and study it, and use it reverently. Do not under any circumstances be tempted to make a jocular or frivolous use of any words of Scripture. "Will nothing please thee," says old Thomas Fuller, "will nothing please thee to wash thy hands in but the font, or to drink healths in but the Church Chalice?" Do not make the mistake of supposing that the growth of knowledge means the decay of reverence. It is the man with "a little learning" who thinks he has fathomed the ocean of truth; it is the Newtons and the Kelvins who feel themselves

"As children gathering pebbles on the shore."

Think with esteem also of the people of God. Remember that they are the true nobility, and that it is a far greater thing to be holy than to be rich or powerful or famous. Do not follow the fashion which too widely prevails of referring to religious people with a sneer, of holding up to ridicule their peculiarities, and of suggesting that most, if not all, of them are hypocrites. That way lies the seat of the scorner. That way also lies the judgment of Bethel. For we must never allow ourselves to forget that the laugh will not be on the side of the scoffer in the end of the day.

VI

ELISHA AND THE KINGS

“ And one of the king of Israel’s servants answered and said, Here is Elisha the son of Shaphat, which poured water on the hands of Elijah. . . . So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him.”—2 KINGS iii. 11, 12.

THE next recorded event in the life of Elisha is one of the most arresting in his history. We see him standing before kings and delivering his message with fearless dignity, while at the same time he secures a notable deliverance for themselves and their armies from imminent disaster. The incident took place at the commencement of the reign of Jehoram, and came about in this way.

On the death of Ahab the Moabites revolted against the dominion of Israel. Previously they had been in subjection to the chosen nation, and had to pay a heavy yearly tribute in token of their dependence. With the accession of a new king they thought the time ripe for throwing off this galling yoke ; so they rose up in rebellion, and refused to pay tribute any longer. Jehoram, being a man of some spirit, determined to quell this rising, and set about bringing the Moabites to a more docile frame of mind. Without delay he put his forces in order, and called in the aid of the King of Judah. Jehoshaphat responded all too readily, and the combined armies set out on their punitive expedition.

The route was left to the choice of the King of Judah, and he resolved to make a detour by the way of the wilderness of Edom. Perhaps he had in view that in this way the allied forces might be able to attack

Moab on its least protected side. Or it may be that his main design was to carry along with them the King of Edom as they went. In any case they secured the co-operation of Edom, and fetched a compass of seven days' journey into the wilderness. In the heart of the desert water failed them. There was not a drop to drink ; they were far off from supplies of every kind ; and the entire force was in danger of falling an easy prey to the King of Moab. Jehoram gave himself up for lost. Jehoshaphat, a man of religious character, thought upon his God. Was there no prophet of the Lord at hand, he asked, to whom they might apply for Divine guidance in this extremity ? Yes, he was told, there was Elisha the former attendant of Elijah. Without further ado the three kings resolved to wait upon Elisha, and made their way to the place where the prophet was to be found.

There followed one of the most dramatic scenes of history. Elisha held the King of Israel in utter contempt, and made no secret of his feelings. Beyond question he had good cause for his derision. Here was a king who in fair weather worshipped the calves of Samaria, but in the day of storm thought it more prudent to turn to the God of Israel. That is a line of conduct which is never entitled to much respect. In this case it was treated with merited scorn. "Get thee," cried Elisha, "to the prophets of thy father, and to the prophets of thy mother ;" let them prove themselves deliverers in the day of trouble. Jehoram was too much cowed through the danger which threatened him to resent this withering rebuke. He humbly reminded the prophet that others were in the same predicament as himself, and left the peril of the situation to make its own appeal. But the meanness of this royal suppliant must in no wise be spared. Elisha turned from him with lofty scorn, and declared that were it not for the presence of Jehoshaphat he would not even look in his direction.

But the cause of the living God demanded the prophet's

immediate intervention. He called for a minstrel, and bade him play before him. His spirit was agitated through his interview with the unworthy monarch of Israel, and needed to be calmed before he could enter the Presence-chamber of a higher King and hear the still small voice of His gracious Spirit. What it was that the minstrel played we are not told ; but in all the circumstances are we not justified in concluding that it would have been an accompaniment to one of the Songs of Zion ? And as the strains of some holy Psalm, accompanied by the musician's cunning touch, reached Elisha's ear, it was as the dew of Heaven falling on his troubled soul. The storm that had ruffled his spirit was hushed ; his mind was soothed ; the hand of the Lord came upon him ; and his eye was opened to a vision of things that were yet to be.

In the name of his Lord he commanded the allies to fill the valley with trenches, with the assurance that in the morning they should be filled with water. In addition to this deliverance from thirst they would also, he told them, gain a great victory over the Moabites. So the soldiers laid aside their weapons of war, and took hold of whatever instruments they could find to dig with. And in the morning, silently and mysteriously, without wind or rain, the promised bounty came from the land of Edom, "and the country was filled with water." It was the doing of the Lord, and, surely, appeared marvellous in their eyes.

The Moabites meanwhile had gathered to repel the attack of the invading kings, and took up a position upon the border of their territory. And when in the early morning they looked across to the camp of Israel, the valley seemed to them to be filled with blood. The red earth of the trenches no doubt imparted its colour to the water, and the glow of the rising sun, reflected from the glistening pools, completed the illusion. At once they leaped to the conclusion that the enemy had fallen out among themselves and had filled the valley with their own blood. Immediately the cry was raised,

“Moab to the spoil!” They rushed forward to seize the plunder, only to fall an easy prey to the waiting Israelites.

The whole of this incident is full of instruction. Each of the outstanding figures of the narrative claims our attention. It will be worth our while to pause for a little and turn our eyes upon them, as one by one they play their part in the scene, and so reveal themselves to our view. The deliverance itself also will be found to be strikingly suggestive. Paying due homage to royalty, let us begin with the kings.

I. IN THE CONDUCT OF JEHORAM WE SEE THE FUTILITY OF A PARTIAL REFORMATION.

The portrait of the son of Ahab is drawn in one or two strokes, but the impression is unforgettable. He was an improvement upon his parents; “for he put away the image of Baal that his father had made:” to this extent he was a reformer. “Nevertheless he cleaved unto the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which made Israel to sin; he departed not therefrom:” in general effect, therefore, “he wrought evil in the sight of the Lord.” But the point to be specially noted is that Jehoram went a certain length in carrying out a reformation. He cleared away the worship which gave to the reign of Ahab so marked a pre-eminence in apostasy.

In this step he was no doubt actuated by prudential considerations. The fate of Ahab would have been fresh before his mind, and a certain display of reforming zeal would be advantageous in various directions. For one thing it probably went far to secure for him the help of Jehoshaphat in his present enterprise. But Jehoram’s heart was not right with God. Some sins he put away, but he cleaved unto others. If it seemed expedient to renounce the abominations of Ahab, it appeared equally advisable to retain the scarcely less baneful corruptions of Jeroboam. His own convenience, whether personal or political, was the main rule of his conduct.

And so when, in the time of trial, Jehoram came to

be weighed in the balance he was found wanting. Helpless, unnerved, panic-stricken, he found no comfort in the calves of Samaria, and appealed with quaking voice to the prophet of the living God. And Elisha did not fail to expose the obliquity of his conduct, but castigated him soundly with the lash of his righteous scorn. Jehoram's partial cleansing of the land was in nowise counted unto him for righteousness.

Many a time since that far-off day the reforming methods of the King of Israel have been imitated. His followers indeed may still be found in the world. There are not a few who go a certain length in the renunciation of evil. Perhaps it is the force of public opinion that weighs with them, for there are sins that bring swift discredit in the community. There are many who are honest, not because of their love of righteousness, but because of their fear of the policeman. There are many who are chaste, not because of their regard for virtue, but because of their dread of social ostracism. Or it may be that material advantage is the determining factor; for there are sins that quickly hit the pocket, even when they leave the conscience untouched. In any case the renunciation is incomplete. These descendants of Jehoram may abandon some sins, but they cleave unto others. Their conscience has not been truly quickened; their heart has not been thoroughly cleansed. So they pick and choose among the commandments, and deal deceitfully with God. Like Saul, when he interpreted the Divine command to destroy the Amalekites as applying only to what was worthless and distasteful to himself, and so spared "the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and of the lambs, and all that was good," they abandon simply what they do not care for, and cling to all that appeals to their hearts.

And in their case also the consequences are equally disastrous. In the testing time they fail in strength and courage. They regard sin in their hearts, and so the Lord will not hear them. It is the pure and

leal-hearted Sir Galahads of the Christian life whose "strength is like the strength of ten." But as for them, their own heart condemns them; therefore are they unstable as water. There can indeed be no blessing from God so long as there is duplicity in the heart. Every unlawful possession must be given up, every forbidden practice must be abandoned. The man who tries to serve God and mammon will not meet with success in either direction.

II. IN THE CONDUCT OF JEHOSEPHAT WE SEE THE DANGER OF AN ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE BELIEVER AND THE WORLD.

Jehoshaphat was a good king, a man who himself feared God, and sought, for the most part at least, to lead the nation in the ways of true religion. But on this occasion he was too ready to enter into a confederacy with the apostate King of Israel. He was too easily satisfied with appearances; there was also an unfortunate bond of kinship between himself and his royal neighbour; and so when the appeal for help came, he did not wait to ascertain the will of the Lord in the matter, but hastened to reply, "I will go up: I am as thou art, my people as thy people, and my horses as thy horses." And it was not long until he reaped the fruits of his rashness. Espousing Jehoram's cause, he became involved in Jehoram's troubles. In a short time he found himself in the waterless desert, with death staring him in the face. And there, in the extremity of his peril, he could learn the folly and the danger of joining hands with an ungodly ally.

The children of God are often too ready to enter into a friendly compact with the unbelieving world. Sometimes, in their anxiety to avoid the appearance of intolerance and Pharisaic exclusiveness, they make so great a show of liberality as to surrender some of their principles. They form alliances that are not sanctioned by the laws of Christ's Kingdom, and begin to realise the cost only when, in loss of comfort and influence, the price has to be paid.

Christian parents, for example, often allow their children to be trained up in the ways of the world. They are anxious that they should be like their neighbours, and the young people themselves of course are all against appearing singular. So in these families there is not much to show that the will of Christ is the rule of conduct. The children are permitted to walk in the ways of the world to their heart's content. They learn the ways of worldly society; their life is fashioned according to worldly maxims; their hearts are set upon worldly enjoyments. Is there any wonder, therefore, that the declining years of many parents, even of such as themselves belong to the household of faith, should be embittered with regrets and darkened with sorrows? They find themselves in the desert place where the waters of consolation have failed. They see their offspring forsaking the ways of God and living for this present world. Their counsel is set aside, and their example is neglected; their authority, it may be, is disowned, and their house is divided. And they know that this tragedy of worldliness is the outcome of those unhallowed intimacies which they themselves at the first had done so much to foster.

Or, again, the undesirable alliance may take place in business life. A man may be induced to enter upon an undertaking of whose precise character he is not sure, along with partners of whose principles he has not sufficient knowledge. It may be a questionable kind of speculation, or a method of making money the moral complexion of which is not above suspicion. But it is commended to him by many arguments, because his co-operation is considered useful. He is assured that it is no unusual thing to do, and that to many others it has proved a swift and easy road to success. So, if he has any scruples, he sets them aside, and enters into the proposed alliance without counting the cost. And the result is disaster. Ere long he finds himself in the desert place, and the waters have failed. Perhaps he is stripped of all his possessions. Perhaps it is the

yet more grievous catastrophe of moral bankruptcy that overtakes him. In any case there is a heavy penalty. And in the parched and desolate wilderness he learns the folly of engaging in enterprises which are not directed according to the will of God.

In other spheres of life as well—the religious and national no less than the commercial and social—there is the same danger of sacrificing the interests of truth and righteousness for the sake of alliances that promise some measure of present gain. We are ready to compromise our principles in order to strengthen our earthly defences, or to increase our possessions, or, it may be, simply to manifest the comprehensiveness of our charity. To secure some mess of pottage we are ready to sell our birthright. And it is not long until the surrender tells upon our life. Our strength is sapped, and our courage is undermined. Our path leads us into the desert place where we taste of desolation and defeat.

“ We barter life for pottage ; sell true bliss
For wealth or power, for pleasure or renown ;
Thus, Esau-like, our Father's blessing miss,
Then wash with fruitless tears our faded crown.”

III. IN THE CONDUCT OF ELISHA WE SEE THE DIGNITY WHICH IS THE OUTCOME OF THE FEAR OF GOD.

Three kings appeared before the prophet as humble suppliants for his favour. It is a scene of extraordinary impressiveness. Here is a man who had walked in humble “ joy behind his plough ” among the meadows of the Jordan Valley, and now three crowned heads are bowing before him in lowly supplication. Surely he is overwhelmed by so amazing an honour ! Had Elisha indeed been like some of those who claim to be his successors in office, he would almost have crawled on all fours to meet his royal visitors. There are some professed ambassadors of the God of Heaven who seem to have reached the height of their ambition when they are able to claim acquaintance, more or less intimate, with the great of the earth. But Elisha was made of

nobler stuff than this. He had no kinship with "that poor man who hangs on princes' favours." There was no fawning on earthly power, no cringing before the glance of royalty. He thought no more of Jehoram than of one of his father's ploughmen in Abel-meholah. The fear of God was before his eyes, and he knew no other fear. He lived in communion with the Majesty of Heaven, and so was not likely to be dazzled with the "vain pomp and glory of this world." Above all, he could have no friendship with moral worthlessness, even when it wore a crown. This is the invariable outcome of the fear of God: it gives real nobility of character.

For, first of all, it furnishes us with the right perspective of life. It takes away "the respect of persons," and supplies us with the true standard of values. So that our criterion of excellence will not be the clothes a man wears, or the gold a man possesses, or the position which a man occupies in the social scale; we shall value him according to the measure of his moral worth. The Spirit of Christ will keep us from judging after the sight of our eyes or reproving after the hearing of our ears; it will make us, instead, of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord. We shall not be impressed with any greatness which is divorced from goodness; the excellent of the earth in our eyes will be the men and women who most clearly manifest a Christ-like spirit.

And, then, it will give us courage to act upon our convictions. Living near to God, we shall be delivered from the fear of man which bringeth a snare. We shall be no frail reeds tossed to and fro with every wind of difficulty, but men of steadfast faith and intrepid spirit. Our step will be firm and confident; our voice will have the accent of conviction; we shall be prepared to look the whole world in the face, and, like those first servants of Christ who had been transformed by the Glory of the Resurrection, declare that we must obey God rather than men.

IV. LAST OF ALL, IN GOD'S WAY OF DELIVERANCE WE SEE "A FIGURE OF THE TRUE."

The circumstances under which the allied armies were relieved from their deadly peril have already been noticed. Under the prophet's direction they made ready to receive the water for want of which they were perishing, and when it came, God turned the means of refreshment into an instrument of victory. The same provision delivered them from inward destitution and from outward danger.

And here there are foreshadowed one or two abiding elements in the Divine way of Salvation. The water of life is God's gift, but He calls upon us to dig the trenches wherein to receive it. In other words, it is our part to make a diligent use of all those outward means whereby He "communicateth to us the benefits of redemption."

And, first of all, we have to prepare for the life-giving water by Practical Repentance. This is especially true of those who have arrived at years of maturity without attaining to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The fallow ground of the unrenewed heart must be broken up. The unyielding surface of the irreligious life must be ploughed through. The indifference and self-satisfaction and stony obduracy of the impenitent soul must be effectively trenched. Otherwise there is "no place" in us for the Word of Christ. The seed falls by the wayside—the common pathway that has been trodden hard by the feet of innumerable passers-by—and fails to sink beneath its impenetrable crust. The water runs off the unfurrowed slopes and leaves them parched and barren. Be the process long or short, be it severe or gentle, there is need beyond question for the digging of the receptive channels. "They that are whole," said the gracious Healer of the broken-hearted, "have no need of the Physician, but they that are sick." It is in the trenches of conviction that the water of grace is retained. It is within the contrite heart that the God of Salvation dwells. It is when sin is forsaken by

the sinner that it is forgiven by the Lord. There must first be a work of emptying, a process of breaking up and digging out, before our souls can be filled with the blessings of Salvation. If the heart is set upon the pleasures of sin, there is no room in it for the gifts of grace. If the hands are full of the possessions of earth, we cannot take hold of the treasures of Heaven. We must begin with the digging of the trenches.

Bible-study is another form of effort whereby we make ready for the quickening streams. "Search the Scriptures," said Christ, . . . "for they are they that testify of Me." It is the duty of all to whom the Word of God has come to make themselves acquainted with its teaching. The Bible should be placed in the hands of all men that they may store their minds with its truths. It conveys to us the knowledge of God, and of the way of Salvation through His Son, and of the great things connected with the life to come. Surely then it is our part to devote our days and nights to its study. Surely we should apply our energies with all earnestness and persistency to the understanding of its message, digging deep in the sacred field, as those do who seek for hidden treasure. And although we cannot by our own unaided efforts attain to the knowledge which is spiritual and saving, for that is a knowledge which flesh and blood cannot give, yet the labour which is expended in humble and patient study of the Scriptures is never labour in vain. The trenches are thereby opened to receive the water of life. When the Spirit of God comes with His vitalising power, our attainments are quickened, and become the channel of His regenerating and sanctifying influences. Through the blessing of Christ the hand of our diligence has made us rich.

Once more we dig a channel for the living streams by means of Private Prayer. This is a fact so obvious in itself, and so clearly revealed in every part of the Scriptures, that it is not necessary to dwell upon it at any length. Prayer deepens our sense of need, and intensifies our desire, and enlarges the capacities of our soul. And,

of course, the deeper the trenches are dug, the more abundant will the supply of water be when the promised blessing comes. This is no doubt one reason why the Lord sometimes keeps us waiting for an answer to our petitions. He would have us deepen the channels of our soul in patient and persistent pleading, in order that when He does open the windows of Heaven we may be able to receive a richer measure of His grace. When, on the most memorable day in his history, Saul of Tarsus was arrested on the road to Damascus, and conquered by the Saviour whom he was so zealously persecuting, he was kept waiting a little while for the joy and power of assured salvation. He was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink. The trenches were being dug deep in his soul. Then there was given to Ananias the commission to become the medium of his deliverance. And the commission was accompanied by a striking reason for its acceptance. "Go," said the Lord, . . . "for, behold, he prayeth." At the touch of the disciple's hand Saul's eyes were opened and he was filled with the Holy Ghost. The living water came in unstinted measure; the trenches were filled to the brim; and the three days of waiting revealed their purpose.

Last of all, we prepare a way for the Lord through our attendance upon the ordinances of Public Worship. There is an urgent call in the present day to emphasise the obligations connected with the House of God. There are multitudes—and their number seems steadily increasing—who live in practical neglect of the Sanctuary. And this attitude is assumed not merely by those who have no regard for the sanctions of religion; the claim is boldly put forth that under modern conditions of life the observances of public worship are equalled if not excelled in spiritual helpfulness by other influences. There are those who speak of the elevating effects of a Sabbath spent in the Museum or the Art Gallery. There are others that claim that a day in the country, passed in fellowship with Nature, is more uplifting than a day in the Courts of Zion. But all this fine speaking is un-
sup-

ported by facts. Neither Art nor Nature will ever transform a sinner into a saint. In the temple of neither the one nor the other does there stand an altar of sacrifice or a cleansing laver. The truth of the matter has been well expressed by the gifted author of *The Hound of Heaven*—

“ Nature, poor step-dame, cannot slake my drouth ;
 Let her, if she would owe me,
 Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and show me
 The breast of her tenderness :
 Never did any milk of hers once bless
 My thirsting mouth.”

It is our part therefore to wait upon God in the ordinances of His own appointment. He has specially promised to dwell in the Sanctuary, and there to meet with enquiring souls. By rendering obedience to His commands with regard to this observance we are digging the trenches for the living water. The instruction received in the House of God, and all the holy influences of Divine worship, are channels along which the Spirit of Life transmits His quickening energies. Thus, like the pilgrims to Jerusalem long ago, we “ passing through the valley of Baca make it a well ; the rain also filleth the pools.”

And, as happened in the case of those armies in the desert of Edom, when the water comes, it is not only a means of present refreshing, but a pledge of final victory. “ The water that I shall give him,” said Christ, “ shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” The gift of the Holy Ghost is the earnest of the unfading inheritance. The Blood of the Cross which is the life of our soul is also the instrument of our triumph. Over every Moabite that crosses our path we shall be more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

VII

THE WIDOW'S CRUSE

“Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, Go, sell the oil, and pay thy debt, and live thou and thy children of the rest.”—2 KINGS iv. 7.

WHEN last we saw Elisha he was directing affairs on the field of military enterprise. Now he appears in an entirely different scene. Instead of the pomp of royalty, the bustle of camps, and the confused noise of warring hosts, we see the pathetic figure of a poor widow, who appeals to him in the bitterness of a great sorrow.

She had been the wife of one of the prophets—a company of men who were being trained for the service of God, and who acknowledged first Elijah and now Elisha as their head. The husband had been a man of genuine piety, and she herself also seems to have feared the Lord. Now he was dead, and she was left with two children to fight her battle alone. It was a hard struggle; for apparently she had not been well provided for: in the nature of the case that could hardly be expected. At any rate, things went against her. Perhaps she was not very capable in the managing of affairs. Perhaps she endured losses over which she had no control. Whatever the cause, she fell into debt. She struggled on as long as she could, surrendering, one after another, her slender possessions, to keep the wolf from the door. Now there was nothing left but a single cruse of oil, while the debt still remained unpaid.

The creditor was a man who knew no pity. The pathos of the widow's history left him utterly unmoved; her appeals gave rise to no generous promptings of heart. He was a Shylock of that far-off time, a harsh and im-

placable exactor, who demanded all that was in the bond. The law permitted him to seize the widow's sons in satisfaction of his claims, and to this heartless extreme he was now preparing to resort. This was the bitterest drop in the poor widow's cup. She could bear up under the distress of widowhood. She could face the reproach of poverty. She could endure even the pinch of want. But when they took her children from her she was bereaved indeed.

In her extremity she appealed to Elisha, the fame of whose recent doings in Jericho and in Edom had no doubt filled the land. Like the other widow in our Lord's parable, she came with the tale of her woes to one whom she believed to be able to help her. And she did not cry in vain. For, unlike the judge in the parable, Elisha had a compassionate heart. He asked her what she had still left in the house, and she told him of the cruse of oil, her sole remaining possession. Then he directed her to go home and borrow from her neighbours all the empty vessels she could secure, and then, in the secrecy of her chamber, to fill them with oil from the little cruse.

Here was a test of the good woman's faith. With hope revived, she turned her steps homeward, and immediately proceeded to collect from among her neighbours all the vessels she could find, until the house was well-nigh full of dishes of every shape and size. Then she shut the door upon herself and her children : the crucial moment had come. The first empty vessel is brought to her, and with trembling hands she pours into it the oil from the cruse. And did not her heart beat wildly as she saw that the oil did not cease until the vessel was full ? Another and another of the borrowed receptacles were brought to her, one of the boys fetching the empty dish, while the other carried the full one away, until at last the entire collection was filled. "Bring yet another," she cried in her eagerness ; for the flow from the cruse showed no signs of abating. "There is not a vessel more," replied the boys ; they had reached the end of their supply. Then the oil stayed.

With a full heart the widow returned to Elisha, and told him what had happened. Then she received from this friend in need further instructions. They were very simple and definite. "Go, sell the oil," he told her, "and pay thy debt, and live thou and thy children of the rest."

There are various important lessons of a general character that are suggested by this incident. Does it not, for one thing, supply us with a striking illustration of the contrast between "man's inhumanity to man" and the riches of God's grace toward sinners? The human creditor refuses to let go his hold, and is prepared to let loose upon his victim the terrors of the law. The Divine Creditor, against whom alone the children of men have sinned, is full of compassion, and "will abundantly pardon." Then the story suggests to us the useful principle that, alike in serving God and in facing the difficulties of life, we are to make use of such resources as lie to our hand. Our talents and opportunities may be as meagre as the widow's cruse of oil, but we are to pour them out in sincere endeavour; and it is in connection with this use of the means within our reach that the Lord is wont to bestow His blessing, and thereby to multiply our slender store. And, more obvious still, the incident reminds us that, whatever our circumstances in life may be, we should strive to the utmost of our power to "owe no man anything." The first duty which the prophet set before the widow when relief came to her, was to pay her debt. This is a lesson in everyday morality which a good many people who make claims to spirituality would do well to bear in mind. If our religion does not teach us to live honestly in the world, the sooner we exchange it for a healthier one the better.

The supreme value of the narrative, however, lies in the symbolical character of the miracle. Oil is in Scripture a standing symbol of the Grace of God, and the inner design of the incident is to set forth one or two great principles which regulate the Divine method of supplying

our spiritual needs. On this parabolic aspect of the miracle, therefore, it may not be out of place to dwell a little more fully.

I

AND, FIRST OF ALL, IT REMINDS US THAT THE GRACE OF CHRIST IS SUFFICIENT FOR ALL THE NEEDS OF MEN.

However many and however capacious be the vessels which we bring to His fulness, there is enough in His gracious store to fill them all. It is an easy thing to believe this when our heart is at rest, and we do not feel the pinch of want ; it is not so easy when our soul is labouring under the pressure of spiritual distress. Then it is hard to appropriate the comfort arising from the thought of the sufficiency of Divine grace. But like the oil which poured forth from the widow's cruse until all the vessels in the house were filled, the saving resources of Jesus Christ are immeasurable in their extent and unstinted in their outflow.

His sufficiency meets the deepest needs of the individual. How beautifully this is brought out in His own great assurance regarding the labouring and the heavy-laden, recorded in the eleventh chapter of Matthew ! Christ looks abroad on sinful men with an eye of tender pity which yet searches out the furthest recesses of their guilt and misery, and calls them one and all to come unto Him that He may give them rest. And this great promise to men He bases upon an equally great assurance regarding Himself—*All things are delivered unto Me of My Father*. This is the fact of His mediatorial sufficiency. "All things" are in His Hand ; His riches are unsearchable ; therefore, He invites us to come with our empty vessels that they may be filled with the holy oil of His grace. This is the general promise.

But He tells us, further, *how* the whole array of these clamouring needs of ours may in particular be satisfied. He alone fully knows the Father, and therefore is able to reveal Him to whomsoever He chooses. Thus He satisfies the understanding by giving it Light—His Pro-

phetic prerogative. And standing forth before the whole multitude of toiling and burdened sinners, He undertakes to give them rest. This He accomplishes by satisfying the conscience with Life—His Priestly prerogative. Last of all, He urges those who in this way are enlightened and quickened to take His yoke upon them, that they may find a further rest in the blessedness of His service. Thus He satisfies the heart with Love—His Kingly prerogative. And with this threefold gift of Light and Life and Love He fills the soul to the utmost of its capacity.

The resources which meet the needs of the individual believer are equally sufficient for all the demands of the corporate life of the Church. Christ is the Head of the body; and just as the holy oil poured on the head of the high priest flowed down until it reached the hem of his garment, so the grace of the living Redeemer pervades His entire church, unto the very feeblest and lowliest of its members. All the vessels in the household of faith shall be filled, both small and great, as surely as were the vessels in the widow's dwelling.

The supply of the Church's need is strikingly illustrated in Zechariah's great vision of the golden candlestick. The candlestick had seven lamps which burned with un failing brightness, because they were constantly fed with oil from the bowl on the top. But how was it that the bowl itself, like the widow's cruse, poured forth its liquid treasure unceasingly, without being depleted? It was because beside the candlestick there stood two olive trees, one on the right side and one on the left, which emptied the golden oil out of themselves into the bowl, and so kept it continually replenished. What a magnificent conception! Two living trees, like those other two of which Miss Rossetti sings,

“ Bud there and blow,
Their leaves and fruit
Fed from an undecaying root.”

Well might the lamps shine with a clear and steady flame! The interpretation of the vision presents little

difficulty. The Candlestick is of course the Church ; and the two trees whose supplies enable it to fulfil its function represent, as the prophet was expressly told, "the two anointed ones that stand by the Lord of the whole earth." These were, first of all, the representatives of priesthood and of kingship respectively in Israel at that time. But Joshua and Zerubbabel were themselves typical persons, and shadowed forth certain aspects of the mediatorial office of Jesus Christ. So that the vision leads us directly to Him. It is the exalted Saviour in His eternal Priesthood and Kingship that is represented by the two productive trees. Priestly efficacy and Kingly power alike are pouring their stores into the bowl of His mediatorial fulness ; and out of that fulness the Church receives the grace that enables her to be the light of the world. The Lord "ever liveth" on the throne, therefore the oil never fails.

And the fulness which avails for the life of the Church is sufficient also for the needs of the world. "Go," said our Lord to His feeble handful of apostles, "go, and make disciples of all the nations." It was an overwhelming commission. But they did not shrink from it. They went forth rather to their task with a high and unflinching courage. And the reason was this : their confidence rested on the conviction of their Lord's sufficiency. "All power in Heaven and over the earth has been given to me. Go therefore. . . . I am with you always, day by day, until the close of the Age." The abundance of the oil is inexhaustible.

II

FURTHER STILL, THIS MIRACLE REMINDS US THAT THE SUPPLY OF CHRIST'S GRACE IS LIMITED ONLY BY OUR CAPACITY TO RECEIVE.

In Elisha's miracle the oil flowed so long as a single empty vessel remained in the widow's house. When the vessels were all filled, the supply ceased. So is it also with regard to the grace of our Lord. If our soul is not

filled from His bounteous store, it is not because His resources are inadequate to attain that end, but because, for some reason or other, we do not come with receptive hearts and empty hands.

And, first of all, we must bring the vessel of our conscious Need. So long as we do not realise our own spiritual destitution we are not in a position to avail ourselves of the grace of Christ. It is the poor that are filled by Him with good things; the rich are sent empty away.

“ We leave the words and works we call our own,
And lift void hands alone
For love to fill. Our nakedness of soul
Brings to that Gate no toll.”

There was once a church which was so rich and increased with goods that it had need of nothing. Every vessel in the house was full. But the real state of the case was very different from this imagined prosperity. Christ was standing *outside* the door. There was no room for Him within. And therefore the church of Laodicea was really destitute of true riches. Two men went one day into the Temple to pray. The one came with vessels that were already full to the brim, and did little therefore but boast of his own attainments. The other was overwhelmed with a sense of poverty, and could do nothing but stretch out empty hands of supplication to God. But it was the man who cried for mercy into whose needy soul the oil of Divine grace flowed; the other went away unblest. And we too, like the publican, must come to Christ with the empty vessel of conscious unworthiness.

We must bring also the vessel of Desire. God does indeed sometimes bestow His gifts upon us without our asking, and He certainly often enriches us beyond our asking; but as a rule the supply of His blessings is according to the measure of our desires. If the longings of the heart are meagre and feeble, we shall not receive much. If we covet earnestly the best gifts, and plead for them,

and expect them, our vessels shall be filled to overflowing. They that hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled. It is of supreme importance, therefore, that we come to Christ's fulness with the vessel of our desire.

And we need not be afraid that the vessel will be too capacious for the supply of the oil. What is the blessing that our heart is longing for? Is it Peace—a deeper and more satisfying peace than we have yet attained to, a calm and settled frame of mind in the enjoyment of God's favour and the conscious possession of the privileges of sonship? There is enough in the Fountain to fill that vessel to the brim. Or is it Holiness that our soul is thirsting for? Do we long for conformity to the image of Christ, for the removal of every stain of sin and every infirmity of the flesh? This certainly is a vessel that is deep and wide-mouthed, so deep and wide-mouthed that no creature resources can ever fill it; but the grace of Christ is sufficient to fulfil the desire for holiness. Or, again, do we long for communion with the Lord? As the hart panteth after the water brooks, does our soul thirst for the living God—yearning to hear His voice, and to look upon His face, and to walk with Him in the blessedness of unclouded fellowship? This also is a lofty boon to crave, but it is not too great for the grace of Christ. However wide we open the mouth of desire He promises to fill it. And if our peace is lacking in serenity, our holiness in radiance, and our fellowship in joyousness, we may be quite certain that one chief reason is that we fail to bring the vessel of our desire to the flowing oil of the Saviour's grace.

Further still, we need to bring the vessel of a submissive Heart. If the heart is rebellious and preoccupied there is no place in it for the Love of God. The supremacy of the god of this world must be overthrown, the dominion of sin overcome, and the heart turned unto the Lord in honest renunciation of evil and in sincere "endeavour after new obedience," before we can be filled with the holy oil of the Spirit's presence and power. So long

as the love of sin fills the heart, we can have no lot or part in the blessings of Salvation.

And when it is the things of the world that form the usurping element the effect is substantially the same. The distraction of earthly cares and the allurements of earthly pleasures too often choke out of the soul the influence of the things that belong to its true well-being. Paul's great direction to the Philippians for the enjoyment of the peace of God is highly suggestive in this connection. Concisely put, it is this: Be careful for nothing; be prayerful for everything; be thankful for anything. The heart is represented, first of all, as filled with care, and it requires to be relieved of this desolating tenancy before it can become a chamber of peace. The instrument to be used in the emptying process is prayer and thanksgiving. And when the vessel is thus cleared of its weary weight of anxiety, the stream of God's peace pours in and fills it to overflowing.

Last of all, we must bring to Christ's fulness the vessel of a surrendered Life. If we are lacking in the comfort and the power of salvation, we may be sure that it is because our life is not fully yielded up to the Lord. There are things that our hands still cling to and refuse to let go; therefore we are unable to receive the Saviour's gifts of grace. We do not sell all that we have, in order that we may possess the Pearl of great price. The appeal of the Heavenly Pursuer may to some extent move the soul, but the heart has not been fully weaned from its earthly treasures, and therefore the surrender is not complete. The poet's sad confession is one that explains the spiritual barrenness of many a life:—

“ Yet was I sore adread
Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.”

The young ruler who one day came to Jesus professed to be anxious to obtain eternal life. But the Lord, who never judges after the sight of His eyes, saw that there were other things that had a firmer hold of his life than the claims of his spiritual being, so He proposed that first

of all the vessel should be emptied of its existing possessions. "Go, and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven," He directed him. And the young man went away sorrowful, for he had great riches, and he refused to give them up for Christ. The vessel had no place for the heavenly oil because it was already filled with earthly possessions.

III

LAST OF ALL, THE MIRACLE REMINDS US THAT THE GRACE WHICH DELIVERS US FROM THE GUILT OF SIN IS A GRACE WHEREBY WE ARE ALSO TO LIVE UNTO GOD.

The proceeds of the oil were used first of all for the paying of the widow's debt, while the remainder formed a means of subsistence for herself and her children. So it is also in the spiritual life. Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we are redeemed from the curse, and through that same grace we are nourished and sustained in the spiritual life.

This is a fact which we are often ready to overlook, and particularly at the outset of our pilgrimage. If we have been delivered from the guilt of sin, and are conscious of a new relation to God, we are apt to think that the rest of the Christian undertaking is to be faced in our own strength. Perhaps we make the mistake of supposing that our initial equipment is sufficient for all the demands of the journey. Perhaps we are under the belief that salvation is wholly concerned with the past, and that, once the handwriting that was against us has been blotted out, the needs of the present are of comparatively small account. Perhaps we have unworthy conceptions of the bounty of our Deliverer, and conclude that because we have been indebted to His grace for salvation from death, we should be expected to rely upon our own resources for the requirements of life.

But the forgiveness of sins is only the commencement of salvation. After the debt has been paid, we are face to face with the problem of maintenance. We have been

brought into a right relation, but there remains the question of conduct, the whole vast obligations of the Christian calling. We are required to glorify the God of our salvation with our bodies and with our spirits which are His. We are called upon to serve Him to the utmost of our power. We are called upon to be His witnesses even unto death. And the path of obedience is ever a narrow way, a way of conflict and of trial, and the warfare is one from which there is no discharge.

“ Does the road wind up-hill all the way ?

Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day ?

From morn to night, my friend.”

But the same grace which saved us from our debt is equally at our disposal for all the demands of duty. The same kind and merciful God who rescued our souls from the horrible pit, and adopted us into His family, holds Himself chargeable for our upkeep as members of His household. As we have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so also are we to walk in Him. Salvation is all of grace, from beginning to end. One of the grandest promises within the whole range of the Scriptures is that in which Paul assures the believers in Rome that the grace which brought them into the Way will enable them without fail to reach the Goal : “ *For, if when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.*”

Jesus Christ is alive after the power of an endless life, and the supply of the oil shall never fail. He will lead His people forth by the right path, and provide for the varied needs of each new day. And at last when the pilgrimage of life is ended He will bring them all into the eternal home He is preparing for them in Heaven. There they shall enter into the joy of their Lord, and the flow of that oil shall never cease.

VIII

THE RAISING OF THE SHUNAMMITE'S SON

“And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and he stretched himself upon the child; and the flesh of the child waxed warm.”—2 KINGS IV.

34.

IN the incident which now claims our attention Elisha's power reaches its crowning splendour: he raises a dead child to life. The narrative of the miracle is one of the most moving in the sacred volume. Incidentally, we are introduced to Gehazi, the prophet's servant, with whom we are destined to meet again and again in the course of the history. Gehazi's character is in itself an intensely interesting study. Sharp-eyed and quick-witted, covetous, crafty, and unscrupulous, he forms a striking foil to his noble-minded master.

As Elisha passed to Shunem, a town not far from Carmel, he was kindly entertained by a woman of some position and influence in the place. This warm-hearted believer thought so highly of the man of God that at length, with the concurrence of her husband, she fitted up for him a little chamber in which he might rest on his journeyings. It was not a very luxurious apartment; some modern prophets might not take very kindly to the severe simplicity of its arrangements; but it expressed the love and esteem of the woman's heart.

Touched with this thoughtfulness, Elisha wished to make some recompense. He consulted the woman herself, and offered to use his influence on her behalf with those in power in the nation; but the Shunammite quietly answered, “I dwell among mine own people.” It was

a reply which revealed a noble spirit, and its combination of simplicity and dignity has seldom been surpassed. One remembers with what telling effect our own great statesman, John Bright—himself a master of the instrument of speech—on a memorable occasion when he was being called to high office in the State, gave expression to his personal attitude to such public honours by quoting the Shunammite's words, "I dwell among mine own people." The woman was manifestly "great," not simply in outward station, but also in heart and mind. The tribute paid to her by the homely Quaker poet is not much in excess of the truth—

"For ne'er was brighter lustre thrown
On path by woman trod,
Than hers who dwelt among her own,
And cared for those of God."

The keen eye of Gehazi, however, had observed the one thing that was lacking in that home. It lacked the sunshine of a child's presence, and the music of a child's voice. So Elisha had the Shunammite brought in again, and promised her that within a certain time her home should be gladdened with a son. This was the good woman's recompense. She had treated the prophet with the kindness due to a servant of the Lord, and she received a prophet's reward.

The child grew into a boy. We can readily understand the place he held in his parents' hearts. He had come late, and he was loved much. One day, as he followed his father's reapers in the field, he suddenly cried out, "My head, my head." It was manifestly a case of sunstroke. He was carried in to his mother, and, in the moving words of the narrative, "he sat on her knees till noon." And at noon the little fellow's sun went down, and the active young frame became cold and still. It was a desolating bereavement, as mysterious as it was bitter. The Lord had given and the Lord had taken away. He had enriched the woman's life with a great

gift after she had long ceased to hope, and then had suddenly snatched it from her grasp. It seemed a cruel mockery of her heart-hunger.

But the Shunammite's faith was not paralysed by the stroke. As soon as she saw that her child was dead, she formed her plan. Without telling her husband of the sorrow that had come to them, she called upon him to have an ass saddled for her, and then set off to find the prophet of the Lord. There is a wonderful intensity of power in the few words which describe that journey. "Drive, and go forward," she said to her servant; "slack not thy riding for me, except I bid thee. So she went and came unto the man of God to Mount Carmel."

Elisha's eye recognised her form while she was yet a good way off, and, divining that something was wrong, he sent Gehazi with all speed to enquire about her well-being. Gehazi, however, had not the key to unlock the Shunammite's heart, and she brushed aside his enquiry with a brief, "It is well." But when she reached the prophet, she cast herself at his feet, and poured forth the bitterness of her soul in a wail of anguish. Her words were not very coherent; but they formed the terrible eloquence of a great sorrow; and Elisha understood. With almost feverish eagerness he sent Gehazi on before with his staff, that he might try to revive the child. But the woman's faith would not be put off with rods or servants. She clung to the prophet himself, and refused to move a step until he accompanied her.

Gehazi hurried on with his master's staff, and laid it on the dead child's face. But there was no response. The rod was but the symbol of power, and there was no true medium between the source of power and the child's need. Soon, however, the prophet himself arrived upon the scene. He called upon the name of the Lord, and thereupon entered the chamber of death alone. Then he laid himself down on the little frame, mouth to mouth, eye to eye, hand to hand. It required severe effort: all his energies were on the stretch. So intense indeed was his application that for a time he had to cease, and then begin

again. And at length his efforts were crowned with success. The eyelids quivered, and then opened, and the breath of life came back to the nostrils. The child was brought back from the dead.

Then the mother was called in again, and with quiet simplicity the prophet said to her, "Take up thy son." And she, having given mute expression to the gratitude of her heart, "took up her son and went out." This was "the end of the Lord" in afflicting her. Her gift was restored to her, with its value enhanced twofold, because of her brief experience of deprivation. Her son had been dead and was alive again; he had been lost and was found. What had seemed a harsh and arbitrary infliction was now radiant with the love and wisdom of Heaven. She had passed through fire and water, but it was in order that at last she might be brought into a wealthy place.

In this miracle again the element of supreme value is the prophetic and spiritual lesson. Regarded from this point of view it suggests one or two great truths.

I. FIRST OF ALL, THE SORE TRAVAIL OF THE PROPHET SUGGESTS THE HUMILIATION OF JESUS CHRIST FOR OUR REDEMPTION.

Elisha came himself to the house of mourning. His staff in the hand of his servant had proved of no avail. He entered the chamber of death alone. There he laid himself down upon the lifeless frame, as if to absorb its death, and impart to it instead the warmth and energy of his own life. He had to contract himself to the dimensions of the little body, that eye might correspond to eye, mouth to mouth, and hand to hand. And, further, the miracle involved effort of a prolonged and exhausting kind. He did not conquer death by a word; the victory was secured through sore travail of body and soul.

Have we not here a remarkable prefigurement of the redemptive toil of the Lord Jesus? Before man could be delivered from that death which is the wages of sin He had to accomplish a work that involved His humiliation even unto death.

To begin with, it was necessary that He should appear

Himself upon the scene of death. All that had come before Him—the servants, and the types and observances of the law—were as helpless to redeem from death as Gehazi with his staff. So the Word was made flesh and tabernacled among us. He stooped to our nature, contracting Himself to the littleness of our human life, so that eye answered to eye, mouth to mouth, and hand to hand. In all things, sin alone excepted, He was made like unto His brethren. He appeared in the likeness of sinful flesh.

Further still, the end of His coming was not achieved without severe and continuous effort. He not only humbled Himself to become incarnate, but the path of His earthly life stretched from the manger to the tree. He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. The work required the forth-putting of His great strength. He laboured unto weariness. See Him in Gethsemane under the shadow of the Cross. Like Elisha extended in the lonely chamber in Shunem, but with an infinitely sorer travail, He is prostrate on the ground in His agony, and the sweat which speaks of the labour of His soul is pouring forth in great drops of blood. He created the world by the simple word of His power, but the redemption of man cost Him infinite toil and pain.

And at last He entered the dark chamber alone, and laid Him down not merely *on* but *in* our death. He poured forth the riches of His own life that we might be delivered from going down into the pit. He conquered death by dying. Death was swallowed up in the victory of His Passion. So out of that insatiable eater came forth meat, and out of that cruel strong one came forth sweetness—the meat and the sweetness of life and immortality. And then, like the prophet when his mighty task was accomplished, Jesus rose from the dead with the light of victory on His face.

II. FURTHER, THE FAILURE OF GEHAZI SUGGESTS THE FUTILITY OF HUMAN EFFORT TO REGENERATE THE SOULS OF MEN, APART FROM THE QUICKENING POWER OF GOD.

The dead child still confronts the Church of God in the world. Sinners are dead in trespasses and in sins until they are raised through the might of the living Saviour. The purpose for which the Christian ministry has been instituted is, first and foremost, that it may be the instrument of the Holy Ghost in accomplishing the miracle of regeneration. The Gospel is to be preached that it may become the medium of Divine quickening. Now the raising of the Shunammite's son suggests one or two thoughts regarding the manner in which this great purpose of the Lord may be realised.

To begin with, it suggests that official authority does not avail without living faith. The prophet's servant went into the chamber of death with the prophet's staff. Gehazi was no doubt filled with a sense of his own importance as he bore in his hand the symbol of prophetic authority. He laid it upon the child's face. But nothing happened. The child was dead, and the staff was dead too; so there was no response. The necessary channel between the symbol of power and the fountain of power was lacking. The rod was dead, because there was no faith in Gehazi's soul to link it on to the might of the Lord.

Mere official standing in the Church of Christ will never avail to raise the dead. There are many people who regard the question of ordination as the one determining thing in spiritual effectiveness. If a man's "orders" are properly attested, according to their theory, he is fully equipped for the work of the Gospel. If he is lacking in these official credentials, his ministry is not recognised as valid, though he should be as manifestly the vehicle of the Holy Spirit's power as John Bunyan or Charles Haddon Spurgeon. The staff of office is, in short, regarded as of more importance than the character of the man who holds it.

But the man who holds it may be a Gehazi—a man of no faith, a man of no spiritual insight or sympathy, a cold, calculating, earthly-minded hireling. In that case his efforts will be as barren of results as those of Gehazi.

Unless a man is called of God, and sealed with the Holy Ghost as His servant, the official stamp of men is of little account. The staff will of itself make no impression on "cold obstruction's apathy." As happened in the wilderness long ago, when the rods of the princes of Israel who were aspiring to priestly honours remained sapless and unproductive, while the rod of the man whom God had chosen for the office was found to blossom and bear fruit, so does it happen still in the case of men who make claims to ecclesiastical authority but are destitute of spiritual power—the symbols of office are impotent in the presence of death.

It suggests, further, that no observance of ritual will avail apart from the blessing of God. In the case of the miracle in Shunem, neither the servant nor the staff proved sufficient to raise the dead child. Gehazi did not neglect his instructions. He laid the staff on the child's face with impressive formality. But death heeded not the touch of the staff.

There are those who attach supreme importance to ritual. The service must be carried out according to the rubric; the building must be duly consecrated; its internal arrangements must follow the recognised order; the proper vestments must be used; the appointed forms and postures must be faithfully observed. Otherwise the worship of God is not acknowledged as regular. The sacraments too are represented as possessing a mysterious virtue in themselves, especially when administered by men of approved ecclesiastical standing. The sprinkling of the water of Baptism is held of itself to possess a spiritual potency. The outward partaking of the elements used in the Lord's Supper means the reception of some magic power. In a word, the touch of the staff is looked upon as in itself efficacious. If the prescribed forms are observed, all is well; if they are lacking, nothing is right.

One desires to speak with restraint of a system which attracts so large a number of sincere and devout souls, and to recognise that there are types of mind that appear

to find help and inspiration from ceremonial and symbolism. On such matters however we must regulate our thinking and our practice by the light which comes from "the law and the testimony." And Scripture and experience declare with equal plainness that ritual, however sedulously practised, can never produce consecration. The staff of office can never impart the gift of life. Neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. There is no virtue in forms or postures or vestments. There is no magic efficacy in the Sacraments. The water of Baptism does not of itself bestow grace. The mere partaking of bread and wine by the lips will not nourish the soul. We may go through all the canonical ceremonies, with scrupulous exactness and unfailing regularity, but the child will not sneeze even once. There can be no spiritual efficacy without the blessing of God.

The miracle in one word reminds us that the use of outward means can never produce spiritual results without the working of the Spirit of Christ. The staff of itself cannot overcome the power of death. It is our part, of course, to use all the means that are placed at our disposal. In connection with the Lord's work, the work especially of saving souls, we are to labour with as much diligence and earnestness as if the result depended upon our own efforts. We are required to do all we can to bring the truth to bear upon the soul of our fellow-man. Instruction, admonition, warning, invitation—each should receive its due emphasis. Both Law and Gospel should be allowed to make their distinctive appeal. The understanding, the heart, and the conscience—all the faculties of the soul—should be addressed in turn with the truths which are appropriate to each. The message should be enforced with those weighty arguments which lie ready to the hand of every servant of Christ, arguments derived from such considerations as the value of the soul, the glory of the Saviour, and the vastness of Eternity. There is much that we can do, and much that we must do. But after we have done everything that it is possible

for us to do, our efforts will be as futile as the laying of the prophet's staff on the dead child's face unless they become the medium of the quickening energy of the Holy Ghost.

"As the prophet in the wonderful old story"—Dr Maclaren's words are well worth repeating—"laid himself down on the dead child, hand to hand, mouth to mouth, lip to lip, and heart to heart, that the throbbing heart might move the pulseless, and the warmth might steal into the dull cold frame, so, but with a contact closer, more real, more all-embracing, as is the difference between man and God, between flesh and spirit, Christ lays His life to our death, and in Him we too live and move. In Him we are quickened together and raised up together."

III. LAST OF ALL, THE CONDUCT OF THE WOMAN SUGGESTS THE SUPREME CONDITION UNDER WHICH WE MAY LOOK FOR SUCCESS IN OUR EFFORTS TO CARRY ON THE WORK OF THE LORD.

That, in one word, is to abide by the Fountain of power. The Shunammite refused to leave the prophet until she brought him to the chamber of death. Nothing could be more beautiful than the words in which she gave expression to the resoluteness of her faith: "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee." As Peter cleaved to His Lord in that dark hour when the fickle multitude left Him, cleaved to Him because he knew that separation from Christ meant death, so this good woman clung to the prophet of the Lord with a persistency that would take no dismissal. She knew full well that Gehazi, equipped though he was with the prophet's staff, would not serve her purpose. The prophet himself must come to the place where her dead child lay.

It is when we cast ourselves at Christ's feet with the same resolute faith, the same quenchless earnestness of pleading, that we shall see the desire of our heart fulfilled. It is thus that the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence. The urgency of our need keeps us clinging and crying. We

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realise that there is no hope for us elsewhere. We are done with Gehazi. We have no confidence in any staff. In ourselves we are

“ weak,
But confident in self-despair.”

Therefore we will not let the Angel of the Covenant go except He bless us. And bless us then He surely will. In the end our faith prevails. He yields to our importunity. The arms of our need and our longing and our pleading are wound about Him, and He grants us all, and more than all, we crave. He comes with us to the darkened chamber, and turns the shadow of death into the morning.

IX

THE POISONED POTTAGE

“ But he said, Then bring meal. And he cast it into the pot; and he said, Pour out for the people, that they may eat. And there was no harm in the pot.”—2 KINGS iv. 41.

THE story of Elisha's life carries us on to a trying period of his history. The land was held in the grip of famine. The earth no longer yielded her fruit—the fig-tree ceased to blossom; there was no fruit in the vine; the labour of the olive had failed. On every hand there reigned the blight of barrenness. It was of course a time of general suffering and gloom. The joy of the reaper ceased. The songs of them that trod the grapes were no longer heard. Man and beast alike were feeling the pinch of want.

In this general distress the sons of the prophets had their share, for grace secures no immunity from the common ills. In Gilgal there was a school of the prophets, a little community where they dwelt together, receiving common instruction in the things of God, and living the religious life. In the season of dearth Elisha came to visit those disciples of his. They had need of his presence, and he did not evade the hardships of their lot.

One day as the little company sat before their master, listening doubtless to his teaching, the prophet's servant was directed to prepare the common meal. This plainly was a task after Gehazi's own heart, and it was with no reluctant mind that he got ready the great pot. What supply there was available for this College dinner is not quite clear; it is not likely that there was much beyond the little “meal” of which the narrative speaks. At any rate one of the company made his way into the fields in the hope of finding some wild fruits to augment their

slender store. His efforts appeared to be attended with success, and he returned in triumph with a bunch of what looked like wild grapes. These were cast into "the great pot," the meal was got ready, and the company sat down to their humble repast.

But soon there was a cry of alarm; faces turned pale, and limbs began to tremble: there dawned upon the sons of the prophets the appalling fact that they had partaken of poisoned fare. The gourds were deadly things, and now that the men had eaten, death seemed even nearer them than the pot.

All eyes were turned upon Elisha. It was he whom with one consent they all addressed, and he alone remained calm amid the general consternation. "Bring meal," he said, and they brought to him what they had. He cast it into the pot, and then calmly ordered the pottage to be poured out and given to the expectant company. What a test of their faith it was! But a moment ago there was "death in the pot"; now, with only a little meal added to the hurtful portion, they are asked to partake of it freely. But when they ate the second time they suffered no injury. The evil effects had been removed. The handful of meal had destroyed the power of death in the pot, and the noxious fare was turned into wholesome and nourishing food.

There are one or two great truths of a general character that are suggested to us by this incident.

I

FIRST OF ALL, IT GIVES US A FIGURE OF THE DANGERS WHICH LURK IN EVERY EARTHLY PORTION.

Here was a portion which the company in Gilgal expected to sustain life. The gourds looked well, and gave the promise of strength and refreshing. But they had grown wild on the blighted field, and in reality were corrupt and deadly. It was only by a miracle therefore that those who partook of them were preserved from death.

There are many fruits growing wild in the field of human life that bear the same character as those deceptive gourds. They may have a tempting appearance, and a pleasing fragrance; they may even be sweet to the palate; but they are really poisonous, and their "mortal taste" brings death and woe.

Take for example the fare of sinful pleasure. Men go in search of such provision when there is famine in the soul—when they are in a state of alienation from God, and have therefore no relish for the enjoyments which are holy and spiritual. Seeking somehow to allay their inward hunger, they go out into the fields that have been blighted by the curse, and gather the wild fruits that grow in profusion there. They are tempting to the eye, those untended gourds, and they seem good to the taste. Many hearts are burning to possess them; many hands are stretched out to pluck them. But they are really unwholesome, and we eat of them at the peril of our soul.

The fare of sinful pleasure will never satisfy the heart. Many a young man has followed the example and shared the experience of "the forlorn son" in our Lord's parable who hastened into the far country to gather a harvest of earthly enjoyment. Ere long he discovered that the fruits that appeared so fair and satisfying to look upon were in reality empty husks—fit food for swine rather than for men. And the pleasures of sin not only disappoint; they also destroy. There is death in the pot. The glass of strong drink has death concealed beneath its sparkling beauty. The cup of fleshly indulgence may be sweet in the mouth, but it is as rottenness to the bones. Ere long it undermines the vigour of the body, and impairs the strength of the mind. The once bright eye becomes dim, the once strong limbs become feeble, the once clear brain becomes clouded. And at last, unless its spell is broken, it will bring the soul down into hell.

Or take, again, the fare of unhealthy literature. There are a great many books in circulation to-day of which one is constrained to say, "there is death in the pot"—

their influence is so utterly corrupting. A really good book is one of the most precious things in the world, and the blessings of its mission who can estimate? "As good," says Milton, in a well-known passage, "as good almost kill a man as kill a good book," which is "the precious life-blood of a master-spirit." But there are countless books in the hands of men to-day which should be killed without mercy, because they are not good but wholly bad.

This is especially true of what has been termed "the fleshly school" of fiction, because it finds its perennial theme in the relations of the sexes. It not only delights in analysing the workings of human passion in its grossest forms, in painting the figure of indecency, and in uncovering the nakedness of lust; it aims in many cases a direct blow at social purity by making light of the sacred obligations of the marriage bond. The attractions of vice are so described as to be in effect recommended; the restraints of virtue are represented as irksome, if not as actually false. Of course there are exceptions to this order of things even among the class of literature that deals with sexual problems: it is possible to handle the subject with a proper reserve and with a worthy purpose; but in the great majority of cases there is a manifest pandering to the baser elements in human nature. The great pot is continually on the fire, and there is many a foul-minded Gehazi who is engaged in preparing the unsavoury pottage. No lofty talk about "Art for Art's sake" will avail to palliate the offence. Art that is divorced from morality is not true Art, but a mischievous imposture. The result is that not a few of our young men and women are being poisoned, for this is the sort of literature on which they nourish their youth. Their hearts are polluted, and their lives in many cases are ruined. For the reading of unwholesome books simply means the death of all that is pure and lovely and honest and of good report in the soul. "There is no worse robber," says an old Italian proverb, "than a bad book."

Once more, let us take the fare of corrupt religious teaching. This is a subject that one shrinks from dealing with, lest one may seem to manifest a censorious spirit. But distasteful in some respects as is the task, in a matter of such tremendous gravity it is necessary for a man to unburden his soul. We live indeed in a time of almost boundless charity with respect to matters of belief; and, beyond question, true charity is one of the fairest, as it is one of the rarest, of the Christian graces. But there is also a false charity, the true name of which is disloyalty to Christ. And it is false charity to acquiesce, either contentedly or reluctantly, in anything that challenges the supremacy or dims the glory of the true Evangelical message.

It is a fact that cannot be denied that in our own time there is a great deal of unwholesome fare presented in the name of religion. Here also there is "death in the pot." On the one hand we have new systems of belief springing up on every hand, and claiming an extensive allegiance among the people. Christian Science, Spiritualism, Theosophy, Millennial Dawnism—to mention only a few—are zealously advocated as the true way of life, and are winning numerous adherents even among men and women who from their earliest years have been familiar with the doctrines of the Gospel. It is useless to suggest that the tenets of these new systems can be reconciled with the truths of the religion of Christ. They are wild and hurtful gourds, and not the life-giving fruits of the true Vine. Yet the multitudes who so greedily devour them are under the belief that here at last they have found the way of salvation.

But still more ominous is the fact that among those who speak in the name of Christ there is disloyalty to some of the vital truths of the gospel. There are many who fail to assert, and many more who expressly deny, the supreme Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. No barren compliments about His uniqueness will make up for this fatal defect. There are many more who are silent with regard to the atoning purpose of His death.

They praise the beauty of His character, but they do not glory in His Cross, and accordingly they do not commend His Righteousness as the one ground of acceptance with God. Perhaps an even greater number leave out of sight the fact of the new birth, and speak more about evolution than about conversion. These vital elements of the old Evangelical message are either toned down or practically ignored in favour of "wordy trucklings to the transient hour." And the result is not simply that "the hungry sheep look up, and are not fed." The evil is worse than that. The sheep are fed with poisonous fare. In too many cases they mistake the hurtful provision for wholesome food. There is "death in the pot," and they do not realise their danger. For the pernicious teaching may be presented with much literary charm, and unfolded through the medium of an engaging personality. But it is not on that account rendered innocuous. To eat thereof in the end means death.

The principle we are considering applies indeed in some sense to every earthly portion. The world itself with all the splendour of its beauty has death eating at its heart. Of all mundane loveliness we must say that, like the "sweet rose" of which George Herbert so movingly sings, its "root is ever in its grave." The sons of men are but fading flesh. "This pleasing, anxious being" of ours, with its throbbing energies, its warmth of feeling, its glowing hopes, its amazing activities, will soon become a prey to "dumb forgetfulness." Already in our mortal frame the seeds of dissolution are doing their work. And, besides this, what lot is there in human life without its crook? Surely this is one of the commonplaces of our experience, the witness of which every man has within himself. Most tragic fact of all, every unconverted soul is the scene of the reign of spiritual death. And death will prey upon its victim for ever, unless its power is destroyed through the gracious might of Jesus Christ.

II

FURTHER STILL, THE HEALING OF THE UNWHOLESOME POTTAGE ILLUSTRATES THE UNFAILING EFFICACY OF THE GRACE OF GOD.

The prophet cast some meal into the pot, and the new element conquered death, and transformed the hurtful repast into nutritious food. The healing efficacy did not lie in the meal. The meal was only "the earthly substratum for the working of the Divine effluence." It was the outward and visible symbol of the grace of God. Elisha's ministry, as we have seen, was pre-eminently a ministry of grace, and those mighty works which formed the chief medium through which he uttered his message were so many practical illustrations, so many parables in action, of the operations of that grace which bringeth salvation.

Wheresoever therefore we find in those early ages a victory secured over death, that victory points more or less clearly to Jesus Christ; it is a foreshadowing of the supreme victory of His Cross and of all the consequent victories of His grace. It was when he laid down His life on Calvary and conquered death through dying—the efficacy of His Atonement passing over into the energy of His Resurrection—that those great words of triumph could first be uttered in the fulness of their meaning, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" All former victories were only figures of the true. But figures they certainly were.

"In such indexes, although small pricks
To their subsequent volumes, there is seen
The baby figure of the giant mass
Of things to come at large."

This triumph over death in Gilgal therefore has its distinctive Evangelical message: it points in its own homely way to the conquering efficacy of the grace of Christ. In its general character it closely resembles the earlier work

of healing performed by Elisha in the case of the fountain of Jericho. In both instances there was the presence of corruption in the necessaries of life, and in both instances a feature of the deliverance was the use of unlikely means, and the introduction into the tainted supplies of a new element from without.

In both miracles, therefore, the spiritual lesson is practically the same. The meal and the salt seemed equally hopeless as a means of overcoming the power of death, and so proclaimed the fact, to which, indeed, the whole history of religion bears testimony, that God delights to perform *His* miracles through means that run directly counter to the wisdom of this world. The fact that the change was wrought by a new element introduced from the outside is also an illustration of a general principle in the Kingdom of grace. Before death could be removed from our guilty world, the Son of God had to come into it in the likeness of sinful flesh and procure for men the gift of life through His own death. Before the reign of death can come to an end in the individual soul a new principle of life must be implanted; grace must come in with its nobler and yet more overmastering dominion, and bind "the strong man" who is in possession of the house. In neither case—and this surely is one of the commonplaces of our religion—can salvation be attained through the operation of principles that are inherent in human life. The gospel of Evolution has small comfort for the poor and the maimed and the halt and the blind. But "the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened." There we have the great and heartening fact—set forth in symbol by the miracle of Gilgal—that Salvation is all of grace, and that the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

When the grace of God comes into the heart it makes all things new. It destroys the power manifested in varying forms of the death that was "in the pot."

Reference was made, for example, to the hurtful fare of sinful pleasure. From that danger grace sets us free.

For the presence of grace means the creating of a "new man," with new tastes, new desires, new inclinations, new delights. The law of God is written on the heart; a new world of vision and aspiration dawns upon the soul; and the old relish for the enjoyments of sin passes away. When "Rabbi" John Duncan was first brought to receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, the change that was wrought in his soul in this respect was nothing short of miraculous. "Now," as he himself afterwards put it, "the temptation to daily sin was gone. I had not even to fight with it." The meal had been cast into the corrupt mass, and had performed its conquering work. And although in the experience of the Christian it generally happens that temptation returns, and the fight has to be maintained unto the end of the day, yet things are never, even at their worst, the same as before. Grace has the upper hand; and although it is sometimes night within the soul, and in the darkness there may be wanderings and stumblings and falls, the bent of the new nature ere long reasserts itself, and the heart comes back to the allegiance of Christ.

Against the dangers of unhealthy teaching also, whether its medium be the press or the pulpit, the grace of Christ acts as a real preservative. In the presence of this enemy its defences assume a new shape. "We know," says the Apostle John, "that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding that we may know Him that is true." Two great attainments of the believer are here set forth. The one is *conviction*—that settled persuasion of the truth which is the outcome of experience, and enables him to say, "We know." The other is *discernment*, that gift of spiritual perception which is the fruit of the illumination of the Holy Ghost, and which enables him to recognise error in its most specious forms.

Because of his conviction, his heart retains the serenity of its hope when the assaults of the enemy are "as a storm against the wall." There may be upheavals, and betrayals, and defections; but in his soul "the foundation of God standeth sure." Over the entrance to Marischal

College, Aberdeen, there has met the eyes of many generations of students a curious inscription—"They have said. What say they? Let them say." It represents, no doubt, the experience of an enquirer after truth, who has passed through a process of questioning and conflict, and has arrived in the end at repose and certitude of belief. "Let them say," he is at last enabled to cry with regard to all the gainsaying of opponents and all the clamour of rival disputants; *he* has his foot upon the rock, and his mind is at rest. So is it with those who out of their experience of the grace of Jesus Christ are enabled to say, "We know."

But there is also the gift of discernment, which is unquestionably one of the most useful of the believer's endowments. It means the possession in some real degree of the mind of Christ—the illumination of the Spirit in addition to the revelation of the Word, the light which comes from inward experience as well as the light which streams from the page of inspiration. And this is a touchstone by which all manner of doctrine may be tried. The Christian judgeth all things, and is not imposed upon by fair appearances. He is able to sift and discriminate; he proves all things, and holds fast that which is good. And so in his case the unwholesome pottage is rendered harmless. If he should "drink any deadly thing"—is not this at least one abiding application of the great New Testament promise regarding "them that believe"?—"it shall not hurt" him.

Over the death that forms so inevitable a part of the believer's earthly experience grace secures a similar victory. The Cross—which is the symbol of that death—is heavy and bitter enough in itself, but grace makes a change on the Cross. It gives patience under the burden, and strength to endure. It makes affliction operative, and therefore remunerative, using it for the cleansing of the soul and for the achieving of the "vastly preponderating and eternal weight of glory." It means the presence of a Friend who in the darkest day "sticketh closer than a brother." Thus it enables the believer to rejoice even in

the midst of tribulation. And when the call comes at the close of the day it is not death that obtains the victory. It cannot strip of everything those whose life is hid with Christ in God. In the soul the work of transformation is perfected, and from every feature there shines forth the image of Christ. The Cross is transmuted into a crown. And even in the grave the victory of death is only apparent. For the body is still united to Christ, and rests in quiet sleep until the Resurrection morning. Then from under the whole heaven shall this shout of triumph go up from all the company of the redeemed, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

X

THE MAN FROM BAAL-SHALISHA

“And there came a man from Baal-shalisha, and brought the man of God bread of the first-fruits, twenty loaves of barley, and full ears of corn in the husk thereof. And he said, Give unto the people that they may eat.”—2 KINGS iv. 42.

THE little community in Gilgal had been delivered from the danger of unwholesome fare, but their troubles were not yet over. The drought still continued, food was scarce, and the prospects for the future were far from cheering. How the faith of the sons of the prophets stood the test of this long spell of want we are not told. Doubtless it often had enough to do. But if their trust in God was a reality, as there is every reason to believe it was, they would have made their requests known to Him, and would have depended from day to day on His bounty. And one day the shadow was lifted. There appeared at the door of Elisha's dwelling a man from somewhere in the country—Baal-shalisha was the name of the place—with a present of the first-fruits for the man of God.

Of this kind-hearted stranger we know nothing beyond what is told us in the narrative. He had tilled and sown his fields in hope, and in due season his diligence was rewarded with success. Resolving to honour the Lord with the first-fruits of his increase, he prepared for Elisha a present of twenty barley loaves and some parched corn, and set off for Gilgal. He reached the prophet's dwelling, told his errand, and laid down his burden; then he took the road for Baal-shalisha once more, and vanished into the silence.

The present was intended for the prophet alone, but Elisha was not the man to feast while his friends were fasting. He ordered his servant to prepare a meal for the whole company. This proposal, however, did not at all meet with Gehazi's approval. He protested on the ground of the insufficiency of the supply to meet the needs of so great a number—twenty loaves and a little parched corn to feed a whole college! It seemed utterly preposterous. Gehazi's hopes were plainly disappointed. His keen vision saw the loaves disappear with startling rapidity before the attack of a hundred famishing men, whereas if they were reserved for the prophet's own sustenance they could last for many days, and might at the same time prove useful to the prophet's servant. It seemed to him nothing short of an abuse of the bounties of Providence; and the tone of his voice, even more than his words, would have been full of protest against such wantonness of prodigality. Elisha's mind, however, was made up. With a suggestion of peremptoriness, he again commanded his servant to spread the table for the whole company. The offering from Baalshalisha had not come alone: the word of the Lord had come along with it; and this had sweetened it and increased its value a hundred-fold. So the prophet was able to add, "Thus saith the Lord, They shall eat and leave thereof."

And so indeed it turned out. The hundred men sat down to their humble meal, which certainly seemed a scanty portion for so great a company. But as one after another received his share, the supply still held out. The loaves were divided, but they were not consumed. And when every man in the assembly had eaten and was satisfied, a portion of the feast—how much we are not told—still remained. They ate and left thereof, according to the word of the Lord.

This miracle, like the others performed by Elisha, suggests some important truths of an abiding character.

I

FIRST OF ALL, THE INCIDENT ILLUSTRATES GOD'S LOVING CARE FOR HIS PEOPLE.

Like the sons of the prophets, believers are sometimes in straits. Some of them even feel the pinch of actual want. But their God interposes to deliver them when the help of man has failed. Two general features of the relief afforded at Gilgal may be regarded as characteristic of the Divine method.

It was seasonable. Elisha and his disciples had manifestly reached the end of their resources, and then the Lord unfolded the wealth of His. Plainly, therefore, the thing was of God. So it often happens in the experience of the believer. When things are at their worst the Divine Helper appears, and His succours are so wonderful that they bear the impress of His glory and the seal of His love. And they are wonderful among other things, because they come at the right time. We are hemmed in, like the fleeing multitude of Israel at the Red Sea, and at the last moment He opens a way for us through the pathless waters. Our Lazarus is dead and buried, when the glory of the Resurrection appears. We have come face to face with "the great stone" of our difficulty, before we realise that angel hands have already rolled it away. Our impatience indeed may have long chided His seeming tardiness. "If thou hadst been here," we sadly reflect, as we think of how differently we should have ordered the course of events. But God's time is always best. He will not keep us in the fire one moment too long. The bruised reed He will not break. He can measure with unfailing precision the distance between bruising and breaking.

It came also from an unexpected quarter. Who could have imagined that it was from Baal-shalisha that supplies would come to relieve the famine in Gilgal? The stranger's name was perhaps never discovered by Elisha and his

friends. He was one of those rare and choice souls who do good by stealth—

“ The bravely dumb who do their deed,
And scorn to blot it with a name.”

Having quietly fulfilled his mission, he went back to his farm, happy that he had obeyed the promptings of his heart even though his action should remain for ever unchronicled. And the men whose necessities he had relieved could only look at one another in mute astonishment, or say, “ This is the Lord’s doing ; it is marvellous in our eyes.” This again is a characteristic feature of the Divine help. The poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth them for thirst ; and then at the critical moment the Lord opens “ rivers on the bare heights and fountains in the midst of the valleys ”—surely an unlikely source from which to expect such help. Some nameless “ man from Baal-shalisha ” appears on his errand of mercy, and those who benefit by his mission are left wellnigh speechless before the surprises of God.

The records of the Church of Christ are rich in illustrations of such opportuneness and unexpectedness of deliverance on the part of her Lord. Let us turn for example to the history of Mr Spurgeon’s Pastors’ College in London—to begin with a case which presents a striking parallel to that of Elisha’s College in Gilgal. The financial burden of this institution rested entirely upon the founder himself, and he often used to tell how, as the work grew in his hands, and his resources were exhausted, the way was opened up for him in a manner that clearly revealed the hand of God. He had come to his last pound, and knew not where to find another. He discussed the matter with a like-minded friend, who asked him if he had prayed about it. “ Yes, I have,” he replied. “ Well, then,” was the rejoinder, “ leave it with Him. Have you opened your letters yet ? ” No, he had not, but at his friend’s suggestion proceeded to do so. In the very first he found a note from a banker telling him that a lady, *who was totally unknown to the writer*, had left with

him the sum of £200 for the purposes of the Pastors' College. This nameless benefactor was a lineal descendant of the man from Baal-shalisha.

Or let us look at the work so long and so nobly carried on by George Müller in Bristol. Here again we find deliverances of a similar character that appear to us—so lacking in expectancy as a rule is our faith—little short of miraculous. The same remark applies to the labours of Dr Francke in connection with the Orphan Houses in Halle. The *Pietas Hallensis* is simply a record of the faithfulness and loving-kindness of the Lord in making His servant's extremity His own opportunity. On one occasion, Dr Francke tells us, he stood in need of a large sum of money for the carrying on of his work. His steward came and set forth the urgency of their plight. He was asked to come again in the evening, and meantime Dr Francke betook himself to prayer. The man duly returned, but the situation was unchanged, and he was asked to come once more at a later hour. Dr Francke was now joined by a friend, and the two continued together in waiting upon God. When at length the visitor took his departure and was being shown out, two men were found standing at the door, One was the steward waiting for the needed funds. The other was a person with a gift of a hundred and fifty crowns for the support of the Hospital. This helper also was a member of the family of Baal-shalisha.

Once more, let us examine the record of Dr Barnardo's monumental work in the cause of orphan children in London. Here also we meet with one instance after another of the surprises of relief which the Lord delights to give His servants in their time of need. When, for example, the eminent philanthropist first conceived the idea of putting his homeless waifs in cottage homes, he got so little encouragement for his proposals that he began at length to doubt whether the scheme was in accordance with the mind of God. In this condition of mind he set off to attend a Conference of Christian workers at Oxford, and on the way unburdened his heart to a friend

whom he met in the train. After discussing the matter the two knelt down together in the carriage and asked God to show clearly before His servant left Oxford whether it was His will that the work should be gone on with or not. On the following morning, as Dr Barnardo was dressing in his hotel, a knock came to his bedroom door. A man thrust his head in. His hair was dishevelled, and he was not fully dressed. "Is your name Barnardo?" he asked abruptly. "Yes," was the reply. "You are thinking of building a village for little girls at Ilford, are you not?" the stranger continued. "Yes, yes," answered Dr Barnardo, too much amazed to say more. "Well," said the other, "put me down for the first cottage." Then he withdrew his head, and closed the door behind him. When he had recovered from his bewilderment, Dr Barnardo rushed after the retreating figure, and elicited his name and the circumstances which had led to his somewhat unconventional offer of help. This kind-hearted stranger also was of the same spirit as the man from Baal-shalisha.

Nor is it alone in connection with works of this public and extensive character that the Lord is wont to reveal His loving care for His people. The pages of biography abound with similar examples of relief vouchsafed unto individual Christians. Let us take up, for instance, the life of Thomas Hog, the saintly and far-famed minister of Kiltarn, and we come upon an incident such as this. In the year 1683 he was banished by the Privy Council for holding private conventicles, and was ordered to remove himself from the kingdom within forty-eight hours. He made his way to London with the purpose of leaving the country, but was there apprehended on another charge and cast into prison. He was allowed a room for himself upon payment of a certain weekly sum, but as the time passed his money was nearly all spent, and it seemed as if this privilege could no longer be secured. The good man resolved to betake himself to prayer, and told his servant that on the following day he was in no circumstances to be interrupted, as he desired to spend

the whole time in fellowship with God. He proceeded to carry out this purpose, but about midday a gentleman called and asked to be allowed to speak with him. He was told of Mr Hog's desire to be alone, but repeated his request with such urgency that at length the servant went in and reported the matter to his master. Mr Hog consented to receive the stranger, who on being admitted discoursed with great appropriateness and power on the subject of suffering for the cause of God. Then he arose and embraced Mr Hog with much warmth, placing at the same time in his hand a considerable sum of money. The other asked him why he showed such kindness to a stranger. "Because I am appointed by our great and exalted Master to do so," was the answer. Mr Hog then asked him his name, but he refused to disclose it. With one or two further words of encouragement he withdrew, and Mr Hog, who was filled with wonder at "the glory of infinite wisdom, love, and faithfulness" revealed in the incident, never saw or heard from him any more. This mysterious stranger also belonged to the noble household of Baal-shalisha.

A goodly company indeed they make, this tribe of Baal-shalisha. Elisha's anonymous benefactor is by no means a unique individual. He has many fellow-workers through the generations in the same blessed ministry. And one day the names of these humble servants of God will no longer be hid. They shall be dragged into eternal fame before an assembled universe, and their "little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love" shall be transfigured through the gracious recognition of their King. "I was an hungered and ye gave Me meat," He will say; "I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink."

II

THE INCIDENT, FURTHER, GIVES US AN EXAMPLE OF HOW GOD'S GIFTS ARE TO BE USED.

They are not to be hoarded up for our own exclusive use. The offering from Baal-shalisha was brought for

the prophet alone, but Elisha shared his present with all the rest. So should we employ for the common good the gifts we receive from God. The new life that has come to us from Christ should be yielded up to Him again in diligence and loyalty of service. The grace that has saved our soul should be used in showing forth the praises of the Saviour. The talent entrusted to us is not to be hidden in the earth or folded in a napkin, but to be used for the benefit of the community. Our blessings ought, as far as possible, to be shared with others; our endowments should not be left "to rust unburnished," but should "shine in use."

The Gehazi spirit has its roots in each of us. We are often tempted to live for ourselves and to overlook the needs of our brother. Our fingers close round our earthly possessions with a tenacious grasp, and we turn away from the cry of our neighbour's distress. Gehazi indeed sometimes reveals himself under the garb of religion. The man, for example, who is unable to see over the walls of his own denomination, and whose interests therefore do not extend to the well-being of the cause of Christ in other communions and in other lands, belongs to this ignoble species. So also does the man who is indifferent to the needs of those "who are without," whether these be the unsaved at home or the heathen abroad. He has of course many plausible arguments in support of his position, just as Gehazi's reasoning appeared to reveal a sensible and prudent spirit. He will tell you that his own needs, or the needs of the particular interest which he represents, are so pressing that he simply cannot afford to respond to the appeals that reach him from other sources.

This, however, is utter selfishness, and leads to atrophy of soul. The spirit of the gospel is generous and merciful. When God's gifts come to me, I should regard myself as a steward of the Divine bounty, and should therefore say at once, "Make ready that the men may eat." And if my prudent and calculating self whispers, "It is but a meagre provision at best; it will not go far when divided,

and your own need is great," the answer is at hand : " It may be small in itself, but still let it be distributed among the people ; with the blessing of God there is no limit to its possibilities."

And when we act upon this principle we shall not suffer loss, for our gifts will be multiplied in the bestowing. In the Kingdom of Christ the way to have is to spend, the way to become rich is to be generous ; " the more we give away, the more we have." Our possessions may be slender enough, but if we use them for God they will grow in our hands. He that loseth his life, by yielding it up unstintingly for Christ's sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.

" I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be."

III

LAST OF ALL, THE MIRACLE FORESHADOWS THE PROVISION OF GOD'S GRACE.

The spiritual reference in this case is unmistakable. Let us pass down through the centuries unto the days of Jesus Christ. We see Him one day on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He had been followed across the lake by a great multitude of people ; the day was far spent, and His heart was moved with compassion for the fainting men and women. He asked Philip, in order to test his faith, where provisions could be got to feed the company. Philip went through a rapid calculation. " Two hundred penny worth of bread is not sufficient for them," he replied—no doubt in a tone which suggested the impossibility of the demand. Andrew heard Christ's words, and in his own practical way volunteered the information that a lad in the company had five barley loaves and two small fishes ; " but," added he, as his thought travelled from this slender supply to the hungry thousands confronting him, " what are these among so many ? " It is almost a repetition—although the accent

is different—of Gehazi's words in Gilgal many generations before.

Then, with a more compelling authority than Elisha in the former day, Jesus ordered His disciples to make the men sit down in readiness for their meal. And thereupon there took place the most wonderful banquet the world has ever seen—five thousand people reclining on the green grass, with the blue sky for their canopy, and, to feed them all, only five loaves and two small fishes ! But the Lord “knew Himself what He would do.” He took the loaves in His hand and blessed them ; then He brake them, and handed them to the disciples ; and the disciples distributed them among the multitude. And five thousand men ate and were filled. Nay, like the company in Gilgal, they did “eat and leave thereof.” For when the whole multitude were satisfied, the disciples gathered of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full. The scanty portion with the blessing of Christ was more than a feast for thousands. Elisha's miracle in Gilgal is thus seen to have been a foreshadowing of Christ's miracle in Galilee.

But Christ's miracle in Galilee was itself a shadowing forth of spiritual truth. It was designed to be to the Jews an object lesson in the way in which their souls might be fed with the Bread of Life. Let us follow the gospel narrative a little further. On the next day we find Jesus on the other side of the lake. The people had followed Him and He began to teach them. Making the miracle of the previous day the basis of His doctrine, He plainly set before them His own claims as the Bread of the Soul. “I,” said He, “am the living Bread which came down from heaven : if any man eat of this bread he shall live for ever : and the bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” And then the hostility of the multitude became articulate and clamorous. “How,” they cried, “can this man give us His flesh to eat ?” They looked at the poverty of His earthly condition and poured contempt on the vastness of His claim. “Is not this Jesus,” they scorn-

fully asked, "the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?"

It is the old objection in another form—the objection of Philip on the day before, the objection of Gehazi in the remoter age. If it was unlikely that five loaves should prove sufficient for the needs of five thousand men, was it not infinitely more unlikely, from the same point of view, that He who stood there in lowliness and obscurity should of Himself be able to meet the spiritual needs of the whole world? He had been born in a stable; He had toiled at the carpenter's bench; He had not where to lay His head; He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief—could this be the Son of God, the King of Israel, the Saviour of the world? How can this man, "whose father and mother we know," give us His flesh to eat? What is this among so many? And most of them were so offended at this saying that they "went back, and walked with Him no more." But when His body was broken on the tree, as the bread had been broken on the shore of the lake, there was enough for the whole great company of the elect of God to "eat and leave thereof."

The same spirit has been manifesting itself throughout the ages in reference to the operations of the Gospel in the world. Men look at the simplicity of the message and the weakness of the messengers, and then at the greatness of the field into which they are sent, and they cry, "What are these among so many?" The old Gehazi spirit rises in their hearts. They are ready to be ashamed of the gospel, because they do not see how it can be "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." They are ready to deride God's methods, and, like the Greeks, to regard them as foolishness.

But the foolishness of God is wiser than men. There is enough in the Gospel of Christ to meet the needs of the whole world. His blood cleanseth from all sin. The strength of His right arm can overthrow the mightiest strongholds of death. His grace can meet our deepest needs. His love is a fountain that can fill our being with

the fulness of God. The Bread of Life beyond question is enough for the souls of men.

Enough, did I say? "They shall eat and leave thereof." The riches of Christ are unsearchable. His grace is a fathomless deep; His love is a shoreless ocean. When the soul is fully satisfied it has seen but the fringe of His glory, for even His train fills the Temple. "We seldom sit down to meat," said the Interpreter to Christiana and her fellow-pilgrims, "but we eat and leave; so there is in Jesus Christ more merit and righteousness than the whole world has need of."

All that the redeemed receive on earth is but the earnest of the inheritance that is reserved for them; and when at length they see their King and their Pilot face to face, they shall realise that the half had not been told them. Throughout all Eternity they shall continue to drink of the living fountains into which the Lamb in the midst of the Throne shall lead them, and each new revelation of His glory and each new experience of His love shall be

"An arch wherethro'

Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades

For ever and for ever when they move."

As the circling ages roll on their way, there remains in the glory of God and in the fulness of Christ an infinite depth that is still unexplored.

XI

NAAMAN AND THE JEWISH MAID

“And the Syrians had gone out by companies, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid; and she waited on Naaman’s wife.”—2 KINGS v. 2.

THE account of the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian is one of the most interesting and instructive of Scripture narratives. It is an intensely human story, full of the tragedy and pathos of life, and rich at the same time in elements of hope and encouragement. Naaman was one of the chief men in Syria. But he was a leper. He heard of Elisha, the great prophet of God in Samaria, made his way to him, and at length was healed of his leprosy. The account of his varied experiences carries us on from step to step with singular power and realistic charm. For the present we shall confine ourselves to the great sorrow which darkened Naaman’s life, and to the remarkable circumstance through which he came to hear about Elisha.

Naaman had had a brilliant career in his native land. He had drunk deeply of the cup of success, and had mounted so high in fame and power that it was scarcely possible for him to go further. The list of his distinctions forms an imposing array.

I

He was Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian army. This was no mere honorary position. The Syrians were a warlike people, and were continually engaged in one military enterprise or another. The merits of their leaders were therefore continually being put to the test, and the posts of responsibility could be held only by men

of approved capacity. Naaman was "Captain of the host of the King of Syria." He accordingly held in his grasp that power and authority over his fellows which most men regard as among the chief prizes of life. He was also the king's right-hand counsellor. He is described as "a great man with his master." There was no man in the land whom the king honoured more highly or trusted more fully. The place which he held in the royal regard is strikingly revealed in the anxiety manifested by Benhadad in connection with his health and in the efforts put forth by him to secure its restoration. Benhadad knew that if he lost his brilliant general the kingdom of Syria would be shorn of its chief glory and strength.

But it was not only with the king that Naaman found favour; he was also a popular hero, because on one memorable occasion he had been a national deliverer. At some critical juncture in the history of his country Naaman had come to the rescue, and had turned the tide of battle. We can imagine, therefore, how he would have been honoured, and fêted, and turned into a kind of national idol. He was the William Tell or the Sir William Wallace of his country. So he was "honourable" in the general esteem, "because by him the Lord had given deliverance unto Syria." And, to crown all, he was a man of distinguished personal valour. His eminence was due to no accident of birth; it was not achieved through the influence of powerful friends. He was

" No carpet-knight so trim,
But in close fight a champion grim,
In camps a leader sage."

His honours were the fitting reward of his deeds. On many a stubborn field Naaman had proved that he was a brave soldier and a resourceful leader of men. Was not his, therefore, a truly enviable position? Wielding immense authority, possessing a notable record of achievement, a royal favourite, and a national hero—surely he had all that the heart of man could desire in this world.

But Naaman, notwithstanding all this, was far from

happy. The tale of his possessions has not yet been fully told. One other fact has to be mentioned ; but that one fact made his day dark with night, and took all the gilt off the glory. He was a leper. At what time he made the dreadful discovery regarding his condition, or how long he carried his secret about with him before he made it known, we are not told. With dramatic simplicity the narrative does nothing more than set the one tragic fact of disease over against the bright array of honours. It may be that Naaman was arrested in the very zenith of his glory. When his cup was full, God laid His hand on him, and turned the sweetness into wormwood and gall. And from that moment his life was overshadowed by the one awful fact. For leprosy was a fatal disease : Naaman was carrying his death-warrant in his body. And what then did it matter that he stood on so lofty a pinnacle of earthly greatness ? His triumphs, his honours, his ambitions, his joys—what did they all amount to now ? Naaman was a leper.

II

Many a man since Naaman's day has found his own biography in this brief but pregnant story. On every hand in human life we find the "but" which turned the history of the Syrian captain into a tragedy. It is an element which enters more or less into the experience of all the sons of men. There are few homes into which it does not find an entrance, few firesides which its shadow does not darken, few pillows in which it does not plant a thorn. When the lot seems most prosperous and desirable, there is always a "but" to be set over against the pleasantness. Usually this counterbalancing fact belongs to the secret things of experience. It is the skeleton in the cupboard, the existence of which may not even be suspected by others. The world knows only the outside, which may appear bright and prosperous ; but there is another side, even more real, which is a constant pain.

The successful man of the world, for example, often

has a secret sorrow. Things have gone well with him outwardly : his business has prospered ; he has accumulated a fortune. Honours come to him. He attains to power and influence. There are many who praise him, because he has " done well " to himself ; there are many more who envy him, because they count him happy. But if we could penetrate into that man's inner life, how often should we find that there is some shadow which is darkening his soul. When his coffers are fullest, and his power is highest, and his name is most widely honoured, there is a secret thorn in the flesh which turns life for him into one long sorrow.

Perhaps in his case also the " but " takes the form of a fatal disease. His doom has been pronounced. His life is hanging by a thread ; and at any moment the severing blow may fall. So he moves about in the sunshine haunted by a disabling fear. Or it may be that the shadow of the past is overhanging his life. In his breast he carries a secret which gnaws at his heart. Away back in his earlier life there was some deed of shame, some dishonourable connection, some course of deception, and the dread of exposure oppresses him like a nightmare. Or, once more, the tragedy may have its scene in the home. Sometimes there is discord at the fireside ; sometimes there is even a burden of vicarious shame. Or perhaps the heart has a continual heaviness because in the home there is some loved one who is doomed to long years of weakness and pain. Such things form a crook in the lot of the most prosperous of men. Where they exist, the outward signs of success are but the mask of sorrow. The man is rich, esteemed, and praised, " but "—his " sincerest laughter with some pain is fraught."

Sometimes—although happily this is of less frequent occurrence—the leprosy is concealed beneath the cloak of a religious profession. One has sometimes heard, for example, of a man who stands high in the regard of his fellows. He is looked upon as a public benefactor. Open-handed, as it seems, and generous, his name is found at the head of subscription lists, and is lent out for

the support of all good causes. His words are quoted to buttress an opinion; his advice is solicited in cases of difficulty; his example is cited as an inspiration and a pattern. But one day the revelation comes. The cloak is somehow torn off, and the man is seen to be a moral leper. His life has been a long falsehood. The means with which he had built up a reputation for generosity are seen perhaps to be the price of blood. The shining example of public virtue is revealed as a secret profligate. In this case, beyond question, the "but" has a sinister significance.

But there is an even more overwhelming fact which applies, without any exception, to every man who is a stranger to the power of the gospel. Every unconverted sinner is a leper in the spiritual sense. Sin is nothing less than leprosy of soul. It pervades the whole being, it is loathsome in its character, and, unless arrested by the grace of God, it ends in death. The testimony of Scripture regarding the corruption of the unregenerate heart is simply appalling. "Out of the heart," said Christ, "proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things that defile a man." "We ourselves also," adds Paul, "were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasure, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another." This is a tremendous indictment, and is so plain and definite that it needs no amplification.

Of course it is sometimes difficult for those whose early life has been carefully shielded from evil, and who have never therefore sunk deep into the mire of actual transgression, to realise the truth of this witness in its application to themselves. To them the description seems greatly exaggerated. But whatever differences may exist among individuals in the matter of actual contact with the pollution of sin in life, the fact remains, beyond any possibility of doubt, that the soul of man is diseased and the disease finds its most appropriate physical analogy in leprosy. That good and devoted servant of

Christ, Adolphe Monod, was one of those who have had difficulties with regard to this question. For a long time he was unable to admit the justness of the Scripture representation of sin. Even after he had been brought to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ it was long before he could completely accept it. Not even when he had advanced to maturity in the Christian life was he able fully to comprehend it. "But," he adds, "I am sure when I shall have laid down this mortal tabernacle I shall acknowledge it to be the most faithful resemblance ever traced of my heart, my natural, unregenerate heart."

Every unsaved soul, therefore, is in a leprous state. And because of this fact, which involves both guilt and pollution, there is another fact, not less real, and yet more dreadful; the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Over the soul, accordingly, whatever may be its outward circumstances, that awful shadow hangs. This surely is the most tragic of all conceivable "buts." There is no escape from it save in Jesus Christ. Let all who are living without God and without hope in the world give heed to this tremendous fact. Let every reader of these lines who is in such a condition suffer a word of plain and affectionate warning. Your outward circumstances may be prosperous, but you are guilty in God's sight. You are young and strong; you have a keen interest in the things of the world and you put the evil day far off; but one day you must die, and after death there is the judgment. You may be honoured and applauded by men, but you are an enemy to God. You may be light-hearted and indifferent: but at such an hour as you think not, the Son of Man may come. You may eat and drink and give yourself to merriment; "but"—the moving finger writes, and the inevitable hour draws on.

III

Naaman heard of the mighty prophet of the Lord in Samaria, and the circumstances in which this knowledge—which issued in the healing of his body and, apparently, in the conversion of his soul—came to his ears are profoundly instructive.

During one of the raids which the Syrians made into the land of Israel, of which we read so much in the Books of the Kings, they carried away captive a little Hebrew maid. This did not seem a very rich prize, but for Naaman at least it proved of more value than all the silver and gold in the land. The girl seems to have caught the fancy of the Syrian General's wife; perhaps the pathetic figure of the little stranger appealed to her heart; at any rate we find this youthful daughter of Abraham installed in Naaman's house as a kind of personal attendant on his wife. We are not told anything of the grief she must have suffered when wrenched from her home in Israel, or of the feeling of loneliness that must have chilled her heart on finding herself in a foreign land amid strange sights and unfamiliar faces. But we may be sure that her thoughts went often back to the home of her childhood, and that as the fond faces and well-remembered scenes of those cloudless days rose up before her view, the bitter tears would fall, and she would sometimes go about her duties in Naaman's house with a heavy heart.

Young as this little captive was, she was not too young to know the God of Israel. Doubtless at a very early age her heart had been impressed with religious truth, and both in the home and in the sanctuary she would have joined in the worship of the living and true God. And throughout all the dark days that followed she remained true to her fathers' faith. Amid the abounding idolatry of the land in which her lot was cast she did not "forget Jerusalem," but kept her early religion pure and undefiled. Ere long an opportunity came of testifying for her God.

Naaman's disease became known far and near : the dread secret could no longer be hid. It reached the ears of this little member of his household, and it filled her heart with grief. She cared for her master ; we have no reason to think that the treatment she received in his home was other than kind. And moved alike by her natural affection and her religious faith, she spoke a word in season. She told her mistress of the famous man of God who lived in Samaria, and expressed her firm conviction that if only Naaman could avail himself of the prophet's help he would be restored to his wonted health. These words at length came to the ears of the king himself, and so the movement was set on foot which resulted in the healing of Naaman the Syrian.

The first thing that commands our attention in this touching story is the loyalty of the little Hebrew maid to the religious faith in which she had been reared. Hers was indeed a brave and noble spirit. Think of the dangers that surrounded her in that distant land, removed from the fostering care of those who loved her. She lived among an idolatrous people, and there would have been the temptation at least to keep silent about her own God. Youth, too, is ready to forget ; the charm of novelty appeals to its restless heart ; and this girl would have witnessed day by day scenes and customs that were fitted to lead her mind altogether astray from the religion of Israel. But amid so many dangers she did not fail. Her heart remained true to her own and her fathers' God, and when the time came, she did not shrink from confessing Him before men.

Is there not here a needed lesson for the young people who read these lines ? They too are sometimes tested in the same way, though seldom with so fiery a trial. They are often put on their mettle with respect to the religion in whose ways and beliefs their early steps have been guided. Boys and girls, for example, leave the home of their childhood and come to the city, to attend school, or to prepare for their life work. How often are they tempted to prove disloyal to the training of their

youth. They had been taught to pray to God, and to read their Bible, and to attend the Lord's House, and to reverence sacred things. But when this religion of theirs, which seemed so good, and so noble, and even so easy, when learned at a mother's knee amid the quiet retirement of a happy home, has to undergo the test of unfriendly eyes and scoffing tongues amid new surroundings, how hard it sometimes is to play the part of Daniel and dare to stand alone. How ready they are to deny the faith according to which their life has hitherto been fashioned, and to conform to the ways of those among whom their lot is cast.

Then we have the inspiring lesson that the youngest of us may be of great service in the Lord's cause. Here was a little girl without much knowledge or experience, but her heart was glowing with love to God, and the word she spoke that day in Syria was followed by results the greatness of which it is impossible for us to calculate. When we think of Naaman's influence with the king, and his favour with the people, as well as the weight of his personal character, it is not unreasonable to suppose that his conversion to the faith of Israel would have had a far-reaching influence upon his countrymen. This at least we have no reason to doubt, that from that time forward there stood amid the idols of Syria an altar to the living God; amid the gross darkness of that heathen land there was one dwelling that had in it the light of Divine Truth. And this mighty result, with all the possibilities attending it, was due to a word fitly spoken by a little Hebrew maid.

Do not suppose that you must wait until you are grown up before you can be of use in Christ's service. There is, no doubt, a danger of unbecoming forwardness on the part of youth. The zeal which is directed by knowledge, or restrained by humility, generally does more harm than good. But if in your heart there is true love to Christ, you will not have to wait long for your opportunity. Many a time the simple word of a child has moved the heart that has held out against all other influences. It

may have been a word of quiet trust in God, or of unaffected love for His Name, a word perhaps of deeper meaning than the little speaker knew ; but like the still small voice which bowed the head of the prophet when the wind and the earthquake had spent their force in vain, it touches the very springs of being. God likes to make use of weak things to accomplish His purposes. The fresh voices of the children crying "Hosannah" in the Temple were in the ears of Christ the perfection of praise. There was a sweetness in their artless notes that excelled the music of the spheres. Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings God was ordaining strength—a strength which, according to the eighth Psalm, is more potent in publishing abroad the glory of His Name than all the splendour of sun and moon and stars.

" Small service is true service while it lasts :
Of friends, however humble, scorn not one.
The daisy, by the shadow that it casts,
Protects the lingering dewdrop from the sun."

XII

NAAMAN AND ELISHA

“ And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. But Naaman was wroth, and went away.”—2 KINGS v. 10, 11.

WITHOUT loss of time Naaman set off for Samaria. He carried with him a letter from his royal master to the King of Israel, and he travelled in a manner befitting his rank, with chariots and horsemen, silver and gold, and changes of raiment in abundance. Having reached his destination, he made his way to the royal palace, and delivered his letter to the king. Jehoram was filled with consternation at the message sent him by his brother of Syria ; for it was virtually an injunction to him to cure Naaman of his leprosy. His suspicious mind read into the communication a plot against himself, and his agitation as he rent his clothes and cried, “ Am I God to kill and to make alive ? ” is distinctly amusing. But he was soon delivered from his perplexity. The news of Naaman’s arrival and of the effect of his message upon the king quickly spread, and ere long came to the ears of Elisha. He at once sent a message to Jehoram, chiding him for his display of weakness, and directing him to send Naaman to *him*, that the Syrian might know that there was a prophet in Israel.

So Naaman was led to the prophet’s dwelling. At last he stood at the right door. But the reception given to him there differed very widely from his expectations. The prophet did not even come out from his chamber to speak with him. He simply sent a message prescribing the cure, a cure that appeared so ridiculously futile that Naaman’s

wrath, which already had been stirred at the lack of deference paid to his nobility, burst forth in unmeasured violence. Wash in the Jordan, indeed! He did not need to come all the way to Samaria in order to bathe! If washing was the thing he required, surely the clean and pellucid rivers of Damascus were more likely to serve his purpose than the sluggish and muddy streams of Israel. Naaman's heart was not only sore with disappointment, but hot with scorn; "so he turned and went away in a rage."

But as he was moving from the prophet's door, his steps were arrested by the quiet expostulating voice of his servants. Was it not worth a trial, this easy cure? Why should its simplicity be regarded as so fatal to its efficacy? Naaman at once saw the reasonableness of his faithful attendants' view, and paused in his hasty course. There could be no harm at least in putting the thing to the proof. Besides, the leprosy was still working its deadly way through his frame, and he could not afford to nurse his wounded pride. He made his way to the Jordan, and plunged in, once, twice, seven times. And, lo, at the seventh time the miracle happened. His flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

In this miracle, once more, the spiritual lesson is the prominent one. In the healing of Naaman the Syrian we have a vivid picture of the cleansing of sinful men from their spiritual leprosy through the power of the gospel. There are two or three outstanding truths presented to us in the narrative on which it may be profitable to dwell for a little.

I. AND, FIRST OF ALL, THE NATURE OF THE CURE PRESCRIBED TO NAAMAN BRINGS TO LIGHT CERTAIN GREAT PRINCIPLES OF GOD'S WAY OF SALVATION.

Naaman's disdain and resentment find an abiding parallel in the spiritual domain, and for very much the same reasons. There are multitudes in every age and country who are similarly affected by the conditions of salvation set forth in the gospel, and who therefore turn

away in a rage from the Divine way of life. Christ crucified is to them a stumbling-block. The gospel is foolishness.

For one thing, it runs counter to human wisdom. Naaman, as we have seen, came to the prophet's door with his own plan as to how he was to be healed. He had the whole scene arranged in his mind. Elisha was to come out and do him honour, then strike his hand over the affected place, and so accomplish the cure with a great deal of outward impressiveness. And the easiness of the real cure, when it was presented to him, filled his heart with scorn. And so it is with the gospel of the grace of God. The very simplicity of its terms proves to many a stumbling-block. The world in its wisdom is ready to pour contempt upon the plan of simple faith in Jesus Christ. It has its own conceptions of how the thing should be done, conceptions which are in direct opposition to the true way. The "I thought" of Naaman has in some degree a place in every heart. So full indeed are we sometimes of our own thoughts that we have no room for the thoughts of God. We are ready to follow the theories of our own understanding rather than the teaching of the "sure word of prophecy," to walk in the sparks of our own kindling rather than in the clear light of revelation, to build on the shifting sands of human speculation rather than on the solid rock of Divine Truth. "Are not Abana and Pharpar," we say in effect, "better than all the waters of Israel?"

For example—to refer to but one instance—there are not a few within the very Church who are sometimes tempted to waver in their loyalty to evangelical methods. In the forefront of their activities they put other aims than the regeneration of the individual through belief of the gospel. Their ideal, for example, may assume the form of social service, and in that case their energies are mainly expended in the effort to improve the outward conditions of life among the people. The sanctuary is turned, in a greater or less degree, into a kind of club, whose attractions are intended to compete with the lure of the public-house ;

and the preaching of the Word is relegated to a subordinate position. Abana and Pharpar have it all their own way! The waters of Israel are regarded as too dull and too noiseless in their flow for the demands of the hour. Now there are elements in these forms of effort that claim our sympathy. There are multitudes of men and women living beneath the same skies as ourselves whose social circumstances are a disgrace to civilisation, not to speak of Christianity; and every sincere endeavour to improve their earthly lot should meet with the cordial appreciation of all right-thinking men.

Nevertheless the Church of Christ must not be turned aside from her Divinely appointed mission by the spectacle of social distress. She has been sent to preach the gospel as the one unchanging and sovereign remedy for human need. And the aim of the gospel is first of all to renew the soul. It concerns itself supremely with the spiritual side of man's nature, and has ever before its view the claims of the life to come. Through the soul, of course, it makes its power felt upon the body; by the way of the spiritual it influences the material; through the regeneration of the individual it achieves the transformation of society. But everything in its order. The preaching of the gospel must ever stand in the forefront of the Church's activities. The waters of Israel must still retain their pre-eminence. For as an eminent modern preacher, Dr Jones of Bournemouth, said with admirable point not long ago: Abana and Pharpar would do very well if all that is involved in the case were a question of *dirt*. But it is more than a question of dirt; it is a question of *disease*; and there is nothing that will cure the disease but God's remedy.

The gospel also runs counter to human pride. Naaman appeared before the prophet's door in the pomp of his lofty rank. He did not come simply as a leper: he came as a great man from Syria, recommended by his king, and with the price of his healing in his hand. And when all this imposing show went for nothing in the eyes of the man of God, when he was asked to do, not "some great

thing "befitting his importance, but a thing that appeared foolishly easy and cheap, Naaman was angry, and turned away in the soreness of his wounded pride. And after the same manner many still deal with the way of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Sometimes it is their pride of heart that rises in rebellion. They are not prepared to accept the character which God's word assigns to them, and, accordingly, they are not disposed to become wholly indebted for salvation to the free grace of God. They prefer to come like Naaman with the price of their healing in their hand. Were "some great thing" proposed to them on the basis of which they might make terms with God they would be much better pleased with the arrangement. But when they are asked to renounce all confidence in the flesh—to cease depending on self and to trust in Another, to have done with working for salvation and to receive it as a sovereign and gracious gift, to go past all that is visible and tangible, and to believe in an unseen Saviour—their pride is touched, and they proceed to make comparisons between these humbling proposals of the gospel and the seemlier Abanas and Pharpars of fleshly confidence. And the gospel summons men not only to abandon their self-righteousness, but also to forsake their sins. Its call to renunciation embraces the whole range of the unrenewed life. And the heart often rises up in resentment against this imperious demand. Its idols are too dear to be thus dethroned, its habits too strong to be given up, its transgressions too pleasant to be forsaken. So there is a turning away in a rage from God's way of healing.

Sometimes it is pride of intellect that gives rise to the unholy anger. Men strike out against bending the powers of the mind to the authority of Divine Truth, and seek to evade the plain command of the gospel by raising questions that are often of a purely speculative character. They are asked to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and they answer by referring to their difficulties about the supernatural or the more mysterious aspects of

revelation. They glory in the might of intellect, and refuse to believe where they cannot prove. Often they are proud of their very doubts ; in not a few cases they make them an excuse for continuing in sin. These are the wise and prudent ones from whom the things of the Kingdom are hid. It is when we humble ourselves before God and become as little children in docility of spirit that we come to "know the truth" and to experience the freedom which it brings.

In the life of the well-known evangelist, Brownlow North, there is recorded an incident which illustrates the kind of attitude we have been considering, and indicates at the same time the handling which, in some cases at least, it should receive. On one occasion Mr North was preaching in Edinburgh, and at the close of the service a young man came into the side-room to which he had retired, to speak with him. "I have heard your sermon, sir," he said, "and I have heard you preach often, now ; but I care for neither you nor your preaching, unless you can tell me why did God permit sin in the world." "Then I'll tell you," the preacher at once replied ; "God permitted sin because He chose to do so." He had at once understood his man, and, like a skilful physician, having diagnosed the case, he was adopting the kind of treatment which was designed to strike at the roots of the disease. "Because He chose it," he repeated ; "and if you continue to question and cavil at God's dealings, and, vainly puffed up in your carnal mind, strive to be wise above what is written, I will tell you something more that God will choose to do : He will some day choose to put you into hell." This was drastic treatment, but it was suited to the case, and it did not exhaust the evangelist's message. After continuing for a little in the same strain, he added, "Remember that besides permitting sin there is another thing that God has chosen to do—God chose to send Jesus." He then pointed out the way of salvation which God in the riches of His grace has provided, and urged the young man to embrace it. A few days afterwards the enquirer

returned, but he was no longer proud and rebellious. The preacher's words had sunk into his heart. He had gone home and pleaded for mercy in the name of Jesus ; and God had heard his cry. Now he was full of joy and peace in believing. Like Naaman, he had put the waters of Israel to the proof, and his flesh had come again like unto the flesh of a little child.

II. AGAIN, THE CLEANSING OF NAAMAN IN THE WATERS OF THE JORDAN ILLUSTRATES THE MIRACLE OF CONVERSION THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.

There is little doubt, indeed, that in Naaman's own case the spiritual miracle had accompanied the physical one, that his soul was healed as well as his body. Christ's reference to the incident in the synagogue of Nazareth clearly points in this direction, and, besides this, we find in Naaman's own conduct certain significant indications of a mighty inward change.

He was enlightened in mind. He had made a great discovery, the supreme discovery for any soul : he had found the true God. Rabbi Duncan danced with joy on the Brig o' Dee when he was enabled to believe even that there is a God ; and to Naaman there had come not only that joy, the joy which springs from an assured conviction of the existence of a Supreme Being, but the deeper delight which flows from a personal experience of Divine grace. The work accomplished in the Jordan was so wonderful in his eyes that it bore the seal of Deity. And Naaman's gladness overflowed into open confession. " Now I know," he cried, " that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel."

He was humbled in spirit. He came back to the prophet's door after washing in Jordan, but how changed ! In more senses than one his flesh had come again like unto the flesh of a little child. He was no longer the proud, overbearing, self-important Captain of the host of Syria. " Thy servant " is how he described himself as he addressed the prophet, and the words are plainly no mere empty courtesy. Naaman's discovery and the experience he had had of the Divine goodness had laid low his

haughtiness. There is no better mark of conversion than humility, and there is nothing that produces humility like an experience of the grace of God.

He was thankful in heart. He returned to give glory to God for the benefit he had received. On this occasion again he brings an offering in his hand; but it is not because he has any thought of purchasing the gift of God with money, but because he desires to show the thankfulness of his heart by making some suitable recognition of the goodness of the Lord's servant. He had got his boon, and he was not minded to make his way back into Syria without acknowledging his indebtedness. This again is a sound mark of conversion. The soul that has tasted that the Lord is gracious comes back with a thank-offering. "What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me?"—this is its cry.

He was renewed in will. From that time forward he was to offer "neither burnt offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the Lord." Within his soul there had taken place a mighty upheaval, and the current of his being was now flowing in a new channel. His whole outlook had changed. He saw the evil and the folly of his old life; for in the transformation which had taken place at the Jordan his conscience had leaped to life. And promptly and firmly he made his decision. He renounced the false gods which he had formerly served. He cast away his idols, and made formal and definite choice of the living and true God. The God who had so wondrously revealed His grace and power in healing him was worthy of Naaman's allegiance, and he bowed his neck at once to the yoke of service. Here, once more, we have one of the surest marks of a saving change. Obedience is unquestionably the fruit of a tree that has been made "good." No experience indeed is healthy that is not attested by this sign. It is the Master's own supreme criterion. "If ye love Me," He said, "keep My commandments." Naaman made a good beginning; and shall we not cherish the hope concerning him that he endured unto the end?

Changed in heart and mind and will, Naaman experienced a marvellous transformation. The leper was cleansed. His guilt and pollution were washed away; his soul was renewed. And what the grace of God did for Naaman it can do for men still.

“ Can peach renew lost bloom,
Or violet lost perfume,
Or sullied snow turn white as over-night ?
Man cannot compass it, yet never fear :
The leper Naaman
Shows what God will and can.
God who worked there is working here.”

III. LAST OF ALL, THE HISTORY OF NAAMAN REMINDS US THAT IMPERFECTIONS ARE OFTEN MINGLED WITH TRUE FAITH.

The healing of the Syrian Captain's soul is almost as clearly proved as the healing of his body, the change in the one case being scarcely less remarkable than in the other. Nevertheless his faith was not wholly free from blemish. In two particulars he showed that he had need of further enlightenment.

First of all, he attaches a superstitious value to material symbols. So much is involved in his request for two mules' burden of Jewish earth on which to build his altar. As if the offering must be more acceptable to God because the altar stood on what he regarded as "consecrated" ground. Naaman had yet to learn that they alone worship God who worship Him in spirit and in truth. But would it not be too much to expect in a man so lately delivered from the darkness of heathenism, and in an age when symbolism had a recognised place even in the worship of the true God, so clear an anticipation of the spirituality of New Testament worship? When we think of how many in our own land, after centuries of gospel teaching, exceed Naaman in their attachment to the external and the sensuous, we can scarcely find it in our hearts to pronounce any very severe judgment upon this recent convert from Syria.

But in addition to this, Naaman tried to make a kind of compromise between the altar of God and the house of Rimmon. He knows now that it is wrong to *worship* in the house of Rimmon; that surely is one of the most profoundly significant facts of the incident. For the first time he realises that the whole course of a lifetime has been sinful, and must not any longer be maintained. But he is not quite ready to face the full consequences of his change of religion. The problem with which he was confronted was how a believer in the true God could engage with a clear conscience in the service of an idolatrous king. He was no longer going into the heathen temple to engage in its worship: that was done with for ever. But the duties of his calling required that he should be in attendance upon his royal master when *he* engaged in his public devotions, and that he should perform certain acts which appeared to involve participation in his idolatry. And Naaman wished to receive from the prophet a kind of indulgence for this mediating course.

Elisha wisely refused to settle the question for him. He recognised the work of God in Naaman's soul, and felt sure that as he advanced in spiritual attainment the path of duty with reference to such cases would become clearer to him. So instead of burdening his conscience with hard and fast rules at the outset, he sent him away in peace, confident that He who had begun the good work in him would carry it on unto clearer light and sounder judgment. There can be no doubt, however, that the path of safety for the believer with regard to all such questions of conscience—they emerge in modern life in a hundred forms—is to adhere with absolute loyalty to the law of his God, making no manner of compromise with the thing that is evil, and leaving the consequences of obedience in the Master's own hands.

XIII

ELISHA AND GEHAZI

“ But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, Behold, my master hath spared Naaman this Syrian, in not receiving at his hands that which he brought; but, as the Lord liveth, I will run after him and take somewhat of him. So Gehazi followed after Naaman.”—2 KINGS v. 20, 21.

WHEN Naaman returned from the Jordan completely cured of his leprosy, he wished Elisha to accept a present in token of his thankfulness. The prophet, however, refused to receive any recompense of that kind, and stood firm against the pressing entreaties of the Syrian Captain. On a former occasion he had accepted without hesitation the offering brought by the man from Baal-shalisha, but in the present case the circumstances were different and called for a different attitude. It was necessary that the prophetic office should be vindicated from any suspicion of mercenary motives, and that Naaman should carry away with him as profound an impression as possible of the loftiness and the purity of the religion of Jehovah.

Gehazi, however, had different views on the subject. His master's conduct on this, as on several previous occasions, failed to meet with his approval. Elisha's refusal of the splendid gifts which had been offered him seemed to the grasping mind of Gehazi the height of folly. “ Unto what purpose is this waste ? ” he said to himself in effect. For his part he was not troubled with any scruples in the matter. His master had “ spared ” the wealthy foreigner, when he ought in all reason to have regarded him as lawful spoil; he himself, accordingly, resolved to make up for this unwarranted slackness.

He was not long in forming his plan. He hastened after Naaman's departing train, and, with the quick inventiveness of men of his class, made up a plausible story as he ran. Two young men, he told Naaman, of the sons of the prophets had just arrived from Mount Ephraim, and his master had sent him to ask some help for them. It was a skilfully constructed tale. What more likely than that men of this class—the divinity students or “probationers” of that age—should be in needy circumstances, and what more natural than that the kind-hearted prophet should be ready to solicit on their behalf what he had been resolute in declining for himself? Naaman, of course, was only too pleased to have the opportunity of making some return for the kindness he had experienced, and he requested Gehazi to take more than he had asked. The wily impostor seems to have made some show of declining the richer gift, and Naaman “urged him” to lay aside his scruples. The situation is highly interesting, and would be amusing if it were not so overshadowed with tragedy—Gehazi in his modesty needing to be pressed to accept more than his original request! Needless to say he yielded to Naaman's entreaties, and turned his face homeward in triumph, laden with his spoil.

I

Gehazi fell a prey to his own covetous heart. That was the nature of his sin. He was a man of grasping nature, consumed with greed; and his lust at length “pierced” him “through with many sorrows.” That is the lesson which confronts us with startling distinctness in this part of the narrative. “Beware,” said Christ, “of covetousness”; and the warning is one which none of us can afford to despise.

For covetousness is the commonest of all sins among men. And no small part of its insidiousness lies in the fact that as a rule it is scarcely regarded as a sin at all. Being largely a matter of the heart, its movements for the

most part are silent and hidden, and so it can be indulged in without loss of reputation. Most frequently it is clothed with respectability; sometimes indeed it is accorded a place among the virtues. One man is foolish enough, in his lust of acquisitiveness, to come into conflict with the law, is branded as a thief in consequence, and is despised and shunned; but his neighbour, who is not a whit less covetous, not a whit less degraded in his desires or sordid in his aims, but has skill enough to avoid collision with human authority, is admired as a capable man of affairs. The drunkard loses his reputation and his influence, and deservedly so; but the man whose soul is blasted with "the narrowing lust of gold" gets no heavier condemnation at the bar of public opinion than that he has a keen eye to the main chance. His diligence perhaps is held up for imitation. His shrewdness is a matter for compliment.

But when we investigate the character of this sin in the light of the plain declarations of Scripture, we find that it is one of the most deadly and loathsome of spiritual diseases. For example, we find it classified along with the blackest offences in the whole catalogue of iniquity, with adultery, and theft, and blasphemy, and murder. We find it, further, expressly described as idolatry—the sin against which God has been wont most frequently and most fearfully to manifest His displeasure. We find it once more represented as so anti-Christian in character that the Church of God is warned against receiving the covetous man into her communion; she is to regard him as unworthy of Christian recognition, and is to keep him at arm's length. And last of all, we find that it claims a crowning distinction in iniquity, for it is described as "the root of all evil." It exposes the soul to divers temptations. It is closely allied to envy and malice; it is only a step removed from theft; it is generally in league with falsehood; it often leads to murder. It impelled Gehazi to the knavery which proved his undoing. It led Judas to sell the Lord of Glory for thirty pieces of silver. The sin of covetousness is black

with the shame and the dishonour of the great betrayal ; it is crimson-dyed with the blood of the Holy and Just One.

The mention of Judas suggests another thought in connection with the fall of Gehazi. Notwithstanding his association with Elisha, he remained a bad man. As the betrayer spent years in the fellowship of Jesus without experiencing any betterment of nature, so Gehazi derived no spiritual advantage from his long intimacy with the Hebrew prophet. He had observed his master's character in its mingled majesty and graciousness ; he had listened to his words and witnessed his mighty works ; but his heart had remained unchanged ; he had continued to follow his own base and crooked way. His privileges, one would have thought, were of a faith-compelling kind ; but his soul remained like the heath in the desert. He may have made a profession of religion—we find the language of piety on his lips even when he is framing his design to plunder Naaman—but beneath the form of godliness he had a corrupt heart.

This is a circumstance that may well lead us to serious self-examination. It reminds us that outward privileges of the most favourable kind are not sufficient of themselves to convert the soul. In the abundance and exclusiveness of our favours we may be like the fig-tree planted in a vineyard of which our Lord in His parable speaks, and yet have "nothing but leaves" to show for our advantages. We may receive the wisest counsel from our youth up, enjoy the blessing of a religious home, witness the brightest examples of godly living, and, generally, be surrounded with influences of the most helpful character, and yet remain unresponsive and unfruitful through it all. There may of course be the semblance of piety. We may use the language of devotion as readily as Gehazi reproduced his master's "As the Lord liveth" ; but within the heart the strength of corruption is unsubdued, the reign of death is unbroken. Day by day we may be encircled with "fine nets and stratagems to catch us in," we may be enticed with

“ blessings beforehand, ties of gratefulness, the sound of glory ringing in our ears ” ;

“ Yet all these fences and their whole array
One cunning bosom sin blows quite away.”

And this is not the whole truth. If we fail to benefit by our privileges, our life will not simply be a blank for good ; it will be productive of positive evil. The soul that slumbers through the day of opportunity suffers a gradual deterioration, becoming more impervious to impressions, more hardened in impenitence. Nor indeed is this all. “ The earth ”—so runs the stern law of the Kingdom of God alike in nature and in grace—“ which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God. But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing ; whose end is to be burned.” Gehazi’s soul yielded thorns and briers, notwithstanding the rains and the sunshine ; and ere long the curse fell.

II

Having disposed of his treasure in what he regarded as a safe place, Gehazi made his way into his master’s presence. We can imagine the air of meek virtue that would have been assumed by the accomplished rogue as he entered the chamber, pretending to be intent on some of his usual duties. At the prophet’s first word, however, his heart must have sunk within him. “ Whence, Gehazi ? ” was all that Elisha said ; but the brief question, uttered no doubt with stern voice, and accompanied by a glance of the eye that seemed to penetrate the culprit’s soul, was ominous. Still, at first he tried to brazen it out, and lied to his master as promptly as he had done to Naaman ; but then the prophet showed that he knew all ; and Gehazi stood before him speechless, found out, convicted of his guilt.

There are two further messages of warning that meet

us in this portion of Gehazi's sad story. The first is the familiar one that once a course of sin is entered upon, it is not easy to turn back. Gehazi began by coveting the wealth of Naaman, and avarice quickly led to deception and falsehood. And this unhappy sequence is repeated day by day in the experience of men and women who turn away from the straight path of integrity and truth. The descent is easy. One wrong step is generally followed by many others. One sin paves the way for a variety of successors. A man, for example, tells a lie, and then feels constrained to tell half a dozen others to support the first. Or he commits a dishonest act, and then is driven by the consequences of his deed to pass on to other offences of a yet more serious character. The path of safety, of course, lies in resisting the beginnings of evil. These may appear trivial, but they must not be neglected. The cloud that at first appears no bigger than a man's hand may be charged with the fury of the tempest or the swift destruction of the lightning. Above all, the desires of the heart should be kept in subjection, for it is there that the trouble has its source. And if we *have* yielded to temptation, the wise thing is to pull up at once, and face the consequences. Let us frankly and promptly confess our fault, and make what reparation is possible. Otherwise, the single false step may lead to a long and bitter course of transgression.

The second warning of the incident is that set forth in the well-known words, "Be sure your sin will find you out." Gehazi laid his plans with skill, and executed them with what looked like complete success. He lost no time in practising his deception upon Naaman, in concealing his plunder, and then presenting himself before his master as if he had been all the while engaged in his appointed work. But the prophet's eye had followed him on his path of crime, and the prophet's words exposed not only the actual offence of which he had been guilty, but also the secret purposes of his heart. For the "olive yards and vineyards and sheep and

oxen " that are included in Elisha's scathing denunciation refer no doubt to the further possession which Gehazi intended to acquire by means of his ill-gotten wealth. He was confronted therefore with his guilt in its complete enormity. The exposure was thorough. He had not a word to say in self-defence. His sin had found him out.

And this is what will happen in the end to all transgressors. There are sins that may escape detection on the part of men in this world, but the old word remains true, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper." However well men may lay their plans of wickedness, and however successfully they may carry them through, there is a greater than Elisha whose eyes are continually upon them. One day they must stand before His Judgment Seat, and then the hidden things of darkness shall be brought to light, and the soul that is found guilty shall bear its doom.

Gehazi's punishment was swift and terrible. The leprosy of which Naaman had been healed was transferred to him, and he went out from the prophet's presence "a leper as white as snow." In one swift moment, as he stood in speechless consternation before his judge, the stroke of retribution fell, and the miracle of cleansing that had taken place in the Jordan a few hours before found a tragic antithesis in a new miracle of judgment. The loathsome disease spread through his entire frame. His comeliness was turned into corruption. His healthy vigour gave place to languor and feebleness. His buoyancy of spirit was crushed beneath a load of despair. Gehazi's sin was great and his punishment did not tarry. The penalty also fitted the offence; it was the just reward of his deeds.

III

There is a twofold aspect of Gehazi's doom which is deserving of notice. First of all, we have to recognise that it possesses a symbolical character. It has its counterpart

in the region of spiritual experience. The simple truth represented is that a man cannot commit sin without defiling his soul. Transgression is not indeed always followed by outward punishment in the present world, but it always involves inward pollution. In Gehazi's case the physical malady was but the visible token of the spiritual leprosy which already had made his soul its prey. God had simply set upon his body the mark of his inward disease : he had been a leper in heart long before. And although as a general rule the outward mark does not appear, the fact remains that the wages of sin is death. Transgression of every kind involves the death of the heart's freshness and purity. The transgressor may flatter himself that it does not greatly matter, that he is suffering no serious harm because he is not overtaken by immediate and visible punishment. He tries perhaps to persuade himself that the seriousness of sin's consequences has been vastly overstated. But this is a fatal delusion. A man cannot break the law of God without defiling his inward being. He cannot indulge in sin and retain his health of soul. He may indeed be able, like the Pharisees in Christ's day, to maintain an outward comeliness. Like them, he may be exceedingly devout in speech and scrupulously careful in his attention to the outward observances of religion ; but if sin is reigning in his heart, he is also like them in being most fitly compared to a whited sepulchre. Sin ere long brings the very rottenness of death into every fibre of his being.

But, in the second place, Gehazi's doom had in it a prophetic element. It was a foreshadowing of the national history. Naaman the Gentile was healed, and his disease passed over to Gehazi the Jew. And this is what actually happened in after days in the religious life of the races represented by these two men. The alien Gentiles have been healed of their spiritual disease through belief of the Gospel, and the Jews have become heirs of their former blindness and unbelief.

The cleansing of Naaman had its own prophetic signifi-

cance. First of all, it had a message which was designed to cast a ray of hope over the darkness of the heathen world. It proclaimed the cheering fact that the Gentiles had a place in God's thoughts of mercy, and it whispered the assurance that a rich harvest was yet to be reaped in the field of which the Syrian captain was one of the first-fruits. But in the very heart of this good news for the Gentiles there was a note of warning to the chosen nation. For the cleansing of Naaman spoke to them, in terms so plain that they could not be misunderstood, of the sovereignty, as well as of the riches, of God's grace. There were many lepers in Israel during those days of Elisha's power, but not one of them was healed. It was reserved for one who was an alien from the commonwealth of Israel and a stranger to the covenants of promise to show forth the graciousness and the power of the living God. And the reason for this remarkable preference is not far to seek. The lepers of Israel were not cleansed because they were lacking in faith. The stranger was healed because, on the slender testimony furnished by a little Jewish maid, he had come all the way from Syria to put the resources of the prophet of Jehovah to the proof. The miracle itself, therefore, was a figure, within the narrow compass of one man's life, of the rejection of the Jewish nation in favour of the alien Gentiles.

It is this feature of the incident that Christ emphasized in the Synagogue of Nazareth. He had come unto His own, and His own were receiving Him not. The prophet was without honour in His own country. Whereupon he promptly reminded the despisers that His saving power would not be left without a sphere of exercise, notwithstanding their rejection of His claims. The grace of God was sovereign in its manifestations. And as one illustration of that sovereignty—an illustration which at the same time was a foreshadowing of the vaster reality to be witnessed in the gospel age—He calls to their remembrance the fact that Naaman the Syrian alone was healed by Elisha, although around the prophet

there were many Jewish lepers who were perishing of their disease.

Now, the episode of Gehazi's punishment carries this prophetic disclosure one step further, and sounds forth the message of warning with a yet clearer note. Already the stranger had entered into the blessing of the Jew ; now we see the representative of the chosen family serving himself heir to the curse of the Gentiles. Which thing is an allegory of the exclusion through unbelief of the Jewish people as a whole from the blessings of God's Salvation.

And the fall of the nation was due to the same causes as the fall of Gehazi. Elisha's servant continued in unbelief, although he was favoured with special privileges ; the Jews rejected Christ although they were exalted unto heaven with favours. Gehazi fell a prey to the covetousness of his own heart ; and it was because of covetousness that Israel, through their representative, Judas, sold the Lord of Glory for thirty pieces of silver.¹ And so the Kingdom of God has been taken from the Jewish race and given unto a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. Blindness has happened into Israel, whilst the Gentiles are rejoicing in the light. The children of Naaman, to a great extent at least, are walking before God in newness of life, while the sons of Gehazi are white with spiritual leprosy unto this day.

¹ Zechariah xi. 10-14.

XIV

THE IRON THAT SWAM

“ . . . But as one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water. . . . And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither ; and the iron did swim. . . .”—2 KINGS vi. 5, 6.

THE next event placed on record in the history of Elisha belongs to the region of his domestic rather than of his public life ; but it is one of the most suggestive in his whole career. The scene of the occurrence is probably Jericho. The school of the prophets there had grown to such an extent that the place in which the work had hitherto been carried on became “ too strait ” for its requirements. The fame of Elisha had attracted scholars from far and near ; the college was overcrowded, and it became necessary to provide more commodious buildings.

The students themselves brought under the notice of their master the need which had been created by their prosperity. They also suggested the course of action that seemed to them expedient in the circumstances. They proposed that each of them should proceed to the Jordan and cut down a beam, for the purposes of the new erection, from among the woods that grew along the river's banks. On receiving Elisha's sanction for this project they further pleaded with him to accompany them to the scene of their toil, that he might personally supervise their efforts. The prophet readily yielded to their importunity, and master and pupils soon made their way to the Jordan. And it was not long until the advantage of having Elisha at the head of the undertaking was demonstrated. On the banks of the Jordan he performed a notable miracle, which had the effect

alike of encouraging the toilers and of helping on their work.

It is quite obvious, however, that the design of this exercise of supernatural power was not simply the restoration of the lost axe-head. That is a consummation which, however desirable in itself, can scarcely be regarded as of sufficient importance to call for the working of a miracle, unless, at the same time, it served the purpose of shadowing forth a wider and deeper truth. It is the symbolical aspect of the narrative therefore that demands our chief attention.

I. AND, FIRST OF ALL, THE INCIDENT REMINDS US THAT GROWTH IS THE NORMAL CONDITION OF A HEALTHY RELIGIOUS LIFE.

The sons of the prophets in course of time found their old place of abode "too strait" for them, and had to move out to a more spacious dwelling. The life of the Theological Seminary in Jericho was in a condition of vigorous health, and the result was expansion. And wheresoever among men religion is a living power, it reveals itself after a similar fashion. The old place of attainment is continually being outgrown, and there is a moving out into a larger room.

The principle holds good, for example, in the region of personal experience. The believer becomes a child, but he does not always remain a child. Through successive stages of growth he advances to maturity. Someone has described with telling effect the painful impression which a case of arrested development in ordinary life is calculated to leave upon our minds. We enter a house in which there is a little child, and at once proceed to make friends with the tiny prattler. Its freshness and naturalness, its artless ways, and simple, guileless talk constitute a resistless charm, and we become its devoted slave. After many years we come back and meet the same little one again. There is practically no change. It wears the same kind of clothes and sits in the same little chair, uses the same childish forms of speech, and engages in the same childish occupations. But now we are no

longer delighted. There is a painful revulsion of feeling. For in this case what we see is not a child but a dwarf.

This is happily a rare experience in everyday life, but it frequently occurs in the spiritual domain, although we are not always conscious of the anomaly. Those early believers to whom the Epistle to the Hebrews was addressed, for example, are described as babes in the Christian life, requiring to be fed with milk instead of with solid food, although they had so long been believers that they ought by this time to be full-grown men in spiritual attainment. And the backwardness of these primitive disciples finds too many parallels in every age. There are Christians who never seem to advance beyond the stage of childhood. They speak as a child, and understand as a child, and think as a child throughout the years, and never put away childish things. They do not manifest any growth in grace. Their spiritual life is stunted and barren.

But wherever there is health of soul there certainly is progress. The child in course of time attains to the vigorous strength of youth, and the youth ere long advances to the ripe experience of manhood. The inner life of the soul is ever expanding, so that the place that was sufficient for its earlier years becomes "too strait" for its growing acquirements. There is consequently a continual forgetting of those things which are behind, and a reaching forth unto those things which are before. The new wine of the life of grace is ever bursting the old bottles of outgrown capacity. Like the chambered nautilus of Dr Oliver Wendell Holmes's suggestive little poem, the soul leaves from time to time its "low-vaulted past," and moves into "more stately mansions." Or, to use the more familiar figure of Scripture, its path is "as the shining light which shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

The principle also applies in the sphere of the Church's outward life. The field which the servants of Christ are to occupy for their Master is "the world," and they are called upon to press steadily forward to fresh conquests

until His glory fills the whole earth. There must be no standing still. The standard by which they are to measure their achievements is found in their Lord's commission, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," and so long as an inch of this wide territory remains in the enemy's hands they dare not relax their endeavours. The place which they occupy to-day becomes "too strait" for their aspirations to-morrow, and they reach forth in aggressive effort toward the appointed goal. Of course the task is supremely difficult, and progress is often very slow. But the bounds of Christ's Kingdom are gradually being pushed forward, and the range of the Church's conquests is continually widening, as the sphere of her labours from time to time becomes "too strait" for her missionary zeal.

It is along this path of gradual extension, indeed, that our Lord intended His servants to travel towards the evangelisation of the world. Beginning at Jerusalem, He told them they were to move outward in ever-widening circles through Judea and Samaria "unto the uttermost parts of the earth"—each successive enlargement of territory becoming in time "too strait" for their expanding life. And it is interesting for us to note how strictly this order was observed in the operations of the Apostles. The good news was published abroad with untiring zeal until it crossed the boundaries of Judea and Samaria and passed into the regions of the Gentiles. And no sooner did the Christians in Antioch organise themselves into an orderly community than they realised that the place wherein they dwelt was "too strait" for them, so without delay they sent out Barnabas and Saul to conquer fresh fields in the name of Christ. That was the beginning of our Foreign Missionary enterprise; and the tiny rivulet which that day issued forth from Antioch has been flowing on ever since and increasing in volume throughout the generations until now its life-giving streams have reached unto "the end of the world."

But "there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed." There are vast regions that are still lying

under the shadow of death. There are gods many and lords many that yet dispute the pre-eminence with Jesus Christ. There are many strongholds of the enemy that present to the Gospel a proud and defiant front. The goal seems yet a long way off. So for the armies of the living God there cannot be any standing still. They must continually strike out into new fields of effort, realising that the place to which they have already attained is "too strait" for them. Their face must ever be turned toward the wider horizon; their ear must be open to the Master's call; their loins must be girt for the stress of the conflict.

II. THE INCIDENT FURTHER BRINGS BEFORE US THE SUPREME CONDITIONS OF SUCCESS IN AIMING AT THIS EXPANSION.

These are twofold. First of all, the sons of the prophets resolved to go to the Jordan and cut down "every man a beam." This is the human condition, and it represents the plan of individual effort. Every man was to do his best. There were to be no idlers. It was not to be a case of some being left to do the work, while the rest looked on. The whole company of the sons of the prophets were for the time being to become hewers of wood. "Every man a beam" was the law for the community. And when the undertaking was entered upon in this spirit, each putting forth his strength in earnest and harmonious effort towards the common end, it was not long until the task was carried to completion.

This is a condition of success in any undertaking; in the Lord's work it is an indispensable condition. For in that work there are things that cannot be accomplished except through individual effort. Andrew must go out and find his own brother Simon and lead him personally to Jesus. The corporate efforts of the Church have their own value, but there is a special potency in direct personal work. Christ expects all His followers to be at once loyal witnesses and diligent servants; and experience has proved that the method of individual application is among the most fruitful of spiritual ministries. Of

course there are degrees of capacity. Not all who engage in the work are able to fell the same kind of beam. But if all who name the name of Christ did what they could, each within his own sphere and according to the measure of his resources, what a revolution we should soon witness throughout the length and breadth of the world!

It would make a mighty difference in our congregational progress; it would soon tell upon the condition of our towns and cities; it would ere long make itself felt throughout the whole range of our national life. Do we wish our congregations to extend and flourish? Then here is the secret of prosperity—"every man a beam." Do we long for the life of our towns to become clean and healthy and fruitful in righteousness? Then here is the best practical method of realising our desire—"every man a beam." Let each man who truly seeks the well-being of the community take off his coat and do his part in furthering the common good. This unhappily is not the order of things which usually prevails. The usual order is that a few have the privilege of doing the work, while the rest have the privilege of criticising them. But there is a more excellent way, and that is when each man realises his own responsibility, and puts forth his strength for God to the full measure of his talents and his opportunities. This is the example set by the sons of the prophets.

But there is a further condition of success which is even more essential than this. The sons of the prophets urged Elisha to accompany them to the field of their labours, and he agreed to go. This may be said to stand for the Divine condition of prosperity, and what it represents is simply the Master's presence. Elisha's disciples were doubtless well aware from experience that if left to their own resources they were likely to fail in their enterprise, while on the other hand they would have been certain that the prophet's presence among them was the pledge of success.

And all this sets forth very strikingly the relation between the Church and her Head. Unless He goes forth

with her to the field of toil, guiding her operations and perfecting His strength in her weakness, her efforts, however earnest and persistent, are doomed to failure. But when He puts His hand to the work, her labours, however feeble and imperfect in themselves, are attended with success. And He has promised to go with her in all her endeavours to extend His Kingdom: in this she finds her inspiration and her hope. The difficulties may be great, but His might is sufficient. He uses weak instruments, but He is not weak Himself. He will never forsake His servants. He will never fail or be discouraged in His work. His purposes are moving on to their ordained fulfilment. He dwells in the midst of His Church; therefore she shall never be moved.

III. LAST OF ALL, WE SEE IN THE MIRACLE ITSELF A FIGURE OF THE MIGHTY EFFECTS OF DIVINE POWER WORKING THROUGH THE CHURCH.

The sons of the prophets made their way to the banks of the Jordan, and applied themselves with vigour to their self-appointed task.

“How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!”

It may be, indeed, that they were not very skilful workmen; their zeal may have outstripped their knowledge, and their blows may not have been specially well-aimed. In any case, as one of them stood by the river's brink, doing his best to fell a tree, his axe-head suddenly flew off, and sank in the stream. The man was filled with grief. He had not only lost his tool; he remembered at the same time that it was a borrowed one; and, because he was an honest man, this fact, instead of affording him consolation, as sometimes happens in such cases, served but to intensify his sorrow. He was indeed in this respect an example to the whole vast company of borrowers—that “great race” of unreturning spoilers against whom the incomparable Elia directs some of his most delightful raillery. But what was he to do in this distressing predicament? There was no use in trying to fell the tree with the piece of wood that was left in his

hand ; the axe itself, with its fine temper and keen edge, was gone. So the hewer, being a wise man as well as an honest, applied in his distress to Elisha. And the prophet did not fail him in his extremity. Cutting down a piece of stick, he cast it into the river, "and the iron did swim." The miracle, in its abiding application, teaches two great lessons.

It reminds us, first of all, of the only way whereby in God's work we may secure the restoration of lost power. We too are sometimes shorn of our strength in seeking to labour for the Lord. Our soul loses its edge ; the axe-head is sunk beneath the stream. Perhaps we have been unwatchful and careless in our life and the Holy Spirit is therefore grieved, and removes the comforting and strengthening influences of His presence. Our zeal becomes cold, our desires lose their fervour, our prayers do not prevail. We have lost our spiritual energy. Or it may be that our heart fails us because of the difficulties of the undertaking. Our faith wavers, our vision is dim, our hope is almost gone. We have laboured in vain, we say, we have spent our strength for nought and in vain. The axe-head has disappeared into the depths of the waters.

Where is there hope for us in such circumstances ? What are we to do in our impotence and distress ? Sometimes we go on dealing ineffective blows with the axe-handle. We persevere in the routine of duty, in a dull, mechanical kind of way. And beyond question the Lord's servant has sometimes to stand at his post and discharge his allotted functions when all his spiritual faculties seem to be benumbed, and the bands of death lie upon his soul. It is a sore and humbling experience ; but he must not quit his post simply because his frame of mind is unsatisfactory. The wise course, however, is to seek without delay the restoration of the lost joy and the lost power. We must betake ourselves to the Lord Jesus, as the young prophet of Jericho appealed to Elisha. If there is sin to be confessed and put away, it must be done. Before we can be of any real use in Christ's service

our life must be rightly adjusted to the upper Fountain, and we must receive afresh the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Then our souls shall be filled with energy, and our efforts will have the penetrating effectiveness of the keen-edged axe.

The raising of the iron further reminds us that the carrying on of the Lord's work demands the power to work miracles. We need not enquire as to *how* the axe-head was made to swim. It was the doing of the Lord, and the process lies beyond our comprehension. It is enough to say that the operation of the law of nature was overborne by the exercise of a higher power. The point of importance is that in seeking to extend our Lord's Kingdom among men we need the forth-putting of the same Almighty strength. Without this there can be no real progress.

For Christ's Kingdom grows through the winning, and the gathering into it in glad allegiance, of human souls. And the tremendous fact that meets us on every hand, throughout the length and breadth of the world, is that men's souls are like the prophet's axe-head, sunk in the river of death. Of themselves they have no power to rise. The law of their nature is to remain at the bottom. This is a fact to which many stern realities of life bear witness. The spiritual insensateness, the lack of perception, the love of sin, the enmity toward God, that more or less conspicuously hold sway within every unregenerate heart, proclaim with unmistakable voice the appalling truth. There must accordingly be a resurrection from the dead. The fallen axe-head must be lifted from the devouring depths by a might that is stronger than the forces that keep it under. And the only power that is sufficient for this, the only power that will conquer death, is the power of the Cross of Christ. "I, if I be lifted up from the earth"—it is His own gracious assurance—"will draw all men unto Me."

In her great mission in the world, therefore, the Church of Christ needs to be the vehicle of Almighty power. She must be able to work miracles day by day through

Him that strengtheneth her. And this indeed is what is taking place throughout the generations. The impossible has been happening. The iron has been made to swim. Multitudes of souls that had been sunk beneath the streams of death have been lifted up into the light of the sun, and restored to newness of life. And they have been saved to serve. They have been restored in order that they might glorify their Saviour. This is how one of them describes the miracle of his deliverance—

“ And from above the Lord sent down,
And took me from below ;
From many waters He me drew,
Which would me overflow.

He to a place where liberty
And room was, hath me brought ;
Because He took delight in me,
He my deliverance wrought.”

XV

ELISHA IN DOTHAN

“And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.”—2 KINGS vi. 17.

THERE is perhaps no part of Elisha's crowded life which has a more thrilling interest than the incident, or, rather, the series of incidents, associated with Dothan. The story takes hold of our imagination from the very start, and our interest is never for a moment allowed to flag as we are carried on through a succession of dramatic surprises to that last memorable scene which took place within the walls of Samaria. As we follow the various movements of the narrative we find that there are four outstanding facts that leave their impression upon our minds. We see Religion proving a national safeguard; Faith revealing a noble confidence; Godliness enjoying a gracious security; and Grace obtaining a glorious victory.

I

Whatever effect the healing of Naaman had upon the King of Syria, it was not long until that inveterate enemy of the chosen people resumed his attitude of hostility towards them. Another inroad was made into the land of Israel, Benhadad himself leading the invading force. There is no mention of Naaman; and the probability is that the famous general, if he still held office under the king, would decline to take part in a war against the people to whom he owed not only the healing of his body but also the salvation of his soul. Benhadad did not follow the method of direct attack. His plan was to set ambushes in unexpected places, and so cut off his enemy

by stratagems and wiles. The King of Israel, however, was constantly kept informed of his designs through Elisha; never was general so well served by an Intelligence Department. The result was that the armies of the Syrian King were continually being thwarted, and his own forces fell from time to time into the pit which they had been digging for their foes.

In this effective co-operation between Elisha and Jehoram we have our first abiding lesson. That harmony of effort affords a striking instance of the relations which in every land ought to subsist between Church and State. The prophet placed his divinely acquired knowledge at the disposal of the king, and the king gave strict heed to the warnings of the prophet. In our own time men's minds are specially occupied with this age-long problem of the right connection between the civil and the religious authorities. The question is one on which widely divergent views are held, but on this element involved in it there surely cannot be but one opinion—the State has need of the services of the Church. That is the outstanding lesson of the incident we are considering in the life of Elisha. Religion is the great safeguard of a nation's well-being, its surest defence as well as its highest glory. The prophets of the Lord are the strongest bulwark that any land possesses against the attacks of its enemies.

The Church should render to the State the service which Elisha rendered to the King of Israel: she should be to it as eyes and ears. Her clearness of spiritual vision, her moral sensitiveness, her enthusiasm for the right, her hatred of all that is unworthy and wrong: all this, expressed in counsel or in warning as the occasion demands, should prove an invaluable benefit to the civil ruler. When the Church is loyal to her Master, she is able to lift up her voice and cry, "Thus saith the Lord, 'This policy is wrong; this traffic is immoral; this legislation is oppressive; this war is iniquitous,'" as the case may be. She should also urge the State to every kind of lofty endeavour. And when the State is true to its vocation, it will not resent the Church's message as

an unwarrantable interference, but will give heed to it as to the voice of God.

II

When Benhadad discovered how his secret purposes were being revealed to his enemy, he was of course greatly perturbed. At first he suspected treachery in his own camp, but some one who knew better told him the real cause of his discomfiture. "Elisha," said this well-informed messenger, "tellethe the King of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bed-chamber." It was a splendid testimony, so far as it went; it came short in failing to ascribe the honour of this marvellous knowledge to Elisha's God. Benhadad then fell upon a bold plan. He saw that the only way to catch the king was first of all to catch the prophet, the only way to subdue the nation was to silence its great religious leader; so he determined to make Elisha his prisoner. He sent out spies to ascertain the prophet's whereabouts; and on being informed that he was in Dothan, he sent off, under cover of darkness, a strong force of men, with chariots and horses, to arrest him and bring him into the Syrian camp. It is interesting to note that he considered it necessary to send "a great host" to effect this purpose. In itself the movement was a masterly stroke, and in ordinary circumstances would have commanded success. There were elements in the case, however, with which the wily king had failed to reckon.

The Syrian host faithfully carried out their instructions. When day broke they had compassed the city about, and things looked dark for Elisha. So at least his servant thought, when he rose in the morning, and discovered the plight in which he and his master were placed. Round about the city on every side were armed men, and the rays of the rising sun were reflected from many a gleaming chariot and many a glittering spear. Terror-stricken he ran in, and told his master the overwhelming news. "Alas, my master," he cried, "how shall we do?"

There seemed to be no way of escape, and the young man's cry was one that bordered on despair. Good reason indeed the lad appeared to have for his alarm. Here were two defenceless men hemmed in by a mighty company of armed warriors. It seemed impossible that they could escape.

But here we are confronted with our next outstanding fact ; and it is a feature which invests this incident with an unfading splendour. That is the quiet confidence of the prophet in the hour of danger. The voice of the young man is quivering with fear, but his master is calm and unmoved. Without doubt he had slept peacefully through the night when his enemies were surrounding the city ; and now when he looks out upon their grim and serried ranks there is no shadow of dismay upon his face. He sees more than his servant sees. "Fear not," he says to him, "they that be with us are more than they that be with them." And because he is sure of this fact his heart is kept in perfect peace. His are the strength and the confidence which are begotten of faith in God.

We are often like the prophet's servant in the hour of trial. We see only the encircling ranks of the enemy, and our heart fails us because we do not also see the chariots of the Lord. The one fact is visible enough to the eye of sense ; the other can be discerned only by the vision of faith ; and the eye of faith is often dim, and its natural force is abated.

Sometimes it is our spiritual foes that form the occasion of our distress. There are sins, it may be, that easily beset us. Within there is a deceitful heart, and without there is an ensnaring world, while round about us continually there are unseen adversaries who are waiting for an opportunity to lead us captive. And as we survey these confederacies of hostile strength, our courage sometimes forsakes us, and we are ready to say, "Alas, how shall we do ?"

Or perhaps it is our experience of trial that is the cause of our distraction. Our sorrows come to us, not as "single spies, but in battalions." They surround us on

every side, and we see no door of hope. We fail to make the Lord our Hiding-place in the day of trouble, and the arm of flesh proves of no avail. We have "to take arms against a sea of troubles": there can be no question of the fact, whatever may be said of the metaphor. The floods lift up their waves, and we do not hear the voice of God above their din. So like Peter, when, in the midst of the heaving billows, he took his eye off the Lord Jesus and was conscious only of the wrath of the sea, we begin to sink, and cry out that we are perishing.

Again, our spirit is often overwhelmed by the opposition we encounter in seeking to serve the Lord. The forces that confront us are entrenched in seemingly impregnable positions. Their chariots and their horses surround us in proud and menacing array. The world's indifference chills our heart. The strongholds of vice and ungodliness appear to laugh at our feebleness. Like the ten unbelieving spies sent out by Moses long ago, we are conscious only of the walled cities and the towering sons of Anak. We are overwhelmed accordingly with a sense of our own insufficiency, and are ready to cry out in dejection of soul, "Alas, how shall we do?"

Or, once more, our fears may arise in connection with the Cause of God. The Dothan that is threatened by the enemy represents the honour of His Name. His word, perhaps, is assailed, or His character is impugned, or His religion is on its trial; in any case the interests of His Kingdom appear to be in danger. Its defenders seem few and weak; its assailants are many and powerful. We tremble for the safety of the Ark.

Let us listen then to the inspiring words of the prophet: "More are they that be with us than they that be with them." Are we on God's side—reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, and seeking in sincere and honest endeavour to further His work? Then, He is on our side; and, it matters not how numerous our adversaries are, we are in the majority. The eternal God is our Refuge, and underneath us are His everlasting arms. Between Him and us there is a community of interests,

and therefore all His resources are at our disposal. Our cause is His Cause ; therefore our sword, like Gideon's, is also the sword of the Lord. Our enemies after all are fighting against tremendous odds. "The floods" may "lift up their waves" and threaten to engulf us in their fury ; but "the Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters."

It is when he realises this fact that the believer is strong and calm in the hour of trial. God is with him ; therefore he is on the winning side, and his enemies cannot really hurt him. Caleb and Joshua speak words of encouragement and cheer to the people when their panic-stricken companions are pouring forth their dismal tale of unbelief ; they make light of the giants and are confident of victory. And the reason for this lofty courage is clearly revealed. "The Lord is with us," said the two men of faith ; "fear them not." The Psalmist can lie down quietly, and say, "I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people that have set themselves against me round about," because with the same breath he is also able to say, "Thou, O Lord, art a shield for me." Hezekiah manifests a similar courage before the invading hosts of the King of Assyria. "There be more with us than be with him," he cried, appropriating Elisha's very words ; and then he added (showing the Rock on which his confidence was established) : "with him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles." Luther expresses his determination to appear before the Diet of Worms although there should be as many devils there as there were tiles on the roofs ; and the courage which sustained the hero was fed from the same unfailing spring. "I know and am certain," he said, "that our Lord Jesus Christ still lives and rules, . . . therefore I will not fear ten thousand popes ; for He who is with me is greater than he who is with the world." And the time would fail us to recall the multitudes more who have confronted overwhelming odds with an unfaltering courage because they realised that God was with them and that therefore they must prevail.

III

The answer which Elisha gave to his servant's despairing cry was both prompt and unexpected. He prayed that his eyes might be opened ; and then the young man saw the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. The confidence of the prophet had not been misplaced. Here was a majestic cavalcade nearer him than the encircling ranks of Syria. The hosts of heaven were "with" him, and appeared in a form adapted to his need. The angels in this case were not white-robed messengers of peace bearing a lily in their hand, but stern-faced warriors equipped for battle—

"Still as the breeze, but dreadful as the storm."

This was the defence afforded Elisha by his God. Before his enemies could hurt a hair of his head they must break through the ranks of that mighty army.

And this brings before us the third outstanding fact of this incident, and that is the Security of Godliness. The angels of God are continually watching over those who are the heirs of salvation. Heaven lies about the believer's path not only in the infancy of his religious life but on to the very end. And especially in the day of trouble does this Divine protection manifest its reality. Many a time, in the hour of extremity, deliverance has come to God's people, so swiftly and opportunely and unexpectedly as to make it plain that the chariots of the Lord were not far away. We see Jacob for example on the bare heights of Bethel, a lonely and weary fugitive from his father's house, settling himself down to sleep beneath the Syrian stars. As he sleeps there flashes upon his soul a vision of a shining ladder and of ministering angels that throng its steps, and when he awakes the fact of the spiritual world is so real to him that he calls that bleak spot on the desert road the very gate of heaven. After many years we see him again on his way from Syria to Canaan. Now he is filled with fear ;

for he is soon to meet Esau, the wild and lawless brother whom he had wronged ; and once more the angels of heaven meet him in his need, and his soul is cheered with the assurance of God's unfailing care. We see Peter in his prison cell in Jerusalem securely chained and carefully watched, for on the morrow he is to be led out to die ; but suddenly in the hour before the dawn a light shines in the prison, and a strong angel appears, at whose touch Peter awakes, and his chains fall off. Then before that majestic form the door opens, and the great iron gate turns on its hinges, and Peter finds himself in the street, a free man.

And although the appearances of these heavenly ministers are most frequently hid from view, the effectiveness of their help is not less apparent. An Armada for example bears down in its pride upon the shores of Britain, and God makes the winds His angels, and blows upon the invaders, and they are scattered. No human eye saw the radiant forms that rode upon the storm, but who will deny that the hosts of heaven were directly concerned that day in the deliverance of our land from the designs of Spain ? Who again has not heard of how old Alexander Peden prayed, when his enemies were approaching, that the Lord would cast the "lap of His cloak" over "puir auld Sandy" and the defenceless company who shared his danger, and how, almost before the words were fully uttered, there arose a great sea of mist which wrapped the band of worshippers in its folds, and concealed them from the troopers who had reckoned on making them their prey ? A similar instance is recorded in the history of the Waldenses ; but it is needless to multiply examples. The fact is clear. The Lord is a stronghold to His people in the day of trouble, and when human resources are unavailing, He gives His angels special charge concerning them.

Elisha knew that the chariots of the Lord were round about him. Once before in the beginning of his ministry he had seen them come and go to bring Elijah to glory, and his vision had not grown dim in the intervening years.

But as for us, we are too often like the prophet's servant—needing to have our eyes opened in order to apprehend the reality of the spiritual world. Until the heavenly illumination comes, our outlook is bounded by the hard material facts of this present life. We are blind to the presence of the heavenly hosts.

“The angels keep their ancient places—
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces
That miss the many-splendoured thing.”

Sometimes indeed men might almost hear the rustling of the angels' wings and the music of their songs—so near do these ministering spirits come; but they are conscious only of the voices of the world. The chariots of the Lord flash past them; but their eyes are holden, and they see them not. They are blind indeed to the glory of any of the things that are spiritual. The Kingdom of Heaven is beside them, but its splendours are hid from their view. The very Christ of God is unto them as a root out of a dry ground, without form or comeliness. It is only when their eyes are opened with the anointing of the Holy Ghost that the facts of the spiritual world are unveiled to them, and stand forth in their majesty and beauty.

IV

Elisha prayed again, and as on the former occasion the eyes of his servant were opened, so in the present instance the eyes of the Syrian soldiers were closed. Here was a power of binding and loosing as effective in reality as that which the poet ascribes in symbol to the pilot of the Galilean lake, with his “two massy keys,” whereof

“The golden opes, the iron shuts amain.”

In one swift moment what an amazing change! The stout-hearted are spoiled, and none of the men of might have found their hands. The proud warriors are groping their way through the sudden gloom, and stumbling

helplessly as they go. Offering to lead them in the right path, the man whom they had come to capture conducted them straight into Samaria. Then their eyes were opened again, and they found themselves in the stronghold of the enemy.

No doubt the Syrians gave themselves up for lost. It was now their turn to be compassed about. They had walked straight into the lion's mouth, and were completely at the mercy of their enemy. But there followed one of the strangest and most beautiful scenes in the whole range of history. Dismissing with indignation the eager request of the King of Israel that he should be allowed to fall upon his foe, Elisha ordered food and drink to be set before the astonished soldiers. And the men of Samaria, entering into the spirit of the adventure, treated their enemies with splendid hospitality. Then when the Syrians had eaten and were refreshed, the gates were opened, and they were sent back to their king. It was a magnificent victory. Never did Elisha's conduct rise to a loftier plane of moral grandeur. The Syrians themselves were profoundly impressed. No overthrow on the field of battle could have disarmed them more completely. It was many a day before they returned on a hostile expedition into the land of Israel.

In this closing episode, then, we have the last great lesson of the story. It brings before us one of those bloodless victories of peace which are "no less renowned than war," a remarkable illustration in that far-off time of the spirit of the gospel. Clearly did Elisha's action foreshadow the grace of the new dispensation. He adopted Christ's own way of dealing with an enemy. When his foe was hungry he fed him; when he was thirsty he gave him drink. This is the best way of finishing a quarrel—the Christian method of paying back an injury. It is a method, however, which the very Church of Christ is slow to learn.

XVI

THE SCOFFER'S DOOM

“Then a lord, on whose hand the king leaned, answered the man of God, and said, Behold, if the Lord would make windows in heaven, might this thing be? And he said, Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof.”—2 KINGS vii. 2.

AFTER a time the Syrians returned to Samaria. For a considerable period the remarkable treatment they had received at the hands of Elisha had the effect of keeping them outside the bounds of Israel; but at length the lessons of that incident were forgotten, and they came back in force, and got so far as to lay siege to Samaria. In the season of sore distress which followed, there are incidents in which Elisha is again the central figure.

Those within the city were reduced to dire straits. Their supplies ran done, and they felt the pangs of extreme hunger. “An ass’s head was sold for fourscore pieces of silver,” and there were worse things than that, horrors such as have seldom been witnessed even amid the privations of a siege. In the soreness of their distress two women agreed to eat their two sons. The arrangement was carried out with regard to the first, but, when it came to the turn of the other, the mother’s love prevailed over her physical craving, and she hid her child.

I

This incident came to the ears of the king, and moved him deeply. He rent his clothes, and when his outer garments were parted, the people saw that he had been wearing sackcloth secretly upon his flesh. This was a promising sign, but the sequel proved that the royal

penitence had not much reality in it. At the same time that he wore the outward symbol of repentance because of the sore judgments with which his people were visited, the king was cherishing a fierce resentment against Elisha, and he vowed that he would take the prophet's life.

The reason for this outburst of anger is not quite plain ; but it is likely that Jehoram never forgave Elisha for letting the Syrians escape when they were in his power within the walls of Samaria. His wrath upon this account would burn all the more fiercely as he reflected that, but for that foolish and criminal leniency—as he would have regarded it—the sufferings of the present crisis might never have taken place. In addition to this it was no doubt due to the prophet's influence that Samaria was still holding out against the enemy. Elisha would have been supporting his countrymen with the promise of deliverance from the Lord in due time. Now they had reached their last gasp, and there was no word of succour. So in the stress of his trouble the king's anger burned against the prophet, and he threatened to cut off his head.

Intent on carrying out his design, he despatched a messenger to Elisha. We find the prophet, as usual, calm and confident in the midst of the prevailing distraction. As on a former day he had not quailed before the enveloping host of Syria, so on the present occasion he did not fear the wrath of the king. He "sat in his house and the elders sat with him." No doubt their minds were occupied in a manner befitting the situation in which they were placed, and their discourse would have been in keeping with their thoughts. Elisha was made aware of the approach of the messenger, as well as of the mission on which he came, and he knew also—by the same secret intimation from the Lord—that the king himself was following on his servant's heels ; so he requested his friends to hold the executioner in check until Jehoram himself should arrive upon the scene. Whether the king had repented of his hasty decision and came to counter-

mand his order, or whether he followed his messenger to make sure that his instructions should be carried into effect, is not quite clear. The narrative at this point is highly condensed. But the first words uttered by the royal visitor lend colour to the darker construction. "Behold, this evil is of the Lord," he cried; "what should I wait for the Lord any longer?"

Jehoram's repentance was not very deep or sincere. There were indeed certain favourable elements in it: let these be frankly acknowledged. He appears to have been genuinely grieved at the sufferings of his people, and when he professed repentance in the sight of God, he made no ostentatious display of the outward symbols of contrition. But there are facts on the other side that more than outweigh these promising features. His humbling of himself before God was external and mechanical in its character. It was of the nature of penance rather than of penitence. He rent his garments, but he did not rend his heart. He turned unto the Lord because of the pressure of his outward need, as many another man has done in similar circumstances; he assumed the attitude of humiliation and sorrow, not because he was conscious of his own unworthiness, but with a view to securing the removal of his trouble. Notwithstanding his outward avowal of penitence, his heart was far from being right with God.

There are two plain facts that force us to this conclusion. The first—which has already been alluded to—is Jehoram's resentment towards the prophet of the Lord. At the same time that he was outwardly covered with sackcloth he was inwardly breathing out threatenings and slaughter against Elisha. There cannot be much real penitence before God so long as the heart is inflamed with wrath against His servants. But the second consideration is more serious still. The king's anger, in the end at least, turned against the Lord Himself: from the servant to the Master is an easy and natural step. "This evil," he cried on Elisha's door-step, "is of the Lord"; and he proceeded at once to express the inevit-

able conclusion to which such a conviction leads—
“What should I wait for the Lord any longer?”

Ascribing the trouble of the nation—not in contrite acknowledgment but in bitter resentment—to the hand of God, he declared in effect that he was now to cast the restraints of religion to the winds. He refused to acquiesce any longer in the will of the Lord revealed through His servant, and so proposed to unfurl the banner of revolt by putting the prophet to death. Jehoram's words accordingly proclaim in effect the rupture of friendly relations with Heaven. His expectations had not been realised; therefore he threw off the mask and became defiant.

Where affliction does not lead to repentance, this is the fruit which in the end it usually bears. It drives men away from God in bitterness of spirit and rebellion. For a time they may assume the appearance of contrition, but, when the trial continues, they fail to wait patiently upon the Lord, and by and by rise up against Him in open revolt. True repentance on the other hand is ever ready to testify that the ways of the Lord are right. “I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against Him”—that is its last and noblest word.

II

Whatever Jehoram's purpose may have been, he was not allowed to proceed any further towards its fulfilment. Elisha received authority to deliver a message from the Lord, a message so momentous and so surprising that the king was startled into silence. On the very following day—thus said the Lord—there would be abundance of provisions in the gate of Samaria. And it was no vague suggestion of deliverance that the prophet was able to announce; he indicated the very time of day at which the relief would come, and mentioned the very price at which the various supplies would be sold. This remarkable promise is worthy of close attention.

It was given at an opportune moment. The besieged city could not possibly hold out much longer ; its strength was almost gone. Day after day the suffering people had looked for deliverance, but no light had arisen in their darkness. Now their hearts were sick unto death with disappointment, and the king had resolved to wait no longer upon God, but to surrender to the enemy. It was in these circumstances that the Divine assurance was given. Help, the prophet declared, was already at their gates. In that very darkest hour of their trial the dawn was coming in upon the hills. God's deliverances are always seasonable. He comes at a time when no coming but His own would be of any help to us. He has supplies to meet our direst extremities, and all that He has promised He will surely fulfil.

The promise also made a severe demand upon the prophet's faith. It was boldly specific and splendidly confident in its assertions ; but it gave no hint as to how the deliverance of which it spoke was to be effected. Assuredly there was as yet no sign of the long-looked-for relief. Nowhere did there appear a door of hope. On every hand things were as black as they well could be. Faith could get absolutely no support from sight ; reason could speak not a word of encouragement. The thing indeed seemed impossible, so far as the judgment of men could perceive. Yet the promise was that on the very morrow the darkness would pass away, and a change would take place in the condition of the people which would fall little short of life from the dead.

God's promise often offers this imperious challenge to faith. It asks us to trust and obey when the testimony of our senses supplies no foothold for belief. We are called upon to believe, not only where we cannot prove, but where all the proof available appears to yield a negative result. There are difficulties, for example, confronting us which appear absolutely insurmountable. Across our path there stretches the devouring sea ; or around us there lies the parched desert. But the command is that we should go forward, and the promise is

that God shall provide a path for us "in the great waters," and open rivers for us in the barren wilderness. The sins of the transgressor, again, may be like crimson and scarlet in their heinousness—marked with every conceivable circumstance of aggravation; but the promise that confronts the transgressor is that through belief of the gospel those sins of his, in all their accumulated guilt and pollution, shall become "white as snow."

Once more, there is the case of a soul that is overgrown with the thorns and briars of the curse. The love of sin is overmastering; the habits of ungodliness have passed into the warp and woof of character; the heart is hardened; the conscience is seared; the whole nature is degraded and corrupt. But to that depraved soul there comes the promise that through the same gracious medium it shall undergo a complete and lasting transformation. The dead bones shall live; the old things shall pass away. Instead of the thorn there shall come up the fir-tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle-tree—the fruits of the curse shall give place to the fruits of the Spirit.

And when we turn to the things of the life to come, it is plain that faith can derive still less support from the facts of experience, and must therefore in a yet more distinctive sense be "the evidence of things not seen." With regard to all those mighty hopes to which our hearts cling most fondly, we must rest with childlike submission in the sure word of God. For throughout the ages the grave has been gathering into itself "the dust of many a vanished race"; within its spacious kingdom "the cloud sits on the sun's brow all the year"; the winter of death holds unbroken sway, and our eyes can see no signs of a spring. So far as sense can discern,

"The other life is a fountain sealed,
And the deeps below us are unrevealed."

But the promise of the gospel takes us within the veil and unseals the fountain. Its last word is not of defeat but of victory. It speaks of a rising again from the dead,

and of a life of everlasting glory and blessedness beyond the grave. And we are asked to take these assurances meanwhile on trust, and patiently "wait for the Lord." This is by no means an easy achievement. However clear and definite the promise in all these cases is, it finds little confirmation in human reason, because the thing promised is a miracle. Before the seeming impossibility of it, common-sense laughs an incredulous laugh, as Sarah did when she was promised a son in her old age.

At the same time we must bear in mind that the Divine assurance does not come to us without the most ample attestation. Not only is it invested with all the authority which belongs to "Thus saith the Lord"; there is also a supreme and unchallengeable fact which enables us with yet greater confidence to receive it as "a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation." There has been One who came back from the dead—One who "with returning footsteps broke the eternal calm wherewith the tomb was bound." "Christ is risen. That has made all things new. It has left unbelief without excuse.

III

Elisha's announcement was not believed by all who heard it. One of the nobles who accompanied the king treated it with disdain. He belonged to a common type of courtier, supercilious, cynical, and flippant, ever ready to make a jest of sacred things. With studied contempt he questioned whether the prophecy would come true even if the Lord were to open windows in heaven—these last words apparently containing a sceptical allusion to some of the ancient miracles recorded in the history of Israel. Elisha's answer was swift and startling. He told the scoffer that his eyes would see the promised deliverance, but that he would not share in its benefits. This prediction was literally fulfilled. On the morrow the siege was raised; for the Syrians fled, and left behind them all their supplies. Word to this effect was brought

in to the beleaguered city ; and when it became manifest that the tidings were true, there was of course a rush to lay hands on the much-needed spoils. An attempt was made to maintain order among the crowd, and for this purpose the nobleman who had ridiculed the words of Elisha was stationed at the gate. The famishing multitude, however, would not be restrained. They rushed the gate, and the proud scoffer of the day before was crushed to death beneath their eager feet. Thus the word of the Lord, both in the promise of mercy and in the intimation of judgment, was exactly fulfilled.

There are those in every age who deal with the word of God after the manner of this mocking nobleman. Not only do they refuse to accept the truths of revelation ; they regard them with derision. Sitting in the chair of the scorner, they treat as matter of profane merriment the things that are held most sacred by believing souls. The whole category of the supernatural they dismiss with a sneer : miracle is an invention, and the hopes that are based upon it a delusion. These conclusions indeed are not usually the outcome of deep and serious reflection on the questions involved. They represent rather the prejudices of a type of mind — irreverent, superficial, and arrogant—which happily is less often met with now than it used to be a generation or two ago.

There is a wider class, however, whose attitude, while less objectionable in its manifestations, is equally fatal in its results. These are not scoffers, but they are unbelievers. They are not aggressively hostile, but they are indifferent. They are not insolently defiant, but they are unresponsive. The range of their beliefs, it may be, is bounded by the things that are seen and palpable : they are not affected by promises which do not appear to receive confirmation from tangible facts. Or, their hearts are simply set upon the world, and, accordingly, when the call of the gospel comes to them, they all with one consent begin to make excuse. Other interests are paramount, and they turn away, one to his merchandise and another to his farm. And in the

end the two classes—the scoffing and the indifferent alike—are involved in a common doom.

That doom is set forth in Elisha's words to the scornful nobleman, and is tragic and terrible. "Thou shalt see it with thine eyes," said the prophet, "but shalt not eat thereof." To behold deliverance, and yet not to taste of it; to see others saved, and yet to be lost oneself; to perceive the glory of the land of promise, and yet fail to enter in—this is surely the intensest bitterness of death. This will be the end of the unbelieving. They shall see the glory of Christ, but shall not rejoice in it. They shall behold the splendour of His salvation, but shall not participate in it. They shall witness the blessedness of the redeemed, but it will be from the left side of the Throne. They shall gaze upon the brightness of the Kingdom, but it will be on their way to outer darkness. The word of the Lord, both in its promises and in its threatenings, shall certainly be fulfilled; and theirs will be that saddest cry in the speech of sorrow—"It might have been."

XVII

THE LAME TAKE THE PREY

“ And they rose up in the twilight, to go unto the camp of the Syrians : and when they were come to the uttermost part of the camp of Syria, behold, there was no man there.”—
2 KINGS vii. 5.

As has already been noticed, Elisha's prophecy with regard to the relief of Samaria was wonderfully fulfilled. That very night the Lord struck terror into the hearts of the Syrians, and caused them to flee in utter confusion. Not a blow was struck, not a drop of blood was shed, but no victory could be more complete. The Syrians left everything behind—their horses, and stores, and treasures ; and the way was strewn with garments which they cast off in their wild flight. The first to discover what had happened, and to bring word to the hard-pressed Israelites within the city, were four lepers who had sat at the gate of Samaria during the siege. The narrative is occupied mainly with the circumstances in which these unhappy sufferers first of all came to taste of God's deliverance for themselves, and afterwards became the messengers of good tidings to others. Let us consider this remarkable story of how the lame took the prey.

I. WE ARE TOLD, FIRST OF ALL, OF THE LEPERS' VENTURE.

According to an old tradition the four men were Gehazi and his three sons. The story is not altogether devoid of probability, and certainly the conduct of the lepers was quite in keeping with Gehazi's character. They of course, in their isolation outside the city wall, had felt the pinch of famine as keenly as those who were within. More keenly, indeed ; for in their case the pangs of hunger had come to aggravate the pains of disease. At

length, when things had reached their worst, they felt that something had to be done, or else they must die. They surveyed the situation in all its bearings, and this is how they reasoned.

To enter into the city was useless. Not only were they excluded by the law because of their leprosy, but, even if they chose to disregard the law under the plea of necessity, there was nothing within the city to meet their need. That course, therefore, was one that offered no hope. On the other hand, to continue where they were would be equally fatal; it meant that they should simply await the slow torture of death by starvation. There was another course open to them, however, and that was to go forward into the camp of the Syrians. There was not, indeed, much likelihood of deliverance in that direction, but then there was not the same certainty of death; and who could tell?—even their enemies might be moved by the spectacle of their distress, and might spare and help them. In any case, if the worst came to the worst, to die by the sword was better than to die of hunger. So the lepers resolved to enter into the camp of the Syrians.

Men are sometimes reduced to straits of this kind in connection with the things of the soul. They have to choose between alternatives which do not appear on either hand to offer much hope of success, and in a certain sense have to reason themselves into obedience to God's command. The man, for example, who is assailed with doubts as to the truth of the Christian revelation is sometimes in a condition of mind analogous to that of the four lepers at the gate of Samaria. He has no rest in his own soul: there is no well of life there. He is, to use Bishop Butler's striking phrase, "by no means complete of himself, but totally insufficient for his own happiness." What are the paths between which he must decide? On the one hand, there is the course of living for the present world and banishing every thought of a future state—let us eat and drink; for to-morrow we die. This, however, is a choice which every reflecting mind

recognises to be fatal. After all, there is something within each of us which testifies that we are destined for higher things than that. Even when we do our best to forget, abandoning ourselves without restraint to the eating and the drinking, there is some monitor or other that assures us of the futility of our efforts; "just when we're safest," there is some handwriting—stern or tender as the case may be—that suddenly appears on the wall,

"And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears."

What, then, is the reasonable course to pursue in such circumstances? Surely it is to go forward, relying on the faithfulness of God's testimony. Even on the lowest conceivable ground this is the wise thing to do; for every other course means death; this course, on the most unfavourable view, cannot mean worse than death; and then on the other hand it may mean life. Even if this were a just representation of the alternatives—which it is not—the advantage from every point of view lies with faith.

The prodigal in the far country, again, has sometimes to make a similar reckoning. He has come to be in want; the husks of the swine cannot satisfy him; to remain where he is means certain death. On the other hand, to return to the home he had forsaken is a course that may seem far from promising. For he sees all things through the dark medium of his own guilt, and so fails to discern the graciousness of his Father's face. His sense of ill-desert makes him think of God as his enemy, and the prospect of forgiveness and restoration seems too good to be true. But even then surely the wise thing to do is to return and cast himself upon the Divine mercy. Even if his worst fears should be realised, he may as well perish at God's door as in the far country.

On every ground, then, belief is reasonable; but to state the position in this form is to do less than justice to the Christian facts. The religion of Christ does not come to us without credentials: its claims are established by many infallible proofs. To stake one's destiny on the

promises of the gospel is not a forlorn hope : the faithfulness of the Divine word has been proved by a great cloud of witnesses. To cast one's self on the mercy of God in Christ is not merely a course that offers a chance of forgiveness : it is a course that has never failed.

“ If I ask Him to receive me,
Will He say me nay ?
Not till earth, and not till heaven
Pass away.”

It is plain therefore, that the reasonable line of action for any who may be harassed with doubts on this question is to go forward, as the lepers did, and put the matter to the proof. This beyond question is the course which reveals the highest wisdom. One is familiar with the view, whether implied or expressed, that unbelief is the rational attitude towards the Christian revelation : the word “ rational,” indeed, has been wellnigh captured by scepticism for its own exclusive use. Underlying the appropriation of the term there is of course the claim that on these questions intellectual superiority lies on the side of negation. Now, this is an assumption which cannot be too emphatically repudiated. Unbelief—let the position be stated quite clearly—is utterly irrational ; it is faith that obtains the verdict at the bar of reason. The farther rejection is carried, the more widely do the positions assumed diverge from the conclusions of sound judgment. The last word in negation is the last word in folly : “ the *fool* hath said in his heart, There is no God.” Even if the gospel were shorn of many of its credentials—and this is the point that is specially suggested by the present incident—there would still be everything to be said in favour of belief.

II. THE NARRATIVE NEXT BRINGS US TO THE LEPERS' DISCOVERY.

Acting at once on their resolve, they went forward toward the Syrians. They reached the outside of the camp, but they were not challenged. They entered the camp itself, but nowhere could they see a single human

form. There was abundance of food lying ready to their hand, but the Syrians themselves had vanished. Then the truth dawned upon the astonished lepers. The enemy had fled, and there lay before them the spoils of a great victory. They did not of course know the reason for this sudden departure. They did not know that the Lord had made the Syrians to hear "a noise of chariots and a noise of horses, even the noise of a great host"—the same mighty host that once before in Dothan had stood between them and their expected prey—and thus had filled their hearts with panic so that they "fled for their life." There was no thought of orderly retreat, or of trying to save their possessions; it was everyman for himself, and that with all possible speed, in that wild, unreasoning flight. What the lepers did know was that their venture had turned out a bewildering success: food and drink, raiment and treasure, all in splendid profusion, were lying about them on every hand, with no one to challenge their claims. Without delay the lame proceeded to take the prey.

Here again we are struck with the analogy which meets us in the spiritual sphere. The faith that goes forward trusting in God makes the same kind of discovery as was made by the lepers. The enemy has been defeated, and the spoils of victory are waiting to be appropriated. Christ has laboured, and we are called upon to enter on His labours.

We advance, it may be, with uncertain tread, assailed with a hundred doubts and fears, and never quite sure of what the next step may bring; and, lo, when we have carried through our adventure, there flashes upon us all at once the splendour of a Divine surprise! From the pain of want we pass into the satisfaction of plenty; from the torment of fear we arrive at the joy of assurance; from the gloom of the valley we emerge upon the uplands, and the glory of the sunshine smites us on the face. "The great stone" of our difficulty has already been rolled away. The fact which in the slowness of our heart we questioned and doubted, is grandly true; the

hope that was so faint and shadowy, and that had to contend against a multitude of fears, is translated into a reality that is more wonderful than our brightest dreams.

We come to Jesus as we are, and find that in Him there is spread before us a marvellous provision. He, the mighty "Breaker" of Micah's vision, has gone before, and accomplished His conquering work. He had a sore conflict to wage, but He triumphed. He finished transgression and made an end of sin; He overthrew and spoiled the principalities and powers of darkness; He vanquished death and the grave. Then, having ascended on high in triumph, He received gifts for men; and now "the prey of a great spoil" is being divided—a spoil infinitely more glorious and abundant than met the astonished gaze of the lepers in Samaria. Peace with God, life everlasting, the adoption of children, a royal and unfading inheritance, grace here and glory hereafter—all this has been secured, and is being divided, by Jesus Christ; and the principle which regulates the distribution is that "the lame take the prey." The gifts of the gospel are without money and without price. The call which has gone forth unto the ends of the earth is, "Who-soever will, let him take." "Kings of armies did flee apace, and she that tarried at home divided the spoil."

III. THE CLOSING PORTION OF THE NARRATIVE BRINGS US TO THE LEPERS' RESOLVE.

In the Syrian camp they found enough to satisfy all their need. They ate and drank until they were satisfied, and of the treasure that was lying about they took the best and hid it. Then they thought of the beleaguered city, and their conscience smote them. Here were they engaged in riotous feasting, and yonder were men and women perishing with hunger. "We do not well," said they; "this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace." Straightway they resolved to return to the city, and convey the good news to the famishing people. And when the inhabitants of Samaria found on enquiry that the fact was even as the lepers had said, they were like

them that dream. The Lord had done great things for them whereof they were glad.

Now, this selfish absorption in their own good fortune manifested at the first by the four lepers finds an abiding parallel within the higher sphere of Christian obligation. Among those who name the name of Christ there are many that display a similar indifference with regard to the needs of their perishing fellow-men. They profess to have eaten and drunk at the gospel table themselves, but they have no word about those who have never shared this privilege, and are therefore dying of want. They have heard the good tidings of salvation, but they have no concern for the plight of the multitudes around them who are lost in ignorance and sin. This is a kind of silence that in the affairs of everyday life would meet with universal reprobation. The man who had access to an abundant store and fared sumptuously every day, while his neighbours were experiencing the ravages of famine, would justly be regarded as a monster of selfishness. The man who saw his fellows wasting away in mortal disease, and looked on with placid unconcern although he knew of a remedy, would be denounced as guilty of a crime against humanity. Of how much severer condemnation must the offence be considered worthy when the famine from which men suffer is a famine of the bread of life, and the disease of which they are perishing is the disease of sin ?

There are various kinds of guilty silence in the region of Christian duty.

There is, for example, *the silence of unavowed discipleship*. Those who have tasted that the Lord is gracious are called upon to make a public profession of their faith, and thereby to make an open acknowledgment of the benefits they have received. When they fail to do this, and appropriate the privileges of discipleship without assuming its responsibilities, their conduct is ignoble and blameworthy. There are not a few who, like the woman in the gospel story who was healed of her disease through touching the hem of Christ's garment, but sought to steal

quietly away without acknowledging the blessing she had experienced, are ready to shirk the ordeal of open confession. This is a discreditable silence.

There is also the *silence of an unfruitful life*. Everybody recognises that there is scarcely any witness for the gospel so effective as that of a sincere and consistent Christian life. The aureole of saintship is "to the Lord for a name," and to the world "for an everlasting sign"; it is an apologetic that cannot be explained away. The life which is a practical embodiment of the doctrine of the gospel speaks with clear and telling voice for the risen Christ, proclaiming the reality of His power, the riches of His grace, and the pleasantness of His fellowship.

"Still holy lives

Reveal the Christ of whom the letter told,
And the new gospel verifies the old."

The life, on the other hand, which is inconsistent and faulty has also a voice, but its testimony is on the wrong side. And when the life is simply barren of spiritual fruit it may be said to be silent. There are multitudes of such voiceless lives among the bearers of the Christian name. This is a disloyal silence.

But, worst of all, there is *the silence of a selfish unconcern for the well-being of others*. It is indeed almost inconceivable that any who have believed the gospel to the saving of their own souls should spend their days in practical indifference to the needs of their less favoured neighbours. I knew a man who used to engage in the fishing industry around our shores. One night his boat, along with several others, was caught in a wild storm off the Pentland coast. They were tossed upon a furious sea, and all hope of being saved was gone. At length as if by a miracle they gained the shelter of a bay, and ere long placed their foot once more on dry land, safe though exhausted. And I remember how movingly this man—he was an earnest and experienced Christian—used to tell of the fears and hopes and desires which successively held possession of his heart that dark night. And this

above all left an unfading impression : he told how all at once, as soon as he realised that he himself was safe, his heart went out in a great rush of desire towards his comrades who were still exposed to the rage of the elements. As long as he was battling for his own life, he had no time to think of anything else ; but no sooner did his foot touch solid earth again than he was filled with a great pity for his struggling friends, and felt impelled to do what he could to help them in their extremity. So it is also, beyond question, with those who have received the Spirit of Jesus Christ. They have been saved themselves, and their heart's desire and prayer to God for others is that they may be saved also.

And yet there are many among the professed followers of Christ who seem utterly regardless of the needs of the unsaved. They are not the bearers of good tidings to the famishing city, whether the city represent the perishing at home or abroad. They are not moved by the perils of those who are still tossed with the tempest. They steel their hearts against the cries that sometimes reach them through the darkness. They go their own way with selfish unconcern. This is a criminal silence.

Who is there, indeed, among the whole company of believers that is not conscious of failure in connection with this obligation ? There is none of them that does not need a fresh quickening of the Spirit of Christ, a stirring up unto more fervent desire and more earnest endeavour. There are far too many of them that live in a guilty silence. Surely the call to tell forth the good news is clear and convincing. Surely the motives unto obedience are deep and impelling. There is the recollection of past danger, and there is the experience of present deliverance. There is also the personal loss involved in failure. For the silence which is criminal with respect to our fellows is also hurtful in its effect upon ourselves. It means the loss of a great joy, one of the purest joys, indeed, of which our nature is capable—the joy of doing good to others. It means the loss of a great benefit—the reflex benefit which consists in expansion and refresh-

ing of soul as a result of self-forgetting service. And it means the loss of a great reward—the reward of those faithful toilers who shall one day hear the Master say, “Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom; . . . for I was an hungered and ye gave Me meat : I was thirsty and ye gave Me drink. . . .”

XVIII

THE RESTORED INHERITANCE

“ So the king appointed unto her a certain officer, saying, Restore all that was her's, and all the fruits of the field since the day that she left the land, even until now.”—
2 KINGS viii. 6.

It is generally supposed that the event in Elisha's life which we are now to consider—the sequel to the story of the Shunammite—does not stand in strict chronological order in the sacred narrative, but belongs to an earlier period. The main fact which lends support to this view is the reference to Gehazi. The man whom last we saw going out from Elisha's presence “ a leper as white as snow ” now appears once more on the scene as the prophet's servant ; there is no mention of his leprosy ; and the fact that he is admitted into the presence of the king appears to favour the conclusion that in point of fact he is not afflicted with that isolating disease. These circumstances are not indeed decisive. The designation given of Gehazi as “ the servant of the man of God ” may possibly refer only to his position in the past, while it is quite a conceivable thing that the king might converse with him even though he should be a leper.

I

The story itself is a very simple one, but it is profoundly suggestive. It brings us back first of all to the little town of Shunem, the scene of perhaps the most notable of all Elisha's miracles. The “ great woman ” who has already figured so memorably in the narrative was still dwelling “ among her own people.” There is no mention of her husband, and the probability is that in

the interval he had died. But her boy, the son that in such wonderful circumstances had come to gladden her advancing years, and was now doubly dear because of the yet more wonderful circumstances in which he had been restored to her after actually passing through the gates of death, was growing up by her side, her daily companion and joy. God had given the Shunammite her own share of grief, but her home, notwithstanding, was one of peace and quiet contentment.

The shadow of a fresh trial was now, however, overhanging it. The Lord had called for a famine upon the land, and the widow's field in Shunem was to share in the general desolation. But in the day of trouble she was not forgotten of her God. He sent His servant Elisha to warn her of the approaching calamity, and to urge her to remove into some place—the choice of a locality was left to herself—beyond the affected area, until the seven appointed years of barrenness should have passed.

The summons to depart imposed a severe strain on the Shunammite's faith. There was probably no sign as yet of the threatened famine. The field adjoining the house, that was being reaped on that memorable day when her boy was so suddenly laid prostrate, would still have been yielding its increase, and her household supplies were doubtless sufficient for her daily needs. But she accepted the testimony of the man of God without the least hesitation, and proceeded at once to act upon the warning so graciously conveyed. In the earlier incident of her life she had displayed a remarkable faith; but it may be questioned whether anything in her former conduct is more beautiful than the prompt and unhesitating obedience which she now rendered to the Divine call.

She made her way to the land of the Philistines. Whatever considerations guided her choice, it is at least clear that in this fertile region she would not have suffered from lack of food. "The most striking and characteristic feature of Philistia," says Dean Stanley, "is its

immense plain of cornfields stretching from the edge of the sandy tract right up to the very wall of the hills of Judah." But it was not all pleasantness, this sojourn in a strange country. She was an exile from the home that was endeared to her by many sacred associations; she no longer dwelt among her own people; and, above all, she was cut off from those religious privileges which manifestly she so highly prized. But she bravely endured these inevitable disadvantages, and at length the seven years of waiting came to an end.

Without delay she turned her steps to the old home in Shunem. One can imagine the gladness that filled her heart as she realised that the winter of her banishment was past, and the fond expectations with which she approached once more the well-remembered scenes. The boy also, who must now have outgrown the stage of childhood, would have been all eagerness to look again upon the home of which he and his mother had so often talked together, and with which his earliest memories were bound up. But when they arrived at Shunem they had to face the shock of a new trial. Strangers were in possession of the widow's house, and other hands were labouring in the little farm. Whether some grasping neighbour had seized the opportunity of adding field to field, and so had planted himself down in the vacant holding, or whether the property had been confiscated by the State and was being occupied under its authority, is uncertain. The Shunammite was confronted with what was by no means a unique experience. "It is still common," says Dr Thomson in *The Land and the Book*, "for petty sheiks to confiscate the property of any person who is exiled for a time, or who moves away temporarily from his district. Especially is this true of widows and orphans, and the Shunammite was now a widow. And small is the chance to such of having their property restored, unless they can secure the mediation of some one more influential than themselves."

It was a bitter disappointment. The usurpers refused to acknowledge the widow's claims, and she found her-

self homeless and destitute. What no doubt added to the poignancy of her grief—it introduced into it at least the element of perplexity and unsettlement—was the fact that her loss had been entailed through obedience to the Divine command. It seemed as if she was being penalised for her piety. Faith had resulted in deprivation. Loyalty to God had involved forfeiture of house and land. She who had sought in every detail to guide her life according to the Divine will was being plunged into one sorrow after another, while others who disowned the authority of that will, and were a law unto themselves, seemed to prosper through their impiety. The question that in another age distracted the mind of the Psalmist may have forced itself also upon the heart of the Shunammite—“How doth God know, and is there knowledge in the Most High?” To prove that God does know, and that obedience to the Divine command always means gain in the end, and not loss, is the aim of the remaining portion of this little story.

II

The Shunammite was not long in deciding upon a course of procedure. With the same promptitude that marked her former actions she resolved to bring her cause before the king himself. She had no resources of her own to vindicate her claims, but her wrongs were glaring, and she would seek to move the very throne of Israel for their redress. So, like the widow in our Lord's parable who had a similar grievance, she made her way along with her son to the highest tribunal in the land in order to be avenged of her adversary. It was not indeed a very hopeful course to follow. Jehoram's character was not conspicuous either for generosity or for fairness. In some respects he was not unlike the Judge in the parable. But the widow's need was urgent, and she had resolution enough to be importunate. To the king therefore she came with her appeal.

It is at this point that the story reaches its culminating

interest. At the very moment when the Shunammite was making her way to the royal palace, the king was questioning Gehazi about Elisha, and receiving from him an account of the prophet's mighty works. What it was that led to this manifestation of interest in the doings of the man of God we are left to conjecture. It may have been a sudden turn of seriousness on the part of Jehoram ; but more probably it was nothing deeper than ordinary curiosity. An interest in the marvellous does not necessarily imply either sympathy or concern. Herod in a later day was anxious to hear about the miracles of Jesus, and desired indeed to witness a demonstration of His powers ; but this was not because he was a sincere enquirer after truth, but rather because he was a curious seeker after a new sensation. Jehoram, at any rate, requested Gehazi to tell him about " all the great things " that Elisha had done. And Gehazi would have been by no means unwilling to comply.* From what we already know of his powers as a story-teller it is safe to infer that he possessed the gift of narrative : he would have taken a personal pride also in relating these exploits, because in at least one or two of them he himself had taken some part—*magna fui pars*, Gehazi might be disposed to suggest— ; and, besides all this, it is not every day that a man has the chance of telling his story to a king. Gehazi accordingly would have applied himself to his task with unfeigned heartiness.

He had got as far as the raising of the Shunammite's son, an achievement over which, for personal as well as other reasons, he no doubt lingered fondly. He would have told of the joy that filled the little household when the promised son at length arrived ; of the sudden eclipse that followed when one bright harvest day the Lord took back the gift He had bestowed ; of the mother's swift journey to Carmel ; of the intensity of her sorrow as she cast herself at Elisha's feet ; of his own unsuccessful efforts with the prophet's staff ; and, last of all, of his master's triumph in restoring the dead child to life and so causing light to arise in darkness unto the upright

pair in Shumen. It was a touching story ; and it is reasonable to suppose that the royal listener was deeply moved.

It was at this very moment, when the tale had reached its happy conclusion, and the king's heart was warmed into sympathy with the parents' joy, that Gehazi's narrative was suddenly interrupted. A woman accompanied by a little boy was admitted into Jehoram's presence in order that she might present to him an urgent petition. She had been wrongfully deprived, she said, of her house and land, and she appealed to the king for their restoration. The suppliant's voice sounded strangely familiar to Gehazi, and, on looking, he discovered that here was none other than the Shunammite about whom he had just been speaking to the king, while the boy along with her was the child that had been raised from the dead.

The coincidence was so startling that he was unable to contain himself, and, regardless of ceremony, he cried out, " My lord, O king, this is the woman, and this is her son, whom Elisha restored to life." The king also was manifestly impressed. He appealed to the woman herself for confirmation of Gehazi's testimony, and heard once more from her own lips the story of the miracle. Then he took prompt and decided action with regard to her appeal. Summoning one of his officials, he commanded him not only to reinstate the Shunammite in her possessions, but also to restore to her the value of the fruits produced by her fields during her years of exile. It was with a full heart therefore that the widow retraced her steps to Shunem. " Return unto thy rest, O my soul," she may have cried, " for the Lord hath dealt very bountifully with thee." Both her son and her inheritance had been lost and were found again ; and they were doubly precious in her eyes upon that account. And no doubt she reflected, as we also are constrained to reflect, that for this second restoration she was as surely, though less directly, indebted to the influence of Elisha as for the first.

III

There are two great truths of a general kind which this remarkable incident is plainly designed to unfold. The first is the wonder of God's providential care for His people throughout all the movements of their earthly pilgrimage. How strikingly this fact is revealed in the Shunammite's experience! To begin with, the Lord sent His servant to warn her of the approaching famine, in order that she might make timely provision against the evil day. Then it was no mere accident, that opportune arrival of hers at the royal palace; nor was it through any fortuitous concatenation of circumstances that the king's heart was prepared for the story of her grievance through listening to Gehazi's narrative. That whole series of occurrences was divinely planned and divinely worked out. The widow was timed to appear before the king at the moment when Gehazi should have reached the conclusion of his story; and these two converging movements were guided with such precision by the controlling hand of God that they met at the appointed instant. And what is so clearly revealed in connection with this particular incident is equally the case with regard to the whole history of all God's children.

In the *Life of the Duchess of Gordon* by Dr Moody Stuart there is recorded a little incident which had a deep influence upon the whole after-life of that loyal follower of Jesus. One day, along with some friends, she paid a visit to the old castle of Huntly in the neighbourhood of the place where she dwelt. It was a time of transition in her life. She was leaving her old home, with all its endearing associations, and taking up a burden of new responsibilities. So she was anxious and sad at heart. An object of special interest in the castle was the great hall, in which there was a fine old chimneypiece with carved figures and several inscriptions, one of which ran along the whole breadth of the lintel. The friends of the

Duchess tried to read this inscription, but failed ; it was too high up. They passed on in search of other sights of interest, and she was left behind alone, wrapped in pensive thought. Just then the sun burst out from behind a cloud, and shone in through the broken window over her head. The light fell on the inscription above the chimney, and every word became luminous. This was the message that stood revealed :—

*“ To . Thaes . That . Love . God . Al
Thingis . Virkis . To . The . Best .”*

It was the voice of God to her soul. The burden was lifted in a moment off her heart, and she went on her way full of new hope and courage. From that time forward, to use the striking words of her biographer, that verse in the eighth chapter of Romans became “one of the pillars that upheld the temple of God in her heart.”

It is the fact set forth in these quaint old words in Huntly Castle that is specially illustrated in the experiences of the woman of Shunem. All the things that happened to her worked “to the best.” An unseen but sure Hand had been ceaselessly guiding her steps and shaping her life according to a predetermined plan. How wonderful is the light which this fact casts upon the character of our God. How marvellous, for example, is that Love of His which comes down to the level of our little lives, and embraces within its plan all the details of our earthly experience. His care is boundless in the vastness of its range, but it is also incalculable in the minuteness of its operations. His hand “preserves the stars from wrong,” but at the same time—

“ The merest grass
Along the roadside where we pass,
Lichen and moss and sturdy weed,
Tell of His love who sends the dew,
The rain and sunshine too,
To nourish one small seed.”

And so in His personal relations with His people : with the same minuteness of supervision He directs alike the corporate activities of His Church and the individual concerns of each believer. The vineyard of red wine is watered every moment, the " one small seed " of grace is tended with sleepless solicitude. The resources of His providence conspire with the riches of His grace to secure the well-being of every single disciple.

How matchless too must be the Wisdom which is able to devise a plan whereby all the disjointed and conflicting events of life shall contribute towards the same happy result, and all the winds that blow shall drive us toward the haven of our desire. The web of our history—to vary the figure—is composed of many threads, of various colours, that cross and recross one another in bewildering intertangement. To make each thread serve its own purpose and maintain its own place, so that the web shall be completed according to the pattern, requires the skill of an All-wise God. And what shall we say of the Power that is needed to carry this purpose into effect ? How resistless is the sway of Him who is able to make all creatures, all circumstances, all forces of the world bend to His own majestic will, and bring their tribute of help to the perfecting of His design !

IV

The second main thought suggested by the incident is the gain which finally results from obedience to the will of God. The immediate outcome of the Shunammite's loyalty seemed to be loss ; but in the end everything was restored to her, and she disappears from view in a light of triumphant gladness. Even from the famine-stricken field she derived a revenue, and so the years of exile proved remunerative after all.

And so it always is in the life of faith. The saints are no strangers to privation and suffering. They have many trials, indeed, that seem to be the direct outcome of their loyalty to God. Christ's bondmen do not always

appear to have the best of it in this world. Many a time they have to endure the loss of all things for His sake—houses and lands, friends and brethren. And there are other losses, besides, that seem utterly desolating—wounds that leave an abiding scar, bereavements that clothe the heavens with sackcloth, and make the day dark with night. But for every child of God there is a day coming when “the end of the Lord” in affliction will be made manifest, and love will produce its abounding recompenses. This is the hope which finds triumphant expression in Robert Browning’s well-known words :—

“ My own hope is, a sun will pierce
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched ;
That, after Last, returns the First,
Though a wide compass round be fetched.”

Then it will appear that the things that seemed to be against the believer were really working for his good, the things that appeared to involve loss were really productive of great gain. The enemies whom he feared and fought with were really made to serve the part of friends. The clouds whose shadow darkened his soul were in truth big with blessing. The disabling assaults of the tempter ; the wasting enmity of the world ; the grinding pressure of poverty ; the disappointments that wrung his heart ; the defeats that crushed his spirit—all these were instruments that, each in its own way, were used to shape his life according to the design of infinite love.

There are rich blessings of a positive kind that even in this life reach us by the way of tribulation. Wordsworth’s *Happy Warrior* is one who, though “doomed to walk in company with pain,” is yet so courageous and resourceful that he “turns his necessity to glorious gain.” The grace of Christ turns the necessity of the Cross into “glorious gain” for the believer. There are fruitful fields of experience that are entered only through the gates of sorrow. There are glories of the heavens above us that come into view only in the night of trial. “Sorrow makes the chastened heart a seer,” and faith

has its songs beneath the cloudiest sky. Even when the blows of circumstance have been most disabling—when our heart is wellnigh benumbed with pain, and our hope is almost extinguished, there are fruits that our gracious Lord will restore to us from the blighted field.

“Tho’ one but say, ‘Thy will be done,’
He hath not lost his day
At set of sun.”

And when the times of restitution come at last, the believer enters upon the full inheritance which is reserved for him in heaven. In that day there will be a great and joyous restoration. The soul will be restored to the full glory of the image of Christ. The body will be restored from the darkness of the tomb to the splendour of an immortal youth. The whole company of the redeemed will be restored to the lost Paradise. In exchange for the little burden of their earthly day they shall receive “a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” Sorrow and sighing shall flee away, and shall give place to unending joy. They shall be made “perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.”

XIX

CARRYING ON ELIJAH'S WORK

“And Elisha the prophet called one of the children of the prophets, and said unto him, Gird up thy loins, and take this box of oil in thine hand, and go to Ramoth-gilead. And when thou comest thither, look out there Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat.”—2 KINGS ix. 1, 2.

AFTER the momentous revelation given him on Mount Horeb, Elijah, it will be remembered, was commanded to carry out a threefold anointing—Hazael to be King of Syria, Jehu to be King of Israel, and Elisha to be prophet in his own room. The latter part of his commission the Tishbite proceeded at once to fulfil. He made his way directly to Abel-meholah, and cast his mantle upon the son of Shaphat. But with regard to the anointing of the two kings he does not seem to have manifested the same promptitude. There is no mention of his ever having executed this part of the undertaking, and although the contrary view has sometimes been maintained, there is little room for doubting that the anointing of Hazael and Jehu was reserved for the ministry of Elisha, the reason for delay no doubt being the long-suffering of God and His slowness to resort to the “strange work” of judgment.

The command given to Elijah appears indeed to have been simply an intimation of the Lord's purpose. But the Divine decree must in due season be carried into effect. Elijah was released from the yoke of earthly service; but Elisha stepped at once into his place, and so became heir to his responsibilities. The events that now claim our attention, accordingly, show us how the commands given to one prophet were obeyed after many days by his successor. They also remind us how surely, and

in some cases how mysteriously, the purposes of God, whether of mercy or of judgment, are sooner or later fulfilled.

I

Elisha's visit to Damascus comes first in the narrative. It is a part of his history which is remarkable in various respects. A journey into the very heart of an enemy's country bears testimony at least—if testimony on that point were needed—to the prophet's courage; and it suggests at the same time that the influence of his ministry extended far beyond the bounds of his own land. But the visit is memorable especially because of the welcome which Elisha received and of the task which as the messenger of God he accomplished.

We are brought first of all into the sick-chamber of the King of Syria. Benhadad was laid low with a grievous disease, and doubts were entertained as to his recovery. The haughty potentate was at length forsaken of his strength, and "the shadow feared of man" was overhanging his bed. He heard of the coming of the great prophet of Samaria, and at once expressed a wish to consult him regarding the issue of his illness. So he summoned Hazael, one of his courtiers, and instructed him to bring a present to the man of God and to ascertain from him the mind of the Lord on the matter.

This in all the circumstances was a remarkable request. Benhadad learns that the man who had really been his chief antagonist in Israel, the man who had often foiled his designs, and whom he had often longed to have in his power, is actually staying within the walls of Damascus, and so is plainly at his mercy. But he does not exult in this opportunity of relieving himself without difficulty of a troublesome adversary; he has no thought of ordering the prophet's arrest. In the light of eternity such triumphs always appear cheap and inglorious, and Benhadad was face to face with death. What actually happened was that the King of Syria, with unmistakable sincerity, acknowledged the character and office of Elisha

as the prophet of the living God, and with the utmost deference turned to him for help in the hour of his need.

This was the practical testimony to the reality of Elisha's religion which was wrung from him by the pressure of his trouble. His action revealed the secret attitude of his soul. He had no thought of sending a messenger to the house of Rimmon in his extremity: the matter was too serious for the keeping up of appearances or the honouring of shams. The nearness of death has often a wonderful effect in bringing to light the hidden convictions, and even the unsuspected leanings, of the heart. It is no unusual thing for the enemies of religion to follow the example of the King of Syria in the time of trouble. They may hate and persecute the people of God in the day of their strength; but when weakness and the fear of death come upon them, it is to these same people of God that they appeal for comfort and help.

Hazael, the man chosen for the interview with Elisha, was an official who apparently stood high in the counsels of his master, but he was a man of a different type from Naaman. He was not much behind the older general, indeed, in courage and forcefulness of character; but he lacked true nobility, and made his position of trust in the king's service "the lawless perch of winged ambitions." It is plain that already his aspirations soared as high as the throne of Syria, and that he had begun to form dark plans for the accomplishment of his design. In heart he was a traitor, although outwardly he still wore the mask of loyalty. The bearer of a magnificent present representing "every good thing of Damascus," Hazael duly appeared before the prophet on his mission of enquiry.

The answer given by Elisha to the question addressed to him appears at first sight a somewhat oracular utterance. First of all, he declares that Benhadad will surely recover of his disease, but with the next breath he cancels this assurance by affirming that the Lord has made known to him that he will surely die. It is clear that this reply was specially intended for Hazael's own benefit, and had reference to the sinister purpose which he was cherishing

in his heart. Benhadad would certainly recover, so far as the natural course of his sickness was concerned ; his disease of itself would not cut him off. Nevertheless it was appointed that he would never rise from his sick-bed ; the inference, therefore, clearly was that he would meet with a violent end. Hazael would have little difficulty in finding the key to the prophet's enigmatic pronouncement, and must have been startled at finding the unspoken thoughts of his heart so plainly revealed. His confusion was increased by Elisha's subsequent conduct. The man of God fixed upon him a long and searching gaze, a gaze that seemed to penetrate and unmask his inmost soul. Before that solemn scrutiny the treacherous schemer stood convicted and exposed. His eye quailed, and he was unable to retain his composure.

Then Elisha gave way to a fit of weeping. With prophetic vision he was able to trace the career of violence and bloodshed on which Hazael was soon to enter, and the scenes of horror that flashed upon his view filled his tender heart with pain. And he did not conceal from Hazael himself the reason for his distress. In answer to his question Elisha told him plainly of the atrocities that were to be committed by his hand as the scourge of the Lord upon the children of Israel.

Hazael's answer to this disclosure has often been misunderstood. Its real meaning is indicated in the rendering of the Revised Version. "But," he cried, "what is thy servant, who is but a dog, that he should do this great thing?" It was not the repulsiveness of the suggested achievements that drew forth his incredulous cry, but their vastness. He was not repudiating with indignation the cruelties ascribed to him as something of which his nature was incapable—he would indeed have regarded deeds of that nature as the recognised accompaniments of warfare—; rather was he modestly suggesting that undertakings of such magnitude were beyond the range of his resources. How could he, who was but a dog in the meagreness of his powers and opportunities, ever hope to achieve such mighty exploits? It may be

ascribing too much subtlety to Hazael to suggest that this affectation of humility was designed to elicit from the prophet a more definite disclosure of his future career. In any case Elisha answered his question by intimating to him plainly, as a fact that he had learned through Divine revelation, that he was to be king over Syria.

The subsequent course of events is set forth with severe simplicity, but it is not difficult to eke out the reticence of the sacred narrative. Hazael made his way back to the royal palace without delay. He must have been deeply moved by Elisha's announcement, and there is little doubt that his interview with the prophet quickened into definite shape the vague purpose that had been gradually forming in his mind. One thing was clear: he was to be King of Syria; and the fact that this assurance reached him as a revelation from the Lord would possibly be regarded by him as a justification of any measures he might adopt for attaining the destined end. He went in to the sick-chamber to deliver his message. Eagerly the king asked him to declare the prophet's verdict. And Hazael then took his first actual step towards the consummation of his evil design. He repeated the first half of Elisha's answer, but deliberately concealed the second and really decisive part. Through the falsehood Benhadad was lulled into a false sense of security, and the way was thus prepared for the carrying out of the traitor's plan. That plan was simple, but quite effective. "The sight of means to do ill deeds" often "makes ill deeds done." On the following day Hazael brought a thick cloth which he had dipped in water, and spread it on the king's face. Ostensibly no doubt his purpose was to relieve the sufferer's distress; but he contrived so to administer the supposed restorative as that Benhadad was suffocated.

Hazael lost no time in establishing himself upon the throne. He does not indeed appear to have met with much difficulty in realising his aim. Of his reign there is not much that has been thought worthy of record. He displayed a considerable measure of vigour in his

military undertakings, but both his character and his work were lacking in real glory. He served, however, the purpose foretold regarding him with reference to Israel. In one or two sentences his operations as the instrument of the Divine chastisement are set forth. "In those days the Lord began to cut Israel short : and Hazael smote them in all the coasts of Israel." This brief reference is sufficiently pregnant to include all the horrors and atrocities the vision of which had moved so profoundly the gentle heart of Elisha.

II

There was a further part of the commission given to Elijah, however, that still remained to be fulfilled. That was the anointing of Jehu to be king over Israel. Not only must the disloyal nation endure the rod of the oppressor from without ; they must also be made to feel the stroke of righteous judgment within their own borders. The people had sinned in going after Baal ; Ahab had specially sinned in the matter of Naboth's vineyard ; while the wicked counsels of Jezebel lay behind the greater part of all the evil-doing in the land. Through the mouth of Elijah, the Lord had made known to Ahab the punishment which was to overtake his house. The stroke did not fall in Ahab's own day ; but it was delayed only for a season. The time had now come for the fulfilment of the Divine threatening.

The instrument chosen for this work of domestic cleansing was eminently fitted for his task. Jehu already occupied a commanding position in the kingdom of Israel. He was a man of extraordinary energy of character, sweeping through the land like a whirlwind, striking his victims with paralysing suddenness, and manifesting in all his undertakings the policy of "thorough." The swiftness and the secrecy with which he carried out his movements, and the ruthless zeal with which he gave effect to his purposes were, indeed, the outstanding characteristics of the man. When resting

at Ramoth-gilead after a war with the Syrians, he was anointed to be King of Israel, Elisha having delegated this duty to one of his younger brethren in the prophetic office. On being anointed he received his commission. He was to smite the house of Ahab, root and branch, in order to avenge the blood of all the martyred prophets; and Jezebel herself, the moving spirit in all the nation's wrong-doing, was to be eaten of dogs in Jezreel, according to the word of the Lord by Elijah many years before. How zealously Jehu proceeded to carry out this commission is set forth in detail in the sacred record.

Driving with all speed toward Jezreel; where the King of Israel was nursing his wounds, he slew Joram with an arrow from his own bow, and cast him into the field of Naboth, the Jezreelite, in deliberate fulfilment of the word of the Lord through Elijah. He also smote Ahaziah, King of Judah, who had come to visit Joram. Jezebel was the next to fall beneath the avenger's stroke, and she came to the ghastly end foretold of her. Further still, the seventy sons of Ahab, as well as all his kinsfolk and priests, were cut off without mercy. This completed the political side of Jehu's terrible task.

There remained, however, the religious side. The worship of Baal still prevailed within the land, and the guilt of the nation in this respect could by no means be overlooked. It was necessary therefore that Jehu should turn his attention to the idolaters. By means of a daring stratagem he succeeded in this part of his work as completely as he had done in all the rest. Pretending to be a zealous devotee of the Phœnician worship, he convened a solemn assembly of all the followers of Baal throughout the land—prophets, priests, and people. These were assembled in the temple built by Ahab in Samaria, and the worshippers of the true God were carefully excluded. Jehu himself went in to offer the first sacrifice, and, as soon as he came out, he gave the signal to a band of armed men whom he had commanded to be in readiness outside; these rushed in and fell upon the defenceless multitude as they were engaged in their idolatrous

devotions, and the entire company of Baal-worshippers were cut off at one stroke. The whole array of images within the temple, including the great statue of Baal, was destroyed, and the sanctuary itself was broken down, and became "the public resort of the inhabitants of the city for the basest uses." With such unsparring thoroughness did Jehu the son of Nimshi fulfil his task.

But while Jehu's work manifested certain commendable qualities, it was far from being perfect, and his character as a whole fails to win our admiration. The punitive element in his commission he certainly carried out with a whole-heartedness which met with the Divine approval and so established his dynasty upon the throne of Israel unto the fourth generation. But even when literally fulfilling the commands of Heaven, he plunged into the work of slaughter with a pitiless ferocity which showed that his heart was not right with God. His ardour in fact was by no means disinterested. His loudly proclaimed enthusiasm for righteousness was tainted not only with cruelty but with self-seeking. While professing a passion of devotion for the cause of God he was ever working for his own ends. And this serious inward flaw was ere long revealed in his public work. He destroyed the house of Ahab, and rooted out of the land the worship of Baal, but, when the time came for carrying out a constructive policy, he stopped fatally short of full allegiance to the will of God. He "took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart; for he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam which caused Israel to sin." His life accordingly reveals a strange mixture of good and evil.

III

There are two or three lessons of a general character that are brought before us in this grim story of vengeance and slaughter.

First of all, there is the thought of *the unbroken continuity of the Lord's work in the world*. Elisha makes his way into the wilderness of Damascus in order to intimate

to Hazael his elevation to the throne of Syria. He also takes measures to accomplish the anointing of Jehu. The mission entrusted to the Tishbite is therefore carried out by his successor. There is no break in the Lord's work. One servant had been removed from the field of labour, but another was ready to take up the relinquished burden. The "torch in flame" which Elijah flung back as he departed for a higher sphere of service was caught by willing hands, and held aloft with undiminished effectiveness. Elisha had been invested with Elijah's mantle, and anointed with Elijah's spirit. The two had clasped hands, and so had preserved unbroken the long succession of the Lord's servants. The commands that had been given to Elijah were binding upon the man who occupied his office, and was carrying on his work. Accordingly, in this incident, we find Elisha accomplishing a task that had been commanded more than twenty years before.

This is a deeply encouraging fact. It reminds us of the stability of the Divine purpose and the riches of the Divine resources. The servants pass away but the Lord remains; and because He lives, "the thoughts of His heart" abide "to all generations." The workmen change, but the work itself continues. There is no turning aside from the continuity of his purpose, no failure in the administration of His resources, no break in the line of His great prophetic succession. He may adopt new methods for the accomplishment of His designs; but He will never forsake His people, or forget the engagements of His Covenant.

The narrative further reminds us of *the part which is sometimes assigned to wicked men in connection with the fulfilling of God's purposes*. Hazael was certainly not a good man. He was a harsh and unscrupulous oppressor, a man who was "for base designs and crooked counsels fit," and who in order to become a king first became a murderer. And though Jehu had perhaps some redeeming qualities which were lacking in the character of his neighbour in Syria, he also moved on the whole on an

unworthy plane of purpose and action. One of the most discerning of our religious poets is full of scorn for his profession of zeal for the Lord of Hosts :—

“ Thou to wax fierce
In the cause of the Lord,
To threat and to pierce
With the heavenly sword !
Anger and zeal,
And the joy of the brave,
Who bade *thee* to feel,
Sin’s slave ? ”

Yet both Hazael and Jehu were plainly used by the Lord for the accomplishment of His purposes. This beyond question is one of the mysteries of God’s holy ways. There was of course an element of severity in the work of both men which had the authority and approval of heaven. The disloyalty of Israel, and especially the wickedness of Ahab and Jezebel, called for punishment of the sternest kind, and the judgments which finally overtook them, terrible though they appear, were of Divine appointment. It is not enough to explain away this terribleness by referring to the progressive character of revelation along the ages. The work of destruction authorised at that time in Israel was necessary and just ; otherwise the only relevant observation is that there has also been a development in the character of God Himself. But there were also elements in the work of Hazael and Jehu—some of them have already been indicated—which were clearly sinful.

Thus it is possible for men to be used, and consciously used, as instruments of the Divine purpose, and at the same time to manifest a great deal of impurity and selfishness in the performance of their task. And God distinguishes between these mingled aspects of good and evil, and rewards each after its kind. Thus Jehu’s obedience, as has already been pointed out, secured for his family the throne of Israel for four generations, but the ruthlessness with which he executed his commission was remembered

against him, and ere long, as we learn from the opening verses of the Book of Hosea, received its appropriate recompense.

No doubt both he and Hazael would have been ready to justify all the excesses which marred their work by an appeal to the Divine authority embodied in their instructions ; but the fact that they were executioners of God's wrath did not in any wise release them from the personal responsibilities connected with the actual discharge of their undertaking. The work on which they were engaged was God's work ; but the sin which disfigured the execution of the work was their own. In a later day the heathen nations were still further used for the chastisement of apostate Israel, but there is at least one remarkable passage in the Book of Zechariah¹ where the Lord declares that He was "very sore displeased" with these scourges of His, because in carrying out their task they exceeded the bounds of their commission. "I was but a little displeased," He says, "and they helped forward the affliction."

God often uses bad men as the sword of His holy anger ; sometimes, as in the case of the two kings set apart through Elisha, calling them plainly to engage in His work ; in other cases using them as the unconscious agents of His will. He overrules, indeed, the very wrath of His enemies for the furtherance of His own gracious designs. This is a strange yet comforting fact. It assures us that good shall yet one day be seen to be "the final goal of ill," and that the most desolating mysteries of Providence shall prove in the end a gain for His children. Here as elsewhere it is the Cross of Calvary that gives us the key to the dark riddle of experience. The most malignant and odious sin in the history of the human race was surely the crucifixion of the Lord of Glory ; but God overruled the iniquity of Judas and his associates for the working out of His own purpose of salvation for a lost world. And many a time the same gracious result has been achieved on the plane of national and individual

¹ Zechariah i. 15.

life. The oppression of despots has often really laid the foundation of human freedom. The conquering march of Alexander the Great, with all its atrocities, opened the way for the chariot of the gospel of peace. The barbarities of the Goths, the Vandals, and the Huns were needed to cast down the fortified corruptions of the Roman Empire. "The Thirty Years' War," according to a memorable saying, "made Germany a nation." The guilty intrigues of Henry the Eighth led to the Reformation in England. God overrules the smaller evil for the overthrow of a greater one, and for the acquisition of an abiding good. "The frost which kills the harvest of a year," says Emerson, "saves the harvests of a century by destroying the weevil or the locust."

Last of all, the story reminds us of *the certain fulfilment, sooner or later, of God's threatened judgments*. The house of Ahab may have thought itself secure because the doom predicted by Elijah was so long of coming. The years passed by, and all things continued as they were; and Jezebel may often have scoffed as she recalled the dark words of the old prophet. But God had not forgotten. In due time the sword of vengeance awoke, and it did not sleep again until its work was finished. So shall it always be with the Divine threatenings. The mills of judgment may "grind slowly," but their work is sure. One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. And although He "is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance," a time is surely coming when the sands of His forbearance shall have run out. Then the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night.

XX

THE ARROW OF THE LORD'S DELIVERANCE

"Then Elisha said, Shoot: and he shot. And he said, The arrow of the Lord's deliverance, and the arrow of deliverance from Syria."—2 KINGS xiii. 17.

WE have now come to the end of Elisha's wonderful life. He had reached a venerable old age, and for a period of about forty-five years—throughout the entire extent, that is, of the reigns of Jehu and Jehoahaz—appears to have passed his days in comparative retirement; at least there is no mention of his name in connection with the affairs of the nation. But before he passed away, there occurred one striking scene which formed a fitting close to Elisha's great career.

I

As the old man lay dying, he was honoured with a royal visitor. Joash, the young King of Israel, had heard of his condition, and came to have a last interview with the mighty prophet who in a former day had wrought such exploits for Israel. When he saw Elisha's wasted frame his heart was deeply moved, and he "wept over his face," crying, "O my father, my father! the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!" Joash was not a good king. It is placed on record against him that "he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord," through walking in the steps of Jeroboam the son of Nebat. But it is plain that his character was not altogether lacking in elements of good, and the homage which on this occasion he paid to Elisha must be remembered to his credit.

Joash was having his own share of the trials of kingship. It was a time of great trouble in the history of Israel. For many years the nation had been harassed with the attacks of the Syrians—Hazeal was diligently carrying out his stern commission—and its resources had been so depleted through successive defeats that it seemed no longer able to offer any effective resistance. It was with a mind full of anxiety accordingly that the king made his way to the prophet's sick-chamber. He would have remembered the help which in a past generation Elisha had rendered to the nation; he may have hoped that in the present crisis that help might still to some extent be available; and when a glance at the prophet's prostrate form convinced him that this expectation must once and for all be abandoned, he was overcome with sorrow. He paid a high tribute to Elisha's worth as one of the noblest of his country's defenders; and he wept because he regarded his impending removal not only as a personal bereavement, but also as a national calamity.

The words used by Joash suggest another thought. They are a repetition of Elisha's own cry on the memorable day long before when Elijah ascended into heaven. The chariot and horses of fire that appeared to escort the Tishbite into glory suggested no doubt to the younger prophet the terms in which he paid tribute to Elijah's services to the nation. Now it was Elisha's own time to pass away; and although the circumstances of his departure were very different from that earlier scene, yet the same words of homage were addressed to him as had been used regarding his predecessor. Elisha had to go home by a less royal road than Elijah. Disease took hold of his frame, and he had to pass through the lowly gates of death. But about his dying bed also the "bright harnessed angels" of heaven were watching. And so it is indeed in the case of every believer. The outward circumstances certainly may be far from glorious. The ebbing strength, the sunken cheeks, the failing vision, the distress of nature in the throes of death—all seem to speak of defeat rather than of victory. But

behind the veil of sense there is the same triumphant fact.

At the king's words Elisha's strength seems to have revived. He was a true patriot, and the supreme concern of his soul in the hour of death was the future of the nation. It was not in vain, therefore, that Joash had come to him in his distress. He had a message to deliver to the king with regard to the welfare of the country, and he adopted a characteristic method of making it known. So in the strange scene which was enacted in the prophet's chamber, the dying man becomes the central figure, and issues to his visitor commands that suggest that he, and not Joash, is the real possessor of royalty.

"Take bow and arrows," he said to the king, and Joash silently obeyed. "Put thine hand upon the bow," he further commanded; and when this was done he placed his own hands on the king's hands—the sign of the communication of power. Finally, he asked Joash to open the window toward the east, in the direction of the Syrian peril, and to shoot an arrow. Then he explained his parable. The arrow was the arrow of the Lord's deliverance, and Joash was to smite the Syrians in Aphek till they were consumed.

In this opening scene we have the first part of the prophet's message. It was of a general character, and consisted of two elements. First of all, it contained a summons to action. The command to take bow and arrows, to put his hand upon the bow, and to shoot toward the east, clearly set before the king his duty with regard to Syria. It was a call to be up and doing, and to prosecute the war with all the vigour at his command. There must be no sinking into despondency and no shrinking back in fear. Joash must go forth and smite the enemies of his country in vigorous, aggressive action. And along with the call to effort there was the assurance of help. The Lord was on the side of Israel, and would give them the victory. As the prophet's hand closed over the king's hand in connection with the

shooting of the arrow, and infused into its effort a more than human strength, so the might of the Lord of Hosts would accompany his endeavours against the forces of Syria, and would enable him out of weakness to become strong, and to wax valiant in fight. The arrow accordingly was "the arrow of the Lord's deliverance"; Joash received from Heaven a pledge of success.

But Elisha's message was not yet fully delivered. The strangest part of the interview was yet to come. He again told Joash to take the arrows, and this time to smite the ground with them, that is, apparently, to discharge them one by one towards the earth. This no doubt appeared to the king a strange request. Very likely he could see no meaning in it at all; but in order to humour the old man's whim he struck the ground three times. Then the prophet was wroth with his royal guest. "Thou shouldest have smitten five or six times," he told him: he should have shot, that is, all the arrows in his quiver; then his victory over the Syrians would have been complete. As it was, he would prevail against them only three times.

What was the meaning of this second part of the strange performance carried through in Elisha's chamber? It was manifestly a test of the king's obedience to the will of God, and for this reason it proved a revelation of character. Joash had been plainly told his duty in regard to the conflict with Syria; he had also received the promise of Divine help in connection with the discharge of that duty. The promise, however, was of a general kind, and was manifestly suspended upon the condition of a loyal compliance on the part of the king. In order that the arrow of deliverance might do its work, the king's hand must be upon the bow as well as God's hand. The question of greatest practical consequence accordingly was whether Joash would prove himself a fitting medium for the forth-putting of God's conquering might. Would he resolutely and steadfastly apply himself to his appointed task? Would he keep his hand on the bow with unyielding perseverance? Had he

faith and courage and stability enough to continue the conflict so long as there remained a single arrow in his quiver? And the answer to these questions furnished by Joash's conduct in this acted parable was a decided "no." His action in the matter of the arrows was indeed a sign of the king's besetting weakness. He was a man of vacillating purpose, deficient in steadfastness of aim and strength of will. And the same lack of thoroughness which characterised his fulfilment of the seemingly trivial task imposed upon him by the prophet would mar his efforts also on the wider plane of military enterprise.

II

The incident contains one or two important lessons of an abiding character. Let us listen to the message which comes to ourselves from Elisha's death-chamber.

In that message, first of all, there sounds forth a CALL TO ENDEAVOUR. To each of us, as surely as to Joash, there comes the command from God, "Take bow and arrows," and "Put thy hand upon the bow." For life as a whole is a conflict; and in order to obtain the victory we must put forth our strength and endure unto the end. In whatever direction we turn, we find contending forces striving for the mastery; on every hand progress is attained through the overcoming of difficulties. This battle of the warrior is not always "with confused noise and garments rolled in blood"; it is often noiseless and invisible; nevertheless is it true, as Matthew Arnold reminds us, that "excellence dwells among high and steep rocks, and can only be reached by those who sweat blood to reach her."

In the personal life of the Christian, for example, there is an unceasing warfare. He enters in, first of all, and not without striving, at a "strait gate"; then he walks to the end along a "narrow way." He has a constant inward struggle, because "sense" is ever "at war with soul"; the old life of the flesh with its characteristic desires and tendencies continues more or less vigorously.

to dispute the pre-eminence with the new life of grace : darkness contends with light ; unbelief battles with faith ; the law in the members wars against the law in the mind. There are personal forces of evil also, unseen but real, against which he must wrestle unceasingly, enemies that are powerful and crafty and malicious. And, to crown all, he often has the experience of a daily cross. The Christian has a battle-field within his own breast, and his hand must never leave his bow.

On the field of Christian service, again, he must prove his valour. The Kingdom of God makes its way throughout the world in the teeth of the most determined opposition. Every inch of new territory which it annexes has been won from the enemy with sword and with bow. Christ is at war with every kind of evil, and His soldiers are called upon to attack without fear or pity the fortified places of error and wickedness. The banner of the Cross waves over many a stronghold which once had been "Satan's seat," and the temple of God is reared above many a pestilential swamp which formerly had been "the habitation of dragons"; but it is not without effort of the costliest kind that these triumphs have been achieved. And in this great work every believer in Christ is called upon more or less definitely to engage. "Take bow and arrows" is the Lord's command to His followers with reference to all the Syrians that menace the interests of His Kingdom. There must be no shrinking from the fray, and no suggestion of making terms with the enemy. The Christian, who in his personal character is meek and gentle "as a dew from the Lord," must be bold and remorseless as a lion when he has to contend for the glory of his Master.

There are many to whom the call to effort comes in connection with their outward lot in life. Throughout most of their days they have to struggle with adverse circumstances—poverty, it may be, and sickness. They have been in conflict with a hard world, and know the bitterness of defeat. Day by day they are confronted with tasks, and have to carry burdens, that are beyond

their strength. Life is "a long holding out," and they are often weary and dispirited. They have no might to combat the forces that appear to be arrayed against them. No longer are they able to grapple with their evil star. They dread the future, and are ready to fall a prey to despondency. To them also there comes the Divine command, "Take bow and arrows." It is a call to renewed endeavour. There must be no thought of capitulation or retreat. Let them rally their forces once more, and go forth to the conflict with a brave heart. It is those unyielding spirits who press on through "the long gorge" of difficulty "with toil of heart and knees and hands" that shall one day emerge upon "the shining table-lands," and shall receive the victor's crown.

III

But, along with the call, there also comes a GRACIOUS ENCOURAGEMENT. It is not our own hand alone that is laid on the bow. The hand of God is placed upon it also, and so the arrow becomes the arrow of the Lord's deliverance. If we seek in sincerity to obey the Divine command, there can be no question as to the issue of the conflict. God Himself is with us in our warfare, and through His gracious power we shall obtain the victory in the end. This joining of hands upon the one bow is a symbol of one of the grandest facts in the life of faith. It sets forth the alliance which is formed between the believer and his Lord. We are on His side in loyal self-surrender and devotion, and He is on our side in fulness of sustaining and conquering might. He looks upon us as fellow-workers with Him for the accomplishment of His own purposes, and we may boldly say, "The Lord is my helper," in connection with all that pertains to our personal well-being.

And this help does not simply reach the believer from without: God does not merely make the external forces at His command work together for the deliverance of His people. The truth is more wonderful than that.

The strengthening is from within. It is one of the supreme facts of the religion of Christ that the living Saviour dwells within each of His followers by His Spirit. Christ is "in us," a real, and operative, and abiding Presence. There is therefore absolutely no limit to what we can do through Him. The Hand that takes hold of our weakness is almighty in its power; the arrow of our deliverance is charged with an energy that is Divine.

Thus it will be seen that there are open to the Christian marvellous possibilities of achievement. He "can do all things" through Christ that strengtheneth him. And the measure in which these possibilities have actually been realised in the history of the Church of God is by no means inconsiderable. Many a time the world has seen believers who went through life wearing the white flower of sainthood, and who made it plain that the beauty of their holiness was but a dim reflection of the glory of their Lord. Many a time it has seen men and women enduring the bitterest suffering for Christ's sake with a courage not only that never wavered, but that seemed to glory in the Cross. There have been multitudes again who yielded themselves to Christ's service with a devotion that faltered at no sacrifice. All this has been accomplished by the power of the Lord's hand laid upon the bow.

The touch of that Hand ever conveys strength and peace and courage. It was because of this fact that Gideon long ago faced the hosts of the Midianites with his three hundred unarmed men, and that "the worm Jacob" in a still earlier day was transformed into "a sharp threshing instrument having teeth." It is for the same reason that in the gospel age these triumphs have been repeated with a yet more arresting splendour. We see the weak and timid peasants of Galilee changed into the lion-hearted heralds of the Cross. We see a Perpetua in the tenderness of her youth facing a terrible martyrdom with a glad heart, declaring that through her Lord's presence "the dungeon became a palace,"

and the day on which she faced the angry bull and the gladiators in the arena was her "day of victory." We see a Margaret Wilson, also with the freshness of the morning upon her face, choking in the rush of the Solway tide, but refusing to be moved from the steadfastness of her faith.

This closing scene of Elisha's life, therefore, is full of encouragement. It has a message for us from God, and that message is, "Fear not, for I am with thee." It assures us that if we are really engaged in the Lord's work, we are on the winning side. This may not indeed always appear to be the case. Our enemies are many and strong, and the hand that fits the arrow to the string may be weak and trembling; but if we are truly on God's side in loyal and abiding dependence, the hand of His great power will close over the hand of our poor endeavour, and the arrow that speeds from our bow will become the arrow of the Lord's deliverance.

"If we are truly on God's side, in loyal and abiding dependence"—it is necessary that these words should be emphasised: they were heavily underlined in Elisha's sick-room. What they set forth is the fixed condition upon which God's promise of victory hangs. It is plain that in the actual experience of believers this promise is far from being fully realised. Some measure of success they do achieve, and in the end they shall all be "more than conquerors." But, in comparison with the life of sustained and joyous triumph which is held out to them in the assurances of the gospel, it must be admitted that the general level of attainment which as a matter of fact prevails among them leaves much to be desired. Their history is not all pitched upon the note of victory. They have to speak of shortcomings and reverses and losses, as surely as of more cheering experiences.

And the reason for this comparative failure—where is it to be found? Why is it that the results are so disappointing when the power available is so unlimited? Once more the answer is furnished by Elisha's parable of the arrows. Believers fall short of the possibilities of

their high calling for the same reason that the King of Israel failed, first of all in the test put upon him in Elisha's chamber, and afterwards in his warfare against Syria. And where Joash was found wanting was in a loyal adherence to those conditions in which alone the power of the Lord is exercised on our behalf, the conditions, above all, of obedience and dependence. From the incident we are considering, therefore, there comes forth, last of all, a message of warning. "Take heed," it says to us, "lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief."

IV

If we are to succeed in our warfare, with a complete and permanent success, there are certain qualities that must mark our efforts.

First of all, we cannot succeed unless we are *true-hearted* men. In other words the supreme condition of effective service for God is personal loyalty to Jesus Christ. In this region of things they alone are right-hearted men who are men of faith: all else are really traitors. We must be bound to the Lord by the ties of soul attachment; no external adherence will suffice. The true soldier of Jesus Christ is first of all a believer. There is a well-known anecdote of Abraham Lincoln which illustrates this point. At the time of the Civil War a deputation waited upon him, and in the course of the interview expressed the hope that the Lord was on their side. "That is not the thing that I am most concerned about," was the President's reply. His hearers were wellnigh astounded: what could be of greater importance than the question of whether God was on their side? They waited for an explanation. "What I am most anxious about," said Lincoln, "is whether we are on the Lord's side." And Lincoln was right. That is the matter of first importance, for the simple reason that it determines the other momentous question whether or not the Lord is on our side.

Again, we cannot prevail unless we are *whole-hearted*

in the work. We cannot look for success if we are lukewarm or indifferent in the King's business. Our obedience must be unqualified; our zeal, impelling and unquenchable. We should be men of burning hearts and surrendered lives, prepared to go all lengths in our devotion to the Cause, resolved not to relax our efforts while there remains an arrow in our quiver. It will not do to rest satisfied with some measure of attainment, to shoot three arrows, and then lay down the bow in easy self-complacency. The true servant of Christ "counts not himself to have apprehended" so long as there are enemies to be conquered and kingdoms to be subdued. Instead of that he continues to "press toward the mark" with eagerness of desire and persistency of effort. There must be no thought of compromise, no disposition to spare what the Lord has condemned. It was their short-coming in this direction that made the conquest of Canaan by the children of Israel so incomplete. They were not whole-hearted in their warfare. Commanded to drive the Canaanite wholly out of the land, they failed to follow up their early victories, with the result that some of the native tribes were spared, to be as thorns in their side.

Once more, we cannot expect to obtain the victory unless we are *brave-hearted*. Real soldiering is never easy. It means difficulty and danger, and it calls for courage and endurance of the very highest kind. If we are to prove ourselves worthy followers of the Lord Jesus we must learn to play the man; we must have no kinship with those children of Ephraim who, though they were equipped with the best weapons of war, "turned back in the day of battle." With our hand placed upon our bow and our confidence fixed upon our God, we must go forward to meet the foe with an undaunted heart. It will not do to shoot two or three arrows and then quit the field; we must stand our ground and smite the enemy until the last arrow is discharged.

Loyalty, zeal, courage—these are three outstanding requirements of the soldiers of the Lord. And it is against

the opposite of these qualities that the warning which comes to us from the failure of the King of Israel is specially directed. Joash, to begin with, was not true-hearted; it followed of necessity that he was neither whole-hearted nor brave-hearted; therefore in the testing time he was found wanting. And so it always happens in connection with the Kingdom of God. The false-hearted soldier certainly cannot render much effective service; but neither does he who is half-hearted or faint-hearted. There is no place for the traitor or the laggard or the coward in the ranks of the followers of Christ.

There are various departments of the Christian life in which these dangers are to be specially guarded against. In "the good fight of faith," for example, the faults of Joash must be carefully shunned. The believer must present an unyielding front to every kind of evil that wars against the soul. His attitude towards sin must be one of uncompromising hostility. Not two or three victories only must he obtain in this life or death conflict; he must keep fighting unto the end. There must be no thought of giving up the struggle, because it is wearisome, still less of going back because the road is rough. His face must ever be turned toward the land of promise; it is he that endureth unto the end that shall be saved.

So is it also in the life of prayer. "Men," said Christ, "should always pray and not faint." But how ready we are to follow the example of Joash and cease smiting ere we have attained our end! The vision soon fades from our eyes, and the ring of hopefulness leaves our voice. Our prayers become listless and formal, with little earnestness in them or importunity. Is there any wonder therefore if our spiritual life is impoverished, and our record of victories is meagre?

In the service of God especially we must watch and pray lest we fall into this temptation. Sometimes we are disposed to make our own convenience the determining factor in our endeavours, and to cease smiting

when the exercise becomes irksome. Sometimes we are dejected because our labours appear to be fruitless, and our hearts are sick with hope long deferred. Sometimes the vastness of our task oppresses our spirit, and our hands hang down in conscious impotence. But this is the way of Joash, which is also the way of failure. The nobler way is the way of Cabel and Joshua. "God," said they, at the time when their fellow-spies were pouring forth their tale of despair, "God is with us; let us go up at once and possess the land." We must at all costs obey the command of the Lord. Whithersoever He calls, we must go forward; whatsoever the difficulty that confronts us, we must not draw back. And we must trust as well as obey. The conflict may be sore, and our energies may be failing; but when His hand is on the bow, victory is sure in the end.

XXI

THE FINAL VICTORY

“And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, that, behold, they spied a band of men; and they cast the man into the sepulchre of Elisha: and when the man was let down, and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet.”—2 KINGS xiii. 21.

“AND Elisha died, and they buried him;” with such simple directness is the end of one of the greatest of God’s prophets recorded in the sacred history. The voice that so often had stirred the heart of the nation was silent. The hands that many a time had proved so strong in the hour of need were hanging down in the great stillness. The form that for long years had been so familiar in Israel waxed old and vanished out of sight. But the land had not yet heard the last of Elisha. It was a time when Israel was sorely harassed, not only with the Syrians, but also with the Moabites. These old enemies of the chosen nation swept over the country in plundering bands, and carried off all the spoil they could find. In connection with one of those marauding incursions the incident took place which is now to engage our attention. It happened in the spring of the year after Elisha died.

One day a company of Israelites were carrying a dead man to his burial. Suddenly, as they drew near the place of interment, the alarm was raised that the Moabites were upon them. There, sure enough, in the distance could be seen the cloud of dust and the gleam of spears that told of the advance of an armed force. There was no time to lose. With trembling haste the men of Israel made for the nearest grave they could find. It happened to be the tomb of Elisha, but there was no

help for it; the stern necessities of the moment dulled the edge of reverence. They laid down their burden in the place where the mortal remains of the great prophet had been laid to rest. And then a wonderful thing happened. No sooner did the dead body come in contact with Elisha's bones than the man came back to life again, and stood up on his feet in the fulness of recovered strength. One feels constrained to wonder which gave that funeral party the greater fright and caused them to run the faster—the approach of the hostile band of Moabites, or the sight of the man they were helping to bury, shaking himself free from the shroud of death, and hastening to escape from his temporary prison-house! Many a wonderful thing Elisha did while he lived among men, but there was nothing in his life so wonderful as the miracle which took place after his death.

I

What was the significance of this remarkable incident?

No doubt it had, first of all, a message which bore directly upon the immediate circumstances of the nation. The land of Israel, as we have already seen, was then in a distressed condition, being continually invaded and laid waste by various enemies. When Elisha passed away, it would have seemed as if the end of the nation had come. For on him the well-being of the country had largely depended, and there seemed to be no one to inherit his mantle and carry on his work. No doubt there were some among the faithful in Israel who feared that Elisha's removal was a sign that the Lord was utterly forsaking the land. But the message which sounded forth so impressively from the prophet's tomb was designed to correct this despondent and unbelieving frame of mind. It conveyed the assurance that although Elisha was dead, the God of Elisha still lived. This miracle was His doing, and it proclaimed the fact of His unchanging might. It directed men's minds also to the

special promise which He had given regarding the deliverance of the nation from the Syrian oppression.

So it was a message of encouragement amid the prevailing gloom. It summoned the people to take heart again, and still to trust in God. He had not yet forsaken the land. He had by no means forgotten His Covenant. His servants might rest from their labours, but He was still carrying on His own work. And it is not without significance that directly after his account of this miracle the inspired historian goes on to tell how the Lord, because of His ancient Covenant, had compassion upon Israel and did not "as yet" cast them from His presence, and how accordingly Joash was enabled in three successive victories—one for each of the arrows he had shot in Elisha's sick-chamber—to regain the cities which Hazael had captured in the preceding reign.

But the incident had also a prophetic significance. It prefigured the great and fruitful victory that was one day to be secured over the grave. Passing on through the centuries we see One hanging on a tree outside the gate of Jerusalem. His lifeless body is taken down and laid in a grave,

"That sad sepulchral rock

That was the casket of Heaven's richest store."

But this Tenant of the tomb has come to rest in it only for a brief season. Once more there takes place the miracle of Resurrection. The lowly sleeper lays aside the bands of death and the grave, and rises in the greatness of His strength. And because He has proved the Conqueror of death, He becomes the Giver of life to sinful men. Jesus Christ is ever more the Resurrection and the Life. "Whosoever believeth on Me," He says, "though he were dead, yet shall He live." If only we touch Him by faith, our souls shall experience a spiritual quickening, even as the dead Israelite was restored to life through physical contact with the prophet's bones.

And so the miracle in Elisha's grave was a pledge of the final resurrection of the body. Through this object-lesson—which was adapted to the stage of spiritual

growth at which they had arrived—God was teaching His Church in those early days that the bands of death were yet to be unloosed, and that the power of the grave was to be broken. As Elisha lay in the grave and so opened the door for that other son of Israel who came to share it with him, so Christ's visit to the tomb and His triumphant resurrection from it, are the pledge that all who believe in His name shall rise again also. He has the key of the grave, and He says to His disciples, "Because I live, ye shall live also." Very fittingly therefore does Elisha's history come to a close on this note of victory. The crowning revelation of the New Testament is the hope that springs from Christ's empty grave. The final utterance of the gospel is the assurance of life and immortality brought to light by the risen Saviour. It was profoundly appropriate, accordingly, that the ministry which so clearly foreshadowed the grace of the Christian dispensation should have as its concluding incident a victory which is pregnant with the same mighty hopes. We take our farewell of Elisha in the light that streams through the open door of a vanquished grave.

II

The miracle, however, has plainly a message of a general character. It reminds us that the influence of a true prophet of God abides long after he himself has passed away. The quickening influence exercised by the bones of Elisha would have been the means of reviving interest in the prophet's work. The miracle indeed was the seal of Heaven placed upon his ministry. Men's thoughts would have been recalled to the message which Elisha had proclaimed, and it may be that in this way his voice was more powerful in death than in life. And so in a certain sense it always happens. The labour of a true servant of the Lord is never in vain. His message does not die with him. His influence is not at an end in the hour when his voice has become silent. Often he is the means of quickening

others long after his bodily frame has crumbled into dust. This is a deeply encouraging consideration.

By all God's children this posthumous influence is in some degree wielded. If only there is a loyal disciple of the Lord Jesus, seeking to live to His praise and to commend His yoke; if only there is a true Epistle of Christ, endeavouring by a life of "cheerful godliness" to reveal the beauty of the Spirit's handwriting, the train of influence thereby set in motion is not arrested at the grave. A great poet has assured us that

"The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones."

This witness is only partially true. The good that men do really never dies. Science tells us of a law of nature which is known as the Conservation of Energy. No force of nature ever passes out of existence. It may assume different forms, and move along new channels, but it is never lost; it lives on. So is it also in the spiritual world. The influence of Christian character and Christian teaching and Christian effort in reality never dies. Its effects may not always be visible, but they are not therefore lost. It has gone to swell the great force of righteousness which is working in the world for God.

Often, however, the effects are visible. Many a time it happens that when men die the real worth of their character comes to light. Apart altogether from the ideal beauty with which we clothe our loved ones when they have departed from us, the fact remains that even the saints seldom receive justice as long as they are with us in the world. But the veil that hides them from us seems to unveil the truth; and when they have passed for ever beyond the reach of our praise or blame, they come at length to their own. Then we realise how sadly we misunderstood them when they lived among us. "The one fact more" that would have made all the difference in our appreciation comes into view, and our eyes are opened. The past becomes luminous. Circumstances that influenced our judgment unfavourably are explained; words and incidents that received little

attention when they were uttered, become radiantly significant in the clearer light. We see how sore was the struggle, and how splendid the victory. The quiet enduring of a secret pain; the meek bearing of a cruel wrong; the self-sacrificing devotion to the interests of others; the slow martyrdom of years; the loyal continuance at the post of duty throughout it all—these are things that come to our knowledge as it were by the pathway of the grave. They are things that make it plain to us that men and women who were worthy to be counted saints had passed their days unrecognised in our midst. And our souls receive inspiration and courage through this voice from the tomb.

How often too has it been seen that only after men have rested from their labours does the fruit of their work appear. They sowed the seed with diligence while it was day, but there was no sign of success till long after they had left the field. Many a devoted preacher of the gospel has mourned over the apparent barrenness of the efforts of a lifetime. One thinks of Hans Egede preaching from the text, "I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought and in vain," as he bids farewell to the inhospitable shores of Greenland, after twenty years of seemingly unavailing toil. One remembers also the similar futility that appeared to mark James Gilmour's fourteen years of heroic labour in Mongolia. And there have been many others, at home as well as abroad, who passed through the same bitter experience. But the work that seemed so plainly stamped with failure had not really been in vain. The fields of Greenland and Mongolia ere long yielded a plentiful harvest. Other labourers reaped the fruits when the hand that sowed the seed was still in death. The diligent unfolding of the message of salvation, the patient instruction, the reiterated warnings and appeals, at length did their work. The seed had been long buried, but it had not been destroyed. In the end it sprang up, and revealed an indestructible and generative energy. And so in a sense the voice of the preacher became more effective in death than in life.

III

Of the prophet especially—the man who has a message from God for his fellows, whatever be the medium of its communication—this has often been the lot. As a rule he is not without honour save in his own generation. Men fail to recognise his worth because he may be clad in homespun and they know his brothers and sisters. Some of the profoundest thinkers the world has ever seen, men whose writings have enriched the intellectual life of mankind, were practically unknown to their contemporaries, and strove in vain to obtain a hearing in their own time. In not a few instances they had to suffer the slings and arrows of envy and detraction. Not perhaps until they were long dead did they come to their kingdom. Then, when the enduring element in their work was separated from its accidental features, the world revised its judgment, and proceeded to build their sepulchres. When Homer is dead, seven cities, according to the well-known couplet, contend for the honour of being his birthplace; but in these same cities the poet during his lifetime had to beg for bread.

Who can estimate the perpetuated influence of a really good book? Through it the writer projects himself into the future, and continues to instruct and stimulate men long after he himself has gone the way of all flesh. By means of the printed page he takes his place among

“The dead but sceptred sovereigns who still rule
Our spirits from their urns.”

“The writings of Plato,” says Emerson, “make it impossible to think, on certain levels, except through him.” Shakespeare is for all time a fountain of inspiration to mankind. The intelligence of every generation is quickened through contact with the wisdom of Samuel Johnson embalmed in the pages of Boswell. This is within the region of general literature, and is specially true of the giants. In the spiritual domain the transmission of influence is more phenomenal, and also,

perhaps, more general. Sometimes the plain words of an ordinary man are charged with a far-reaching potency, because they are the vehicle of the Holy Spirit's power. Every reader of Christian biography will remember the chain of literary influence—in which books by Baxter, Doddridge, and Wilberforce were the successive links—through which a little volume called *The Bruised Reed*, by the Puritan minister, Sibbes, led to the spiritual illumination of Thomas Chalmers, and thereby to the quickening of the whole evangelical life of Scotland. The piety of a nation was kindled as if through contact with the old preacher's bones.

The martyrs did more for Christ by their death than by their life. Their blood, according to the saying which has passed into a proverb, has been the seed of the Church. As the ashes of Wyclif, when the reformer's remains were burned in obedience to the decree of the Council of Constance, were borne by the brook Swift into the Avon, and by the Avon into the Severn, and by the Severn at length into the boundless sea, so the truths for which these noble confessors of Christ laid down their lives were spread abroad, "wide as the waters be," as a consequence of their sufferings. This fact is strikingly illustrated in the case of Patrick Hamilton, the man who first went to the stake in Scotland for the cause of the Reformation. His death, instead of hindering the spread of the truth, gave it a mighty impulse forward. "The reek of Patrick Hamilton," it was said, "infected all on whom it blew." He suffered at so early an age, he was a youth of such noble birth, and the circumstances of his end were so startling, that men were forced to enquire into the nature of the truths for which he died. And the result was a great awakening of interest throughout the land. Many an unreflecting mind was stirred, and many an insensate heart was quickened, as if through contact with the martyr's ashes.

On the less prominent fields of Christian effort the same striking fact is often disclosed. A godly father or mother, for example, may have mourned for many days

over the waywardness of an erring child. The appeal of their life was made in vain. Warnings and entreaties were alike disregarded. But when the fond eyes were closed in death, and the tender voice no longer pleaded, the message came home. Perhaps it was the faith and hope in which they died that was made the conquering influence. Perhaps it was the remembrance of the well-spent life, or of some single word of faithful admonition. Or it may have been simply the natural pain of parting. At any rate the glad result was achieved; and the heart that resisted all the appeals of the living voice was won by the message that came from the tomb.

The lesson of the incident is therefore one of hope and cheer for every believing soul. Especially is it charged with comfort for all who are engaged in the work of Christ. That work is often difficult and discouraging. The soil is so unyielding, and there is so little evidence of success, that sometimes the labourer is ready to give up in despair. Let us listen, then, to the voice that speaks from the grave of Elisha. "Do not give up," it says; "keep on; let your light shine, and your life speak, and your hands cease not from toil. In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening withhold not your hand. And it may be that when the grass is growing green over your grave, the fruit of that sowing will be seen in fields white unto the harvest."

This is one of the ways in which the believer gets the victory over death. To extend by word or deed one's influence into the unbounded future is to be immortal. To live in hearts that are turned to righteousness or moved to noble impulse by that transmitted power is not to die. Rather is it to anticipate in some degree, even in this present world, that final victory when

"Attired with stars we shall for ever sit,
Triumphing over death, and chance, and thee, O Time."