Handbooks for Bible Classes and Private Students

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HEBREW IDEALS

PART I. (GEN. XII.-XXV.)

BY JAMES STRACHAN

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HEBREW IDEALS

FROM THE STORY OF THE PATRIARCHS

A Study of Old Testament Faith and Life

Part First
(GEN. 12–25)

BY

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IN MEMORIAM

A. B. D.

O Dulce Decus Nostrum!

PREFACE.

THIS handbook is an attempt to give, not a critical analysis of documents, but a sympathetic interpretation of ideals, and it is written for the purpose of instructing and stimulating young minds.

There are plenty of learned critical works on Genesis. The best are those of Dillmann, Delitzsch, Gunkel, and Ball. To add another to the number would be wasteful and ridiculous excess. My commission was to write something simple. That is more difficult, and at present more needful. Criticism has had its innings, and the time is come for appreciation. Analysis must lead to a new synthesis.

It is sometimes said that "vast tracts of Scripture, and especially of the Old Testament, which were luminous and very comfortable to our fathers, are bare desert to the younger generation of preachers." If there are such tracts, I believe they can all be reclaimed. Genesis, at any rate, should not be allowed to become desert; and rightly cultivated it will always rejoice and blossom as the rose. My conviction is that when criticism has done its worst, or, as I for one prefer to say, its best, Luther's words will be as true as ever: *Nihil pulchrius Genesi, nihil utilius.*

A word should be said as to the divine name. I do not care to use the discredited form *Jehovah*, which was unknown till it was coined by an erring scholar in the sixteenth century. Some authors are beginning to write *Yahweh*, even in popular

books. I shall not follow this practice till we begin to say *Yoseph* and *Dawid*. If we are to be guided by analogy, we may agree to write *Jahveh*. Meantime in this text-book I generally use the familiar form LORD, like the Authorised and Revised Versions.

J. S.

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HEBREW IDEALS.

I.

IDEALS.

"The world is ruled by great Ideals, the soul responds to them."
WESTCOTT.

IDEALS.—"Nothing," said Luther, "is more beautiful than Genesis, nothing more useful." Genesis is not a bare record of facts, but a book of ideals. It embodies in living and attractive forms many of the highest Hebrew conceptions of faith and character and conduct. The story of the Patriarchs displays the ideal of fellowship between God and man. The LORD draws nigh to men in love, chooses them for His service, blesses them with His favour, enriches them with His promises, binds them with His behests. Men are taken into covenant with God, justified by faith, disciplined by trial, perfected through suffering. The story also exhibits the ideal of human fellowship in its various relations—between husband and wife, parent and child, master and servant, warrior and priest, statesman and king, saint and sinner. The Book touches existence at every point. Manners and customs, ethnology and ethics, highways and byways of history, births and weddings and burials, love and war, eating and drinking, laughter and tears—all the sunshine and shadow of life are found in the story. But the ideal is never

absent. Sometimes it is patent in the characters depicted, sometimes it is latent in the tone and spirit of the narrator. The *dramatis personæ* are men and women of like passions with ourselves; we are permitted to see them in their frailties, deceits, and deeds of violence; and inspired writers never spare the saints. Genesis would have but little value for us if it did not hold the mirror up to nature, before displaying the operations of grace and showing how human characters are ennobled and transfigured and made Godlike. The Book portrays the failures as well as the victories of the servants of God. For its purpose is not hero-worship, but encouragement to humble seekers after God, religious discipline, culture of moral sentiment. No attempt is made to hide the tragedies of life which are the results of sin. Plain tales of human weakness and folly are told, no censure is passed, no moral appended; yet the narrator makes his own ideal as clear as daylight. Here is realism, not of the sort that defiles like pitch, but of the kind which purifies the mind with emotions of pity and fear. The ideal so shines through the real that we feel "how awful goodness is," and see "virtue in her shape how lovely." Everything is described as it appears, not to the sensual eye of man, but to the pure eye of God; and behind all the shortcomings of actual goodness we see the divine potentiality of good.

> "Not in their brightness, but their earthly stains,
> Are the true saints vouchsafed to human eyes.
> Sin can read sin, but dimly scans high grace,
> So we move heavenward with averted face,
> Scared into faith by warning of sin's pains;
> And saints are lowered that the world may rise."[1]

HEBRAISM.—Modern writers are in the habit of comparing and contrasting the Hebrew with the Greek and the Roman ideals. They speak of the Hebraic, the Hellenic, and the Roman *spirit*, and say that to understand and sympathise with each of these is to possess the noblest culture. It would be

[1] Newman.

narrow-minded to deny that in each of them there is something of the Spirit of God; but the Hebrew spirit has a higher potency for moral and religious culture than either the Greek or the Roman spirit. Where, then, shall we find the essential Hebrew spirit? If we except the Psalms, no book in the Old Testament contains such a fulness of Hebrew life and thought as the book of Genesis. No book is so rich in materials for constructing the real history of the Hebrews. How they acted, how they thought, how they talked, how they felt; their public and private life; what they made of the world—here it is all delineated in classic form. Here are no bare annals or chronicles, no dates or dry-as-dust details; but here are living and glowing pictures of real life; here are the action, passion, emotion of actual men and women, who interest us as intensely as our most intimate living friends. Names and places are unessential; the life and thought are all that we need care for. The book is real as nature, true as life; it enables us to see the Hebrew world in the warm glow of flesh and blood; it preserves for us, as far as inspired art can do it, the reality of an old faith and civilisation; and to understand it is to be imbued with Hebrew modes of thought and feeling, to be penetrated by the Hebrew spirit.

CHARACTER.—The Book of the Patriarchs is a series of character-studies. It evolves, displays, and rewards character. It is an unsurpassed gallery of portraits, and the study of character is the primary task of the reader as of the writer. Truth is made most attractive when it is embodied in concrete forms. The word must be made flesh, and dwell among men. Abstract virtue is pale and cold as a marble statue. Theoretical morals are impotent. Wise men say that you cannot by any possibility "cordialise with an *ens rationis*"—a thing which exists only in the mind. We love to see "ideal manhood closed in real men."[1] It is not beautiful abstractions, but good and true men and women, warm and pulsing with humanity, that win our affec-

[1] Tennyson.

tions. The more vividly their characters are depicted, the greater is their power to allure us to whatsoever things are lovely and of good report. We love them even in their weakness, perhaps because of it, and we are drawn to the ideal which they sometimes attain and sometimes miss. On the other hand, the study of evil characters gives us that moral insight and practical guidance which only contrast can afford us. In Genesis there is no need for moralising or appealing or exhorting, for the story does its own work, the characters speak for themselves, and the moral effect is all the greater. The Bible easily surpasses all other books in skilful and truthful portraiture. "The characters in Scripture," as an eminent student of character has said, "are a literary marvel. It is very hard to write characters in one country to be popular in every land and age. Especially hard in narrative. Hardest of all to create such world-wide and everlasting characters in few words, a bare record of great things done and said. What the whole world outside Palestine could not do, this petty province did on a large scale." Its writers "all achieved a wonder. They sat down to record great deeds done, and great words spoken, and they told them wondrous briefly, yet so that immortal and world-wide characters rise like exhalations from the narrative. Written in the East, these characters live for ever in the West; written in one province, they pervade the world; penned in rude times, they are prized more and more as civilisation advances; product of antiquity, they come home to the business and bosoms of men, women, and children in modern days. Then, is it any exaggeration to say that the characters of Scripture are a marvel of the mind?"[1]

PATTERNS.—The narratives in Genesis are to a large extent transcripts from a vivid oral tradition. In times when there was no written Word in Israel, tradition was the medium of religious instruction in Hebrew homes. The Divine Spirit made the

[1] Charles Reade.

recital of the sacred stories the means of arousing in the hearts of the young a living interest in the ancestral faith. The old traditions were necessarily recast and amplified again and again in accordance with the advancing requirements of successive ages. When a sacred writer undertook to collect these traditions and weave them into a continuous narrative, he was animated, not by an antiquarian or æsthetic, but by a religious, motive. The moral and spiritual interest predominated in his mind. He went to work, not as a Percy gathering reliques, but as a man of prophetic spirit, mastered by great religious convictions, seeking to give his people spiritual light and leading by exhibiting to them a divine pattern of faith and duty, and for this purpose he used the sacred traditions which lay ready to his hand, modifying and supplementing them according to his prophetic principles, "breathing into them, or rather eliciting from them, important moral and spiritual truths, without taking away anything of their poetic character and the childlike simplicity of expression which belonged to them as they came from the lips of the people."[1] Sacred history was prophecy teaching by example. "The ancient traditions are moulded into forms of rare grace, dignity, and simplicity under prophetic influence. . . . The peculiar features and essential elements of the religious life are nowhere so vividly portrayed as in the living and breathing pictures of the patriarchs."[2] Genesis is far more than a book of origins. It contains not merely the roots, but the flowers and fruits of Hebrew faith. "The patriarchs are not inferior to the prophets of the eighth cent. B.C. in purity of religious insight and inward spiritual piety."[3] "If any man wishes to get a true idea of the conduct expected in ancient Israel of a just, upright, pious, sensible man, he must not first turn his attention to the Commandments in the Pentateuch. . . . We must first of all study the ideal figures of the Patriarchs, and the traits most prominent in the greatest religious characters of the earlier ages."[4] Thus, while we trace the footsteps of the heroes of faith, we shall be

[1] Dillmann. [2] R. L. Ottley. [3] Kuenen. [4] Schultz.

under the guidance of men of prophetic inspiration. The collected and edited traditions are treasures of moral and spiritual truth for all time, because they are made to embody prophetic ideals, which are set forth for our imitation, admiration, and emulation. "Look to your progress," says À Kempis, "that if you see or hear a good pattern set, you may be straight on fire to keep it."

II.

SEPARATION.

GEN. XI. 27–XII. 1.

"Thou shalt leave each thing
Beloved most dearly: this is the first shaft
Shot from the bow of exile."—DANTE.

REVELATION.—The story of the Hebrews, which is the story of divine grace striving against human sin, begins in heaven rather than on earth. The stream of sacred history rises among the hills of God. Salvation must be traced back to Revelation. It was a divine movement towards the human race that formed the starting-point of a true religion. "The LORD spake unto Abram" (12[1]). "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham."[1] "God at the first did visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name."[2] When we raise the question, How did Abram find God? the only adequate answer that can be given is, that God found Abram. God cannot be reached by human effort. It is not only difficult, but impossible, for men, left to their own resources, to find out God, and to retain Him in their knowledge. "If a man is to have aught of God, he can only receive it from God, who communicates Himself in love."[3] The development of a higher religion was due, not to the natural genius of the Hebrew race, but to the supernatural action of God upon the human soul. Abram was called by God; the voice, impulse, light, inspiration, came to him from God; he obeyed a summons, and his steps were directed by a

[1] Acts 7[2]. [2] Acts 15[14]. [3] Schultz.

wisdom not his own. Revelation is a direct influence of God on the souls of men which teaches them the truth in moral and spiritual things. Religion, which is on the human side a grand discovery, would be impossible but for the divine intervention. "No historian dealing with primitive days ever thinks of man as raising himself to God by his own act. From the first God is the Speaker, man the hearer. God reveals Himself; man reverently calls on His name. The religion of Israel came into existence by God speaking, commanding, and by man obeying and believing."[1] Nothing less than a spiritual vision of the divine glory and a heaven-born impulse towards righteousness is grand enough to break the ties which bind man to the world, and prepare him for the service of God.

DETACHMENT. — The Hebrews were to have impressed upon them the ineffaceable stamp of separateness. Lo, it is a people that dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations."[2] Abram is "the ideal representative of the life of faith and of separation from the idolatries of an evil world."[3] God's call to him detached him from his heathen environment. It was a command to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house (12[1]). The words are terribly clear, sharp, and stern. God is rigorous, severe, exacting in His demands, but this is the sternness of love. Life is so precious for Him, and character so grand, that He deems them worthy of the sharpest sacrifices. Fatherland, kindred, and home are sacred; there is scarcely aught that men will not do for them; the best literature of the world is a record of what men have done for them. There is just one thing which a man must not do even for country, kindred, and home; he must not for their sake lose his own soul. If we have to choose between everything on earth that the heart counts most dear and our obligation to God, the claims of earthly relationship must yield to the

[1] Schultz. [2] Num. 23[9]. [3] Ottley.

superior claims of God and duty, even though the surrender almost breaks the heart. The man who has once heard the divine call, and seen the heavenly vision, will allow no natural craving, no desire for personal pleasure, no prevailing customs, no counsel or entreaty of friends, to come in his way, but in defiance of custom and habit he will yield himself to the will of God. Separation from the world is the crux, the cross of true religion. "It is only with renunciation that life, properly speaking, can be said to begin."[1] But what is essential in this is the detachment of the heart. "Abram's renunciation," as Augustine observes, "was not the bodily removal, but the inward separation of the soul, from his worldly possessions." His change of locality would have effected little, had there not been at the same time a change in the condition of his heart. When God commanded His people to separate themselves, this was but a means to an end. Detachment from the creature is useless unless it leads to attachment to the Creator. God asks not only world-surrender, but self-surrender. The abiding ideal is not abstraction from the world, but protection from its evil; to be in the world without being of it; not to forsake from the world, but "rather to retire from the world as it is man's, into the world as it is God's."[2] Religion is no mere negative thing —the quenching of the love of the temporal; it is a positive thing—the love of the Eternal. What we require for unworldliness is not the pilgrim's staff and scrip, but the pilgrim's spirit of detachment, which we may have in our own quiet homes. Whatever injures the soul and impedes its service of God must be abandoned; and the passion of self-denial, of losing life to save it, of throwing it away in devotion to some high ideal, is what has made saints and martyrs and missionaries.

INDIVIDUALITY.—God's call to Abram individualised him. The summons was, "Get thee out *from* thy kindred," not "*with*

[1] Carlyle. [2] Cowley.

thy kindred" (12[1]). "Look to Abraham your father," said the LORD by the prophet Isaiah, "for I called him *alone*."[1] Individuality was not only a national, but a personal ideal. "These tales in Genesis teach us that it is an error to suppose that ancient Israel was conscious only of God's relation to Israel, for they speak everywhere of God's dealings with individuals. We should rob many of the tales of all their charm if we failed to appreciate this fact."[2] Not only the Hebrew race, but each Hebrew was called to be God's servant. The Hebrew religion endowed every man with the right to say "I." Aloneness is an essential element of true religion, which is nothing if not personal. "Solitude is to character what space is to the tree." As every man enters through the gate of life alone, and will depart through the gate of death alone, so in the decisive spiritual crises of life every man is alone. He must repent and believe alone, he must bear his own burden alone, he must give account of himself to God alone. There is a sympathy which unites souls, but the singleness and loneliness of personality remains. "By degrees," said Newman, "we begin to perceive that there are but two persons in the universe, our own soul and the God who made it." The deeper a man's spiritual life, the more lonely, secret, and incalculable it will be. In all his great experiences Abram was "alone with the Alone, one with One."[3] So long as a man shields himself behind others, loses his individuality among the many, God's work cannot be done in his soul. It is when he isolates himself, and lets God speak as directly to him as if there were not another person in the world, that the truth finds him. Nothing but a distinct personal call addressed to the individual heart and conscience avails to bring a man into a right relationship with God. "In the solitary places of the human heart is to be found the meeting-place of man with God."[4]

EXPERIENCE.—While the divine call to Abram was sudden

[1] Isa. 51[2]. [2] Gunkel. [3] Dean Church. [4] Prof. James Seth.

and decisive, there lay behind it a moral and spiritual experience. A divine revelation does not dispense with certain qualities of heart and mind in the person who receives it. God does not reveal Himself to the indolent and the debased. His calls are preceded by a season of spiritual unrest and inward questioning, of heart-hunger and unsatisfied desire. "The relations of God to men were never mere objective calls to take a certain place and do a certain duty, there was always a personal element in them; they were a crisis in the individual religious life. . . . That was the source of the power wielded over the masses of their fellow-men."[1] What conflicts a man has passed through ere God's clear call comes to him, how the providence of God has controlled his life, how his mind has exercised itself on questions of faith and duty, how he has battled with his doubts and fears till the knowledge of the living God has flashed upon his soul and laid a divine compulsion upon his conscience, how he has broken with the religion or irreligion of his fathers, and what he has endured inwardly and outwardly for conscience's sake—all this may remain untold. But his silent struggles and sorrows, known to himself and God, are, like roots and sap working underground, the secret power of his life. Abram is already quitting the land of Chaldea, like Pilgrim leaving the City of Destruction, when without prologue the tale begins. The seventy-five silent years in Ur, like the thirty silent years in Nazareth, are full of significance. The Bible gives us results rather than processes. But in every life of fellowship with God there has been a prevenient grace leading up to a spiritual crisis and victory.

FAITH.—Abram was called to leave a certainty for an uncertainty, to go forth to a land which the LORD promised to show him (12[1]); and "by faith he obeyed, not knowing whither he went."[2] His faith was the sense of the unseen. By faith he ventured forth into the untried and unknown in obedience

[1] A. B. Davidson. [2] Heb. 11[8].

to a divine impulse and in reliance on divine guidance. "What," said Augustine, "is faith, but to believe what you do not see?" "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the proving of things not seen."[1] Faith is sure of its destination, but asks merely light enough for the next step. Its language is, "He knoweth the way that I take,"[2] and—

> "Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see
> The distant scene; one step enough for me."[3]

There is a venture, an *abandon*, in true faith, which has been the secret of all the best lives lived on earth. "The life of goodness, the ideal life, is necessarily a grand speculation, a great leap in the dark. But its progress brings with it the gradual conversion of the speculative peradventure into a practical certainty."[4] The man of faith acts on the assumption, which is also the assurance, that the best things which the heart can conceive are real. He orders his life on the conviction that God, the soul, and immortality are not imaginations but facts—that the ideal is the true. "That blessed thing which the Bible calls faith is a state of soul in which the things of God become glorious certainties."[5] Abram was through his faith the prince of spiritual pioneers and pathfinders. He is called the father of the faithful; and whosoever steps boldly forth into a dim future, along an unknown path, taking as guide the known will of God, in the expectation of finding a land of promise at the end of the journey, is a partaker of Abram's faith. Not only prophets, apostles, martyrs, pilgrim fathers, and Christian missionaries, but all who live as seeing the invisible, are of the family of faithful Abraham.

HEBREWS.—The name "Eber," which is found in the "generations of Shem" (11^{15}), is only an eponym from "Hebrew," like Romulus from Rome. "The name *Hebrews* is usually explained

[1] Heb. 11^{1}. [2] Job 23^{10}. [3] Newman.
[4] Prof. James Seth. [5] F. W. Robertson.

as those who have come from the far side of the Euphrates; and this remains the best explanation that has been given."[1] The name is found for the first time in Gen. 14^{13}, where Abram is called "the Hebrew"; and in this passage the Septuagint has "Abram the *Crosser*." The name was applied by other tribes to the Shemitic family that crossed the Great River and settled in Canaan. The supposition that the name was given by the Canaanites to a tribe which immigrated from the other side of the Jordan, is unfounded. The crossing of the Euphrates was an epoch-making event, like Cæsar's crossing of the Rubicon or Columbus' crossing of the Atlantic. "There is no cogent reason for doubting that the migration of Israel's ancestors from Mesopotamia was the starting-point of a higher faith";[2] and the name "Hebrews" kept those who bore it for ever mindful of their origin, at once humbling them and filling them with gratitude. "Your fathers," said Joshua to them, "dwelt of old time beyond the River, and they served other gods."[3] As Crossers the chosen people emerged from the darkness of heathenism into the light of revelation, they passed from the region and state of nature into the sphere of grace. In that sense all the servants of God are Crossers.

III.

BLESSEDNESS.

GEN. XII. 1–3.

"There is in man a HIGHER than happiness: he can do without happiness, and instead thereof have blessedness."—CARLYLE.

PROMISES.—The summons which Abram received to quit his home and country was accompanied with seven generous promises (12^{1-3}). The LORD did not send him forth to an unknown land with no prospect but the cheerless one of perpetual exile. He opened before him a vista of future blessings so immense

[1] Dillmann. [2] Ottley. [3] Josh. 24^{2}.

that the sacrifices and hardships of the present were unworthy to be compared with the glory that should be revealed. As soon as a man finds God, and consecrates his life to Him, his blessedness begins. God purposes the highest good of His servants in every task and trial to which He summons them. His calls are always upward to a better, richer, fuller life; and divine promises come trooping in the footsteps of self-denial. God's commandments are not grievous, and His promises are exceeding great and precious. "God calls no man to a life of self-denial for its own sake."[1] If we only let His sweet, stern spirit have its way with us, we shall always find how gracious His will is. What looks like the rigour of law quickly turns out to be the tenderness of gospel. God's will has reference, first and last, to our best estate and most assured happiness; and for what He takes away, He never fails to give a superabundant recompense. He never requires us to do anything which it is not for our highest advantage to do. He so governs the world that sin is always loss, godliness is great gain.

(1) PATRIOTISM.—God first promises Abram a country, calls him to a land which He undertakes to show him (12[1]). The country thus mysteriously mentioned for the first time was to be the inheritance of the chosen people, the scene of the most momentous events in human history. God had destined the land for the Hebrews, and the Hebrews for the land. He was to make them the most ardent patriots the world has ever known. Their country has been called "the least of all lands," being much smaller even than little Greece, scarcely so large as Belgium, and not much greater than Wales. But to the Hebrews it was "a good land and a large";[2] a land of plenty, "flowing with milk and honey";[3] "the land which He promised";[4] "a land for which the LORD careth";[5] "an exceeding good land";[6] "a land which is the glory of all lands."[7] It was a

[1] Henry Drummond. [2] Ex. 3[8]. [3] Num. 13[27].
[4] Deut. 9[28]. [5] Deut. 11[12]. [6] Num. 14[7].
[7] Ezek. 20[6, 15].

land to love, and, if need be, to suffer and die for, as myriads did. To us it is the Holy Land, consecrated by a thousand memories—

> "Those holy fields
> Over whose acres walked those blessed feet
> Which" nineteen "hundred years ago were nailed
> For our advantage to the bitter cross."[1]

(2) NATIONALITY.—The LORD promised to make of Abram a great nation (12[2]). Abram's faith, received and cherished by his descendants, was by God's grace to weld the Hebrews into a great and strong people, who were once for all to give the world a true ideal of nationality. "It is a common Faith, a common Ideal, a common Spirit, which makes a nation. Victory, commerce, art, and science do not make a nation: God makes a nation."[2] The Hebrew kingdom in its palmy days was a theocracy, willingly and gladly governed by Jahveh, Lord of hosts. Theocracy is the ideal government, and nations are great in proportion as they approach the ideal. "Every human society," said Carlyle, "not either dead or hastening towards death, always is a theocracy." Green the historian tells us how essential it is to know "the intimate part religion plays in a nation's history, and how it joins itself to a people's life." A secular nation, based on self-interest, and held together by fear, is from the outset doomed to failure. "For that nation and kingdom that will not know Me shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted."[3] The Hebrews were invincible so long as the LORD was their God and they His people; they became weak as water when they would not own His ways, and He left them to their own. The greatest empires have fallen to pieces, not for want of power, but for want of character, which means want of faith, want of God. There is nothing which a country needs more jealously to guard than its national faith, and its sense of dependence on God for greatness and prosperity. "Do we not hail in this less the energy

[1] Shakespeare. [2] Charles Kingsley. [3] Isa. 60[12].

and fortune of a race than the supreme direction of the Almighty?"[1]

"God of the nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget, lest we forget."[2]

(3) BLESSEDNESS.—The LORD next promises that He will bless Abram (12[2]). God puts pleasure in the forefront of a believer's right relations to Himself. Pleasure is an essential element in true religion. If a man's religion is not giving him pleasure, and more and more pleasure, there is something essentially wrong with his religion. Faith does not subtract from, but indefinitely adds to, the sum of human happiness. It is the reasoned conclusion, or the simple intuition, of the Hebrew thinkers and saints, that life is meant for happiness. Their Scriptures are full of beatitudes. "Happy is the people whose God is the LORD."[3] Blessedness is the keynote of their national songs.[4] It is absolutely certain that God wills us to be happy; true religion is a well-spring of pure unmingled joy; and our chief end, our highest good is to enjoy God. None have the same right and reason as believers have to say "Gaudeamus—Let us rejoice." The exquisite pleasure called blessedness, the gift of the blessed God to believing men, is a joy unspeakable, a song without words. This blessedness is promised, and must not be pursued for its own sake. God never commands or commends the search for pleasure. To hunt after happiness is the sure way to miss it. Blessedness is the fruit of faith, obedience, and self-denial. True self-surrender cannot be made for the sake of happiness, but once made it always leads on to blessedness. All other kinds of joy, springing from youth and beauty, health and wealth, are soon followed by dull satiety; blessedness is perennial. It is inseparable from the ideal life of faith.

"Live greatly; so shalt thou enjoy
Unknown capacities of joy."[5]

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[1] Lord Rosebery. [2] Kipling. [3] Ps. 144[15].
[4] Ps. 1[1]. [5] Patmore.

(4) GREATNESS.—The LORD promised Abram a great name (12^2). As "a mighty prince" (23^6), as "the father of many nations" (17^4), as "the father of all them that believe,"[1] as "the friend of God,"[2] his name became illustrious above almost all human names; and to this day it is universally honoured by all Christians, Jews, and Moslems alike. His memory, his example, his spirit live for evermore. His grand ideal life is indestructible. His influence is intact, undiminished, pervasive, enduring. "The righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance."[3] "We want to know more about this man than we do," said Max Müller, "but even with the little we know of him, he stands before us as a figure second only to One in the whole history of the world."

(5) SERVICE.—God next offers Abram the joy of service. The fifth promise takes rather the form of a command, "And be thou a blessing" (12^2 R.V.). Abram is to be the channel and bearer of divine blessing to others. He and his descendants are chosen not only for salvation, but for service. Religion is not a possession to keep, but a blessing to share, a light to diffuse, a life to communicate. Elect and highly-favoured men and nations are specially endowed and gifted that they may help and save and bless their fellows. Election is in order to mediation. We are not redeemed just to be happy; we are saved to serve. "The election of some does not, as many complain, mean the proscription of others. Election was simply a method of procedure adopted by God's wisdom, by which He designed to fit the few for blessing the many, one for blessing all."[4] The believer is so blessed in himself that he has a surplus and overflow of blessing for others. "The greatest felicity that felicity hath," says Hooker, "is to spread and enlarge itself."

(6) PROTECTION.—The next promise to Abram was, "I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse" (12^3). Jahveh completely identifies Himself with His people

[1] Rom. 4^{11}.
[2] Jas. 2^{23}.
[3] Ps. 112^6.
[4] Dr. Bruce.

in spirit, purpose, and effort. He makes common cause with them, so that He and they have common friends and common foes. So jealous is He of their reputation, rights, and honour, so close, both in joy and sorrow, is His union and sympathy with them, that whatsoever is done unto them is done unto Him, and will be rewarded or punished accordingly. Their defence is sure; their lives are sacrosanct and inviolable; for they are "bound in the bundle of life with the LORD their God."[1] A kindness done to them will in no wise lose its reward; a word spoken against them, a hand lifted in opposition to them, is an outrage offered to their God, who resents it as His own. "For he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of His eye."[2] "In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them."[3] This is a foreshadowing of the wonderful truth of the mystical union of the Saviour and His followers. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me."[4]

(7) UNIVERSALISM.—The seventh and last promise is the most marvellous of all. God undertakes that in Abram all the families of the earth shall be blessed (12^3 18^{18} 22^{18}). "The sense is little altered if for 'be blessed' we render 'bless themselves,' *i.e.* wish for themselves the same blessings as Abraham and his seed are seen to enjoy."[5] In either case the Hebrew sphere of influence, like the divine purpose of grace, is regarded as conterminous with the human race. The Hebrews were not to be guilty of the exclusiveness which looks down with contempt upon all those who are outside a favoured caste. They were to cherish the largest sympathies, and to realise the wide sweep of the divine purpose. They had not the monopoly of God and His love; they were not His favourites but His ministers; His revelation came to them not merely as a message but as a mission; they held the truth in trust for all mankind; they were a light to lighten the nations; through them the LORD'S way

[1] 1 Sam. 25^{29}. [2] Zech. 2^8. [3] Isa. 63^9.
[4] Matt. 25^{40}. [5] A. B. Davidson.

was to be known upon earth, and His saving health among all nations.[1] The believing Hebrews were not the exclusive people they are sometimes represented to have been. They early recognised God's hand in universal history; and when they knew the LORD their God to be the God of the whole earth, their monotheism led them straight to universalism. If there was one God, there was one humanity, and all the families of the earth must sooner or later begin to draw together, and ultimately enjoy the blessings of a common salvation. Thus "instead of exclusiveness there was a most expansive liberality in this first call to Abraham. It was connected with a wide purpose of mercy on behalf of mankind at large."[2] Our words of aspiration and prayer—

> "Through the great world far and wide
> Let there be light"—

have a modern ring; yet they express the very ideal which thrilled the great heart of the Hebrew race in the glimmering dawn of history.

IV.

WORSHIP.

GEN. XII. 4-9.

> "They have left unstained what there they found,
> Freedom to worship God."—FELICIA HEMANS.

OBEDIENCE.—The fulfilment of the divine purpose of grace depended upon man's response to the revealed will and electing love of God. Abram's characteristic was that in simple unhesitating faith he acted at once and to the fullest on every intimation of the divine will. Divine voices called him, visions beckoned him, instincts urged him; and "he went, as the LORD had spoken unto him" (12[4]). His new faith was followed and verified by immediate action. As no selfish passion had hindered him from knowing God's will, no weakness hindered

[1] Ps. 67[2]. [2] Thomas Chalmers.

him from doing it. The visions of the mind, the intimations of the conscience, the ideals of the heart, are converted into practice and experience by the actions of the will which issue in obedience. God gave the Hebrews no abstract truth, no light for the mere speculative intellect; He gave a Revelation, not merely that men might *know* it, but that they might *go* by it. True religion is a willing, cheerful obedience to God. It is only when the will, the controlling faculty, is called into play that religion is actualised. Thomas Fuller more than two centuries ago divided mankind into three classes, intenders, endeavourers, and performers, these making an ascending scale. The Hebrews, whose ideal was to run in the way of God's commandments,[1] most significantly called the divine Word a lamp, not unto the eyes, but unto the feet, and a light unto the path.[2] If we bravely advance through the darkness, we shall have the whole way of life illumined; if we stand still, irresolute and fearful, we only waste the guiding light. Religion is an active progress along a highway revealed by the gleaming light of divine revelation.

> "Make me to go in the path of Thy commandments;
> For therein do I delight."[3]

POWER.—When Abram was enjoined to leave his home and his friends, he would have given a sorry proof of his affection if he had refused the divine call for fear of displeasing his kindred. But he dared to obey at all costs, thinking only of his duty; and then his power began. His faith conquered his kindred; his example moved them to embrace his religion and become his fellow-pilgrims. He did not leave his native land alone. He was accompanied to Haran by his father Terah (11^{31}), and to Canaan by his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot (12^{5}); and there was a sequel in the migration of his brother Nahor and his household to Haran ($20^{20.23}$). They all shared his faith. It is when a man has the heroism to stand

[1] Ps. 119^{32}. [2] Ps. 119^{105}. [3] Ps. 119^{35}.

morally and spiritually alone and independent, that he begins to exercise a powerful influence over the lives of others. So long as he is of the world he can do the world no good. Union with the world is weakness, separation from it is strength. Our loyalty to truth renders the greatest possible service to our friends. When we are prepared for conscience' sake to leave them, impulses of natural affection blend with motives of spiritual grace to make them resolve to cast in their lot with us and follow us on to the land of promise. Many a man has found that by forsaking his friends for a season he has gained them for ever. Every Pilgrim's Progress has a sequel. Grace does not run in the blood, but the natural affection of the human heart is the oldest and strongest ally of divine grace. Nothing is finer than to observe "grace working together with nature, and example working together with prayer, to draw forth the most blessed issues which this world can see." [1]

LIBERTY.—Abram and his people "went forth to go into the land of Canaan, and into the land of Canaan they came" (12^5). "We feel," says Professor Gunkel, "as we read Genesis, that it has a melody of rhythmic numbers." The sacred words quoted have a lightsome musical cadence, expressing the cheerful alacrity with which the pilgrims sped along their way till they reached their destined goal. There was a will and a way, a purpose conceived and achieved, a journey bravely begun and quickly done. Into the land of their dreams the pilgrims came with a glorious sense of freedom, as men redeemed from a cruel and evil world. Their manhood was liberated, their souls were saved, their real life was begun. The old historian understands his task right well, and gives us the impression that through the power of faith the most arduous labours are accomplished with ease. It is no part of his duty to magnify difficulties or exhibit a pageant of bleeding hearts. What

[1] Kerr-Bain.

though between Chaldea and Canaan there were leagues of desert, a fierce sun overhead, wild beasts and hostile tribes hovering around. By God's grace the dangers are passed, the goal is reached, the labours and difficulties are speedily forgotten. Thus every believer follows the LORD his Deliverer, bating no jot of heart or hope, saying or singing—

> "He my Guide, my Guard, my Friend,
> Leads me to my journey's end."

SOULS.—Abram and Lot took with them "the souls that they had gotten in Haran" (12[5]). These "souls" were slaves, a class frequently mentioned in Genesis. They were "persons," not chattels or soulless machines. As a slave-owner Abram conformed to the ordinary Hebrew practice. Bond-service was one of the institutions of the Hebrews. But it is a significant fact that while a Roman master counted the "heads" of his servants, and an English master counts "hands," a Hebrew master counted "souls." The Hebrew master's servants were not only hands to work for him, and heads to think for him, but souls to be cared for by him and to be saved by God. True religion had the power of refining and sweetening all human relationships, and it breathed a new spirit into the relation between master and servant. It taught that God was the true Lord of human life, and that masters and slaves were alike His servants; it stirred in the heart a new pity, tenderness, sympathy for weakness and suffering; it inspired good men with feelings of reverence for the humblest of their fellow-men, and invested the meanest slave with a certain dignity. When the divine saying, "All souls are Mine," was once realised, it proved a grand humaniser. In comparison with pagan slavery, Hebrew bond-service was mild and gentle. When we think of Egyptian bondage, we think of crushing labour and cruel torture; when we think of Roman slavery, we think of "the sum of all villainies." But the Hebrew master said of his slave, "Did not He that made me make him? And did not One

fashion us in the womb?"[1] With such a thought in his heart he could not handle his servant harshly and ignominiously. "Hebrew slaves were very humanely treated. They were really regarded as members of the family, for whose welfare the master cared as for that of his own children . . . As co-religionists they received a kind and paternal treatment."[2] Thus the Hebrew ideal, without directly condemning the whole system of slavery, so controlled and limited it as to divest it of its greatest evils, and ultimately to undermine it. "To abolish slavery," says Ewald, "was not to be thought of; but no ancient religion was ever so emphatically opposed to it, or at least to all inhumanity connected with it, or made such preparations for its overthrow."

REST.—Having entered Canaan, Abram passed through it till he came "unto the place of Shechem" (12[6]). He lighted on a spot which is all loveliness, fragrance, and delight. Robinson says there is nothing in Palestine to compare with it for beauty. Stanley describes it as "a valley, green with grass, gay with olives, gardens sloping down on each side, fresh springs rushing down in all directions." There Abram and his companions rested and refreshed themselves after their journey, pitching their tents under the sacred "oak of Mamre,"—the oak of the Teacher or Oracle,—once the haunt of some heathen soothsayer who interpreted the murmuring wind and rustling leaves as the voice of a god. "Oracles and omens from trees are among the commonest among all races. . . . The tree is believed to be the actual seat of a god, and embodiment of a divine life."[3] In this spot Abram worshipped the LORD; it became a real presence-chamber, where he bowed before his God, and where it was revealed to him that God would give him the goodly land he had entered as a personal possession. This assurance was the first reward of obedience. To all His tired servants, worn

[1] Job 31[15]. [2] Benzinger. [3] Robertson Smith.

with desert marches, God gives seasons of refreshing, "green spots on the path of time," valleys warm and sunny under the smile of heaven, where the memory of their journey and its hardships is obliterated. "He makes me to lie down in green pastures: He leads me beside still waters: He restores my soul." [1]

WORSHIP.—It was neither poverty, nor love of adventure, nor the migratory spirit of his age that impelled Abram to quit his native land. No sooner had he entered Canaan than he showed what had brought him to that distant scene. His first care was to build an altar to the LORD at Shechem (12^7). He set up a second on the hill to the east of Bethel (12^8), a third at Mamre (13^{18}), and at a later time he erected a fourth on Mount Moriah (22^9). He came to the new country seeking and finding freedom to worship God. It is important to note the characteristics of his worship. (1) It was *local*, without being limited to one sacred spot. The scene of a theophany was invested with special sanctity. Sacred associations will always make certain places dear to good men and helpful to their devotions; and memory loves to linger where special mercies have been received. The place where the soul first knew God, where it had a special sense of His presence, where it consecrated itself to Him, will always be specially hallowed. But the Hebrews never speak of God as locally confined like the gods of the heathen. "The multitude of altars scattered over the country, if they did not suggest the positive idea of His ubiquity, suggested, at least, that there was no place where He might not let Himself be found." [2] (2) It was *vocal*. Abram "*called* upon the name of the LORD" (12^8). Mental prayer, silent adoration is good; but vocal prayer does more to awaken and to sustain the spirit of devotion. Children all pray vocally, and nothing helps men so much to retain the childlike spirit through life as daily vocal prayer. (3) It was *simple*. Abram's

[1] Ps. $23^{2,3}$. [2] A. B. Davidson.

worship was always an open-air service; and his holy places were marked by nothing more than a rude cairn of unhewn stones, or a heap of earth covered with turf; yet these were the precursors of all the temples, synagogues, churches, and domes in which his spiritual children have met to commune with God. However grand and inspiring the accompaniments and non-essentials of worship may be, the reality of it is always intensely simple. True worship is an attitude of the soul, a humble, reverent, thankful, adoring posture of the mind. It is entirely irrespective of place; God cares no more for St. Peter's or St. Paul's than for a hillside. (4) It was *spiritual.* When Abram called upon the name of the LORD, he bowed himself before the Unseen, he lifted up his heart to the living God, without the aid of image or emblem, picture or symbol. He saw "no manner of form." The Godhead was represented by no art or man's device. The Hebrew saint worshipped neither man nor nature, neither stock nor stone; his adoration went past all visible objects, all the gods of heathenism—sun, moon, and stars; heaven, earth, and sea; birds and beasts and fishes —to the Infinite. He worshipped the Invisible alone. Hebrew religion was the triumph of the spiritual over the material. (5) It was *reasonable.* Abram regarded his God, not with slavish terror, but with intelligent, loving reverence; and the more his knowledge grew, the warmer grew his piety. Growing intelligence, which sooner or later leads all the heathen to become unbelievers in their gods, made the Hebrews ever firmer believers in their God. Reason abolishes false religion, but establishes true religion. God, the highest Reason, seeks a "reasonable service,"[1] and nothing else is holy and acceptable to Him.

[1] Rom. 12[1].

V.

TRUTH.

GEN. XII. 10–20.

"The truth, whatever the consequences may be, is what you owe to your country, and to that God whose word is truth, and whose name you have now invoked."—SCOTT.

DEPENDENCE.—Abram had not sojourned long in Canaan before "there was a famine in the land" (12^{10}). After tasting the pleasures of Shechem, he had an experience of utter want. He saw the Promised Land turned for a season into a wilderness. God showed him the best for the comfort of his spirit, and then the worst for the trial of his faith. Central Palestine is a tableland in which there are no perennial streams. Its surface is seamed with deep ravines, which are periodically flushed with roaring torrents; but during the greater part of the year the bare white channels lie blistering in the sun. When the early and the latter rains fall in their due time, God gives healthful, fruitful, peaceful seasons. But drought is a constant menace. Sometimes no rain falls all the year round; the heaven is as iron, the earth as brass, and no clouds drop fatness on the valleys; the pastures, cornfields, and vineyards are dried up; the cattle perish; and little children cry in vain for bread and water. Three famines are mentioned in Genesis, one in Abram's, one in Isaac's, one in Jacob's time. God had a purpose whenever He turned the fruitful land into a desert. He taught His people by a sign that could not be mistaken that He was the Master of ocean and earth and sky, giving, sustaining, and withdrawing life at His pleasure; and that His creatures, who were dependent upon Him for life and breath, were indebted to Him for all other things. "He suffered them to hunger . . . that they might know that man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."[1]

WATCHFULNESS.—When the famine was sore in the land of

[1] Deut. 8^3.

Canaan, "Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there" (12[10]). All through their history Egypt was to the Hebrews the land of temptation and witchery and danger. When they went thither of their own accord, they always went down morally as well as geographically. "Alas for them that walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at My mouth!"[1] As Abram entered the land, he imagined that his life was in imminent danger, and instead of taking counsel with God and trusting wholly in His protection, he resorted to scheming. He put his own shrewdness in the place of Divine Providence. Every human being has his vulnerable point, his Achilles' heel. But it is singular that a man's subtlest temptations assail him where he is strongest rather than where he is weakest. Abram was called the father of the faithful; faith was his special grace, his highest achievement, and the secret of all his triumphs. Yet it was just by unfaithfulness that he erred and sinned. He was not tempted to passion or lust or pride, hatred or ambition or idolatry. But he was tempted to infidelity, and succumbed to the temptation. It is recorded in history that Edinburgh Castle was supposed to be inaccessible on the precipitous side, and there the defences were feeble and the outlook careless, while on the weaker sides the fortifications were strong and the watch was strictly kept. But it was at the strongest, not the weakest point that the entrance was effected and the citadel captured. It is also on the strongest side that the citadel of man's soul is often captured. The weakness of God's servants is most conspicuous where their strength lies. The sense of security is near akin to the haughty spirit that goeth before a fall. Abram, the most faithful of men, sinned by unfaithfulness; Moses, the meekest of men, by anger; Solomon, the wisest, by folly; Elijah, the most valiant, by fear; John, the gentlest, by vindictiveness; Peter, the bold, by cowardice. Unguarded strength is double weakness. "We are not to walk in all the footsteps of the saints, but only in the footsteps of their faith."[2]

[1] Isa. 30[2]. [2] Thomas Chalmers.

TRUTH.—Dillmann rightly observes that in the narrative of the sojourn in Egypt "the author presents Abram in an unfavourable light." We see the hero unheroic, the saint unsaintly. The tone and spirit of the story condemn his prevarication. The question whether the popular tradition ever had a different colour—praising and enjoying the patriarch's cleverness—does not at all concern us. The Bible never suggests that lying is good business and sharp practice to be admired and imitated. Abram's title was "the father of the faithful," and an essential part of fidelity is truthfulness. Our ideal English king, Alfred the Great, had as noble a title as Abram, being called "Alfred the truth-speaker." It is always a sorry, and sometimes a ludicrous, spectacle to see a man of faith attempting to play the part of a shrewd man of the world. The part does not suit him; he handles but awkwardly the weapons of duplicity which less scrupulous men use as past masters. At the entrance to Egypt, Abram became the victim of fear. He thought that the princes of luxurious Egypt would kill him to get possession of his beautiful wife. His alarms were the offspring of his own imagination. In his trepidation he adopted an unworthy subterfuge to secure his own safety. He devised a scheme which he hoped Providence would aid and abet him in carrying out. His own arrangements took precedence of God's purposes. He trusted his self-activity more than the divine operations. God was to be fellow-worker with him, rather than he with God. The true course in all difficulties is to begin by taking counsel with God, to make sure of knowing His mind and will, and then to go bravely forward in His way, trusting Him to take charge of our life and open the gates before us. "Do not," said a modern hero of faith, "try planning and praying and then planning again; it is not honouring to God."[1] Abram inverted the moral order of things; he went in front of God, acting upon the prompting of his own self-will, instead of waiting upon God. If we cannot do a right thing to meet our difficulties, we should do

[1] General Gordon.

nothing. Our hurry and worry only interfere with God's working on our behalf. "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength." By taking one false step Abram quickly involved himself in a labyrinth of errors.

(1) He spoke *untruthfully*. He studied to suppress the truth and suggest what was false. He used words in a sense true, but with intent to deceive. Augustine defends him, pleading that "he spake of his sister, but did not deny his wife; withheld part of the truth, but did not speak anything false." But the fact remains that he tried to convey a false impression, and succeeded in doing it. Truth-speaking is the representing of things *as they are*. A lie is anything said or done with intent to deceive. Silence may spell insincerity: *suppressio veri suggestio falsi*. Verbal misleading is not a whit better than plain lying; it is only meaner. We are not bound to gratify every idle curiosity, but we are bound to tell the truth which will materially affect another's moral conduct. The intention to deceive constitutes the essence of lying. A true man thinks, speaks, acts, and lives the truth. "Behold, Thou desirest truth in the inward parts."[1]

> "Even to the truth
> Which but the semblance of a falsehood wears,
> A man should bar his lip."[2]

(2) Abram acted *presumptuously*. He counted on God assisting him to carry out a policy of deceit. Delitzsch represents him as "thinking that he would give the marriage honour of his wife as a sacrifice for his self-preservation." He did not sink so low as that; he believed that his wife would be preserved from danger for the promises' sake. Still he did evil that good might come; he thought the end justified the means; and he was guilty of tempting the LORD his God. The protecting providence of God needs no aid of human sin; His wisdom requires no supplement from our own wickedness. All tricks of policy, all compromises with error, all silence through fear of consequences, so far from assisting God, are hindrances which He has to overcome before He can help and save us. "The God who delivered

[1] Ps. 51^6. [2] Dante.

Abram in spite of his perversity would have delivered him had he committed himself in all fearlessness and truth to His holy keeping."[1] (3) He acted *faithlessly*. His anxious, restless, personal action was the opposite of faith. His divided confidence, his resting partly on God and partly on self, his oscillating between faith and reason, indicated that the simplicity of trust was still too difficult for him. He must build partly upon the sand and partly upon the rock. On the few occasions on which Abram's activity took the form of scheming for himself, he fell far below the moral ideal. Whenever he was content to watch and wait for divine direction, to live by faith, he attained the ideal. (4) He acted *imprudently*. His scheme was a blunder as well as a wrong, creating the very trouble which it was designed to prevent. He would have avoided all danger had he told the simple truth. Double-dealing is always shortsighted, and the sure precursor of shame. The wise man is snared in his own craftiness, learning the folly of his wisdom and the feebleness of his strength. In all self-reliance there lurks a perilous weakness. It has been said that the raw material of a grossly foolish man is a very cautious man, who scents danger where there is none, and blunders egregiously when all is simple. The morally right course is always the wisest. "We too often forget the penetration of sincerity, the depth of simplicity, the cleverness of uprightness, the stategy of straightforwardness."[2] "Above all things, truth beareth away the victory."[3] (5) Abram acted *dishonourably*. Pharaoh treated him well for Sarah's sake (12^{16}). According to the custom of the country, the king sent a rich present to his prospective brother-in-law. Sheep and oxen, asses and camels, men-servants and maid-servants arrived at the Hebrew camp; and Abram had by his crafty dealing placed himself in such a dilemma that he could not refuse the ill-gotten gain. He did not keep his hands clean, he accepted gifts on false pretences. It is well to see him with the blots and blemishes in his character, caused by lack of faith;

[1] Thomas Chalmers. [2] W. L. Watkinson. [3] 1 Esdr. 3^{12}.

we are to see what the grace of God can make of him. The narrative shows "what the best of men are when they take to their own devices. As the minister of God, Abram is great and noble; as the architect of his own fortune, he is cowardly, selfish, and false."[1]

DISCIPLINE.—With a fine sense of justice the author represents Pharaoh as speaking the word of truth and righteousness, which is always the word of God. The heathen king condemns the Hebrew patriarch's sin, and administers the judicial and merited rebuke. Deceived and indignant, he puts two or three pointed questions which cut through all quibbles. Abram is struck dumb, feeling that the reproach is just. Pharaoh has the last word; and with kingly dignity and forbearance he bids the Hebrew behold his wife, take her, and go his way (12^{19}). Dishonoured before the royal court, Abram is required to leave Egyptian society as unworthy to be trusted, and with the stern words of rebuke ringing in his ears he turns back to Canaan, escorted on his way by Pharaoh's servants. Defeat and humiliation are wholesome. To be beaten and thwarted and compelled to see our shortcoming and failure—nothing is better than this for the soul. Our reverses drain us of our self-reliance and self-will, and throw us back upon the help of God. We cannot pay too high a price for the lessons of spiritual faith and moral fidelity. God disciplines us that we may learn that in morals as in geometry a straight line is the shortest distance between two given points, and that it is not our own grovelling wit, but simple obedience to the laws of heaven, which conducts us safely through the perplexities and difficulties of life. The purpose of all our defeats is to show us the excellence of the precept: "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart, and lean not upon thine own understanding: in all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct thy paths."[2]

[1] Joseph Parker. [2] Prov. 3^6.

VI.

DECISION.

GEN. XIII.

"Choose well; your choice is
Brief and yet endless."—GOETHE.

WEALTH.—"Abraham was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold" (13[2]). His possessions were a blessing to him, because he recognised them to be the gift of God, because he had grace and wisdom to use them aright, and because he set his heart upon the true riches. "Say not in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God, for it is He that giveth thee power to get wealth."[1] The man who recognises that his wealth is a loan from God, and deems it his duty and privilege to administer it as a trustee on behalf of others, never fails to get a blessing with it. Wealth in itself has no moral quality. The character is in the possessor, not in the possession. It is the waste and abuse, not the possession and use of wealth, that is to be reprobated. The gifts of God may be consecrated to noble ends, or prostituted to wicked uses. Not money, but the love of money, is the root of all kinds of evil.[2] There is a right, blessed, holy use of wealth; and the consecration of property is the rich man's ideal. Wealth rightly administered is the means of diffusing immense happiness. Flowing into proper channels it assists the cause of God, of truth, of humanity. Wealth is power, and all power is dangerous if it is not wisely controlled and directed, beneficent if it is rightly governed. "Once get Abram's humble, noble, heavenly mind, and then set your heart upon making riches as much as you like. For the good that you will then be able to do all your days, both to yourself and to other men, will be simply incalculable."[3] But the story of the choice of Abram and Lot inculcates a high-minded indifference to *mere* wealth. While it proves how one man is unharmed by

[1] Deut. 8[17. 18]. [2] 1 Tim. 6[10]. [3] Dr. Whyte.

his wealth, it shows how another is almost drowned in his. The purchase-power of riches is easily overrated. Wealth cannot procure "the best gifts." Youth and health cannot be bought. Friendship, peace, blessedness, the love of our fellow-men, the esteem of the wise and good, have no market price. The invaluable possessions are free to the poor as well as to the rich, to the rich as well as to the poor. God is no respecter of persons: "the rich and the poor meet together; the LORD is the Maker of them all."[1] When Dives, who was punished, not for the possession, but for the abuse of wealth, lifted up his eyes in the place of torment, he saw Lazarus in Abraham's bosom—the man who on earth was miserably poor in blessed fellowship with the man who was "very rich," both enjoying their reward in Paradise.

RESTORATION.—From Egypt Abram returned to the South of Canaan, and advanced by slow steady marches "from the South even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai; unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first" ($13^{3.4}$). This is not topography; it is the story of a penitent soul. The pilgrim labours like the period. The very words are heavy with the yearning of an unquiet spirit to get back to God and itself, to live again the pure ideal life of faith as "at the beginning," to kneel at the altar of Bethel as "at the first." The holy place was the magnet that drew the traveller's soul. His flesh and heart cried out for the living God. Back from the temptations of Egypt, defeated and defiled, he returns to the old trysting-place on the clear heights of Bethel, and calls upon the name of the LORD (13^{4}). On holy ground he recollects himself; seeks restoration of soul in communion with God; unburdens himself in prayer; waits for new voices, intimations, revelations; until at length he realises the blessedness of "the man in whose spirit is no guile, nor fraud is found therein."[2]

[1] Prov. 22^{2}. [2] Ps. 32^{2}

Whenever a blight falls upon a believing Hebrew's life, he can do nothing better than revisit the place where the LORD'S honour dwelleth.

> "O send out Thy light and Thy truth; let them lead me:
> Let them bring me to Thy holy hill.
> Then will I go unto the altar of God,
> Unto God my exceeding joy."[1]

FRIENDSHIP.—"And Lot also, who went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents" (13[5]). For a time these two men were inseparable. In Ur of the Chaldees and Haran, in Shechem and Bethel, in Mamre and Egypt, they and their households dwelt together as brethren in unity. Lot had felt the quickening touch of a loftier soul, the stimulus of a magnetic friendship; and the alluring visions of a grand faith had given a spiritual impulse to his pliant will. Lot never did a wiser thing than when he chose as his guide and counsellor and friend the man who for conscience' sake forsook his native land to be a stranger and pilgrim in the earth. "Our wisest plan," says Charles Kingsley, "is to choose our friends, not for their usefulness, but for their goodness; not for their worth to us, but for their worth in themselves; and to choose, if possible, people superior to ourselves. It is wise, it is ennobling to our own character, to choose our friends among those who are nearer to God than we are, more experienced in life, more strong and settled in character. Wise to have a friend of whom we are at first somewhat afraid; before whom we dare not say or do a foolish thing; whose just anger or contempt would be to us a terrible thing. Better it is that friendship should begin with a little wholesome fear, till time and mutual experience of each other's characters shall have brought about the perfect love which casts out fear." Abram was superior to Lot in years, in experience, in character. "Exactly in the degree in which you can find creatures greater than yourself, to look up to, in that degree you are ennobled yourself, and, in that degree

[1] Ps. 43[4].

happy."[1] Lot was one of those good but weak men to whom, as they cannot stand alone, the sympathy, encouragement, and support of a strong friendship are indispensable. Well it had been for him had he been more conscious of his weakness, had he always realised that "two are better than one; for if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow."[2]

DESTINY.—The unwisest thing that Lot ever did was to let the bickerings of his servants estrange him from his friend. "There was a strife between the herdmen of Abram's cattle and the herdmen of Lot's cattle" (13^7). The great herds got mixed; the question of precedence at pastures and wells was a source of constant irritation; the herdmen bandied angry words, giving as good as they got; and words would soon have led to blows. The flames of strife once kindled burn fast and furiously. It lay with the masters to terminate the unseemly dispute, and this obligation brought out all the moral worth of the two men; it revealed their true quality and temper. They were both converts from heathenism, and worshippers of the true God. But believing men have still fresh choices to make, choices which serve to show how far they have become detached from the world and holy unto the LORD. One man is indifferent to earthly gain, and avoids everything that can imperil his moral ideal. Another is allured by a vision of earthly happiness, and, hastening to be rich and careless of danger, "falls into a temptation and a snare, and many foolish and hurtful lusts."[3] An unexpected trial proves how men's minds have been growing in the slow course of silent years. Suddenly, stealthily the crisis comes, and before they realise what has happened, they have cast the die, and for good or evil made a decision which seals their destiny.

> "And the choice goes by for ever,
> 'Twixt the darkness and the light."[4]

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[1] Ruskin. [2] Eccles. 4^{10}. [3] 1 Tim. 6^9. [4] Lowell.

BROTHERHOOD.—Abram acted the noble part of a peacemaker. His calm, strong figure rebuked all petty feelings. In the midst of strife he was tranquil and self-possessed, his speech was gentle and courteous. He avoided the causes in which discord originates; he was free from pride, unkindness, selfishness, and ambition. He lived among the high things of life, and on those altitudes he was calm. Speaking with the meekness of wisdom and the gentleness of faith, he deprecated strife between brethren (13[8]). The name of brother carries with it a sweet and delectable sound, and is in itself an argument for peace. It is true that the complication of interests strangely relaxes the fraternal tie; brethren pursuing their fortune by the same path often jostle and hinder one another; but a common faith originates a true and perfect brotherhood, which nothing should ever be allowed to disturb. The beautiful ideal of brotherly kindness is always a reason for peace. Fraternal discord is an odious spectacle. Strife between those who should be friends is more grievous than an outbreak of plague. If brethren or their households cannot live quietly together, let them quietly separate (13[9]). "The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water: therefore leave off contention before there be quarrelling."[1] The world is wide; there is air and sunshine for everybody; there is healing in new scenery and surroundings. Quarrels among brethren are always unnatural, and in the presence of unbelievers—the Canaanite and the Perizzite in the land—unspeakably mischievous. There is always a common foe around us, within earshot of our brawling and controversy, rejoicing in our internecine warfare, and watching for our fall. On the other hand, it is beautiful and impressive when men who are united by a common faith and hope live in love and peace. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"[2]

"Religion should extinguish strife,
And make a calm of human life."[3]

[1] Prov. 17[14]. [2] Ps. 133[1]. [3] Cowper.

RENUNCIATION.—Whether as senior partner in business or as chief of the Hebrew clan, Abram might have dictated terms to his nephew. But he waived his own rights and claims and privileges. He was meek when he might have been masterful. He was actuated by the love which seeks not its own, which rejoices in the promotion of others, and gladly takes the lower room. Out of the fulness of his heart, and not from any thought of being magnanimous, he made the proposal that his nephew should take the choice of the land, and promised to be content with whatever was left (13[9]). He acted, not as one who was painfully denying himself the delights of the world, but rather as one who was unconscious of the existence of any attractions or pleasures which were worthy of his notice. His disinterestedness was the more beautiful in contrast to Lot's self-seeking. In Abram aspiration was predominant, in Lot ambition; Abram coveted righteousness, Lot success. Abram had given up the world in a passion of holy love to God, and now it was easy to give up what to his nephew seemed an earthly paradise. Life with its alternatives and possibilities presents the inevitable necessity of choice. The freedom of the will, involving the duty of personal decision, is the privilege and responsibility with which God endows every man. It is a critical moment when a man has to make one of the supreme decisions of life. Abram's choice was to have no choice. He could be indifferent to wealth in the consciousness of the value of God's friendship. When "Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan," Abram dwelt in the bare uplands of Canaan (13[11, 12]). Every noble life can be traced to some great renunciation, and every ignoble life to a "great refusal." The alternatives are always essentially the same—duty and pleasure, the austerity of Canaan and the luxury of Sodom. The moral problem is complicated when the choice lies, not between the bad and the good, but between the good and the best. The story of the renunciation of the good and the choice of the best never fails to thrill every generous heart, to which a true example of disinterestedness is an inspiration.

The Greeks had their legend of the choice of Hercules, who preferred the rough path of virtue and spurned the allurements of the way of pleasure. The Moslems have no other tale so fine as that of young Mohammed standing on the brow of Mount Selahie, gazing long with ravished eyes upon the gorgeous city of Damascus, and then turning away with the words, "Man has but one Paradise, and mine is fixed above." But the Hebrews have left us the noblest examples of men who with a light heart renounced all earthly advantages because they knew the things which were superexcellent. Abram's children in modern times are men like Henry Martyn and John Cairns, who lightly abjured the dazzling splendour of the highest rewards and honours, because their hearts were satisfied with the service and love of God.

DECISION.—An important decision is never an isolated act, it is the epitome of a life. The desire which seems to arise in a moment has its roots in our whole past history. Character is condensed into a single concrete act. Hence Lot's choice is full of instruction and warning. He was not slow to seize the advantage offered him by Abram's generosity; no sense of gratitude, no rush of right feeling, impelled him to reject the magnanimous offer. From the hill of Bethel on which the two men stood, Lot cast his eyes over the broad Circle of Jordan, where, on both sides of the winding river, lay the richest pasture-lands of the country, bringing to his mind the proverbial beauty of Eden and the green fields of Zoar in Egypt. The sweet valley, with its luscious herbage and shining waters, was very attractive to one in whom the lust of the eye was so strong. The picture presented itself to his fancy with a mighty allurement which he could not resist; it worked like magic, and promised him infinite happiness and joy. His ruling passion was covetousness, and his only course of safety lay in avoiding all the avenues and approaches to this particular sin. But his eye was dazzled, his mind was engrossed, by the outward appearances of things; and

"Lot chose him all the Plain of Jordan" (13^{11}). He was not in the least conscious that a solemn and awful crisis in his life had come; he did not pause to think well over the new paths he must tread; he cast no prescient glance into the future. He did not wait to let God choose for him. It is not the temptations which meet men, but the temptations which they go to meet, that imperil their moral life; and Lot entered the magic "Circle" with open eyes. The character of the men of Sodom was already notorious, the dangers involved in associating with them were apparent; but Lot was resolved to run the risks for the sake of capturing the prizes. Across all moral obstacles he would drive to his goal. "For the sake of gain, do we not put aside all considerations of principle as unseasonable and almost absurd?"[1] Had Lot's vision not been strangely impaired and distorted by avarice, he would have seen, not a well-watered plain, but a whirlpool of iniquity that would suck the strongest into its depths. Had he known the subtle perils of city life, he would have thanked God for the safety of his tent. His fateful decision, his choice which was a mischoice, on the hill of Bethel, illustrates Thomas à Kempis' well-known history of a temptation in four words: *cogitatio*, *imaginatio*, *delectatio*, *assensio*—a thought, a picture, a fascination, a fall. Lot did not, however, go straight to Sodom; he approached it by a finely graduated process of descent. There was no apparent rashness or impulsiveness in his action; his downward path was so gradual and gentle that it seemed quite natural and safe The whole history of his declension, from first to last, is summed up in four sentences. He looked toward Sodom (13^{10}). He "pitched his tent toward Sodom" (13^{12}). He "dwelt in Sodom" (14^{12}). "He lingered" in Sodom (19^{16}). Every wrong step led to another. *Facilis descensus Averno.* "Sow a thought," says Thackeray, "reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap character; sow character, reap destiny."

PARADISE.—The Plain or Circle of Jordan was so beautiful

[1] Newman.

that Lot almost doubted if Eden were more fair. As he viewed it from the hills of Canaan it looked "like the garden of the Lord," the lost Paradise of the race (13^{10}). It charmed his eye and feasted his imagination. Distance lent enchantment to the view; but on closer inspection Lot found that the green plains of Sodom were not the sweet fields of Eden. Sin had entered that demi-paradise, and changed it into a pandemonium. The beauty of nature did nothing to save men from impurity of affection, imagination, language, and behaviour. "The men of Sodom were wicked, and sinners against the Lord exceedingly" (13^{13}). It was one of many scenes "where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile." Socialists cherish the idea that if man were placed in good surroundings, he must himself become good; and they clamour for an experiment. As a matter of fact, Nature has often made the experiment. Times out of number she has created for men a perfect environment. She made the Circle of Jordan a dream of beauty and fertility, and gave the people "fulness of bread and abundance of leisure."[1] But the result was not satisfactory. The inhabitants of this other Eden were infamously base. Neither the beauty nor the bounty of Nature restrains the sinful passions of men. An earthly paradise does not produce ideal lives. If the ashes of Sodom or the ruins of Pompeii could speak, they would warn us that in the very sanctuaries of Nature he that is filthy will be filthy still. Man's first and imperative requirement is not the production of a new environment about him, but the creation of a clean heart and the renewing of a right spirit within him. Purity of heart is Paradise restored.

RECOMPENSE.—"Abram's beautiful and glorious example of love to our neighbour"[2] kindled no spark of gratitude in Lot's cold heart. Oftentimes kindness elicits no response; goodness wins no honour or applause; charity and self-denial seem to be wasted; and generosity begins to wear a different aspect when

[1] Ezek. 16^{49}. [2] Luther.

its benefactions are accepted as if they were a birthright. Keen is the grief which comes from unrequited affections and unappreciated aims; and many are tempted to ask, "Why should we be kind to the selfish and the ungrateful?" But there is a high chivalry which refuses to entertain such questions, and nothing will ever prevent the sons of the Most High from being "kind to the unthankful and evil." Love is pure and uncalculating; it has no selfish aim. Nevertheless, Greatheart has his reward, though not of men. It is God whom he serves and by whom he is requited. Immediately after the departure of Lot the LORD revealed Himself to Abram, and assured him of a recompense. Abram had refused to choose, and was willing to forego every advantage; but God had chosen for him, and would maintain his lot. God would give the whole of that beautiful land to Abram and his descendants, and make his seed like the dust of the earth (13[14-16]). For all who are generous and self-denying God has prepared an unimagined happiness. There is much to be endured and much to be given up in His service, but whatever He makes it our duty He also makes it our interest to do. We may not always see this, and the world would cease to be a scene of probation if it were always manifestly our advantage to follow the noble and generous course. Virtue does not always carry a material bribe in her hand, and it is the apparent conflict between duty and interest that makes it hard to yield to the pleadings of conscience. But the conflict is only apparent. Our interest is always on the side of duty. The soul of the world is just. God gives measure for measure. "He that watereth shall be watered also himself."[1] "Verily there is a reward for the righteous."[2] The balance soon adjusts itself; there are equivalents and compensations for all deprivations. No act of self-sacrifice, prompted by love, will pass unrewarded. "Say ye of the righteous, that it shall be well with him."[3] Because God is just, and the world is governed reasonably, goodness and blessedness in the end coincide. We lose nothing by making a sacrifice,

[1] Prov. 11[25]. [2] Ps. 58[11]. [3] Isa. 3[10].

but receive an hundredfold. Man's ingratitude is a foil to God's grace. John Calvin said when he was banished from the city of Geneva, which he had loved and served so well, "Certainly, if I had merely served men, this would have been a poor recompense; but it is my happiness that I have served Him who never fails to reward His servants to the full extent of His promise."

VII.

WARFARE.

GEN. XIV. 1–16.

"War is the foundation of all the high virtues and faculties of men."
RUSKIN.

VICTORY.—The fourteenth chapter of Genesis echoes with the din of warfare. Two campaigns are described in language so terse and vivid that the reader can scarcely avoid catching the excitement of the field. For the merits of clearness, force, brightness, and simplicity, the narrative style of Genesis has never been surpassed. This story bears the marks of an ancient date, and some scholars have suggested that it may be a chapter from the lost *Book of the Wars of Jahveh*.[1] Four kings of the East, *i.e.* from beyond the Euphrates, under the leadership of Chedorlaomer, made war upon the five kings of the Circle of Jordan, who had attempted to throw off the suzerainty of the king of Elam. The invading army came down the eastern side of the Jordan, harrying the homesteads of the primitive tribes whose lands they traversed, and advanced as far as the Arabian desert. Thence they turned back, swept round the south end of the Dead Sea, spoiled the oasis of Engedi,[2] and at length encountered the army of the Pentapolis in the bituminous vale of Siddim. Gaining a complete victory, the invaders entered the cities of the Plain, plundered Sodom, the richest of the five, and retired northwards along the western bank of the Jordan, laden

[1] Num. 21^{14}.

[2] Or Hazezon-tamar, 2 Chron. 20^{2}.

with spoils, and leading many captives in their train. But their victory was quickly turned into ignominious defeat and disaster. For Abram the Hebrew, receiving tidings that Lot was among the captives, speedily mustered a band of three hundred and eighteen retainers, called his three Amorite confederates to his aid, and hastened in the track of the invaders. After a pursuit of a hundred and twenty miles he scouted the enemy among the hills of Dan by the springs of the Jordan, and lay concealed till night-fall, when, dividing his slender forces into companies, he made a sudden and impetuous onset, from different sides at once, upon the careless sleepers, drove them in headlong panic, and did not abandon the pursuit till he had rescued all the captives and recovered all the spoils.

WARFARE.—Abram the Hebrew left his people an ideal of noble warfare and high chivalry. He is the type of all those heroes of faith, mighty men of valour animated by the spirit of God, by whom brave deeds were done for the glory of God and the cause of liberty. Age after age the story of his prowess was told to infuse into the young Hebrews the spirit of valour, magnanimity, and contempt of fear. Good men never love war for its own sake; but so long as the weak and innocent are oppressed by the strong, there will be need for deeds of daring rectitude, and war will be a sacred duty. "We must look at war with manly eyes," said Martin Luther. When the tyrant fights for lust of bloodshed, glory, and spoil, God raises up the true hero to lay the tyrant in the dust. Sympathy for the weak turns peaceful men against their will into men of strife. Conscience imposes on them the task of war. The noble impulse to succour the distressed, to liberate the captive, to raise the fallen, has been the motive to heroic deeds in all ages. The most peace-loving man who willingly turns his own cheek to the smiter, cannot stand quietly by and see his brethren done to death while he has power to rescue them. Lawless war makes war lawful. The same law of humanity which requires a nation to punish one

criminal, requires it to repress ten thousand, and that is war. If we justly punish every thief, we cannot in consistency allow a whole land to be devastated by a horde of armed invaders. "Justice and duty require princes to keep themselves armed, and to enter into defensive leagues, as Abram did, for the purpose of repelling attacks and incursions."[1] War is a stern, serious, tragically earnest business, which never fails to bring many calamities in its train; but it is not the worst evil. It is better than—

> "a peace that is full of wrongs,
> Horrible, hateful, monstrous, not to be told."[2]

The Hebrews believed that in every just quarrel the LORD of hosts was with them,[3] that they were fighting the battles of the LORD,[4] whose spirit came upon them to arouse them to action,[5] who taught their hands to war and their fingers to fight,[6] who girded them with strength for battle,[7] who went forth with their hosts,[8] whose right hand and holy arm got Him the victory.[9] Their true successors are the Christian soldiers of to-day who contend for justice and liberty and humanity. Dan, the scene of Abram's triumph, was the first of many fields of honour in Canaan—Jericho, Michmash, Bethhoron, Kishon, Mizpah, Jezreel, Bethbarah, Aphek—where the Hebrews won great victories, renowned in legend and song. The memories of battles fought for liberty are among a nation's best traditions, and consecrate a land scarcely less than its altars. The appropriate limits of the Holy Land—Dan and Beersheba—were a battlefield and a shrine. Valour and faith are the springs of all that is most glorious and inspiring in a nation's history. "The man is little to be envied whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of Marathon, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona."[10]

[1] Calvin. [2] Tennyson. [3] 2 Chron. 32^{8}. [4] 1 Sam. 25^{28}.
[5] Judg. 6^{34}. [6] Ps. 144^{1}. [7] Ps. 18^{39}. [8] Ps. 108^{11}.
[9] Ps. 98^{1}. [10] Samuel Johnson.

BROTHERHOOD.—Abram gives the Hebrews an ideal of true brotherhood and its offices. The invaders "took Lot, Abram's brother's son. . . . And when Abram heard that his *brother* was taken captive, he led forth his trained men" ($14^{12.14}$). In ancient days the only protection for life and property lay in a man's willingness to defend his kinsmen, and avenge the injuries done to them. Every male relative, every man of the same tribe or people, was a brother.[1] It was the thought of a brother in chains that stirred Abram's heart. There had been no drying up of the springs of his affection, and no selfish indolence repressed his exertions on behalf of his brother. Though he was formally separated from Lot, he was still knit closely to him by natural and spiritual bonds of fraternity. He could not be unmoved by the thought of his brother's suffering, or indifferent to his fate. He counted his brother's welfare as sacred as his own. The same ideal of brotherhood which but lately made him a peacemaker (13^{8}), now transforms him into a man of war, intense and ardent, swift to move and strong to smite, with "a brow for a noble cause." Love is changeless, though circumstances modify its offices. "A brother is born for adversity,"[2] and never asks the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Dangers which expose a false and hollow friendship reveal a true brotherhood. In the darkest hours the lamp of love shines the brightest. Abram was ready to seek his brother's welfare by every service and sacrifice which love could inspire. Practical sympathy which is willing to dare and do all things is the proof of brotherhood. Abram might have left his nephew to the consequences of his avarice and selfishness: Lot thought he could do without him, let him try. But Abram was too magnanimous to fail his old friend in time of need; Lot should feel the grasp of a brother's hand, and know that love is unaffected by the breath of change. It has been said that our moral rank is determined by the returns we make for good and evil. To return good for evil is Godlike; good for good, manlike; evil for evil, beastlike; evil for good,

[1] Gesenius. [2] Prov. 17^{17}.

devil-like. There could be no doubt about Abram's moral rank. He forgot his brother's great errors, and thought only of his sore need; and like some "very perfect gentle knight" of modern chivalry, took his life in his hand and valiantly went forth to redress the wrong.

VALOUR.—Abram the pursuer of invaders, the rescuer of captives, the victor in battle, who made the pride of Eastern kings bite the dust, was the same man who feebly shuffled for his own safety among the princes of Egypt. He was the same, and yet not the same. Out of weakness he was made strong. By the courage of faith the peaceful shepherd was transformed into a military hero, fit for noble enterprises; by faith he "waxed valiant in fight, put to flight the armies of the aliens."[1] His valour was derived from a lofty faith in God. There is a kind of fortitude, much admired among men, which has little moral value; an instinctive animal courage, a physical delight in danger —the bravery of the savage. But Abram's valour is much more than strength of nerve, more than reckless defiance of danger; it is courage of soul, begotten of calm trust in the living God. To this high courage God gives the victory. The first, typical battle-story in the Bible teaches us that Providence does *not* fight on the side of the strongest battalions. "There is no restraint to the LORD to save by many or by few."[2] He gives the conquest to the weak. Moral power, the might of right, counts for much in the armies of the living God. The courage of the mind is always in the long-run more than a match for the courage of the sword. "Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just."

SERVICE.—Abram "led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued as far as Dan. And he divided himself against them by night, he and his servants, and smote them" ($14^{14.15}$). It was the rank and file who

[1] Heb. 11^{34}. [2] 1 Sam. 14^{6}

won the battle. Abram's retainers were all first-rate fighting men. They were slaves, born thrall to Abram the Hebrew, but they had none of the qualities of slaves. What's in a name? No freemen ever fought with greater spirit than these serfs. They were "home-born" (14^{14}), slaves of the best class, trained under their master's eye from childhood. They loved and trusted their master; they were loved and trusted by their master. It is true they were not their own, and their labours were not formally requited. But they knew nothing of grinding toil, or burdens too heavy to bear, or the lash of the taskmaster, or the open slave-market, or the other horrors of pagan slavery. They were trained men—trained in habits of obedience, order, respect for authority, mutual trust, and co-operation. Inured to heat and cold, to wind and sun, to hardships and dangers, they were sinewy, vigorous, valorous young men. Best of all, they shared their master's faith. He commanded his household that they should know the way of the LORD (18^{19}). True religion does not unfit men for hard fighting. "I know nothing," said Oliver Cromwell, "that will give courage and confidence in battle as a knowledge of God in Christ will." Abram's retainers and Cromwell's Ironsides afford sufficient proof that faith and fortitude go hand in hand.

LEADERSHIP.—Abram displayed high qualities of leadership in the mustering and disposition of his forces. His own trained men were at his beck and call, and his magnetic influence over strangers is evidenced by the ease with which he attracted the Amorite princes to his side.

> "These valiant chiefs their sympathy declare,
> And pledge their faith his righteous cause to share."[1]

When Abram had sighted the enemy, he divided his men into companies, which simultaneously fell upon the enemy by night from different sides, and struck a panic terror into their hearts

[1] Cædmon.

The Hebrew flockmaster proved himself a born leader of men, an untaught master of strategy. He adopted the tactics afterwards employed by Gideon[1] and Saul,[2] and in other lands by such experts in the art of war as Cæsar and Napoleon. The rapid march, the division of forces, the sudden irresistible onset, enabled him to gain a victory which he could hardly have achieved in a pitched battle. Untutored valour fighting for a good cause has often been more than a match for military science. There are many historical parallels to the Hebrew shepherd's achievement. Cromwell was a common farmer till he was past middle life; but when he had once taken up arms, he proved himself a consummate leader of armies, the greatest soldier whom Britain has ever produced.

DISCIPLINE.—The men of the East "took Lot, Abram's brother's son, who dwelt in Sodom, and departed . . . and Abram brought again his brother Lot and his goods" ($14^{12.16}$). Lot had the opportunity of terminating his unholy connection with Sodom. The thought of renewing his separation from the world was forced upon him. He had been chastised for his worldliness, had been roused from his false peace and gross content by the rude shocks of war, had seen his imaginary Eden made desolate, and found that "riches certainly make themselves wings and fly away."[3] He had shared the fate of his chosen companions; and, but for the valour of his tried friend, would have ended his days in heathen captivity. God had troubled, startled, shaken him; spoiled his pleasure and dissipated his dreams; vexed his heart and soul. Well for him had he then emerged from Sodom with strong crying and tears. But when the chance of a happy release from worldly entanglements, and of return to the peaceful separate life, was presented to him, he let it go. There is a fatal fascination in sin—a kind of insanity, so that, against his reason, against his true interests, a man will follow that which he knows will injure him; and neither the

[1] Judg. $7^{16\text{-}19}$. [2] 1 Sam. 11^{11}. [3] Prov. 23^{5}.

terror of the LORD drives him, nor the goodness of the LORD leads him, to repentance. Lot had fallen in love with inglorious ease; Sodom's "fulness of bread and abundance of leisure"[1] had become indispensable to him; his family had formed pleasant associations in the Circle; and though his righteous soul was vexed by the evil life of the city, he could not again become a stranger and a pilgrim in the earth. He could not, because he would not. Compromises and compliances had become part of his nature. The shudder of fear passed quickly away, and, like a bird that has been rescued from the fowler's snare and straightway returns to it, Lot went back to Sodom. This is the tragedy of human life, that "we see the better course and approve it, but follow the worse."

VIII.

PEACE.

GEN. XIV. 17–24.

"His face wore
The utter peace of one whose life is hid
In God's own hand."—H. A. KING.

FELLOWSHIP.—Abram's return from Dan was marked by events no less striking than the campaign itself. The report of his victory had gone before him, and he received a singular welcome home. In the vale of Shaveh he was met by Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who brought forth bread and wine for the wearied troops, invoked the divine blessing on the conqueror, gave thanks to God Most High who had given the victory, and received from Abram the tenth part of the spoils of war (14^{18-20}). The two men who thus interchanged good offices belonged to different branches of the human family, Abram the Hebrew being Shemitic, and Melchizedek, if a Canaanite, Hamitic. Their paths had never crossed before. Abram came from the far East, Melchizedek from no

[1] Ezek. 16^{49}.

one knew where. But they found a bond of fellowship and brotherhood in their common faith. They believed in El Elyon, God Most High. They were akin, not after the flesh, but after the spirit, and they needed no introduction to one another. "Between simple and noble persons there is always a quick intelligence: they recognise at sight."[1] Abram and Melchizedek were both heroes of faith, kings of men by divine right, born to rule because they had great souls, receiving the homage which is yielded to real superiority and not to official claims, exercising an authority that rested on character, laying men under the spell of a great manhood. Theirs was "a kingship of the inevitable kind, whether crowned or not."[2] When they met and looked in each other's eyes, at once soul recognised soul. They embraced in God. What "father or mother or lineage" they had was a matter of no moment; of one of them it is said that he had none.[3] "If it is a happiness to be nobly descended, it is no less to have so much merit that nobody inquires whether you are so or not."[4] Genius and grace have no genealogy.

"There is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they came from the ends of the earth."

As Melchizedek and Abram met, so they parted, grateful for a little of each other's fellowship, yet nobly independent. The best friends in the world are unnecessary to one another; for each of them El Elyon—God Most High—is enough.

KINGSHIP.—Melchizedek's government at Salem is a miniature theocracy. He is a priest upon a throne, a royal priest or priestly king, a religious as well as a political ruler, having both the temporal and the spiritual power vested in him. He is clothed with the attributes which adorn both offices. Alike his royalty and his priesthood are of the texture of his character. He is a king by his intrinsic excellence, his commanding per-

[1] Emerson. [2] Ruskin. [3] Heb. 7[3]. [4] La Bruyere.

sonal influence, his native might and majesty. His claims rest upon no hereditary descent. He is a true king—the guardian, the leader, the father of his people. His priesthood hallows his kingship. He governs wisely, establishes righteousness, loves peace, observes the moral law in his own person, seeks to have the lives of his subjects moulded by faith in the Most High, and so makes civil order and personal conduct an expression of the will of God. He is the ideal king of righteousness, and he reigns in the City of Peace. A special sanctity attaches to his character, a special virtue to his blessing. He is greater than Abram, for "without any dispute the less is blessed of the better."[1] The secular and military power is consecrated by the religious sanctions wielded by the priesthood. These are the few ideas associated with the name of Melchizedek. He vanishes and leaves no peer, but not before he has created a new order of manhood; and among the Hebrews he begins to have the power of an endless life. Being dead, he yet continued to speak. He was not merely a historical figure, but had a significance far beyond himself. His was the kind of personality that furnished the Hebrews with their ideals. They were an idealising race. They viewed the grand figures and events of their history in the light of God's declared purpose of love, and out of the existing materials, by a high and sacred use of the imagination, they fashioned ideals which they believed that time would realise. Their inspired phantasy, which we call idealism, was justified by their knowledge of God's power and purpose to perfect whatever He began. They believed in the succession of grace, and their great recollections awoke ever greater anticipations. They seemed always to stand on tiptoe with expectation. They had a passion for perfection; every historical character gave them a glowing hope that a greater was on his way; and their golden age of the future was not a fancy picture, but an ideal which God Himself gave them. Thus, having once caught a glimpse of Melchizedek, king of Jerusalem, they not only cherished his

[1] Heb. 7[7].

memory, but predicted the advent of a greater "Priest upon a throne," [1] "a Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek." [2]

"The King who reigns in Salem's towers
Shall all the world command."

PEACE.—"Blessed be Abram of God Most High," said the king of Salem. The Prince of Peace came out to bless the man of war (14[19]). Melchizedek the ideal king loved the reign of gentle peace, and desired the time when wars should cease unto the ends of the earth. Yet he was no advocate of peace at any price. He was "first, by interpretation, king of righteousness, and *after that* also king of peace." [3] He blessed the hero whose good sword was wet with the blood of tyrants. Before the dulcet notes of peace there must often be heard the trumpet tones of war for righteousness. God Most High does not permit peace to be gained or maintained apart from the ends of justice. His priest approves "the slaughter of the kings of the East," [4] and is thankful for the stern arbitrament of war. Strong, firm, inflexible righteousness must lead in mild, merciful, gentle peace. The kingdom of God is first righteousness, then peace and joy. [5] "Righteousness and peace kiss each other." [6] The Hebrew saints never cease to emphasise the fact that there can be no peace without God or with sin. "The work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever." [7] A peace, or even a truce, with iniquity is monstrous. Blessed is the man of God who lays the usurper low and gives the captive liberty. The "King of Peace" would not have blessed Abram had he not rescued his weak brother from the four Eastern despots; just as, were he living to-day, he would not bless the European Powers that have failed to rescue their Armenian brother from the brutal Sultan. He who is after the order of Melchizedek "shall strike through kings in the day of His wrath . . . He shall wound the heads over many countries." [8]

[1] Zec. 6[13]. [2] Ps. 110[4]. [3] Heb. 7[2]. [4] Heb. 7[1].
[5] Rom. 14[17]. [6] Ps. 85[10]. [7] Isa. 32[17]. [8] Ps. 110[5, 6].

"Blessed be God for the sword when it is wielded by the hands of justice and virtue."[1]

> "The mountains shall bring peace to the people,
> And the hills, *by righteousness*."[2]

DIVINITY.—Both Melchizedek and Abram believed in "God Most High, Possessor (or Maker) of heaven and earth" ($14^{19.\ 22}$). Their God was one, and personal. The heathen said there were many gods, each possessing and ruling a bit of the world; the Hebrews believed that there was one Elohim, God Most High, the Maker and Possessor of all things, the sole Proprietor of the world. Modern men of thought say that behind the sum of things there is only an impersonal Force, of which the world is the necessary result, manifestation, or emanation. But from the Hebrews we learn that God and the world are not related merely as cause and effect; that God is neither embodied in the world, nor adequately expressed by it. They teach us that the world—heaven and earth—is the possession of a personal Being who created it, who is known to His rational creatures, who is distinct from the world, greater than it, and exalted above it, and who was as truly God before as after the heavens declared His glory and the firmament showed His handiwork. Looking at all the wonders of the world the Hebrews said, "Lo, those are but the outskirts of His ways; but the thunder of His power who can understand?"[3] This majestic idea of God, as an infinite, free, self-conscious, personal Being, an idea which is not found in antiquity outside the Hebrew sphere of thought, is the noblest heritage we have received from the Hebrews. It was their greatest achievement, and nothing can ever obliterate the knowledge of it from the minds of men.

THANKSGIVING.—"Blessed be God Most High," said the king of Salem in Abram's presence, "which hath delivered thine enemies into thine hand" (14^{20}). When Abram and his

[1] Joseph Parker. [2] Ps. 72^{3}. [3] Job 26^{14}.

brave followers returned, all dust and sweat, victorious from the battle, they were less or more than human if they were not flushed and elated with their success. The excitement of a triumph has often turned good men's heads. But in the quiet Vale of Shaveh the minds of the Hebrews were raised above the tempting joys of victory to high and holy thoughts of God, the Possessor of heaven and earth, their Preserver in the hour of danger. They heard the priest lift up his voice in praise of God Most High, the Giver of victory. The simple *Te Deum* hallowed their triumph, purified and uplifted their hearts. It was as if they took up the strain and said, "Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory."[1] They learned to attribute their exploit, not to their own sinewy strength, but to the grace and goodness of their God, for whom and by whom are all things. They suddenly felt that they were on holy ground; God was near them, and they laid their trophies at His feet. Their passage through the King's Dale, their meeting with the man of God, their partaking of bread and wine, the solemn benediction, the joyful thanksgiving, the dedication of the tithes —all this was to Abram and his young men a real sacrament. Happy is every man who remembers hallowed hours and scenes which have transfigured his life, and made him feel that henceforth he "should be, else sinning greatly, a dedicated spirit."[2]

LIBERALITY.—In the Vale of Shaveh Abram gave Melchizedek "a tenth of all" the spoils of war as a thank-offering to God, a token of gratitude for help and deliverance in battle. Whenever men are really in the presence of God, and have a warm sense of His goodness, they instinctively wish to present Him an offering of love. The spirit of gratitude naturally finds expression in freewill offerings. Our liberality is an infallible index of the temperature of our religion. Abram's offerings were a pattern to all his descendants. The Hebrews regarded the tithes of their income—whether from the fruits of their fields,

[1] Ps. 115[1]. [2] Wordsworth.

or from their herds and flocks, or from the spoils of war—as the LORD'S portion, which they put aside before beginning to use the rest. The tithe was the first charge upon their income, and brought a blessing on the rest. They believed that they could not safely and happily enjoy the bounties of God until they had gratefully dedicated the first-fruits to Him as too holy for themselves. The practice taught them habits of forethought and self-denial for the LORD'S sake. The motive which prompted them determined the value of their offerings in God's sight. Gifts of love were to Him pleasing sacrifices, while offerings without love were "vain oblations." [1] The Hebrew "knew no greater happiness than to draw near his God with offerings; no acuter pain and no deeper dishonour than for this to be impossible or forbidden to him." [2] The invariable Hebrew practice stands before us with the moral force of a noble precedent. The tithe is more than an interesting relic of a submerged antiquity; it is a present, potent, stimulative ideal. We who are instructed to lay by us in store as God hath prospered us,[3] cannot let our Christian aim fall below the Hebrew practice. The giving of a tenth of one's income is a simple, easy, unencumbered plan. We are not in bondage to law; every believer is now a law unto himself; and God would not accept our offerings if they were wrung from us by constraint. But heart-religion changes all the pain and effort of self-denial into very delight. "Men rejoice when they divide the spoil," [4] but they have the purest joy when they give the LORD His portion, the first and the best.

> "Give all thou canst; high Heaven rejects the lore
> Of nicely calculated less or more." [5]

The Hebrews teach us how close is the connection between liberal offerings and spiritual blessings. "Bring ye the whole tithe into the storehouse, and prove Me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of

[1] Isa. 1^{13}. [2] Ewald. [3] 1 Cor. 16^{2}. [4] Isa. 9^{3}. [5] Wordsworth.

heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it." [1]

HONOUR.—The meeting between Melchizedek and Abram was witnessed by the king of Sodom, who had either come back as one of the rescued captives, or had crept out of a hiding-place to meet the returning forces and salute the conquering hero. Melchizedek ignored the king of Sodom, but Abram required to come to an understanding with him. As memorable as the clash of arms at Dan is the moral encounter between these two men in the King's Dale. Abram's instinctive revulsion and high disdain when face to face with the king of Sodom is as expressive as his beautiful reverence for the king of Salem. Having witnessed the interchange of gifts, the king of Sodom thought he would not be outdone in courtesy and liberality, and made a proposal to Abram which seemed to himself generous. "Give me the persons," he said, "and take the goods to thyself" (14^{21}). Abram might have replied that it lay with the conqueror to be the divider, that by the law of war both the spoils and the prisoners belonged to the victor. But Abram was in no mood for insisting on his rights; he had determined to relinquish them all. Though he had won a battle and captured the spoils of a whole city, he was resolved to take no reward. He was no mercenary soldier, he had no personal ends to serve, and no shadow of self should darken his victory. His motives were pure: it was brotherly-kindness, not covetousness, which constrained him to take up arms; and either before or after the battle he had made a solemn vow to God that he would not touch so much as a thread or a shoe-latchet. As a servant of God he must not compromise himself or do anything unworthy of himself; he must keep his hands clean, and stoop to nothing mean; he must be above suspicion, and cherish a scrupulous regard for his own good name and the honour of his God. His high self-reverence was a reverence for what

[1] Mal. 3^{10}.

God had made and redeemed. His manner of using his own name was an expression of noble self-respect. The king of Sodom make *Abram* rich! Abram had been constituted heir of the whole land by the Possessor of heaven and earth. Abram could not receive any portion of his heritage from man, least of all from a man of Sodom. Having ended his campaign, Abram would go back to his place no richer than he left it. He would be indebted to none but God for wealth and happiness. A modern soldier of this high type was seen in General Gordon, who at the close of his famous Chinese campaign wrote, "I know that I shall leave China as poor as when I entered it, but with the knowledge that through my weak instrumentality upwards of eighty to a hundred thousand lives have been spared. I want no further satisfaction than this." When honours were pressed upon him, he said he did not "care twopence for these things." He accepted a grant of money only to divide it all among his troops; and bringing home a gold medal, the Empress' special gift, he effaced the inscription, and gave it to God by giving it to His poor.

VOWS.—Abram made a solemn vow that he would not enrich himself with the spoils of battle, the treasures of Sodom. He expressed his purpose in the most emphatic language—not a thread, not a shoe-latchet would he take, and with uplifted hand he called on God to hear and remember his vow ($14^{22.23}$). He foresaw a temptation, and forearmed himself against it. He took measures to save himself from himself. While he clearly discerned the path of duty—the will of God—he bound himself to follow it at all costs; he committed himself to a line of conduct from which he could never turn back. "A vow is an act of self-restraint by which a man keeps himself from falling into evil." [1] Because there is in a vow at once a confession of weakness and a prayer for strength, a wise and good man makes many vows in the course of his life.

[1] Calvin.

Knowing his liability to be assailed by fierce temptations, he fortifies himself in time of moral strength and clear vision for the conflicts that will certainly come, conflicts in which strong human passions are so apt to get the better of reason. If we could always live at a high level, there would be no need for vows; but as experience teaches us how often we are untrue to ourselves, common prudence bids us determine beforehand what our course of action will be under certain conditions. By making a vow, "not to any creature, but to God alone, we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties." [1]

> "Tasks in hours of insight willed
> May be in days of gloom fulfilled." [2]

A vow gives a man firmness and fixity of purpose, and saves him from the misery of an unstable will. Whether we utter our vow in words with the right hand lifted towards heaven, as Abram did, or silently attach our name to a written pledge, in either case we deliberately take upon ourselves a solemn obligation of which God is witness; and a vow once taken should be faithfully and religiously kept. "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it. Better is it that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay." [3] An honourable man changes not though he swear to his own hurt.[4] The obligation of our vows, in things right and expedient, is sacred, and the bond indissoluble. And vows are all the more effective if they are often made afresh, till all doubt and danger shall be past.

> "High heaven, that heard the solemn vow,
> That vow renewed shall daily hear."

There is a certain subtle danger connected with all acts of self-devotion. If a man takes a vow or pledge trusting in the strength of his own will, the emphasis of his words, the firmness of his purpose, or the goodness of his intentions,—if his vow is a mere

[1] Confession of Faith. [2] Arnold. [3] Eccles. $5^{4,5}$. [4] Ps. 15^{4}.

utterance of self-confidence, it will be worth less than nothing —idle breath or wasted ink. But if he vows with a knowledge of his utter weakness and an absolute dependence upon Divine strength, his vow will bring him off more than conqueror.

LIBERTY.—Abram stipulated with the king of Sodom that his Amorite confederates should have a due share of the spoils of war (14^{24}). He would not touch the booty himself; he had a sure sense of his own duty, and would keep his conscience scrupulously clean. But he would not make his action a standard for other freemen. His own young serfs, who had fought so bravely and risked their lives so nobly, should have nothing for their service but "what they had eaten"—and perhaps everlasting renown. But there was no reason why the allies should not have their portion of the spoils. Abram was a law unto himself, but no conscience-keeper for other men; and his treatment of his confederates displays a fine sense of what is just and right and fitting. The Amorites had no scruples about taking the spoil, and Abram almost invited them to take it. The man who is most severe—almost merciless—to himself, is often the most gentle in his judgments of others, and the last to interfere with their liberty. "I rebuke not what others do," said Chevalier Bayard, "but I will not do it myself." Conscience needs to be enlightened, not coerced; and only voluntary actions have moral worth. Many questions of conduct do not admit of categorical answers; what is right for one person is wrong for another; and hard and fast rules are a poor substitute for personal reflection and decision. Every free agent must be thrown on his own responsibility, and make his own moral determinations. "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." [1]

SELF-CONTROL.—Having given proof of his valour by subduing kings, Abram displays his greatness of mind by con-

[1] Rom. 14^{5}.

quering himself. Nothing tries a man like power. What with the blessing of Melchizedek the priest of God Most High, the support of princely confederates, the subservience of the king of Sodom, and the devotion of the brave retainers who formed a lifeguard around their master's person, Abram had reached the highest pinnacle of earthly power. He was a king in all but in name. Here he had his opportunity and his temptation. Had he chosen to follow up his advantage, he might quickly have had the country at his feet. It would have been very pleasant for him to attain his end at once. But his hour was not yet come. He must not march through bloodshed to a throne. God had some better, as yet unknown, way of achievement prepared for him. With the coveted prize—the possession of Canaan—within his reach, he sheathed his sword, quietly disbanded his forces, returned to his herds and flocks, and resumed his old attitude of waiting only upon God. "Better is he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city." [1] God's hand cannot be forced. There is no short cut to the ideal. The first of possessions is self-possession, the noblest conquest is self-conquest.

IX.

ASSURANCE.

GEN. XV. 1-6.

"All great souls are apt to be in thick darkness till the eternal ways and celestial guiding stars disclose themselves."—CARLYLE.

REFLECTION.—No book is so true to life and experience as the Bible, which pictures men in all their changing moods. Human spirits are subtle and delicate, subject to strange alternations of hope and fear. The tides of feeling flow and ebb. Shadows of doubt creep across every soul. The bravest hearts have their "fainting fits." After the elation of victory Abram is seen in an hour of heavy depression. The swift march, the clash of arms,

[1] Prov. 16^{32}.

the shout of victory, the voice of thanksgiving are past, and he is back among the sleeping oaks of Mamre. The unwonted strain is relaxed, and the excitement of action is followed by the dulness of reflection. Everything is "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." What is the net result of the successful war? What progress has been made? The achievement seems pitifully small. The king of Sodom has got back his crown, his people their goods and chattels, and Lot is re-established in the city of ill-fame. Meantime the fierce hatred of the men of the East has been inflamed, and will they not return in overwhelming numbers and take their revenge? Abram has let slip his opportunity of seizing his heritage by the aid of the sword, and no other means seem available. He has striven and not attained. And even if the promised possession were already his, what would it profit a childless man who sits brooding in solitude, whose only heir is a slave? Here is a striking proof of the strange dualism of human character. Abram unabashed before kings, and Abram sick and sad and sore at heart when left to his own reflections, is one and the same man. The strongest soul has its conflicts with doubt and its seasons of dejection. Meditation is heartening only when it keeps God full in view. Faith is the great aid to reflection, delivering the soul from its stupor, and restoring it to the vigour of hope. The verdict of melancholy is always a mistake.

REASSURANCE.—The LORD is very gracious to Abram in his dejection. His word comes to him in a vision of the night, allaying his fears and bidding him hope. Clear above all the bodings and murmurs of doubt and fear the divine voice speaks, giving assurance of safety and blessing. God is to Abram a shield, against which the most powerful enemies will only dash themselves to their own destruction; and his reward, richer far than all earthly possessions. But it is not easy to overcome a deep-seated despondency. "What wilt Thou give me," Abram sadly asks, "seeing I depart (die) lonely, deserted, childless?" (15^2).

The end of life is in sight, and the desire of his heart is unfulfilled; what to him are all rewards and possessions, no son of his succeeding? The divine response is that no stranger, but a son of his own loins, shall be his heir,—not Eliezer, whom in default of a real heir he had adopted as a substitute (15^4). Then still another message of comfort is given. There is no better tonic for a sick heart than the sights, breaths, and sounds of Nature. In the hush of night God leads His servant forth under the cloudless skies, and bids him look up and tell the number of the stars if he can. Abram's soul is uplifted, awed, overpowered by the incomparable glory of the Syrian heavens, and the prophetic voice whispers to him that so great and so glorious shall his seed be. Abram accepts the astounding prophecy in faith, his doubt is dispelled, his hope revived, his soul satisfied. Such faith is counted unto him for righteousness (15^6).

PROPHECY.—The formula, "the word of the LORD came" (15^1), is the all but invariable introduction to a Hebrew prophecy. It virtually puts Abram into the goodly fellowship of the prophets, and in Gen. 20^7 he is expressly called a prophet. The prophet was a man conscious of a supernatural call, quick to apprehend and welcome and publish the promises of God. He was God's interpreter, through whom we, God's moral creatures, have received our rich knowledge of His mind and will. *How* the word of the LORD came to the prophet, how he apprehended the promises and purposes of God, we can never fully know. To Abram the LORD spake in a vision (15^1), in a deep sleep ($15^{12.\ 13}$), by His angel (22^{11}), as a man speaketh to his friend (18^{17}), and in unrecorded ways (12^1 21^{12}). To other prophets He spake by oracles, by the still small voice, by His Spirit. But the secret of inspiration remains. The relation between God and the prophet is, as Wellhausen says, "mysterious and irreducible." No one has succeeded in plucking the heart out of the prophet's mystery. What we do know is that through the prophets God brake the silence of eternity, and introduced a new order of things in the

world ; that He gave them a line to sound the hidden depths of His providence, a key to unlock the secret places of the Most High ; that they were the embodied soul and conscience of the Hebrew community ; that the moral and spiritual truths of which they were the bearers came to them, not "from their own hearts," but from the living God, and commended themselves to every pure heart and enlightened conscience ; and that all their ideals were ultimately realised, if not in the details, then in some grander way than ever they anticipated.

PROTECTION.—Abram receives the assurance of safety in the midst of all dangers : he need fear no enemies, however strong and malignant, for God will be his shield (15[1]). If he has mighty foes, he has a mightier invisible Defender. The ancient warrior bore strapped on his arm a shield of brass or of wood covered with leather, armed with which he rushed into battle and turned death aside. In modern warfare the shield is quite unserviceable ; it hangs with bows and arrows in the museum of ancient armour. But "no word ever becomes obsolete which has once deeply touched the heart of humanity."[1] The shield will always be a weapon of spiritual warfare ; God will never cease to be "a shield to all them that trust in Him."[2] The believer's defence is complete ; before and behind, on the right hand and on the left, he is beset by the protective power of God. This was a favourite thought of Luther's, whose famous spiritual battle-song opens with the words—

> "A sure stronghold our God is He,
> A trusty shield and weapon."

"What will you do," Luther was asked, "if the Duke, your protector, should no longer harbour you?" "I will take my shelter," he answered, "under the broad shield of Almighty God." Modern nations, with their immense armies and fleets, are apt to forget how insecure they are without that divine pro-

[1] Parker. [2] Ps. 18[30]

tection. Foolish are they if they "put their trust in reeking tube and iron shard."[1] He who spread His shield over Abram and his little Hebrew army must equally be the "Lord of the far-flung battle-line."[1] He is the ultimate safeguard of all national greatness, and no weapon formed against Him shall prosper.[2] "For the LORD God is a sun and shield."[3]

REWARD.—Abram next receives the divine assurance, "I am thy exceeding great reward"; or perhaps it was, "Thy reward shall be exceeding great" (15^1). God is both the Rewarder and the reward of His people. The writings of the Hebrews are full of this great idea. "The LORD is the portion of my inheritance"; "God is my portion for ever"; "I will go unto God my exceeding joy." The LORD communicates to His people not only His attributes, His love, His covenant, but Himself. Since the beginning of history thoughtful men have been asking what is man's *summum bonum*, his highest good, his heart's true ideal. "Power," "wealth," "pleasure," "wisdom," "culture," are some of the answers. The true answer is "God." "I have no good beyond Thee,"[4] said one who had learned the secret. "Lord, give me Thyself," was Augustine's constant prayer; and he adds the exquisite reason, "*Habet omnia qui habet habentem omnia*—he has all who has Him that has all." Slowly or suddenly we rise from delight in God's gifts to delight in Himself. "Unless," says Hooker, "the last good, which is desired for itself, be infinite, we do evil making it our end. No good is infinite but God; therefore He is our felicity and bliss." Every soul has capacities greater than the infinite sea, and only He who filleth heaven and earth, whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, can satisfy one little human heart.

STARS.—Abram was heartened and reassured by the sight of the stars, which God made a prophecy of the greatness and glory of Abram's posterity, a symbol of the splendour of His own

[1] Kipling. [2] Isa. 54^{17}. [3] Ps. 84^{11}. [4] Ps. 16^2.

inheritance in the saints. Among the ancients the Hebrew alone could rightly read the heavens. No sad astrology, no superstitious dread of planetary influences, troubled his thoughts. On him the stars looked down, not with malignity or scorn or pity, but radiant with a message of infinite hope. To him the night glowed with a myriad stars of promise, under which men could not live with desponding hearts. He knew that the incomparable God who created them, and nightly marshalled their host, would do as marvellous things for men in grace. Their glory and their steadfastness reassured his faith. "Lift up your eyes on high," said the prophet, "and see who hath created these, that bringeth out their host by number: He calleth them all by name by the greatness of His might, and for that He is strong in power; not one faileth."[1] In the clear atmosphere of Palestine the stars shine with a brightness of which we dwellers in northern climes have but a feeble conception; the Pleiades are not seven stars but a hundred; and the rings of Saturn are visible to the naked eye. Our knowledge of the heavens has immensely widened since Abram's day, and with the aid of the best instruments a hundred million worlds are now visible, and many more pursue their pathless way through awful space. But the Hebrew reading of the stars remains for ever the right one. "To the intelligent, nature converts itself into a vast promise."[2] Carlyle called the starry heavens "a sair sicht," only because the Hebrew hopefulness was not so strong in him as the Hebrew righteousness. That great host, stretching numberless beyond the range of vision, was set in the heavens, not "to burn and brand his nothingness into man," but the reverse—to illustrate his splendid destiny, to be a shining warrant for all idealism—

> "A world above man's head to let him see
> How boundless might his soul's horizons be,
> How vast, yet of what clear transparency!
> How fair a lot to fill
> Is left to each man still!"[3]

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[1] Isa. 40^{26}. [2] Emerson. [3] Arnold.

FAITH.—When Abram received the promise of a great posterity, he believed it because he first "believed in the LORD" (15^6). Under the stars, in the presence of God, he came back to clear vision, sweet peace, triumphant assurance. Inspired with a sense of God's goodness and faithfulness, he passed from fear to confidence, from sadness to joyousness. His reason might be stunned, his imagination dazzled, by the promise; but God was true, and he reposed implicit faith in God. "Everything in himself and on earth forbade him to hope, but in the place from which the promise came he saw nothing but the strongest grounds for hoping."[1] If the greatness of God's promised gifts almost staggers us, the greatness of the Promiser reassures us, and we believe amid all the improbabilities of nature and experience. God's revealed goodness is a warrant for faith in all good things. If the promises were spoken by any other than God, they would have to be dismissed at once as incredible and preposterous. But nothing is too good to be true if it is promised by God. Once we believe in Him we bid good-bye to all our faint-heartedness. Having such a God, it becomes easy for us to believe the sixty thousand promises which are contained in the Bible, shining like stars of hope in the firmament.

RIGHTEOUSNESS.—"Abram believed in the LORD, and He counted it to him for righteousness" (15^6). "The great text of the Book of Genesis," exclaims Luther. It is quoted three times in the New Testament,[2] and it contains a vital, grand, everlasting truth. Righteousness was the supreme quest of the Hebrews, as wisdom was of the Greeks and power of the Romans. The Gentiles followed not after righteousness, but Israel followed after the law of righteousness.[3] .The Hebrews exulted in the attainment of righteousness; they were in an agony of penitence whenever they had broken the law and lost righteousness. Primarily "the ideas of right and wrong among the Hebrews are forensic ideas—that is, the Hebrew always thinks

[1] Tholuck. [2] Rom. 4^3, Gal. 3^6, Jas. 2^{23}. [3] Rom. $9^{30.31}$.

of the right and the wrong as if they were to be settled before a judge. Righteousness is to the Hebrew not so much a moral quality as a legal status."[1] He attains this status, however, not by good works, tithes, or sacrifices, but by faith in the LORD. "The requirement of faith runs through the entire Old Testament."[2] "In the Old as in the New Testament, faith is the subjective condition of salvation."[3] It is the prerequisite of all spiritual blessings—pardon, guidance, enrichment, help, discipline, communion. The words regarding Abram contain the essence of evangelical faith. When the typical believer was counted righteous by the divine Judge, the meaning is not that he was acquitted, for acquittal declares that a man has done no wrong, but that God accepted him in spite of his sins. The evangel of both Testaments is that righteousness is not achieved by deeds, but received as a gracious gift. Had Abram won God's favour by his extraordinary merits, he would have been no example to his posterity; but he was accepted by God for his faith, which all could imitate. Here, as Ewald says, is "a sketch and model of genuine faith which could never be forgotten, but in all succeeding ages exerted a wonderful influence. The writer regards faith in its extreme importance as the chief and crowning excellence of a man's life in God." "Know ye therefore that they who are of faith are children of Abraham . . . are blessed with faithful Abraham."[4]

X.

GRACE.

GEN. XV. 7–21.

"The covenant of grace inwraps the unchangeable love and favour of God."—JOHN OWEN.

COVENANTING.—The religion of the Hebrews did not consist of mere instincts, feelings, and aspirations, but of definite objective

[1] W. Robertson Smith. [2] Oehler.
[3] Schultz. [4] Gal. $3^{7.9}$.

relations historically established between God and His people. The primary fact in their religion was not their rising to God in prayer and praise, but God's coming down to them in grace and mercy. The connection between the LORD and His people had a historical beginning; it was based not on nature, but on grace; and God's manifestation of His grace is from the earliest times described as the making of a covenant with the Hebrews. Such a covenant He is represented as entering into with Abram, the typical believer. Having for the third time received the promise of the possession of Canaan, Abram desired to see the promise in some way confirmed (15[8]). Men naturally crave present and visible tokens of future and spiritual blessings. Before the diffusion of the art of writing, and the consequent use of written bonds, signs, and seals in the making of agreements, there were various means by which a man's promise was made stringently binding upon his conscience. In early times "it cost the most gigantic efforts to get men at all accustomed to respect truth and abhor perjury."[1] Of the solemn religious sanctions used for this purpose the most awful and impressive was the covenant. Victims were slain and divided, the pieces were laid on the ground with a space between them, and the persons forming an agreement then passed between the pieces, virtually or really imprecating on themselves the fate of the victims if they should break their word. They could not look at the blood of the slain beasts without an involuntary shudder, and it symbolised the death deserved by him who violated his promise. The covenant was thus "an intensified oath."[2] Abram made such a covenant with Mamre and his brothers (14[13]), and with the king of Gerar (21[32]); and the LORD is represented as confirming His promise to Abram by making a covenant with him. What men demanded from their treacherous fellow-men, that the true and faithful God deigned to offer His people. He acted just as suspected human promisers were required to act. Being directed to make the needful preparations for the rite, Abram waits all day beside the slain victims, warding

[1] Ewald. [2] A. B. Davidson.

off unclean birds. At sunset he falls into a deep ecstatic sleep, a horror of great darkness descends upon his mind, and awful coming events cast their shadows before. Awaking in the darkness of night, he sees the covenant concluded. A smoke as of a furnace, and a flaming torch—the symbols of God's presence—move down the lane between the divided victims, the LORD thus binding Himself to perform His gracious promise. Abram does not pass between the pieces: it is not for him to make terms with the Almighty; he is simply a witness and recipient of the covenant graciously made by God. The promise itself is then repeated to Abram in an ideal form, giving his posterity as a possession the whole region that stretches between the Nile and the Euphrates (15^{18}).

GRACE.—An ordinary covenant, entered into by equals, was a security for mutual benefits and services to be rendered, an end of enmity and uncertainty, a basis of friendship and mutual confidence. But the covenant between God and man—between the Infinite and the finite, the Holy One and the sinner—was in every way unique. It could only originate with God, and could only be a covenant of pure mercy. Man could not make peace with God, or confer favours on God, or exact terms from God. But God could make peace with man, could bestow benefits on man, could lay down conditions for man. All this He does in the covenant. It is a divine institution or dispensation rather than a contract. It is all of grace. God stoops down to the weakness and want of His creatures, and makes Himself a debtor to them. He lays His love under bonds, freely pledging Himself to bestow His favours. This does not mean that He did not love men before He made a covenant with them: He loved them with an everlasting love. God *is* eternally Love. The covenant is not the beginning of His grace; it is the declaration of His grace. It gives weak human nature a firm hold of the love of God. Embracing at first but a single promise (15^{18}), it is gradually widened till it includes all divine

favours, and the LORD stands pledged to bestow numberless, priceless, endless blessings. The covenant was the great and sacred charter of the Hebrews. It was the mould of their ideals, the spring of their enthusiasm, the argument of their prayers. They loved it ardently, they clung to it passionately. It gave them everlasting consolation and good hope through grace.

SYMPATHY.—Men who have been brooding over their own cheerless and lonely lot are startled out of their fantastic sadness by a vision of real suffering. The mystery of the world's pain, and the tears that are in mortal things, steel the heart to brave and silent endurance of its own trials. Individual murmuring is hushed by the still sad music of humanity. "Brave men are perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it."[1] God therefore made Abram a witness of the awful tragedy of Israel in Egypt. In a night-vision He unfolded to him the future of his own race, not concealing from him that for long dark ages they would be afflicted as bond-servants in a strange land, but consoling him with the promise that they would ultimately be avenged, and return to their own land with great substance (15^{13-16}). Abram is brought face to face with grander sufferings than his own, becomes one with other men by the enlarging power of sympathy, and learns God's way of disciplining His people for His service. As the vocation of the Hebrews was higher than that of any other nation, they were to be subjected to severer trials, to be trained by a stern and exceptional process. It was the dark periods of adversity, rather than the sunny times of prosperity, that made the Hebrews a people prepared to serve the LORD. Suffering had a chastening, softening, purifying, enlightening influence upon them. The memory of the terrible bondage and glorious deliverance at the beginning of their history kept the Hebrew consciousness ever alive to God's providential method of dealing with His

[1] Emerson.

people. His ways with them never changed; and though they might shudder at the prospect of pain, they always saw in the end how sweet were the uses of adversity. "I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction,"[1] said the LORD to His people. "It is good for me that I have been afflicted,"[2] was the response of a nation.

JUSTICE.—Abram learns that the conquest of Canaan must be delayed for a long time—four generations or centuries—because the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full (15[16]). The old civilisation of Canaan, sated with morbid vice, is to be dismissed, and the young Hebrew race, hungering for the higher truth and pressing toward a divine ideal, is rising into favour. God has ordained that the corrupt and decadent nations of the earth, as cumberers of the ground, shall make room for new and morally healthy races. When vice has sapped the vital strength of a people, they fall like a rotten tree. There is a profound truth in the saying that "the history of the world is the judgment of the world."[3] God wills it that in the struggle of nations for existence the morally strongest and purest shall survive. The destiny of a nation is the result of its character. When a people has filled up the cup of its iniquity, it must drink the cup of judgment. The conquest of Canaan was divinely decreed before it was carried out by men, and the Hebrews were the appointed executioners of the LORD'S sentence. As yet, however, the Amorites had not outlived their day of grace, and were not outlawed of God. He is not unjust to one nation in order to be indulgent to another; He governs all nations for moral ends; and not even for the sake of Abram's seed would He anticipate by an hour the stroke of vengeance on the wicked races of Canaan. "The LORD is righteous in all His ways, and gracious in all His works."[4]

LIGHT.—Symbols are mysteriously suggestive. They are like

[1] Isa. 48[10]. [2] Ps. 119[71]. [3] Schiller. [4] Ps. 145[17].

music, of which we can never say, It means just this one thing and nothing more. God was to be to His people "an awful guide in smoke and flame"; [1] and at the making of the covenant of grace His presence is symbolised by a smoking furnace and a flaming torch appearing in the night (15^{17}). Abram receives the assurance of God's love, not in the full blaze of noonday, and not in his own happiest and sunniest mood, but in the darkness of midnight, and while his mind is oppressed with supernatural fear. Everything terrible is called in to heighten the awe and solemnity of the divine presence. The approach of the supernatural awakens a sensation of dread quite beyond the control of the will. The darkness, the silence, the solitude, the tension are all terrible to the covenanter. The still forms of the slain beasts around him are awful symbols of merited death. Then the LORD'S coming, the sudden transition from gloom to glory, the shining of a great light in the thick darkness as the sign and symbol of covenant love, produces a striking effect. All real knowledge is by contrast: light is known by darkness, and God's grace by man's sin. A great writer has said, "Mere light is too common a thing to make a strong impression on the mind, and without a strong impression nothing can be sublime. . . . Darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light." [2] But it is the sudden change from the one to the other that causes the greatest surprise and delight. The first rays of dawn, following the deepest darkness, thrill our souls with joyful wonder. So God's love, symbolised by light, has always made the deepest impression upon those minds which have first been oppressed with "an horror of great darkness." At no time did God leave His covenant of love without the dread symbols and awful sanctions of His might and majesty. He would not let men abuse His love by forgetting that it was mercy; and herein lay the strength of the Hebrews' religion, that in their relation to God there was a wonderful union of the deepest awe and reverence with the most intimate personal friendship and love. The

[1] Scott. [2] Burke.

new covenant was sealed amid darkness and earthquake.[1] Even in heaven, when the seer beheld the symbol of the covenant, "there followed lightnings and voices and thunderings."[2] Thus God still

> "with majesty of darkness round
> Circles His throne."

If our modern religion is weak, it is because, having no great fear of God's majesty and holiness, no horror of great darkness on account of sin, we are not *surprised* at God's love. In true religion the love of God to men is an astonishing, amazing, all but incredible thing.

> "Philosophers have measured mountains,
> Fathomed the depths of seas, of states, of kings;
> Walked with a staff to heaven, and traced fountains:
> But there are two vast spacious things
> The which to measure it doth more behove;
> Yet few there be that sound them—Sin and Love."[3]

DOMINION.—Abram received the promise that his seed should one day possess the whole region extending from the Nile to the Euphrates (15[18]). Some scholars think that "the river of Egypt" is the *Wady el Arish*, a torrent in the desert of Sinai, dry during the greater part of the year. But it would be entirely out of harmony with the ideal character of the prophecy to name "the great river" in the same breath with a desert stream. The river intended must be the peer of the Euphrates.

> "It flows through old hushed Egypt and its sands,
> Like some grave mighty thought threading a dream."

Once in the history of the Hebrews was this glowing vision of dominion realised. "Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River unto the lands of the Philistines and unto the border of Egypt."[4] And though his wide possessions were lost, and the glory of his kingdom dimmed, by his feeble successors,

[1] Matt. 27[45. 51]. [2] Rev. 11[19]. [3] George Herbert. [4] 1 Kings 4[21].

the ideal was never forgotten. On the contrary, the people of God constantly widened their outlook, until at length they predicted the coming of a King who should have "dominion from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth,"—an ideal with which they entwined the highest hopes that could be conceived for humanity.[1]

XI.

PATIENCE.

GEN. XVI. 1–6.

"All things are best fulfilled in their due time,
And there is time for all things."—MILTON.

ENDURANCE.—"The LORD is good unto them that wait for Him."[2] He teaches all His servants to have patience till His hour strikes: their times are in His hands, and He keeps none of them waiting a moment beyond the right and appointed time. For the drawing out of their faith and the exercise of their patience, He may cross them in their desires and hopes, but His delays are not refusals. He knows "the time to have pity, yea, the set time."[3] The restless and the feverish lose the reward; the blessing is for those who endure. Gen. 16 tells us of three people who needed to acquire the grace of patience. (1) One of them, a slave-girl, more sinned against than sinning, was hard beset in the tent of her jealous mistress, and at length, exasperated beyond endurance, fled into the wilderness (16^{1-6}). The angel of the LORD found her by a fountain, gently rebuked her waywardness, charged her to return and submit herself to her mistress, and promised that great blessings would be found in the way of patient obedience. Duty might seem to her an irksome bondage, vexatious restraints might be put upon her liberty, and it is not so easy to be in subjection to the froward as to the good and gentle.[4] But in the dark day let her wait for the dawning of a brighter. True patience, the endurance of evil for the LORD'S

[1] Ps. 72. [2] Lam. 3^{25}. [3] Ps. 102^{13}. [4] 1 Pet. 2^{18}.

sake, never misses its reward. "Fret not thyself, . . . be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for Him."[1] (2) Hagar's master and mistress, having long expected a promised blessing which was to complete their lives and make them thoroughly happy, became impatient of delay, and tried to snatch the boon in another than God's way. He punished them in His own way. Having waited ten years and grown impatient, they were required to wait other fifteen; and having grasped the coveted blessing before the time, they found that it was not what they expected. Instead of bettering themselves by expediency and policy, they only brought elements of discord and confusion into their lives. "Do not thou hasten above the Most High: for thy haste is vain to be above Him."[2] Better to wait long, meekly, silently, in solitude, weariness, and darkness, than to anticipate God by a single movement of rash haste.

> "Endurance is the crowning quality,
> And patience all the passion of the saints."[3]

COUNSEL.—Abram and Sarah were knit together by a love which knew no alteration. Through a long lifetime they were true helpmates and soul-comrades. They were heirs together of the grace of life. Yet Abram was Sarah's tempter, and Sarah was Abram's tempter. Sarah erred by following the counsel of Abram (12^{13}), and Abram erred by hearkening to the voice of Sarah (16^{2}). "Walk softly, lest, without knowing it, your love should make you sin."[4] We are easily seduced through our affections, and we need to beware of our bosom friends, and they of us. The subtlest allurements come from the lips of a lover. The mistaken kindness of a real friend, who wishes to give us a pleasure or spare us a pain, may be as fraught with danger as the malicious counsel of a false friend, who seeks to lure us to our destruction. The masterpiece of the spirit of evil is to set a friend to take us off from holy self-denial. It may

[1] Ps. $37^{1.7}$.
[2] 2 Esdr. 4^{34}.
[3] J. R. Lowell.
[4] George Macdonald.

be no repellent fiend, but a winsome friend, who makes the worse appear the better reason. It was no enemy, but the choicest and best of friendly comrades and counsellors, who persuaded Hopeful to turn into Bypath Meadow. Peter, as well as Satan, tempted the Lord to lower His ideal, and had to be answered in the same words, "Get thee behind me, Satan." The gentlest and most tender-hearted have need of a note of austerity in their speech. Some Hebrew of wide experience has left this appallingly stern precept: "If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend who is as thine own life, entice thee secretly . . . thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him."[1] It has been well said that "they seem to take away the sun from the world who withdraw friendship from life,"[2] and human love is God's best earthly blessing to man. But Abram had only one perfectly wise and faithful Friend, and we have but one Friend and Lover of our souls of whom we can always be absolutely sure that He will "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

VIRTUE.—Sarah's portrait is firmly and distinctly drawn by a master-hand. She is of the high heroic type of womanhood. She is far from being a puppet or plaything to her lord, as an Eastern wife too often is. In many features she resembles the wise man's ideal of a "virtuous woman," given at the end of the Book of Proverbs. "Virtue" used to denote mind-force or strength of character. Sarah took a full share in all the serious concerns of her husband's life, cherished the same faith (16^2), and bore all the real hardships of her lot with cheerful patience. St. Peter says that all women who "do well and are not put to fear by any terror" are daughters of Sarah.[3] But it was Sarah's fault and misfortune that she could not bear the petty grievances of her lot. She was easily stung and irritated by her inferiors.

[1] Deut. 13^{6-8}. [2] Cicero. [3] 1 Pet. 3^6.

She could not endure the insolence of a maid; she let Hagar's foolish pride and contempt rankle in her breast; and when her heart was so hot with jealousy that she gave up the control of her temper, her husband had to bow his head beneath the blast, and her maid to flee into the wilderness. She lacked one of the loveliest traits of woman's ideal—the law of kindness was not on her tongue.[1] "This is the peculiarity of ill-temper, that it is the vice of the virtuous. It is often the one blot on an otherwise noble character. You know men who would be nearly perfect, and women who would be entirely perfect, but for an easily-ruffled, quick-tempered, and touchy disposition. . . . Generally, too, it is the weak who are the sufferers; for temper is the prerogative of superiors; and inferiors, down to the bottom of the scale, have not only to bear the brunt of the scorn, but to sink their own judgment and spend their lives in ministering to what they know to be caprice."[2] St. Peter praises in woman "the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit."[3]

> "Her voice was ever soft,
> Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman."[4]

LOVE.—The law of monogamy is not found formally enunciated in the Hebrew Scriptures, yet the love of one for one is unquestionably a Hebrew ideal. "They twain shall be one flesh" (2^{24}), is a very ancient divine precept, contained in the earliest stratum of Genesis. "The marriage of one man and one woman is to form the fundamental indissoluble relationship before which all other ties, even the most sacred, must give way."[5] Almost every specimen of polygamy given in the Bible is so thoroughly bad that no one can doubt its radical wrongness even in its mildest form. Abram's relation to Hagar was not contrary to the customs of primitive nations, but Abram's standard of action was the will of God and not the ways of men. He entered into that relation at the instance of his wife, not in

[1] Prov. 31^{26}. [2] H. Drummond. [3] 1 Pet. 3^{4}.
[4] Shakespeare. [5] Schultz.

obedience to God, and whatsoever is not of faith is sin. The practice of the majority, the current of opinion, the spirit of the age, the laxer notions of society, are poor substitutes for the counsel of God. The Mosaic law tolerated polygamy for the hardness of men's hearts, but never sanctioned it; and all the beautiful delineations of wifehood contained in the books of Wisdom and Prophecy presuppose monogamy as the ideal. Nearly all the happiness described in Genesis springs from right relations between men and women, nearly all the misery from wrong relations. Pure love bestows incomparable happiness, impure love creates piteous tragedies. True religion, which is the foundation of the highest and holiest manhood and womanhood, is the best friend of the home and the best guardian of its sanctities. Love refined, purified, and consecrated by faith is necessarily opposed to polygamy. Abram, Sarah, and Hagar had all to suffer for the error in which they were all involved. The avengers of injured love are envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness. Concerted sin is punished by mutual recrimination. Nothing is so hard to bear as love changed to hatred. Sarah had brought Hagar up with her from Egypt to be her lady's-maid, had preferred her to all the girls of the camp, and made her the companion of her solitude. They lived happily together till the shadow of sin fell between them, and then each became to the other an instrument of torture. Polygamy also makes men callous. Abram allowed Hagar to be hardly dealt with (16[6]), and remained silent and inactive while she was being driven from his house at the time when she most required kindness. "These devices, which produced such irregularities and heart-burnings in the families of the patriarchs, are equally mischievous at the present day. The whole system is productive of evil, and that only, to the individual, the family, and the community."[1] Polygamy is the profanation of marriage and the degradation of woman. True religion emancipates woman, raises her to spiritual equality with man, and restores

[1] *The Land and the Book.*

marriage to its proper dignity and purity. The Hebrew ideal of wedded life—the entire self-surrender and mutual delight of two souls—is expressed in the exquisite idyll of the Song of Songs: "My beloved is mine, and I am his."[1]

SELF-KNOWLEDGE.—One of the invariable effects of sin is that it blunts our sensibility and dims our perception of truth and righteousness. It blinds us to our own faults; it makes us special pleaders for ourselves. Having committed a mistake and begun to suffer for it, Sarah first persuaded herself that she had done no wrong; then she looked round for an accomplice on whom she might cast all the blame; after that it was but a step to call God Himself to see and judge if she was not an innocent and injured woman (16[5]). Happily kind Heaven did not take her at her word. Sarah was too proud to admit her error. "In general, pride is at the bottom of all great mistakes."[2] An honest, unreserved acknowledgment of sin is the rarest and most difficult thing in the world. Human nature always bids us accuse others to screen ourselves. Apologies for sin are as ancient as human history. Adam shifted the blame from himself to his wife; Sarah shifted the blame from herself to her husband. There is always a convenient scapegoat on whom we can lay our hands and say, "My wrong be upon thee" (16[5]). We excuse, or extenuate, or altogether deny our sin; self-love, self-trust, self-pity will not let us see anything against ourselves. While the spirit of evil has possession of us, lashing us to do his will, we do not hesitate to incriminate our dearest friend, sacrificing our love to our pride. Or we lay the burden of guilt upon God by blaming our position, our constitution, our fate, our stars—anything but the right thing. When a sinner comes to himself, he blames nobody but himself; his prayer is, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy loving-kindness,"[3] or, "God be merciful to me the sinner."[4] The Hebrews regarded self-knowledge as so difficult that only God could enable them to

[1] Song of Songs 2[16]. [2] Ruskin. [3] Ps. 51[1]. [4] Luke 18[13].

acquire it. "Search me, O LORD, and know my heart,"—so each was taught to pray,—"try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."[1] Happily we know, better than the Hebrews knew, that there is one Substitute who permits us to say to Him, not in bitter anger, but in penitent faith and adoring gratitude, "My wrong be upon Thee."

XII.

COMPASSION.

GEN. XVI. 7–16.

"The heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind."—FABER.

VISION.—When Hagar was alone in the silent desert, weary and sad and despairing, thinking there was no eye to pity her, no heart to feel for her, no hand to guide her, no friend to take her part, "the angel of the LORD found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness" (16^7). "It has been disputed whether the angel of the LORD be one of the angels or the LORD Himself in self-manifestation. The manner in which He speaks leaves little room to doubt that the latter view is the right one: the angel of the LORD is a theophany, a self-manifestation of God. In Gen. 16^{10} the angel of the LORD says to Hagar, 'I will greatly multiply thy seed,' and in Gen 21^{18} the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, 'Lift up the lad, and I will make him a great nation.' The angel identifies himself with God, and claims to exercise the prerogatives of God. Those to whom the angel appears identify him with God: in Gen 16^{13} Hagar called the name of the LORD who had spoken unto her, 'Thou art a God that seest (all-seeing)'; in Gen. 18 the angel is called the LORD."[2] "Though the angel distinguishes himself from God, and speaks of Him in the third person, as when he says to Hagar, 'Jahveh hath heard thy

[1] Ps. $139^{23.\ 24}$. [2] A. B. Davidson.

affliction' (18[14]), yet his appearance and speech are equivalent to the appearance and speech of Jahveh."[1] "God, working at a particular spot, and at a definite point of time, is called the angel of God."[2] It was not in the stir of the Hebrew camp, but in the silence of the wilderness, that the LORD found Hagar. She had been for years in Abram's household, had daily seen her master offer sacrifice, and heard him call upon the name of the LORD. Religion was one of the proprieties of Hebrew camp-life, a solemn and awful ceremonial which had only a distant relation to herself. But God makes a silence in her heart that she may hear Him speak. In the desert He meets her with words of tender rebuke, wise counsel, and gracious promise (16[7-12]). He reveals to Hagar the greatest secret in the world, that God cares for Hagar. For the first time in her life she realises that the LORD sees her, hears her, thinks of her, feels for her. She receives a revelation of the divine pity; she finds God a refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. All that she had heard of God in the camp at Mamre flashes back into her mind, and she wonders that here in the desert God has seen her and she has looked after God (16[13]). To *look after* God was to recognise Him by the traces of His working.[3] Hagar is allowed to see something of God, and to realise that God knows all about her. True heart-religion always begins with this: "He looked to me, I looked on Him." It is the mutual recognition of the Divine Spirit and the human spirit. There is one faith of hearsay and another of vision: "I had heard of Thee with the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth Thee."[4] Hagar's experience was recorded in the name she gave the desert fountain beside which her God met her; "Beer-lahai-roi" means "the well of the living One who seeth me." God's ways and means of winning His people to Himself never undergo any essential change. He still makes a silence and a solitude around us that we may hear Him speak to our hearts. Having robbed us of human comfort and hope, He favours and enriches

[1] Schultz. [2] Hitzig. [3] Schultz. [4] Job 42[5].

us with a revelation of His love. His method is exquisitely described by one of the great Hebrew prophets: "Behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her (*Heb.* to her heart). And I will give her the valley of Achor (Trouble) for a door of hope."[1]

SELF-EXAMINATION.—Self-scrutiny is often the most unpleasant, and always the most difficult, of moral actions. But it is also the most important and salutary; for, as the wisest of the Greeks said, "an unexamined life is not worth living." Because self-examination is both so essential and so difficult, God Himself asks us questions which set us about undertaking this task. "The righteous God trieth the hearts and reins";[2] His word is "quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart."[3] If the Searcher of hearts puts questions, it is for the benefit, not of the Questioner, but of the questioned. When He found Hagar in the desert, He asked her, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence comest thou? and whither goest thou?" He who knew her name and her mistress' name, knew everything else. He questioned her that she might know herself. She was drifting on in a course which she had now for the first time paused to consider, and a pointed and searching question would make her tell herself in plain words just what she was doing. God calls her to review her past and forecast her future. His questions, whence? whither? seem on the surface very easy to answer, yet they pierce far into the heart of things. They are questions about life, conduct, character, and destiny. Hagar answered the first question very simply, "I flee from the face of my mistress, Sarai" (16[8]). But she began to realise that she was also turning her back upon the best home, the purest life, the finest opportunity that she could find anywhere in the world. She was fleeing from goodness, and hope, and happiness, and grace. She was going out of the light, and whither? But she does not attempt to answer the second question, and her silence

[1] Hos. 2[14. 15]. [2] Ps. 7[9]. [3] Heb. 4[12].

is expressive. She knows what is behind her, but she knows not what is before her. She has come to the wilderness of want and hunger and thirst; will she go farther, to the land of darkness and cruelty and sin? The thought is too terrible. Instinct itself makes us "rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of." God's searching questions, whence? whither? imply that for Hagar and for every one there is a right way, and that our great business is to know it and keep to it with full purpose of heart and will. If we have erred from God's way, He says to us, "Return" (16^9). At the same time He persuades and enables us to do it. His presence searched and humbled and changed Hagar, till, submissive to God, she was willing to submit herself to her mistress. Before the LORD found her, and while she felt nothing but her own bitter wrongs, it would have been the hardest thing in the world for her to acknowledge her fault to her mistress. After she saw the LORD, and felt her heart suffused with His wonderful love, she was ready to return and say, I have sinned, forgive me.

FREEDOM.—God has designed that each of the nations of the earth shall have its distinctive aims, spirit, and ideals. Nature, climate, and environment make it impossible that they should all be alike. Nations as well as individuals have a distinctive character stamped upon them. Ishmael the Arab was never intended to be a Hebrew, any more than the Celt is meant to be a Saxon, or the Hindoo an Englishman. To Hagar it was foretold regarding her son, "He shall be as a wild ass among men (*Heb.* a wild-ass man); his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren" (16^{12}). The prophecy is spoken, "not of Ishmael's person, but of his progeny. It is applicable only to the whole nation."[1] Ishmael's destiny may not seem very attractive, especially the first part of the threefold prophecy. But it should be remembered that the wild ass of the desert is

[1] Calvin.

quite different in character—as well as in his Eastern names—from his stupid second-cousin, and our estimate of him should not be prejudiced by his connections. The Arabian wild ass is a more expressive and appropriate national emblem than the British lion. The author of Job knew and admired the wild beasts of the field, and there are few finer pieces of nature-poetry than his description of this beautiful untameable creature of God.[1]

"Who hath let the wild ass go free?
And who hath loosened his bonds?
God hath made the wilderness his home,
And the barren steppes his dwelling.
He scorns the multitude of the city,
And has no heed of the driver's cry.
He ranges the hills as his pasture,
And searches out every green thing."

There is Ishmael the Arab, the wild-ass man, limned to the life: his unrestrained love of freedom; his scorn of city crowds; his hardy, frugal, unconquerable spirit; his home the illimitable desert; his heart in the green oasis. There are few nobler types of manhood than the ideal Arab, and the time to favour Ishmael will come. Unsubdued by arms, Arabia's desert ranger may be won by love. In a beautiful description of the Messiah's reign it is said, "They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before Him."[2]

OBSERVANCE. — Hagar's simple confession of faith, "Thou, God, seest me" (16^{13}), contains an unwelcome and alarming thought for the bad, a grateful and comforting truth for the good. Max Müller says he once heard a child exclaim, "Oh, I wish there were at least *one* room in the house where God could not see me"; and adds, that the words reminded him of the Psalmist's "Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?"[3] Hagar fled into the wilderness, but God was there; and God sees every one in the dark, in the crowd, in solitude, everywhere, and always.

[1] Job 39^{5-8}. [2] Ps. 72^{9}. [3] Ps. 139

"Among the deepest shades of night,
Can there be one who sees my way?
Yes,—God is like a shining light,
That turns the darkness into day."

This is one of the primary beliefs which transformed the Hebrews into the people of God. "The eyes of the LORD," they said, "are in every place, keeping watch upon the evil and the good";[1] "His eyes behold, His eyelids try, the children of men."[2] Faith in God's oversight gives an awful depth and meaning to life and duty. It signifies that God fixes His attention upon us, perceives our motives, scans our thoughts, weighs our actions, and is "acquainted with all our ways."[3] It differs totally from idolatry, whose gods are blind; from atheism, which has no God; from deism, whose God is too exalted to take notice of man; and from agnosticism, to which God is unknowable. Among those who believingly say, "Thou, God, seest me," there are some who say it tremblingly, some who say it rejoicingly. God's omniscience is an appalling thought to transgressors; they dread to think that nothing screens them from God's all-seeing eye; they tremble when they hear of One "unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid." But to all who love and trust the LORD, the belief in His gracious providence is the creed of creeds. Their only fear is lest God should *overlook* them, lest they should have to say, "My way is hid from the Lord."[4] "Thou, God, seest me" brought immense comfort and cheerful hope to Hagar at the fountain in the desert. Mr. Barrie has told us that it was his mother's favourite text. She had a little son who meant, when he grew up, to be a minister and preach his first sermon from this text; but when he was six years old a cart went over him, and his mother carried him home in her arms lifeless. After he had been "twenty years dead," she would say "That day he was coffined, for all the minister prayed, I found it hard to say, 'Thou, God, seest me.' It's the text I

[1] Prov. 15^3 [2] Ps. 11^4. [3] Ps. 139^3. [4] Isa. 40^{27}.

like best noo, though, and . . . I turn't up, often, often in my Bible. I read from the beginnin' o' the chapter, but when I come to 'Thou, God, seest me,' I stop . . . I let the Book lie in my lap; for aince a body's sure o' that, they're sure o' all."

MERCY.—"Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bare, Ishmael" (16^{15}). The name means "God heareth." "Samuel" is another combination of the same words. It is very important to note what God hears. The angel of the LORD said unto Hagar, "Thou shalt call his name Ishmael; because the LORD hath heard thine affliction" (16^{11}). This is one of the tenderest sayings in the Bible. If the words express a general truth, it is a marvellous one. It was no articulate prayer, but the mute appeal of a lonely woman's distress, which moved God to give a gracious answer. Mere misery has a wonderful eloquence when it speaks in the ear of mercy. Affliction is a voiceless prayer which God understands, and to Him its pathos is irresistible. He attends not to words, but to wants. Eloquent prayers which are uttered without sincerity have no wings, and never leave the ground; but the human distress which has no language, or none but a cry, flies upwards and enters into the heart of the Eternal.

XIII.

POWER.

GEN. XVII.

"You have all the power of heaven at your back, and you *must* succeed."
HENRY DRUMMOND.

POWER.—God was about to call Abram to a higher level of service and a higher range of truth—to require of him a perfection which might seem unattainable, and to unfold to him a grace which might seem incredible. But He prefaces the call with the revelation, "I am El Shaddai—God Almighty, the Wielder of power, the All-sufficient" (17^{1}). After that nothing

is impossible, nothing incredible. The august title reveals the infinite resources from which man can draw, the divine energy which ensures his success. Absolute reliance on God's almightiness is the condition of power. For every duty there is an appointed dynamic: "Thy God hath commanded thy strength."[1] The Almighty will not let His servants fail or be put to shame, else that is not His name. He links His power to His imperatives. What we can do in our own strength is one thing, what we are empowered to achieve by omnipotent grace is far different. The possibilities of life are to be measured, not by the ability of man, but by the power and will of God. Instead of desiring a lower ideal, we should pray for a higher energy. "Lord," said Augustine, "give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt." "Attempt great things for God, expect great things from God," said Carey. "Who is sufficient for these things?" asked Paul, and presently answered, "Our sufficiency is of God."[2]

GODLINESS.—God sets before Abram two ideals. First, He requires him to walk before God (17[1]). He is to be a model of the consecrated life to all his descendants. The Hebrews had a dislike for abstract terms. Their profoundest thoughts on religion were vivid pictures. They did not speak of cultivating godliness, or of deepening spiritual life, but of walking before God. To live in the realised presence of God, to order their thoughts and acts so as to harmonise with His character, to rejoice in His company, to look up to Him with a smile of loving recognition in the work and warfare of life—this was to walk before God. It was the Psalmist's ideal to set the LORD always before him,[3] to walk in the light of His countenance;[4] Micah's, to walk humbly with his God.[5] It was Milton's ideal to live ever in the Taskmaster's eye; Brother Lawrence's, to practise the presence of God. "God and the angels are

[1] Ps. 68[28]. [2] 2 Cor. 2[16] 3[5]. [3] Ps. 16[8].
[4] Ps. 89[15]. [5] Mic. 6[8].

spectators," said Bacon. It is the thought of God's presence which makes men serious, devout, earnest, trustful, consecrated, holy. Agnostics preach an independent morality: they would have men to do their duty without a thought of God, who, they say, is in any case unknowable. But common men find, and history proves, that the morality which goes without God soon grows limp and tired, while the righteousness which stays itself on God has an unquenchable ardour and energy. "They that wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."[1] God is the indispensable moral dynamic, and walking before God is the highest ethics. The everlasting goodness is after all godliness—a living before, with, in, for, and like God.

PERFECTION.—The other ideal which God presents to Abram is perfection (17[1]). The LORD shows Himself "strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him."[2] The Psalmist calls himself perfect.[3] God called Job a perfect man,[4] and the reader of the Hebrew Scriptures is bidden mark the perfect man for imitation.[5] Here it is evident that we need a definition. "Perfect" means true-hearted and whole-hearted in the service of God. The Hebrew Scriptures speak of many men as perfect, while they call none sinless. The man who walked with a perfect heart[6] was the man of integrity or sincerity, who saw that the LORD'S service was an integer, not a fraction of life. God could not be satisfied with a partial love, a divided allegiance. No true lover offers less than a whole-hearted affection, nor can he be content with less. Where there is a right to all, partial love is a mockery and an insult. The divine Lover of our souls gives to us, and asks of us, a perfect love. "Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."[7] Perfection, in the Hebrew sense, was a passionate, whole-souled love of

[1] Isa. 40[31]. [2] 2 Chron. 16[9]. [3] Ps. 18[23]. [4] Job 1[1].
[5] Ps. 37[37]. [6] Ps. 101[2]. [7] Deut. 6[5].

God. Partial loyalty was disloyalty; partial obedience was disobedience. The perfect life was simple, because it had one ruling motive—the love of God, and one chief end—the glory of God. The divided life was difficult, because it had mixed motives and heterogeneous ends. Perfection was what we express by such terms as full allegiance, absolute surrender, complete consecration. It was what Bunyan expressed by saying that Emmanuel would not give the least corner of Mansoul to Diabolus to dwell in; He would have all to Himself. It was what Henry Drummond meant when he said, "Don't be an amphibian, half in one world, half in another." It was what Mr. Moody meant when he said, "Be out and out." But the very men whom God called, and who sometimes called themselves, perfect, were the last to say or imagine that they were sinless. The best of men feel themselves the greatest sinners. It was "a perfect man" who said, "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."[1] The Hebrews called no man on earth sinless: "Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?"[2] The perfect adjustment of the will or devotion of the heart is a very different thing from the perfect attainment of the ideal. In the latter sense no man was perfect. "I have seen an end of all perfection," said the Psalmist, "but Thy commandment is exceeding broad."[3] "Not as though I had already attained, or were already perfect," said St. Paul; "but I press on."[4] One sinless life has been lived on earth, and no second. "There's nobody perfect," said Rabbi Duncan; "that's the believer's bed of thorns, that's the hypocrite's couch of ease."

WORSHIP.—Abram had an awe-inspiring sense of a mysterious presence, and fell on his face before God (17^3). Another time he "bowed himself to the earth" (18^2); another, he "stood before the LORD" in an act of intercession (18^{22}). The Hebrews had no fixed rules as to attitudes in devotion. The posture

[1] Job 42^6. [2] Prov. 20^9. [3] Ps. 119^{96}. [4] Phil. 3^{12}.

which the worshipper assumed varied with his mode of feeling. We find some men standing as they pray—Abraham, Phinehas, Solomon (so the penitent publican); some kneeling in prayer—Solomon, Daniel (so Jesus, Peter, Stephen, Paul); some falling on their faces—Abram, Moses, David, Job, Elijah (and so Jesus); some praying in a sitting posture—David and perhaps Nehemiah; some praying with the hands lifted up and spread forth—Moses, David, Solomon. Gestures were natural signs of devotional feeling, and powerful aids to it. Faber says that reverential attitudes are half the battle of vocal prayer. It is natural and befitting to stretch out the hands in supplication; to bow the head in reverence; to bend the knees in petition; to cover the face, close the eyes, or prostrate the whole body, before the majesty of God; to lie "in dust and ashes" before Him under a sense of guilt. Man, penetrated with the mystery of sin, cannot endure without agony the blinding light of God's holiness. Even Moses the servant of God exceedingly feared and quaked in the presence of God;[1] Isaiah felt undone when his eyes saw the King, the LORD of hosts;[2] Daniel had no strength left, and fell with his face toward the ground, when he beheld the great vision;[3] John, when he saw the Son of man, fell at His feet as one dead.[4] This humiliation of the soul is what prepares it to receive a revelation. "Can a man, to this hour, get guidance by any other method than intrinsically by that same—devout prostration of the earnest struggling soul before the Highest?"[5]

SOVEREIGNTY.—God renews His covenant with Abram (17^4), and connects seven promises with it: that Abram shall be the father of a multitude of nations, that kings shall be among his posterity, that the LORD will be a God to him and his seed, that the land shall be given to them as an everlasting possession, that circumcision shall be the sign of the covenant, that Abraham shall have an heir by Sarah, and that the covenant shall be

[1] Heb. 12^{21}. [2] Isa. 6^5. [3] Dan. $10^{8.9}$.
[4] Rev. 1^{17}. [5] Carlyle.

established with Isaac. The third promise—that the LORD will be the God of Abraham and his seed (17[7, 8])—is the all-embracing covenant-promise. It means that God will be to His people all that God can be—that He will exercise His power, wisdom, faithfulness, and grace on their behalf, and never cease working for their happiness. All His attributes are pledged for their welfare. His power will be their protection, His wisdom their guidance, His faithfulness their security, His grace their salvation. It is a promise as large and unlimited as language can express. No words can sum up all that the LORD will be to His people. The "shalls" and "wills" of the covenant—twenty of the former and fifteen of the latter in this chapter—express the fixed purpose of God. They are absolute and infallible. There is no "if" in the covenant of grace. God speaks in imperial language. Man is free, yet God has a plan for humanity which He will carry out. He is "great in counsel, and mighty in work."[1] The covenant is not to be annulled by the sins and shortcomings of any particular generation. It is impossible for the unbelief of man to make the promises of none effect. God has absolute control over the course of history, as over the forces of nature. Man's sin does not thwart His purpose any more than His purpose interferes with human freedom. He is the LORD, and changes not.[2] "If we are faithless, He abideth faithful; He cannot deny Himself."[3] "The gifts and calling of God are without repentance."[4]

FATHERHOOD.—A Hebrew proper name was significant. It was a condensed creed, or story, or prophecy. Abram (High Father) and Ishmael (God heareth) are creeds; Isaac (laughter) and Jacob (supplanter) are stories; Abraham (father of a multitude) is a prophecy. "Abram" does not describe the man who bore the name, as if "High Father" were equivalent to Patriarch; "it is rather the recognition of God as a Father by him who is so named." So at least Delitzsch thought; and if his

[1] Jer. 32[19]. [2] Mal. 3[6]. [3] 2 Tim. 2[13]. [4] Rom. 11[29].

view is correct, the name contains an indication of the early groping of men's minds after the truth of the Fatherhood of God. The Hebrew word for father is AB, and the divine Fatherhood is the alphabet of the Christian religion. Though this doctrine never had anything like the same prominence among the Hebrews, still there are clear enough indications of it in their writings; and certainly the filial consciousness, the childlike spirit of trust, is not wanting in the Old Testament. The LORD says to His people, "Thou shalt call Me, My Father,"[1] "for I am a Father to Israel."[2] And Israel responds, "Now, O LORD, Thou art our Father."[3] "Like as a Father," says the Psalmist, "pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear Him."[4] As applied to the God of Israel, the word "Father" has lost all physical associations, and is used to denote the loving relation to Himself in which the true God has placed His people. It is only through the divine Son, however, that men are learning to acknowledge and rejoice in the universal Fatherhood of God.

NATIONALITY. — The LORD said unto Abraham, "I will establish My covenant between Me and thy seed after thee. . . . And as for thee, thou shalt keep My covenant, thou and thy seed after thee" ($17^{7.9}$). He makes His covenant with the people or nation. The ideal of a covenanted nation was the heart of the Hebrew religion and the life-blood of Hebrew history. The Hebrews had the unalterable conviction that God had entered into a covenant with their race, and that they had solemnly bound themselves to be His people and to serve Him. The covenant ideal was at once the consecration and the inspiration of the people. There was the spirit of duty and service and self-surrender in it; there was the spirit of power and freedom and invincibility in it. It is well known that the ideal of a nation in covenant with God has had an extraordinary fascination for the people of Scotland. Of its value and power one of the greatest

[1] Jer. 3^{19}. [2] Jer. 31^{8}. [3] Isa. 64^{8}. [4] Ps. 103^{13}.

of living Scotsmen has spoken thus: "A thought has played a large part in Scottish story. . . . Side by side with the intense type of personal piety there was, in Reformation and later days, an equally clear perception of the duty, not of a Church, but of a nation to its God. . . . When our typical form of individual piety is taken, as it ought always to be taken, along with the old desire to make the collective life of a community subserve the ends of righteousness, to make the nation an instrument of doing God's will on earth, our hereditary ideal of religion—I at least will not hesitate to avow it—is the grandest, the most catholic, the broadest which any Church or land has ever endeavoured to embody throughout the nineteen Christian centuries. The thought of a covenanted nation was both great and true—a thought most difficult in virtue of its greatness to apply in adequate detail, but better fitted to raise men's daily practice out of selfishness and sin, and to make them fellow-workers with the risen Christ, than any separate thought in the history of the universal Church."[1]

CONSECRATION.—Circumcision was the appointed sign of the covenant (17^{11}). Sometimes the covenant itself was said to be in the flesh (v.[13]), the thing signified being used for the sign. It is somewhat difficult for us to appreciate the sacred significance of this rite. Whatever it originally was,—and it may be traced to what were intellectually very crude conceptions,—it was invested by the Hebrews with profound spiritual meaning. It was the symbol of moral purity, of ethical circumcision—the cleansing of the heart from the pollution of sin: "The LORD shall circumcise thine heart, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart."[2] Circumcision was the mark of entrance into the believing community with all its rights and duties. It consecrated a man to the worship and service of the LORD, and secured to him the blessings of the covenant. It was designed to be an avowal of faith, a testimony to faith, and an assistance to faith. St. Paul

[1] Principal Millar, of Madras. [2] Deut. 30^{6}.

calls it "a seal of the righteousness of faith."[1] All male Hebrew children were consecrated to God by this rite (17^{12}). It was the sign and seal of their privileges, signifying that the LORD was their God in childhood as He would be in manhood. It was the mark of the rights of slave children as well as of the freeborn ($17^{12.\ 13}$). Bond and free alike were heirs of salvation. To the pure all things are pure, and even the child Jesus was "circumcised on the eighth day, according to the commandment."[2] If any man despised and neglected the sacrament, he declared himself to have broken the covenant and denied the faith, and that soul was cut off from his people (17^{14}). As believers are still in the same covenant of grace with Abram, as they are still justified by faith, the promise is still unto them and to their children.[3] Now are the children holy.[4] Their privileges have never been withdrawn or curtailed. The children have not been cast out of the covenant. Jesus did not rob them of their charter. He simply replaced the sacrament of circumcision by the sacrament of baptism, which equally seals and secures to the children the same ancient covenant rights.

FAITH.—When Abram was promised a son in his own and Sarah's old age, "he fell upon his face, and laughed" (17^{17}). Questions arose "in his heart," but never came to his lips. The tidings seemed almost too good and too wonderful to be true; yet "looking unto the promise of God, he wavered not through unbelief, but waxed strong through faith, giving glory to God, being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform."[5] We read of believers who, on receiving extraordinary tidings, "believed not for joy, and wondered."[6] Abram laughed, and wondered, and for a moment questioned, but did not disbelieve. Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt. Behind all natural obstacles, behind all our questions, suggestions, and surmises, we see God, and faith triumphs.

[1] Rom. 4^{11}. [2] Luke 1^{59}. [3] Acts 2^{39}.
[4] 1 Cor. 7^{14}. [5] Rom. 4^{20}. [6] Luke 24^{41}.

There is no presumption in believing God. The Hebrews gave the quietus to many doubts with the reverent question, "Who is like unto Thee, O LORD, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" The principle underlying the narrative is of immense value. Reason makes its careful distinctions between the likely and the unlikely, and teaches that probability is the guide of life. Men raise their doubts into a system, and declare that miracles do not happen. Faith looks to God's almightiness, and concludes that the unexpected will happen. Unbelief laughs at miracles, and calls them impossibilities.

"Faith laughs at impossibilities,
And says, It shall be done."

LIFE.—The joyful promise of an heir suddenly brought a spasm of fear to Abram's heart. What if the birth of another son should bode ill to his firstborn? Would the LORD withdraw His tender mercies and shut up His compassions from Hagar's child? Would He abandon him to some cruel fate? Abram uttered a passionate heart-cry for his son, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before Thee!" Fear made him an intercessor. Parental love and solicitude find their natural outlet in fervent prayer, and nothing reacts upon and increases parental affection so much as earnest intercession. Abram's prayer was ejaculatory, swift as an arrow of light or a glance of the mind. Every devout heart sends up many such winged words to heaven every day. The important matter is not how long one prays, but how intensely and earnestly. The longest prayer may have the shortest flight, the shortest prayer the longest. If one's prayer reaches heaven it is long enough. "Prayer is like lightning, and does not take time."[1] Abram prays for Ishmael, naming him in prayer, not describing him in a circular way, and stating distinctly the blessing he craves for him. Great love and great fear make definite prayers. The boon Abram seeks for his son is life before God. The LORD is He "in whose hand is the soul of every living

[1] Henry Drummond.

thing, and the breath of all mankind." [1] Abram knew that he had no grounds for anxiety about Ishmael's physical health. The archer boy was as robust a child as ever felt the wild joys of living. What the father desired was that his son should not be excluded from the sphere of God's love, that he should be cared for, guided, and blessed by God. In the Hebrew idea of life "there is always included the thought of blessedness, of fellowship with God. No one who does not rejoice before God in the light of life can be said to live. An existence without God, and without joy in Him, is not worthy of the name." [2] "Life in His favour lies," [3] and the thought of a beloved child missing the true life fills the sympathetic heart with a dread which speeds the soul's petitions up to the throne of God. The modern question, "Is life worth living?" was answered long ago. Life without God, the Hebrews believed, was certainly not worth living. But life before God, life irradiated by the light of His countenance, life embosomed in His love, is infinitely desirable, now and for ever.

XIV.

HOSPITALITY.

GEN. XVIII. 1–15.

"Among the guests there never cometh
One who can find such high and honoured place."—SPITTA.

SCRIPTURE.—The narrative contained in Gen. 18–19 is one of enthralling interest. It is an Epic of Mercy and Judgment. The divine acceptance of the righteous and reprobation of the wicked are the double theme of the piece. Good and evil, light and shade, are as vividly contrasted as in Michael Angelo's Last Judgment. Above, on the clear heights of Mamre, the friend of God, radiant in moral beauty, receives celestial visitants, and the presence of God makes a heaven on earth; below, in the sunken cities of the Plain, flagitious vice and insatiable lust turn human

[1] Job 12^{10}. [2] Schultz. [3] Ps. 30^{5}.

life into a hell. Here, the children of light, the beauty of holiness, the rewards of righteousness; yonder, "the city of dreadful night," the works of darkness, the wages of sin. The glory of saints and angels is intensified by contrast with the vileness of incarnate fiends. The style of the narrative is in keeping with the great ideas. Only in the Hebrew Scriptures can we find language so noble and simplicity so fearless. "The Bible," says one of the great masters of style, "should be read if it were for nothing but the grand language in which it is written, an education in itself."[1] "The excellence of Holy Scripture," says another of them, "does not arise from a laboured and far-fetched elocution, but from a surprising mixture of simplicity and majesty, which is a double character, so difficult to be united that it is seldom to be met with in compositions merely human."[2]

HOSPITALITY.—Heaven was far away and inaccessible to the Hebrews, but earth was not inaccessible to God. It was possible for God to reveal Himself, to visit the sons of man,[3] and what was possible became actual. This was the essential fact, and it was clothed in many forms by "the poetical, vivacious, and powerful phantasy of the people of Israel."[4] Sitting at the door of his tent in the slumberous Eastern noontide, Abraham sees three strangers draw near. He is unconscious of their supreme dignity, and for this reason the welcome he extends to them serves all the better as a pattern of hospitality. He runs to offer them obeisance. The ancient Hebrew "looked upon politeness not merely as a desirable outward formality, but as the indispensable expression of a good disposition."[5] Abraham begs the strangers to honour him by resting under his tree and accepting a morsel of meat. "A gentleman," says Newman, "makes light of favours when he is doing them; he thinks he is receiving an honour when he is conferring a kindness."[6] The

[1] Tennyson. [2] Newman. [3] Ps. 84.
[4] A. B. Davidson. [5] Gunkel. [6] Newman.

morsel turns out to be an ample repast, "tender and good." Abraham has many servants at his beck, and Sarah many maids; but the master and mistress bestir themselves to prepare the meal with their own hands; and when the table is spread under the green tree, Abraham stands to wait upon his guests (v.[8]). His lowliness of mind deems no office degrading which can be lovingly rendered. This is sweet, stately, noble hospitality. Times and manners change; every age has its etiquette, and East differs from West; but courtesy and loving-kindness are the same under all guises. True welcome never consisted in meats and drinks, but in the affection of the heart. Love can make a little gift excel. The sympathy which feels for others' need, the kindness which is happy in serving, the modesty which says little and does much, the open house and heart and mind—these are some of the elements of hospitality. But this grace cannot be analysed. "There is an emanation from the heart in genuine hospitality which cannot be described, but is immediately felt."[1] Abraham and Sarah found that the rewards of hospitality are spiritual. It brings a blessing to the giver as well as the receiver, and some who show love to strangers entertain angels unawares.[2] The hosts and hostesses of the Bible, generous and philanthropic souls who did not squander the gifts of God on sinful pleasures, nor hoard them for selfish ends, but delighted to spend them in doing good,—Abraham and Sarah, Rebekah and Abigail, the women of Sarepta and Shulem, and like them the sisters of Bethany, Lydia, and Prisca, and Gaius,—found that their kindness came back to them an hundredfold in the hallowing memories and heavenly influences which lingered in their homes, and in the joy of the diviner life to which they were called and stimulated by the messengers of God.

FAITH.—When it was announced to Abraham that he should have a son, Sarah was not present, Eastern etiquette requiring a lady of rank to remain in her private apartment during a visit of

[1] Washington Irving. [2] Heb. 13[2].

male strangers. Nigh in her tent she sat, of all unseen, but hearing all. Through the intervening curtain she listened to the promise, and laughed at it with bitter incredulity. It sounded liker irony than truth, and awoke in her the spirit of doubt and denial. But when she heard the Guest rebuke her secret laughter, and expose the dissimulation into which she was betrayed by fear, and ask in tones which seemed more than human if anything was too hard for God, she was shaken out of her doubt, and restored to the humility of faith. She received the great blessing, "because she judged Him faithful who had promised."[1] Incredulous laughter at divine things, the mockery of the unbelieving human heart, betrays one's natural disposition to limit the power of God, and to judge the future, not by faith, but by our own notions of what is reasonable and likely. Low and unworthy thoughts of God are at the bottom of all doubt as to His power to perform what He has promised. We glide into the dialect of infidelity, into bitter and arrogant questioning, because we forget that we have a great God and of great might, who gives splendidly and graciously after His own nature. "No word from God shall be void of power."[2] The language of faith is, "Thou art great, and doest wondrous things."[3] The whole Old Testament regards the miraculous as a matter of course. "No pious Hebrew ever doubts that when God wishes to give His servants special help, the necessary occurrences must take place, whether they be ordinary or extraordinary."[4] The greatest of men soon find their limitations; but "is anything too hard for the LORD?" (18^{14}). Is "difficult" or "impossible" a word in His vocabulary? One of the great prophets makes answer, "Ah, LORD God! behold, Thou hast made the heaven and the earth by Thy great power and stretched-out arm, and there is nothing too hard for Thee."[5] Morally, some things are, of course, impossible for God. He "cannot lie,"[6] He "cannot deny Himself,"[7] He

[1] Heb. 11^{11}. [2] Luke 1^{37}. [3] Ps. 86^{10}. [4] Schultz.
[5] Jer. 33^{17}. [6] Heb. 6^{18}. [7] 2 Tim. 2^{13}.

"cannot look on iniquity" without displeasure.[1] But no miracle or grace or power is too hard for Him to perform. Omnipotence knows no limits to its sphere of action. This was what Job believed: "I know that Thou canst do everything";[2] and what Jesus taught: "With God all things are possible."[3]

WIFEHOOD.—Sarah called her husband "Adoni—my lord" (18[12]). St. Peter, when writing about "the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit," praises the holy women of the olden time, who trusted in God and were in subjection to their husbands, "as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord."[4] Sarah's use of this title of honour in reference to her husband would in itself be an insufficient reason for making her a pattern of wifehood, especially as some words of quite an opposite import are recorded against her (16[5]). But the apostle sees that the dutiful word is weighted with all the love and loyalty of a lifetime. When Abraham made the great venture of faith, renouncing hearth and home for conscience' sake; when he lived a nomad life among strangers, summering and wintering under canvas, enduring trials and afflictions, she was always by his side, lightening the way he travelled, doubling his joys and dividing his sorrows, ordering the peace and comfort of his house, cheering him to face all hardships with constancy of mind, and sometimes in hours of temptation and danger putting him to shame by her quiet-hearted heroism. Nothing is finer than the courage of a true and noble woman. Sarah was a Princess in name and in nature. She understood her husband's divine vocation, shared his religious aspiration, and never ceased to be his true helpmate. He could not but see in her "the stately form of female fortitude, of perfect wifehood."[5] Thus she has her rightful place in the great Roll of Faith.[6] The strength of character and woman's love which carried her through all her trials with a spirit unbroken and a fountain of

[1] Hab. 1[13]. [2] Job 42[2]. [3] Matt. 19[26].
[4] 1 Pet. 3[6]. [5] Tennyson. [6] Heb. 11[11].

laughter still in her heart, were not less worthy of praise than the faith which subdued kingdoms and wrought righteousness.

XV.

EDUCATION.

GEN. XVIII. 16–19.

"I acknowledge the all-but omnipotence of early culture and nurture."
CARLYLE.

FRIENDSHIP.—The visit of friendship at Mamre over, the strangers turned their faces toward Sodom, Abraham escorting them on their way (18[16]). A work of inquisition and judgment was now about to begin. But the LORD first revealed His purpose to Abraham. There were two reasons for making him the man of His counsel: it was befitting that the Hebrew who was His friend should be made His confidant; and it was necessary that the man who was chosen to be the head of a holy family, the founder of a great nation, the channel of blessing to the world, should know the principles of divine government. When Philo the Jew quotes Gen. 18[17] in one of his books, the text runs, "Shall I hide from Abraham, *My friend*, that which I do?" The Septuagint has "from Abraham, My servant." The words "My friend" may once have been in the Hebrew, and nowhere would they be more appropriate than in this passage. The relation of friendship was a strong reason why the LORD should confide His secrets to Abraham. In Isaiah He calls Israel "the seed of Abraham, My friend"; [1] and St. James says [2] expressly that Abraham was called the friend of God. El Khalil, El Khalil Allah—the Friend, the Friend of God [3]—is the name which the Arabs habitually give their renowned ancestor. No prince, or noble, or hero ever had so honourable a title as "the friend of God." Abraham would never have dreamed of assuming it. As Dr. Whyte has said,

[1] Isa. 41[8]. [2] Jas. 2[23]. [3] 2 Chron. 20[7].

"Abraham would have protested against, and would have repudiated the name of friend with fear and shame." But while it was received with all humility, it must have filled his heart with unutterable joy. No man has any claim to God's friendship; all men are by nature enemies to God. Friendship between God and man can be initiated, continued, perfected by God alone. God reveals His love to man, and, when man responds to the divine call, there is opened in his own renewed heart a fountain of love to God which becomes the master-passion of his soul, transforming his life, and making him great, wise, good, and noble enough for the LORD to call him, and for all men to call him, the friend of God. Abraham's friendship with God was once unique, it is now typical. Divine friendship is within the reach of every believer. It is the high ideal which our Lord set before all His disciples: "Ye are My friends, if ye do the things which I command you. No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends; for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known unto you."[1]

FOREKNOWLEDGE. — Abram's election to service was the second reason for his being taken into God's counsel. Because he was chosen to be the founder of a holy nation, and a channel of blessing to humanity, God reveals to him the principles on which He rewards and punishes men. "Surely the LORD God will do nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets."[2] "I have *known* Abraham," He says, "to the end that he may command his children and his household after him" (18[19] R.V.). This means, "I have taken knowledge of him in grace, I have befriended and chosen him." The same idea is found in Amos' words, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth."[3] We often ask the question, Is God knowable to man? That seems to be the fundamental question of religion. But there are more important preliminary questions, Is man knowable to God? and has God taken knowledge

[1] John 15[14. 15]. [2] Amos 3[7]. [3] Amos 3[2].

of man? The Hebrews were certain that man could never by searching find out God,[1] but they were equally certain that God could and did take knowledge of man in such a way that man should have a real though imperfect knowledge of God. Every believer knows that God has known him; he is as sure of that as he is of anything. He would never have left the realm of spiritual darkness of his own accord; his salvation has been planned, provided, secured, and maintained, as it will be perfected, by God. He gives God all the praise. "Truly," said Luther, "our knowledge is more passive than active, *i.e.* it is rather being known than to know." One of Paul's self-corrections is full of significance, "But now that ye have come to know God, or rather to be known of God."[2] When a friend of Frederick Maurice said, "I have found God," Maurice interposed, "Or rather have been found by Him." Abram was chosen to be a spiritual leader of men, and his sense of divine foreknowledge was invaluable and indispensable to him. "He who is destined for a work of religious revolution must have a full conviction that God is acting directly, immediately, consciously, and therefore with irresistible power upon him and through him. He who is not predestined, who does not believe himself predestined, as the author of a great religious movement, but in whom God is not manifestly, sensibly, avowedly working out His pre-established design, will not be a saint or reformer."[3]

EDUCATION.—Abraham was chosen to be a blessing to the whole earth (18[18]); but his vocation was to begin to take effect in the simplest way. He was called to teach his own children and his household (18[19]), who again would hand down the truth to their children and their households. His being a blessing to the world depended on his being a blessing to his own home. The lamp of truth must first be lighted in one dark place. Saving knowledge is diffused over the earth, not like sunlight,

[1] Job 11[7]. [2] Gal. 4[9]. [3] Dean Milman.

but like torchlight, which is passed from hand to hand. Abraham is chosen "that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the LORD, to do justly and rightly" (18[19]). This is the first Welfare of Youth scheme—God's own unalterable scheme. He makes the family the spiritual unit of society, and His educational code, addressed to every Hebrew parent, ran thus: "These words which I command thee this day shall be in thine heart, and thou shalt teach them diligently to thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."[1] This divine method may be supplemented, but must never be supplanted. The responsibility of the religious training of the young can never be shifted from parents to strangers. "Train up a child in the way he should go" is addressed to a parent; and no other work that God gives a man to do is so important, so sacred, so far-reaching in its influence. The parent is the child's first and best teacher, whose duties can never be adequately done by a substitute. No one can lodge a great moral or religious truth in the opening mind of a child as a father or mother can. No person has the same opportunities, the same motives, the same obligations, the same power as the parents have. Neither the Church nor the State can subvert the order of nature. The words and ways, the ideal and spirit of the parents do more to shape the character of their children than all other influences combined. It was the home that made the Hebrews the people of God and the most influential nation in the history of mankind. "It is from the nursery," said Tholuck, "that the world is governed." "Believe me," a Prime Minister has said, "the roots of empire are in the home. It is in the family we build the commonwealth."[2] The home-school has been called the great factor of national success; it is certainly the fountain of a nation's purest and noblest life. "All other causes," says Sir John Gorst, "have a comparatively small effect upon national

[1] Deut. 6[7]. [2] Rosebery.

character, which is in the main the product for good or evil of powerful causes which operate, not in the school, but in the home." Progress in secular education is no compensation for the loss of domestic religion. God will not let us change His methods with impunity. One quarter of an hour daily devoted to earnest family worship does infinitely more for the formation of character than all the long hours given to secular knowledge. "*Pro aris et focis*"—"For altar and hearth"—is still the most sacred of battle-cries. Church, school, and home are three abiding institutions; but the greatest of these is home. "Blessed is the son who has studied with his father, and the father who has instructed his son."[1]

AUTHORITY.—It was the LORD'S purpose that Abraham—here as usual the ideal Hebrew—should command his children and his household after him (18[19]). "Command" is a strong word, but not too strong to express the authority which God delegates to parents, and for which they are to give account to God. Only a strong government can be true and tender. Human nature is such that a lax discipline, which tolerates sin or treats it lightly, which allows a false freedom, which humours the child and gratifies his appetites and his vanity, is essentially weak and cruel. The Hebrews teach us that "the laws of the family have a religious character, and are to be regarded with holy awe."[2] It is the parent's right and duty, not to make laws for his household, but rather to exact obedience to divine laws: "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." Parental authority is here based on faith; and if the children lose their reverence for their parents, the first reason is that the parents have lost their reverence for God. When authority is not arbitrary but moral, it secures the blessings of order and peace and happiness; and reverence for parents becomes reverence for all that is just and true and pure and good. Nothing is so wholesome and bracing to one's character as to grow up under

[1] Talmud. [2] Schultz.

strong and wise and holy laws. Discipline, it has been said, is so important that it may almost be called salvation. Where strong and true love exercises a spell which makes the lightest word a law—where "all's law and yet all's love"—obedience is a spirit and not a form, and there is true liberty in exact proportion to obedience. The failure to assert authority is the betrayal of a solemn trust, which endangers the best interests of a household. It was a good and devout Hebrew's condemnation that "his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not";[1] that he honoured them above God.[2] Soft, easy, indulgent as he was, Eli plagued himself and his house by his kindness to his children's sin. There is the rigour of true love in these words written by the mother of two of the best men that have ever lived: "In order to form the minds of children, the first thing is to conquer their will and bring them to an obedient temper. This is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education, without which precept and example will be ineffectual. As self-will is the root of all sin and misery, so whatever cherishes this in children ensures their after wretchedness and irreligion; whatever checks and mortifies it promotes their future happiness and piety."[3] Some parents delay the religious discipline of their children under the impression that serious thoughts are not to be encouraged in the young; others do it on the principle that every one should be left to decide for himself in matters of religion. "Thewall," says Coleridge, "thought it unfair to influence a child's mind by inculcating any opinions before it should have come to years of discretion, and be able to choose for itself. I showed him my garden, and told him it was my botanical garden. 'How so,' said he, 'it is covered with weeds.' 'Oh,' I replied, '*that* is only because it has not yet come to its age of discretion. The weeds, you see, have taken the liberty to grow, and I thought it unfair in me to prejudice the soil towards roses and strawberries."

[1] 1 Sam. 3^{13}. [2] 1 Sam. 2^{29}.
[3] Susannah Wesley.

GUIDANCE.—Every believer was to teach his children and his household to keep the way of the LORD (18[19]). Here is another instance of the Hebrew love of simple and concrete terms. "The way of the LORD" was the whole course of moral and religious thought and action which the people of God were to pursue—the ideal life which God set before His servants. He did not leave them to find out their own way. "O LORD," said one of the prophets, "I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps."[1] But as God has given the stars their orbits, the earth its path, the rivers their courses, so He has given man his way. This is not merely the way of life which God prescribes for man and approves of in man; it is the LORD'S own way revealed to man. There is a moral law universal in its operation and binding upon all moral beings, binding even upon God. This law is the expression of God's perfect character; and though no man fully conforms to it, it is the true law of every man's life and happiness. As there are not two or many gods, but one God, so there are not two or many ways of life, but one way. To learn it is the best education and noblest science which man can receive. This way is perfect, and permanent, and free—every man enjoys the right of way. "And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for His people: the wayfaring men, though simple, shall not err therein."[2] It is called the way of understanding, the way of truth, the way of righteousness, the way of holiness, the way of wisdom, the way of peace, the way of good men, the right way, the highway, the perfect way, the way everlasting. God sent many prophets to teach men His way, and at length One who could say, "I am the Way."

CHARACTER.—Abraham followed the divine method of instruction with the best results. He did not give his children

[1] Jer. 10[23]. [2] Isa. 35[8].

and his household what we now usually understand by education. Among the Hebrews reading and writing were long the accomplishments of the few. The very words are not found in Genesis. Yet the young Hebrews received, in happy circumstances, a noble education for head and heart, body and soul. Abraham taught them by word and example to *know* the way of the LORD—true religion, and to *do* justice and judgment—true morality (18^{19}). He showed them how to walk before God, to trust in Him for righteousness, to pray to Him for guidance. He required them to be faithful in their service, simple in their habits, pure in their lives. He instructed them to be peaceful and generous and brotherly. At the same time he trained them to be strong and brave and manly, to fight, when occasion required, for a good cause, and to be submissive to God's will, if need be, even unto death. They learned the lessons to good purpose. Isaac was consecrated to God in spirit from his childhood; Hagar believed in the all-seeing God; God was even with the lad Ishmael (21^{20}); the steward Eliezer had a perfectly childlike trust in his master's God; and Abram's home-born trained men (14^{14}) were the bravest of the brave, going into battle with their master like Cromwell's Puritans or Havelock's Saints. The highest education is not the storing of the memory with knowledge, but the cultivation of manly and womanly character.

XVI.

INTERCESSION.

GEN. XVIII. 20–33.

"What are men . . .
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer,
Both for themselves and those whom they call friend?"
TENNYSON.

JUDGMENT.—Viewed from the heights above Mamre, the guilty cities lay still and peaceful in the lovely Circle of Jordan. Even

in the hush of evening no audible voices came up the slopes to where "Abraham stood yet before the LORD" (18^{22}). But from the cities a great mysterious cry ascended to God the Judge and Avenger ($18^{20.21}$). There are loud testimonies to all human wrongs. Sin, once committed, seems over and done; sinners promise themselves impunity, and earthly judges sleep; but the cry of violated purity—as of yore the cry of an innocent brother's blood,[1] and in later ages the cry of labourers' hire kept back by fraud[2]—fills earth and heaven, eloquently appealing to God to punish the guilty.

> "My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
> And every tongue brings in a several tale." [3]

This idea of crime demanding retribution pervaded the ancient world; it was exhibited with terrific power in Greek tragic poetry. Among the Hebrews punishment was regarded as the work of a personal Judge. Hearing the cry of the cities, God purposed to "go down and see" their actual condition (18^{21}). This is a vividly human way of expressing and visualising the fact that God acts according to the strict laws of justice, that His judgments are preceded by a full and impartial inquiry, that He condemns no man without a trial. "He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness." [4] Vengeance is called His strange work.[5] Still He vindicates His character as the Judge of all the earth, who will by no means clear the guilty. All His judgments have a merciful purpose. His severity has love at its core as its motive. It condemns the wicked in mercy to the rest of mankind. It prevents the torrent of sin from rushing over the world. It seeks the purity of the race when it removes those families which have become horribly depraved. "When Thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness." [6]

INTERCESSION.—Abraham stood on the heights overlooking the valley of the Jordan—according to tradition at the spot now

[1] Gen. 4^{10}. [2] Jas. 5^{4}. [3] Shakespeare.
[4] Joel 2^{13}. [5] Isa. 28^{21}. [6] Isa. 26^{9}.

called *Kepher Barucha*—and made intercession for Sodom. He sought to avert from the cities of the Plain the judgment which was threatened. The LORD listened graciously to his prayer. He loves intercessory prayer, for the less of self there is in our petitions, the more of love, and therefore the more of God. No man ever receives a divine blessing without having poured upon him the spirit of prayer for others. Every true believer's soul is consumed with holy desires for the good of men. He grasps the mighty promises and attributes of God, and turns them all into arguments. When a man comes out of himself, and becomes an intense pleader for others, the LORD is near to answer him. There is much in Abraham's intercession to admire and imitate. (1) He prayed with *charity*. He assumed that there were at least fifty righteous men in Sodom. He could not believe that the whole populace was debased. Since the wisest may err in their opinions of their fellow-men, we ought always to begin with the judgment of charity, which hopes and believes all things. Brotherly love is the secret and strength of intercession. The believer's detachment from the world does not mean indifference to the world. He loves the world because God loves it. Separation from sin and sympathy with sinners are equal and not opposite. As Abram had once saved Lot and Sodom by the sword, it was natural that he should now seek to save them by intercession. Prayer and good deeds constantly react on one another. Do a man a kindness, and you will be disposed to pray for him; pray for him, and you will be kind to him. While Abram's pleading was generous and large-hearted, it turned out that he was mistaken in his charitable judgment; for instead of fifty righteous men being in Sodom, there was only one. Still his mistake was nobler than that of the great prophet who thought there was but one faithful man left in Israel, when there were seven thousand. (2) He prayed with *jealousy* for God's glory. He believed in the rectitude of the Judge (18^{25}), and feared that God's name would be compromised if Sodom were destroyed. The Hebrews held that both the righteous and the wicked shall be "recompensed in

the earth."[1] They could not believe in the present failure of justice, and as yet they did not know of the future recompense for the immense wrongs of the world. Rightly or wrongly, Abraham supposed that God's honour demanded a certain course, and in any case his zeal for the divine glory is admirable. He was sensitive to everything that touched the divine name. He would not sacrifice a ray of God's glory. God's character was dearer to him than his own, and his chief desire was that it should be vindicated in the world. Men pray best when God's cause and honour lie near their own hearts. "Glorify Thy name," "hallowed be Thy name," should always be the first and most urgent of all our petitions. (3) He prayed with *humility*. He whom others called the friend of God, the father of the faithful, called himself "but dust and ashes" (18^{27}). The higher he rose in God's favour, the lower he sank in his own esteem. He was nothing, God was all. "Humility does not consist in abasing ourselves lower than we are. But as all virtue is founded in truth, so humility is founded in a true and just sense of our own weakness, misery, and sin."[2] Growth in humility is progress towards truth. Abraham's fellowship with God, his partaking of the divine nature, his sublime calling and destiny, did not prevent him from remembering that his native home was in the dust. The nearer he got to God, the more he was conscious of his unworthiness to be there. "If we think we are something, we have only to turn our eyes to God, and immediately we acknowledge that we are nothing."[3] (4) He prayed with *reverence*. He twice confessed his fear that he was guilty of overboldness in having "taken upon him to speak to the LORD" ($18^{27.31}$); and twice prayed God not to be angry with him for persisting in speaking ($18^{30.32}$). He felt he was too audacious in appearing to expostulate with God. He feared that his earnestness bordered on presumption. He hardly realised his right to speak at all. Nearness to God increases one's awe of His majesty. Perfect love casts out fear, but deepens and

[1] Prov. 11^{31}. [2] William Law. [3] Calvin.

intensifies reverence. (5) He prayed with *importunity*. He renewed his request time after time—six times in all—asking a greater thing each time. He pressed and urged his suit. He "stood yet before the LORD" (18[22]), he "spake yet again" (v.[29]); he would "speak yet but this once" (v.[32]). Again and again he used almost the same language, as men do when their hearts are deeply stirred. True prayer is earnest, intense, fervent, importunate. God gives men what they seek with their whole heart. He cannot endure lukewarm petitions. If we pray without fervour, we as good as ask a refusal. It is the ardent, persistent suppliant whom God rewards. The boldest words of a loving heart are not irreverent in His ear. Luther sometimes prayed in this audacious strain: "Lord, I will have my will of Thee at this time, for I know that my will is Thy will." As he would take no denial, God did not deny him, and people looking at him as he passed would say, "There is the man who can get what he likes from God." (6) Abraham prayed with *success*. "The fervent prayer of a righteous man is strong in its working."[1] The prayers of the Hebrews were all based on the assumption that prayer moves the will of God. The modern theory that prayer is useful to ourselves, but cannot be operative upon God, is neither Hebrew nor Christian. It is true that Abraham's intercession did not avert the doom of Sodom itself. The depraved inhabitants of the Jordan Valley were worthy of death. But "it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow" (19[29]). Thus God made Abraham "a second time the deliverer of Lot from ruin, strongly marking the contrast between the two, in that the weak brother owed his safety to the intercession of him who, enjoying God's favour, was content to be without earthly portion."[2]

RIGHTEOUSNESS.—"Shall not," asked Abraham, "the Judge of all the earth do right?" It was the glory of the Hebrew religion

[1] Jas. 5[16]. [2] Newman.

that this question admitted of only one answer. The Hebrews believed in a righteous order of the world under the sovereign rule of a righteous God. The Hebrew conscience has been called the keenest religious instrument of the ancient world, and it made religion ethical through and through. (1) The grandest possession of the Hebrews was the character of their God. They had a noble passion for righteousness, and exalted it to the supreme place among human interests; but they had no abstract righteousness, no independent morality. They derived their ideas and their practice of righteousness from God; they had and knew no other justice than God's. The LORD their God was the personal source, sanction, standard, and ideal of righteousness. He was not merely the impersonation of ethics, but the Creator of universal law; and to suppose God swerving from justice was to suppose the spring and pattern of morality becoming immoral, which was unthinkable. We moderns are in the habit of saying that there is *something* above ourselves which makes for righteousness, or that the soul of the world is just. The Hebrews teach us rather to say, "Righteous art *Thou*, O LORD, and upright are Thy judgments"; [1] "the LORD our God is righteous." [2] (2) The Hebrews attained the idea of a righteous order and judgment of the world. There is justice in heaven, and it is extended to earth; God rules the world in righteousness. "Verily, there is a God that judgeth in the earth." [3] The essential feature of His rule is its morality. His government is not despotic; for absolute power in His hands cannot err or act unjustly. The righteousness of God is "the mighty rock on which the moral order of the universe is founded. . . . It is the pledge that justice will triumph in the world." [4] Should the Judge of all the earth once act unjustly, this moral order would be turned into chaos, which is again unthinkable. "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" [5] Confidence in the absolute rectitude of God and the righteous government of the world made the Hebrews,

[1] Ps. 119^{137}. [2] Dan. 9^{14}. [3] Ps. 58^{11}.
[4] Schultz. [5] Ps. 11^{3}.

despite all their faults, morally the strongest race of antiquity. The Greeks and Romans wanted the divine ideal and sanction of virtue. They could never count on righteousness being done in heaven or on earth. They were tormented by fear of the fickleness and injustice of the gods—privileged despots who took a malignant delight in levelling down human greatness. Their best men were morally not inferior, but superior to the gods. Hence their faiths have been completely dissolved, while the Hebrew faith, having a God of absolute righteousness, is everlasting.

INFLUENCE.—"And the LORD said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous men, then I will spare all the place for their sake. . . . I will not destroy Sodom for ten's sake" ($18^{26.32}$). The whole Circle and its cities would have been saved had there been ten righteous men in Sodom. The presence of one imperfectly righteous man was for a time sufficient to prevent the stroke of justice from falling; the LORD could not do anything to Sodom till Lot had reached a place of safety (19^{22}). Righteous men have always been the saviours of society, the salt of the earth. A pure and upright character is a common and public good. The lives of true men are fountains overflowing with blessing for their fellow-men. When Jerusalem was threatened with ruin, one of the great prophets cried in God's name, "Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and seek in her squares, if ye can find a man, if there be any that doeth justly and seeketh truth, and I will pardon her."[1] A city's best defence is not its walls and battlements, but its upright and God-fearing citizens. "It is a mighty encouragement that He who saves by many or by few has invested human agency with the power of so wide an operation, insomuch that one man has by his single voice decided the fate of nations. Ten righteous persons would have saved Sodom."[2]

[1] Jer. 5^{1}. [2] Chalmers.

XVII.

MERCY.

GEN. XIX. 1–16.

"In mercy and justice both
Through heaven and earth,—so shall My glory excel:
But mercy first and last shall brightest shine."—MILTON.

PURITY.—The Book of Genesis was written, not only with the design of commending virtue as lovely, but for the purpose of branding sin as hateful. The authors sought by the pen, as the prophets by the living voice, to arouse the public conscience, to create a hatred of the levity and frivolity of heathen races. Gen. 19 presents a terrible picture of the condition into which men fall when, abandoning moral restraints, they refuse to have God in their thoughts, and He therefore gives them up to a reprobate mind. The companion picture is St. Paul's awful description of the pagan world as it was in his time.[1] It has been said that if virtue were once embodied, and appeared on earth, all men would worship her. But the facts are against this beautiful theory. When the angels of God visited the Circle of Jordan, their presence only roused the brute and the demon in men. When perfect virtue was at length embodied on earth, it was crucified. The heart must be cleansed by divine grace before it can love the light and reverence the ideal. Progress in civilisation has been progress towards moral purity. Plato despaired of exterminating vice; he called the thought of doing so "a romantic aspiration." The Hebrews did not despair. They succeeded, and their success made them the greatest benefactors of the human race.

GAIN.—Lot's choice of a home in Sodom was dictated by lust of gain and pleasure rather than by regard for the will of God. When he went down from Bethel to the well-watered

[1] Rom. 1.

Plain of Jordan, he never dreamed of losses. He was grasping his earthly ideal, he was coming into his kingdom. He had a vision of princely wealth and civic honour and domestic felicity, crowned in the distant future with a serene old age. But when he entered Sodom, he left peace for ever behind him. His life became a vexation of spirit. He was out of his element, alone and friendless, hated as an intruder, mocked as a blunderer. He lost the holy and helpful influence of his best friend; he lost his property, first in war, then in fire; he lost his kindred and his wife; and it was of the LORD'S goodness that he did not lose his life in the general conflagration. His soul, too, was beggared. He retained goodness enough to make him thoroughly unhappy amid the carnivals of sin; but he lost a righteous man's clearness of vision, sensibility of honour, purity of heart. "Lot chose the Plain of Jordan because it was well-watered, but his soul was all but withered there."[1] The story of Lot's unwise choice and its unhappy issues is an old commentary upon our Lord's saying, "He that loveth his life shall lose it";[2] while Abram's wise choice is an illustration of the beautiful words—

> "Happy is the man that findeth Wisdom,
> For . . . her gain is better than fine gold.
> She is more precious than rubies:
> And none of thy delights are to be compared with her.
> Length of days is in her right hand,
> And in her left hand riches and honour.
> Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
> And all her paths are peace."[3]

CHARITY.—Lot was to be rescued from Sodom, not merely because he had Abraham for an intercessor, but because he was himself a servant of God, "a righteous man." He had begun well, renouncing heathenism, embracing a spiritual religion, and linking his fortunes to those of a strong man of faith. Even in Sodom he was not without good qualities.

[1] M'Cheyne. [2] John 12[25]. [3] Prov. 3[13-17].

His righteous soul was daily vexed with the lawless deeds which he saw around him.[1] He practised the sacred rites of hospitality when everybody else was shamefully violating them (19[1-3]). His house was the only place in Sodom where strangers were safe. The messengers of God accepted his kindness. He exposed himself to the violence of a raging mob in order to shield his guests (v.[6]). The worst thing which the citizens could allege against him was that, being a stranger, he had set himself up as a censor (v.[9]). He retained the instincts of faith and obedience to God. He believed the warnings of coming judgment, earnestly but vainly endeavoured to rescue his kinsmen (v.[14]), was thankful for divine grace and mercy (v.[19]), and cried to God in his distress (v.[20]). St. Peter reviewed the facts of Lot's life, and, with a restored backslider's tenderness to a broken man, recorded the judgment of charity, that Lot was a righteous man. It was unfortunate that, like many another man who is justified by faith, Lot gave himself scarcely a chance to become nobler in character.

ZEAL. — Lot's moral righteousness lacked the quality of passion. The revellers of Sodom beset his house like a swarm of demons let loose from hell. Burning words of holy indignation were urgently needed. But Lot parleyed with the criminals. He called them his brothers. He begged for peace at any price, and was willing to sacrifice the honour of his daughters. But while Lot's sensibility was so blunted that he sordidly bargained with the licentious crew, the sacred writer's heart has a glow of consuming indignation against sin—a glow which he communicates to the reader. Anger is not always wrong, and peace is sometimes far from right. The lack of moral indignation is the lack of manhood. He who is not angry at sin is not in love with virtue. While there is an anger which is holy love and pity aflame, there is a kind of prudence which is one of the deadly sins. The continuous

[1] 2 Pet. 2[8].

enjoyment of worldly ease sensualises the mind till the grossest vices are but mildly rebuked or silently tolerated. "A gentle reproof encourages sin and makes it seem as slight as the censure implies. To reprove sin mildly is to patronise it." [1] The man who barters his ideals for a false peace, whose working principle in hours of danger is "anything for a quiet life," flatters himself that in a troublesome world he gives proof of an amiable and conciliating disposition; but what he really proves is that the Spirit of God is departing from him. Every heart which God indwells has an intense love of purity. Moderation in morals is treason against God. "No heart is pure which is not passionate; no virtue is safe which is not enthusiastic." [2]

MERCY.—Lot and his family were to be rescued from the wicked and doomed city, but they had to be saved almost against their will. Even when they knew their danger, they lingered in Sodom (19[16]), hesitating, doubting, wavering. There is a critical state of mind in which a man knows his duty, and feels that he ought to do it without delay, but something pulls him back and keeps him from doing what is right. The angels who were sent on a mission of mercy to Lot and his family gave an example of true kindness which is worthy of imitation. Being hospitably entertained in the house of Lot, and receiving conclusive evidence of the city's abandonment to sin, they delivered their message to those whom it concerned. They began by directing (19[12]), proceeded to warning (v.[13]), advanced to commanding (v.[15]), and ended by fairly compelling (v.[16]) Lot and his family to quit the City of Destruction. There is a gradation in the methods by which angels and ministers of grace fulfil their sacred obligations to souls in danger. They may enlighten the mind, alarm the conscience, move the heart, and at last, when all else fails, grasp the lingerers by the hand with the holy vehemence of love, lead them forth from the place of danger, and set them in the way of safety. An exqusite parenthesis

[1] Robert Hall. [2] *Ecce Homo.*

in the narrative implies that this last method is the one which answers the tenderness of divine pity and fulfils the purpose of divine love. "While Lot lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand, and upon the hand of his wife, and upon the hand of his two daughters—*the* LORD *being merciful unto him*—and they brought him forth, and set him beyond the city" (v.[16]).

> "Thus while they waver, surely long ago
> They had provoked the withering blast,
> But that the merciful Avengers know
> Their frailty well, and hold them fast.
> 'Haste, for thy life escape, nor look behind'—
> Ever in thrilling sounds like these
> They check the wandering eye, severely kind,
> Nor let the sinner lose his soul at ease."[1]

Holy love has an urgency which will brook no denial. It is severely kind. It snatches brands from the burning. Its apparent violence is the proof of real love. "Compel them,"[2] are words of One who was all love. Unhappily it always remains possible that the utmost endeavours of mercy may prove unsuccessful. The human soul retains its freedom, and may in the end chose destruction instead of salvation. After the heralds of mercy had done all that men or angels could do, one member of the rescued family was a pillar of salt when the sun rose upon the earth (v.[26]). "If thou," said a great prophet, "warn the wicked of his way to turn from it; and he turn not from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul."[3]

XVIII.

JUDGMENT.

GEN. XIX. 17–38.

"Infinite love, yet also infinite rigour of law."—CARLYLE.

PRAYER.—When the angels had led forth Lot from Sodom, the LORD directed him to escape to the mountain—the mountain range of Moab is meant—lest he should be consumed (19[17]).

[1] John Keble. [2] Luke 14[23]. [3] Ezek. 33[9].

But Lot's imagination conjured up all kinds of danger in the mountain region. "The morbid fear of the hills, which fills any human mind after long stay in places of luxury and sin, is strangely marked in Lot's complaining reply, 'I cannot escape to the mountains, lest some evil take me.'"[1] His heart was still in the Plain, and he pleaded for permission to turn aside to the little town of Zoar and live there (19[19. 20]). Lot's prayer teaches us how *not* to pray. The substance of all true prayer is, "Not my will, but Thine, be done." Lot prayed in effect, "Not Thy will, but mine, be done." With the waywardness of unreason, he ventured to differ from God, he dictated to God, he argued with God, he begged God to change His mind. He set aside an express divine commandment, and tried to wrest a blessing from God; whereas humility always pays, "Deny me this, O LORD, if it be not for Thy glory and my good." His prayer was the fretting and chafing of an unhumbled spirit. Whenever Abraham received a divine injunction, he said not a word, but simply and implicitly obeyed (12[4] 22[3]). When Lot learns the divine will, he grows loquacious; instead of obeying, he gives many reasons for disobeying—reasons which are merely the murmurs of his restless self-will. Augustine used to pray, "Lord, deliver me from that evil man, myself." It is significant that Lot's selfish prayer was granted (v.[21]). He was punished for his wilfulness by getting his way. He quickly discovered the misery of having a wrong prayer answered. He was permitted to eat of the fruit of his doings until he loathed them. He had not been long in the city of his choice before he changed his mind, and "went up and dwelt in the mountain" after all (v.[30]). But it was not the same. A tardy submission does not win the reward of a prompt unquestioning obedience. St. Bernard says there are three bad kinds of prayer—timid prayers, tepid prayers, and temerarious prayers. Lot's prayers were temerarious—rash, inconsiderate, wilful, daring without reason. The language of humble faith is, "I delight to do Thy will, O my God."[2]

[1] Ruskin. [2] Ps. 40[8].

"Oh let Thy secret will
All Thy delight in me fulfil!
Let me not think an action mine own way,
But as Thy love shall sway,
Resigning up the rudder to Thy skill!"[1]

MORALITY.—The effects of Lot's sojourn in Sodom at length became apparent. He had deliberately chosen to dwell "in the tents of sin," and the grace of God does not make even a righteous man invulnerable to the deteriorating influences of an illegitimate calling or a dishonourable situation. Neither good habits, nor prudence, nor self-respect saves him from the slow infection of a poisonous moral atmosphere. The friendship of the world inevitably lowers the temperature of the soul, and lukewarmness never kills the germs of temptation. One of the great prophets says, "Behold, this was the iniquity of Sodom: pride, fulness of bread, and prosperous ease was in her."[2] Luxury is the mother of licence. An easy accommodation to evil and a lowering of the moral ideal are the natural results of an overestimate of the comforts of civilisation. The man who makes pleasure his chief good, will, in the common course of things, begin by mildly rebuking sin, then tolerate it, then connive at it, then succumb to it, and finally be overwhelmed by it. When Lot went up out of Zoar, after his act of disobedience had put him out of harmony with God, the good no longer predominated in his character. The man's moral fibre was gone, and nothing remained but a shuffling, cringing, sensuous egoist. Having long lingered on the confines of the kingdom of evil—"the borderland dim 'twixt vice and virtue"[3]—he at last fell into foul sin, and his name was covered with infamy. "We allow temptation to come and go at pleasure, and one day the soul wakes up to find itself possessed with all manner of evil. . . . There is no such thing as an unrelated sin in any life. The great fall which suddenly stains the reputation of a public name, and which the world's charity glosses over as merely a sudden slip, is never the first of

[1] George Herbert. [2] Ezek. 16^{49}. [3] Arnold.

a series but the last."[1] When Lot fell, his lamp went out in obscure darkness. Better, we are apt to say, had the good angels left him to perish in Sodom; he would have died with a cleaner record, and we should have been spared one of the most ghastly stories in the Bible (19[30-38]). His life—like every backslider's—was a series of contradictions. He was the friend of faithful Abram, and the citizen of Sodom; he was the host of angels, and the kinsman of scoffers; he was "that righteous man," and an incestuous drunkard. But no one who knows the gracious power of God will deny that his manhood might be restored. He might again be as he had been, and feel as he had felt. The tears of repentance might flow in the withered waste of his life. The prophet Amos was thinking of Lot when he coined his terrific simile of "a brand plucked out of the burning."[2] And St. Paul may have been alluding to him when he spoke of the man who "himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire."[3]

TEMPERANCE.—Sometimes the Bible seems a stern book. It is as stern and as tender as nature and grace. One of the ways in which it commends virtue is to paint vice in its naked ugliness; and here it tells the frightful, humbling truth about strong drink. The story of Lot's fall gives expression to the abhorrence with which the Hebrews regarded the drinking customs of the nations on the other side of the Jordan; Lot being the father of the people of Moab-Ammon. It was written for the purpose of creating an intense aversion to the degrading vice of drunkenness. Lot would never have fallen into gross sin if he had not first been sodden with wine—if his reason, conscience, and manhood had not been drowned in drink. Innumerable crimes are the work of senseless drunkards, who are covered with shame when they return to reason and realise their guilt. They "mortgage miserable morrows for nights of madness."[4] "O God!" cried Cassio, "that men should put an enemy in

[1] Henry Drummond.
[2] Amos 4[11].
[3] 1 Cor. 3[15].
[4] Charles Lamb.

their mouths to steal away their brains! that we should with joy, pleasance, revel, and applause, transform ourselves into beasts! . . . O thou invisible spirit of wine! if thou hast no name to know thee by, let us call thee devil."[1] The praises of wine have often been sung, but the true story of strong drink is a record of misery, brutality, vice, crime. Chaucer said long ago—

> "A lecherous thing is wine . . .
> For drunkenness is very sepulture
> Of manne's wit and his discretion."

There is a connection of the vices, one sin facilitating and provoking worse sins. Strong drink undermines the foundations of the moral life, so that a sot is an easy prey to the worst and vilest passions. The most ghastly evils of civilisation could never exist unless they were propagated and supported by strong drink, which breaks down all the restraints of reason, prudence, affection, and religion. Carlyle rightly described strong drink as "the most authentic incarnation of the infernal principle yet discovered." Charles Lamb called it "wet damnation." Intoxication is derived from the Greek word toxicon, poison. Drunkenness was the shame of heathen Moab, and it is the shame of Christian Britain. "It has been said that greater calamities are inflicted on mankind by intemperance than by the three great historical scourges, war, pestilence, and famine. This is true for us, and it is the measure of our discredit and disgrace."[2] Immense power for good or evil always lies in the hands of the women of a nation. The mothers of Moab-Ammon made themselves odious and infamous by encouraging the use of strong drink. The women of Britain have it in their power to achieve the honour of delivering their country from the vice of intemperance, which one of the noblest of womankind, Queen Victoria, has characterised as "so great a curse."

KINSHIP. — It was Lot's duty to shelter his family from danger and sin, but his worldly choice left them exposed to the fiercest temptation, and it was no wonder if they fell before

[1] Shakespeare. [2] Gladstone.

it. Our Lord bids us "remember Lot's wife." The painful things of the Bible are to be kept in memory; they are written for our admonition; they are absolutely necessary as beacons to warn us of danger. Lot's whole family was deeply infected with the evil of the fascinating, fatal Circle. Only the strongest minds can fortify themselves against the influence of a bad environment. (1) Lot's *sons-in-law* are types of the happy-go-lucky fellows who trip merrily through life, counting earnestness folly. When Lot went out at night to warn them of judgment to come, he seemed unto them "as one that mocked" (19[14]). God's word was to them an idle tale or a fool's jest. "They might see my fears," Lot would say afterwards like Pilgrim, "in my countenance, in my tears, and also in my apprehension of the judgment that did hang over our heads; but all was not sufficient to prevail with them to come with me." Listening to their father's admonition with amusement and scorn, growing merrier as he grows more earnest, reckless of danger, thoughtless to the last, piping amid the crack of doom, they were suddenly overwhelmed by the fire-shower of ruin. (2) Lot's *wife* left Sodom unwillingly; her treasure and her heart were still there; and it was for a love-look that she forfeited her life. The backward glance revealed her character. She turned with a sigh of regret, a fierce spirit of disobedience, a defiance of divine counsel, a passionate desire—that was all in the retrospect. As she stood to gaze at the splendid home of her luxury, she was caught on the margin of the fire-shower, the sulphurous smoke enveloped and stifled her, the saline matter encrusted her, and she was transformed into a pillar of salt. Lingering, longing, looking, she was lost. Jesus bids us remember her as a type of those whose attachment to earthly things is their ruin—who, in the day of trial, perish with the perishing goods from which they cannot separate themselves.

"Once gain the mountain-top, and thou art free;
Till then, who rest, presume; who turn to look, are lost." [1]

[1] John Keble.

(3) Lot's *daughters* are among the most pitiful figures in the Bible. The consequences of an evil choice often fall most heavily upon those who least deserve them. Lot was bound by every motive of religion and natural affection to care for and protect his daughters, to shield them from sorrow, sin, and shame. But he gave them a home and an upbringing in Sodom, and they could not live in that noxious atmosphere without being tainted. When they were rescued from the guilty city, their lovers were burned and their mother was a salt pillar. They had no home but a mountain cave. They were saved from the wicked city, but not from its wickedness. Womanly grace and delicacy they had none. The daughters of the friend of Abraham were unclean savages. They fell into abysmal depths of sin, and we are glad when the kindly darkness covers them from our sight. So swift and sure is the descent from the highest to the lowest when temptations are strong and the restraints of godly fear are withdrawn.

RETRIBUTION.—Milton represents Satan as saying, "Evil, be thou my good." There are men who practically say the same—men of earthly, sensual, devilish minds, who glory in their shame and abandon themselves to the fascination of vice. Such men are abhorred of the LORD, whose hatred of sin and purpose to exterminate it are as strong and unwavering as His love of purity and holiness. God pities weakness and infirmity, but not sin. He "is angry with the wicked every day."[1] God is love; but love is not all sentiment, pity, and tears. "It is love that burns; it is love that judges; it is love that damns. No other love would be worth having."[2] When men make evil their good, God's Spirit ceases to strive with them.[3] He bids "leave them alone," as Hosea says.[4] He "gives them up," as Paul thrice has it.[5] He suffers them to "eat of the fruit of their own way and be filled with their

[1] Ps. 7^{11}. [2] Joseph Parker. [3] Gen. 6^{3}.
[4] Hos. 4^{17}. [5] Rom. $1^{24.\ 26.\ 28}$.

own devices."[1] He holds His hand, and lets sin do its own sad work in their souls. That is the first retribution of sin. Unclean passion is the most speedily self-punishing and ruinous of all sins. It desolates brain and heart and life. It ruins the grace and health of the body; it ruins the tone and temper of the mind; it ruins the taste and capacity for pure pleasures; it ruins the reputation; it ruins the soul.

NATURE.—When God sent His angels of death to destroy Sodom and her sister cities (19[13]), natural agencies were no doubt employed in the overthrow. The words, "the LORD rained brimstone and fire out of heaven" (19[24]) are to be compared with such words as, "God gave us rain from heaven."[2] In both cases heaven is the atmosphere. The elements, fire and water, ascend before they descend. Milton speaks of "that bituminous lake where Sodom fell," and bitumen affords the means of solving a difficult problem. Had the sacred historian viewed the catastrophe as a man of science, he might have written thus: "Now around and underneath the Sea of Salt were bituminous and sulphur springs, by which reservoirs of petroleum and gas were formed far beneath the surface of the earth; and these being suddenly discharged, either by their own pressure or by the shock of an earthquake, the gas escaped with explosive force and carried far into the air the ignited petroleum, which fell back in burning rain; and the inrushing draught of air produced a vortex which carried the fiery element upward to a still greater height, and distributed it still more widely; and it fell on four cities and consumed their inhabitants, and covered the Circle of Jordan with a thick crust of salt unto this day." There have been explosions of this kind in the petroleum regions of Canada, and the similarity of the geology of these districts to that of the Dead Sea suggested to Sir William Dawson the theory above summarised.[3] At the same time, as this man

[1] Prov. 2[31]. [2] Acts 14[17].

[3] The destruction of St. Pierre by a whirlwind of fire (8th May 1902) presents a still more striking parallel to the overthrow of the cities of the Plain.

of science himself says, "the scientific account does not detract from the providential character of the catastrophe." God is the Lord of Nature. He is able, by the secret but mighty power of His will, to control the unconscious elements and make them minister to the highest interests of His kingdom. The laws of nature have been called the hands of God, and His hands are not tied. Though the tempest of fire did not come from another world, it was none the less the red hail of the LORD'S judgment. "He turneth a fruitful land into a salt desert for the wickedness of them that dwell therein." [1]

JUDGMENT.—When Abraham rose up early in the morning and returned to the heights above Hebron to see how his prayers had sped, an appalling spectacle met his view. The sacred writer may well interject a "Behold!" in his brief description of the sublimely awful scene, at which Abraham gazes transfixed. "The scene has value not merely as an event, but for the *thoughts* which Abraham must have had: still the writer does not describe them; he gives us merely the outward facts, and we ourselves have to add the chief thing." [2] The hurricane of vengeance has fallen on the guilty cities, crime is punished, righteousness is vindicated, the haunts of infamy are destroyed, the plague-spots are burned from off the face of the earth. Fire has ended the rout and riot, and signalised the divine abhorrence of sensuality. Purity has triumphed. Abraham "looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and, lo, the smoke of the land went up as the smoke of a furnace" ($19^{27.\ 28}$). There is no relief, no softening, to the stern and terrible picture, which makes the same impression upon the mind as the reading of the whole of Dante's *Inferno*. On the face of nature God wrote once for all, in letters of fire, for all the world to read, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay."

[1] Ps. 107^{33}. [2] Gunkel.

XIX.

INTEGRITY.

GEN. XX.

"Dare to be true! Nothing can need a lie!
A fault, which needs it most, grows two thereby!"—HERBERT.

HONOUR.—The story in Gen. 20 is regarded by many scholars as a replica of Gen. $12^{10\text{-}20}$. The scene is laid in Gerar instead of Egypt, but the principal features of the narrative are the same. The writer of the earlier story uses the divine name *Jahveh*, the LORD, and is therefore often called by scholars the Jahvist; the writer of the later narrative uses the name *Elohim*, God, and is called the Elohist. The two traditions are inserted in appropriate places. If the incidents are regarded as separate occurrences in one and the same life, the lesson is the familiar one, that good men may, after a long interval, lapse into the very sins which darkened their former days. No man ever gets so clean away from evil as to be beyond the reach of danger. There are surprises of sin in holy lives. The prophet's words, "Thy first father sinned,"[1] may refer to Abraham. The heroes of the Bible are not immaculate; they are never called, like the classical heroes, divine; they are in themselves frail human beings, made good and noble only by the power of divine grace. Sarah, whose beauty fascinated kings, is again represented as too willingly giving her consent to her husband's unworthy stratagem. "The soul's armour is never well set to the heart unless a woman's hand has set it, and it is only when she braces it loosely that the honour of manhood fails." The love of man and woman is not ideal unless their love of truth is even greater than their love for one another.

"I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more."[2]

INTEGRITY.—Abraham erred whenever he began to ask him-

[1] Isa. 43^{27}. [2] Lovelace.

self the questions, "What is now the safe and expedient course for me? What is politic in the circumstances? What will make for my present advantage?" He never erred when he asked himself, "What is God's will? What is His thought, His ideal, His plan for me?" In Gerar as in Egypt he was actuated by the fear of man, which "bringeth a snare."[1] Fear is the indication of a weakening of faith. A strong faith transcends all fear. Chrysostom once said in reply to a threatening message from an empress, "Go, tell her I fear nothing *but sin*." Abraham endeavoured to excuse the untruth he told Abimelech, king of Gerar, by saying that he supposed there was no religion in the place (20[11]). But there was more of the fear of God—more genuine religion and integrity—in Gerar than he expected. Abimelech, heathen though he was, had instincts of reverence and kindness. He spoke and acted with true kingliness and dignity. He esteemed and practised the virtues of truth, justice, and humanity. His conscience—God's voice in his soul—was a witness for honour and uprightness; he received the divine warning with meekness; he shrank with horror from the sin of adultery; he earnestly pleaded before God his integrity and innocence; he deprecated the punishment of a righteous nation; he rebuked the servant of the LORD for "deeds that ought not to be done"; he accepted with magnanimity the offender's feeble apology; and he went so far as to make honourable amends for a quite involuntary error. His piety is surprising; his generosity, courtesy, and self-restraint are admirable. In whatever unexpected quarter such noble qualities are found, their source is God; they are rays of the light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. "All good desires, all holy counsels, all just works" proceed from God. "The figure of Abimelech, like that of Melchizedek, shows an unmistakable superiority to national limitations."[2] "In every nation," the sacred writer seems to say, "he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of Him."[3]

[1] Prov. 29[25]. [2] Schultz. [3] Acts 10[35].

TRUTH.—When Abraham departed from the truth, he was under the impression that Divine Providence needed the aid of human cunning. But God may always be trusted to carry out His plans without requiring any man to deviate an inch from the line of truth and honesty. Abraham was convicted of violating a code of honour which is elementary and universal. The law of truth is part of the moral endowment of the rudest savage; all the stronger are the reasons why the servants of God should set a strict watch by the door of their lips. Men have a right to be indignant, as Abimelech was, when they find that those who suspect them of irreligion are themselves not perfectly straight. Nothing commends true religion to "them that are without" like "walking honestly."[1] "I would rather," said Cromwell, "miscarry in justice to the believer than to the unbeliever." It is the part of a Jesuit to dissemble, to palter in a double sense, to speak with mental reservations, to lie for the glory of God. The higher life conjoined with the lower standard of truth is the scorn of the world. "My soul," says Montaigne, "naturally abominates lying, and hates the very thought of it. For my own part I have this vice in so great horror, that I am not sure I could prevail with my conscience to secure myself from the most manifest and extreme danger by an impudent and solemn lie." Abimelech's reproof gained in severity by being temperate in expression: "Thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done" (20[9]). The words of the heathen king were the verdict of God. Untruthfulness is not only evil in itself, but has remote issues. It propagates itself. A bad man's example has little influence over good men. But the bad example of a good man, eminent in station and established in reputation, has an enormous power for evil. For all that the prophets could do, lying remained an ugly characteristic of the Hebrew race, and Hebrew subtlety is a byword to the present day. It is un-English to lie. Macaulay said that "English valour and English intelligence have done less to extend and preserve our Oriental empire than

[1] 1 Thess. 4[12].

English veracity." "As for the truth, it endureth and is always strong; it liveth and conquereth for evermore."[1]

SINCERITY.—Though Abraham was convicted of a grave offence, yet he was a prophet of God (20[7]), and his prayer for Abimelech and his household was heard (v.[17]). His errors did not prove him to be either a hypocrite or a recreant to his ideal. Righteousness was still the characteristic, the habit, the law of his life. God makes imperfect men His prophets, and answers their prayers, else His work could never be done in the world. The best of men have memories which fill them with regret and shame. Men are not to be judged by the presence or absence of faults, but by the *direction* of their lives. The believer's bent is toward truth and goodness; he loves the LORD in sincerity; he habitually faces the light, not the darkness; he has "breast and back as either should be"; and in spite of many stumbles and bruises he is pressing upwards toward a divine ideal.

XX.

LAUGHTER.

GEN. XXI. 1–7.

"And one laughed, and another laughed, and they all laughed together."
BUNYAN.

PRAISE.—The greatest joy is the rebound from sorrow. If hope deferred makes the heart sick, the desire accomplished is sweet to the soul.[2] It was every Hebrew woman's ambition to be the mother of good and great men. Sarah had resigned herself to the belief that it was not God's will to give her the holy joy of motherhood. She laughed a bitter laugh at the promise of a son, which sounded like a mockery to her lonely heart. But when the child of promise was born, she laughed in pure ecstasy. A new light was in her eyes, a light from heaven; a new tone in her voice, a music from heaven. She praised God

[1] 1 Esdr. 4[38]. [2] Prov. 13[12. 19].

the Giver of her heart's desire; and her motherhood doxology is recorded:

> "God hath prepared laughter[1] for me;
> Everyone that heareth shall laugh with me."

Her joy was at once natural and spiritual. It was hallowed and deepened by the knowledge that God was the Author of her happiness. As she folded her child to her bosom, she knew that both mother and child were wrapped round with the love of God. All the world had suddenly grown brighter to her, and she saw her joy reflected in every face. The natural response to a miracle of love is a song of praise; and Sarah's simple words breathed the same pure joy and devout gratitude which afterward found much grander expression in the magnificats of two other Hebrew mothers. "My heart exulteth in the LORD," sang the mother of Samuel. "My spirit rejoiceth in God my Saviour," said the mother of Jesus. These three holy women mused on the mystery of Love till the fire burned in their hearts, and they caught for once the inspiration of poetry and praised the LORD for His gifts to them and to the world.

LAUGHTER.—Laughter, like sunshine and music and love, is prepared for us by God (21[6]). It is not one of man's "many inventions." "Laughter," wrote John Brown, the good physician, "like all else, is a gift from the Supreme Giver, to be used and not abused." It has been said that we must have touched a graver side of life before we can take in the fact that Heaven is not opposed to laughter. At any rate the deep sad undertone of the world makes the high clear notes of heavenly joy the more thrilling. The heart-easing mirth which is prepared by God—happy laughter which readily blends with grateful tears—is the natural and inevitable expression of the soul's dawning sense of God's all-encompassing love. It was another woman who sang—

> "I smiled to think God's greatness flowed around our incompleteness,
> Round our restlessness His rest."[2]

[1] R.V. margin. [2] E. B. Browning.

Incomparably fine is the language in which a Hebrew poet has expressed the ecstatic feelings that accompany the sudden cessation of a long and wearing sorrow:

> "When the LORD brought home again the captives of Zion,
> We were like them that dream;
> Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
> And our tongue with melody."

Our Lord Himself has made laughter the symbol of all spiritual gladness: "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall laugh;"[2] and Luther, with his wonderful note of childlike genius, declares that the whole evangel of the grace of God is "*Nichts anders als Lachen und Frolocken*—nothing but laughter and joy." There are always abundant causes for sweet and jubilant laughter in the surprising loving-kindnesses of the LORD; spiritual life flourishes best in the warm atmosphere of joyful feeling; and whenever God's people begin to let their religion grow too decorous, too restrained, too cold, God ordains that "a little child shall lead them" back to the sunshine of divine love.

JOY.—"Blessed be childhood," said Amiel; "it brings down something of heaven into the midst of our rough earthliness." Isaac's weaning—which would take place when he was two or three years of age[3]—was made the occasion of a great feast (21^8). In Genesis there are many feasts and no fasts. The voice of rejoicing was in the tents of the righteous. The Hebrew religion not only permitted but appointed many festivals, when the people of God came before Him with gladness and mirth. Every feast had a religious character. Men drew nigh to God on the footing of sacrifice, then they ate and drank with the consciousness of His blessing. "Ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God;"[4] "thou shalt rejoice, thou and thy household;"[5] "thou shalt rejoice in thy feast,"[6] are the directions for

[1] Ps. $126^{1,2}$. [2] Luke 6^{21}. [3] 2 Macc. 7^{27}.
[4] Deut. 12^{12}. [5] Deut. 14^{26}. [6] Deut. 16^{14}.

such occasions, reiterated times without number. "They saw God and did eat and drink,"[1] "they did eat and drink before the LORD with great gladness,"[2] are accounts of festivals. Every happy and important occasion in Hebrew domestic life was celebrated with sacrifice and feast. The rejoicing was always before the LORD. Innocent mirth was no offence to Him. The wise patriarch, with his grand sunny nature, was minded to give his children and his household an idea of life as essentially bright and joyous because God was so near and so good. A little child's memory of such festive days observed for *his* sake fills his heart with trust and gladness, and binds him for ever to his home. The ideal Hebrew saint himself retained the child-heart. He was no ascetic of pale countenance and wasted form practising self-inflicted austerities and pleasing God by renouncing pleasure. The Hebrew race were a robust and happy breed of men, whose natural enjoyment of life was not diminished but immeasurably enhanced by the assurance of God's favour. Their faith made them a strong and manful people, who did not question the innocence of happiness, and were not unduly cast down by sorrow. "The joy of the LORD," they said, "is your strength."[3] Their strenuous earnestness did not damp their happiness, but only made it intenser and purer. "There is an endless variety of phrase for the thought that the pious exult in God, delight in Him, as at a gladsome thanksgiving festival."[4] The patriarchs were rarely if ever morbid, and never sick except with old age. We do well enough to follow the practice of calling them saints, though the word "holy" is not found in Genesis. But it is beyond question that their piety was healthy and joyous and human; their lives were spent, not in celibacy, but in the midst of little children; not in fastings and vigils, but in the free and full enjoyment of life; not in cloistered shades, but in God's greenest fields, and under His bluest skies. Their optimism finds abundant expression in their sacred poetry;

[1] Ex. 24^{11}.
[2] 1 Chron. 29^{22}.
[3] Neh. 8^{10}.
[4] Schultz.

"Let all those that trust in Thee rejoice,
Let them ever shout for joy;
Let them also that love Thy name be joyful in Thee."[1]

XXI.

TEARS.

GEN. XXI. 8–21.

"The wise God will have it so; some must pipe and some must weep."
BUNYAN.

BIRTHRIGHTS.—Gen. 21 is like a day that dawns in brightness, darkens at noon, and ends in clear shining after rain. Laughter and tears, ecstasy and agony, meet in a chapter and in a day's experience. One person's joy is too often another's sorrow. Isaac, the innocent, happy, prattling child, could not know that his feast was gall and wormwood to his brother. Ishmael never till that day felt so keenly, or resented so bitterly, his birth's invidious bar. Brought up as presumptive and undisputed heir of Abraham's possessions, he suddenly found himself a nobody. It was hard for a lad of fifteen to be superseded by a child, to be ousted from what he counted his birthright, and to have all his prospects in life darkened. Under these conditions the worse side of Ishmael's character displayed itself. Sullen, moody, and mischievous, full of envy and bitterness against the little child who had already the power to make such a mighty stir in the camp, he became the killjoy of the feast. Sarah's watchful eye fell upon him mocking and teasing her son—*Isaac-ing* him—turning the beloved name into a jest. It was not innocent mirth, but unmannerly rudeness and wanton cruelty. "He that was born after the flesh persecuted him who was born after the spirit."[2] The jealous mother's smouldering wrath was quickly rekindled, with the result that she demanded the instant expulsion of the bondwoman and her son. Abraham was deeply grieved, but

[1] Ps. 5^{11}. [2] Gal. 4^{29}.

God showed him that the rough measure required by his wife would prove in the end the best thing for his son. Sarah meant no good to Ishmael, but God would turn evil to good. Ejection might be too severe a punishment for a piece of boyish insolence; but it was well that Ishmael should early be cast upon his own resources, and obliged to strike out a path for himself in the world. A youth with hot Egyptian blood in his veins was never meant for the monotonous life of a Hebrew shepherd.

> "The pastoral scene, its quiet joy,
> They only chafe the archer boy."

Ishmael's birthright was his bow. His hero was Nimrod, who "was a mighty hunter before the LORD." He needed the free adventurous life of sport and war to nurture his manly strength, to buffet him into the healthy hardness which is required by men who are to mould the destinies of the world. Self-reliance is so important a trait of character that scarcely any price is too high to pay for it. Ishmael in his father's camp was an idle and mischievous boy, whose masterpiece was profane jesting. Ishmael cast adrift on the world, spurred by adversity to put forth all his native vigour, becomes a man of heroic spirit,—"a noble of nature," as Dr. Chalmers finely describes him,—fit to be the founder of a great nation. God has designed the desert for Ishmael, and Ishmael for the desert. Let its free air once penetrate his blood, and he will never leave it till the end of life, nor his descendants till the end of time. God has a plan for every life. There is no youth but has received special talents which require a special field for their exercise. To bind a lad to an uncongenial occupation, to put a check upon the natural outflow of his vital energies, to tame and subdue a high heart, is to spoil a life. Our happiness consists in finding our destined sphere of service, and providence often leads us in strange ways in order that we may discover it. Many an "unwanted" boy, like Ishmael, who has had a rough and cold beginning, has turned out an exceptionally brave and noble

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man. Early losses are transmuted by a divine alchemy into permanent gains. "Reverses, difficulties, trials, are often God's best blessings. The man compelled to labour gains energy, strength of character, the development of all that is within him. Can you call that loss?"[1]

AFFECTION. — Abraham's fatherly love encompassed his wayward and wilful son. His affection shines in bright contrast to Sarah's step-motherly dislike. The expulsion demanded "was very grievous in Abraham's sight on account of his son" (21[11]). Grief is love bereaved of its object. The father's heart had for many years been bound up in his only son; he loved him still; and fondest love makes sorest parting. Calvin takes Abraham to task for his love of the bondwoman's son and unwillingness to him cast out. "It may truly seem absurd," he writes, "that the servant of God should thus be carried away by a blind impulse; but God deprives him of his judgment, not only to humble him, but also to testify to all ages that the dispensing of His grace depends upon His own will alone." Even Homer nods. The patriarch's blind impulse, his warm natural affection, his father's heart, guided him better than the commentator's cool judgment. Under all conditions a father's love to his child is lawful and imperative. God is always in nature, not always in theology. Nothing in Abraham's story becomes him better than his warm love and clinging affection for his son, and his keen distress at parting from him.

TEARS.—Gen. 21 contains a whole group of exquisite and pathetic traits of maternal love. One mother is seen bending, radiant with smiles, over her newborn babe, another sobbing with breaking heart beside her dying son. Sarah, crooning her cradle song in her quiet tent, reaches the acme of earthly happiness; Hagar, laying her swooning boy under a desert bush, averting her face from the pallor of death, and raising

[1] F. W. Robertson.

her impotent cry in the pitiless desert, touches the nadir of human sorrow. But God is near them both, the one in her joy, the other in her sorrow. Their maternal love is a ray from the glowing heart of infinite love. "Can a woman forget the child she bare?" It is all but incredible. Hagar would gladly give "a mother's free and final sacrifice" to save her son. The sensitiveness of a mother to suffering which she cannot relieve is the most touching thing in the world. But there is a divine meaning in tears as well as in joy. God does not mock the immense mother-love which has brooded and planned and toiled so long for a child. Only, He answers prayer in His own way; and He endures the pain of seeing His children weep, because sorrow has saving and healing virtues. Abraham prayed that his son might live before God (17^{18}). God answers the prayer by bringing Ishmael within an inch of the grave. Many who have been at the gate of death, and have looked through it into eternity, come back to confess that "by these things men live, and wholly therein is the life of the spirit."[1] It was good that Hagar's son should know his frailty and mortality before he received the gifts of power and fortune which were in store for him. Prosperity would be disastrous to almost every man if he were not prepared for it by adversity. "Take out of your character all the fine qualities which came into it through sorrow, and you would be turned into a crude and selfish creature."[2]

> "But who can so forecast the years,
> And find in loss a gain to match;
> Or reach a hand through time to catch
> The far-off interest of tears?"[3]

COMPASSION.—"When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the LORD will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them."[4] "God heard the voice of the lad" Ishmael (21^{17}). It is not said that the boy uttered an articulate prayer for help. It is

[1] Isa. 38^{16}. [2] Joseph Parker. [3] Tennyson. [4] Isa. 41^{17}.

rather implied that the only voice which God heard was that of Isbmael's dying sobs and groans. As He once heard the mother's affliction, so He now hears the son's anguish. He was near them in the desert, and very compassionate. Hagar's son was not called Ishmael—God hears—in vain. Sceptics question the utility, indeed assert the futility, of prayer.

> "And yon inverted bowl we call the sky,
> Whereunder crawling cooped we live and die,
> Lift not your hands to *It* for help—for It
> As impotently moves as you or I."[1]

But the Hebrews have given us a better and a truer creed. The living God heard the cry of the outcast Arab in the desert of rocks and sand; He hears the cry of the street "Arab" in the wilderness of great cities; and He cares for all the waifs and strays of humanity. The cry of the children "who are weeping in the playtime of their brothers," moves the kind heart of the Eternal. There is no impassable gulf between His greatness and their littleness. The Ancient of days is the Friend and Guardian of childhood. Above the songs of angels and the music of the spheres, God hears a child's cry. "The tradition of God's listening to the voice of weeping Ishmael was so touching to the ancient hearers because it told of His compassion for a *child*: this God, they said, will also regard the weeping of *our* children."[2] The most beautiful saying to be found in the Talmud is, "When the gates of prayer are shut in heaven, those of tears are open."

VISION.—Ishmael was fainting, panting, dying of thirst in the lonely desert. His cries of pain were growing fainter; the tides of life were fast ebbing from his heart. His mother was wringing her hands in the anguish of despair, oblivious of everything but her child's distress. Resentment, weariness, and grief had blinded her. She had cast aside her shrivelled water-skin, "the

[1] Omar Khayyam. [2] Gunkel.

last drop drained, the sweetest and the last, drained at her darling's lips."

> "The scrip is emptied and the flagon dry,
> And nothing left them but the leave to die;
> To die—and one so young and one so true,
> And both so beautiful and brave to view."[1]

Yet all the time a desert well was brimming and bubbling beside them. "God opened Hagar's eyes, and she saw a fountain of water" (21[19]). There it was—

> "Into the sunshine,
> Into the light,
> Leaping and flashing
> From morning to night."[2]

It was but a moment's work for Hagar to snatch up her water-skin, dip it in the living stream, put it to her child's parched lips, and moisten his burning brow. His thirst was slaked, his fever allayed, his spirit came again, his life was saved. To have died of thirst beside a fountain of water would have been a doubly horrible fate. "Hear, O LORD my God; give light to mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death." In a world which is full of divine blessings, the greatest of all boons is open eyes to see them. Hagar's desert well is a symbol of present but unperceived blessings. Till God opens our eyes we are like those mariners who, having lost their course and been becalmed off the mouth of the Amazon, were dying of thirst, imagining there was no drop of water to drink, while all around them for hundreds of miles there was nothing but fresh water. We thirst where streams of living water flow. Our souls are parched and fevered and faint at the very "wells of salvation." For lack of vision we despair because there is no God, or no God who can be known, whilst—

> "Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."[3]

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[1] Edwin Arnold. [2] Lowell. [3] Tennyson.

We are like one who wept inconsolably for her LORD, till her eyes were opened, and He was before her;[1] like the travellers who mourned the loss of their Master, till "their eyes were opened, and they knew Him."[2] Wordsworth tells how his sister Dorothy "couched his eyes" to see the beauty of the world. "The light of the eyes rejoiceth the heart,"[3] and every one needs some divine or human voice to say to him, "Ephphatha—Be opened." Then, and not till then, do we know of a certainty that God, the great Fountain of blessing, is, as Rebecca sang, "present still, though now unseen."[4]

XXII.

ASPIRATION.

GEN. XXI. 22–34.

"Thou who canst think as well as feel,
Mount from the earth! Aspire! Aspire!"—WORDSWORTH.

CHARACTER.—Abraham's grand and commanding character won the admiration of the princes of Canaan and Gerar, among whom he lived as a stranger and sojourner. They came to pay court to him, and to seek alliances with him. "When a man's ways please the LORD, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him."[5] "In nothing," says Ewald, "is the memory of the reality and grandeur of Abraham's far-reaching life more clearly preserved than this, that powerful men even in foreign countries were compelled to confess that God was with him, and eagerly sought his friendship and blessing." King Abimelech came to renew his acquaintance with him. He and Phicol his captain paid him a fine tribute when they said, "God is with thee in all that thou doest" (21^{22}). They were so impressed by his character that they could not help thinking he must have a wonderful God. They might have but a vague notion of the

[1] John 20^{16}. [2] Luke 24^{31}. [3] Prov. 15^{3}.
[4] *Ivanhoe*. [5] Prov. 16^{7}.

real springs, motives, and aspirations of his lif ; they judged him chiefly by his outward bearing, conduct, and success. Still they could not fail to see an intimate connection between his faith and his life, and they had the sense and candour to give the praise to his God. A believer in the living and true God can have no higher ambition than this, to bring glory to God by his noble conduct and character. The best defence and recommendation of the faith is the life of a servant of God which constrains the world to say, "God is with thee."

TRUTH. — Abraham consented to make an alliance with Abimelech, and the name of the well at which they met and covenanted was called Beer-sheba, the Well of the Oath, "because there they sware both of them" (21[31]). At the same time they settled an old dispute about the possession of this well, which Abimelech's servants had, without their master's knowledge, "violently taken away" (v.[25]). Curious rites were employed to ratify the treaty and to put the future possession of the well beyond dispute. The Hebrew word for "to swear" means literally "to bind oneself by seven things." The parties to an agreement invoked or touched seven sacred objects as witnesses of their declaration. "If from some special causes—for example, in the ratification of a treaty—it was desired to make the oath still more impressive, seven gifts were also taken, and the person more interested in the safe keeping of the treaty sought by the presentation of these to bind the other party more firmly to himself and to the oath, just as might be done by any acceptable gift."[1] The ceremonial varied, but the significance of the oath was always the same. It changed a promise made to man into a promise made to God. The person swearing invoked the vengeance of God on himself if he should fail to fulfil his engagement. Grievous dishonour was done to God when a man sware with the secret intention of violating his oath. To perjure oneself—to deceive by false oaths—was an awful defiance of

[1] Ewald.

God. The oaths taken by Abraham and Abimelech had something of a public nature. But even "private oaths, used soberly, sacredly, and reverently, on necessary occasions, it were perilous to condemn, supported as they are by reason and example."[1] In ordinary conversation, however, the Perfecter of our faith has forbidden all swearing: our yea is to be yea, and our nay nay. "Execrations, being manifestly insulting to God, are unworthy of being classed among oaths. God's name is vulgarised and vilified when it is used in oaths which, though true, are superfluous."[1] If a man is known to be truthful, his oath is unnecessary, his word being as good as his bond; and if a man is known to be untruthful, his rash and passionate oath makes no impression on others, and is an aggravation of his own sin.

ASPIRATION.—"Abraham planted a tamarisk tree (R.V.) in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God" (21[33]). When the old Semites worshipped by a fountain of water, or under green trees, or on a high hill, they regarded the spot as the sacred dwelling of a deity. The fountain refreshed them, the forest thrilled them, the mountain-top awed them; they cast their gifts into the well, hung their presents on the trees, and anointed the mountain rocks with blood or with oil. "To the primitive man all the forces of nature were divine: either for propitiation or for admiration, many things, and in a sense all things, demanded worship from him."[2] The wonder was right, the worship wrong. Devout men of a later and more enlightened age, entirely free from idolatry and superstition, might still worship in the same sacred spots, simply because they loved to dwell close to the heart of nature, and

> "The still retreat, the silent shade
> With prayer and praise agree."

Thus Abraham worshipped God at the well and grove of Beersheba, and there, in the midst of his ordinary life, he was con-

[1] Calvin. [2] Carlyle.

tinually overawed by voices and visions from another world. He lived a life of pastoral activity. Rising early in the morning, going forth to his labour until the evening, striking and pitching tents, rearing and tending flocks and herds, digging wells and planting trees, training and overseeing serfs—that might have seemed to be the nomad flock-master's whole life. It was certainly an important part of his life. The Hebrews were entirely free from the Greek and Roman scorn of practical business and vulgar toil; and they never dreamed that religion required them to renounce the ordinary activities of the world. Abraham entered into business, mixed with men, cultivated social relations, handled money (23^{16}). He was interested in all kinds of people—in his herdmen, his shepherds, his craftsmen, his soldiers, his neighbours, his allies. He fulfilled all the duties and obligations which devolve upon a practical man of the world. Yet this constituted but the minor half of his life. All the time that he lived in the world and seemed to be engrossed in its affairs, he was detached from it, and aspired above it; his faith continually drew him to elevating communion with the Eternal; and his sacred tamarisk-tree, pointing upward, reminded him that the monotonous lives and ways of men need to be connected with the blue heavens. His vision of eternal things was preternaturally keen, and the window of his soul that looked heavenward was never shut. Earth was his work-field; but he belonged to, and had business with, another world—a spirit-world. He knew that far above the green valley of Beersheba, alive by day with the bleating of flocks and the hum of human voices, peaceful at night with folds closed and tents hushed, was the LORD, the Everlasting God, keeping watch and ward over the little lives of men. On this God he continually called (21^{33}). His real business and highest happiness in the world were to have communion with his Divine Friend and to be morally like Him. His preoccupation with the world's affairs never detained him from fulfilling his high vocation to consecrate himself to the holy service of

the Eternal. This became every believing Hebrew's lofty and steadfast ideal of life.

FAITH.—It was a great and ennobling thing for a man to worship the Everlasting God (21^{33}), to have his own existence linked in a sense to the boundless ages of the past and the future. This gave his life a spacious background, a far horizon, an outlook upon the infinite. It was the Hebrew's supreme aspiration to know God and rejoice; and to this end the inspiration of the Almighty gave him understanding.[1] Every advance in knowledge was at once a revelation and a discovery, and every new divine Name was the recognition of another aspect of the divine nature. Abraham, the typical Hebrew, already knew God as *Jahveh*, the LORD, the God of Revelation (12^{8}); as *El Elyon*, God Most High (14^{22}); as *El Shaddai*, God Almighty (17^{1}). To the thoughts of God's grace, elevation, and power he now adds the sublime thought of God's eternity. His conceptions of God were important, not only in themselves, but because they determined his thoughts of the world and of his own duties and relations in it. He necessarily became more and more like the Being whom he loved and worshipped. His faith made him the great, reverent, just, humane, valiant man he was. Nothing could be more erroneous than the common idea that it does not matter what a man believes. The fortunes of the Hebrews invariably followed their faith. Their conceptions of God were the vital principles which shaped their destinies; and faith is the root of every nation's greatness. "The history of a nation becomes fruitful, soul-elevating, as soon as it believes. . . . This is what I mean by a whole 'nation of heroes'; a believing nation. . . . Scepticism is not intellectual only; it is moral also; a chronic atrophy and disease of the whole soul. . . . You lay your finger on the heart of the world's maladies, when you call it a sceptical world."[2] Right conceptions of God always liberate, expand, and purify men's minds; wrong conceptions

[1] Job 32^{8}. [2] Carlyle.

narrow, darken, and defile them. "The truth shall make you free,"[1] "consecrate them in the truth,"[2] are divine words; and Jesus' own manhood was nourished on Old Testament ideals. It was the mission of the Hebrews to give the world a true theology—grand, noble, just, radiant thoughts of God, such as all nations need and will one day welcome; and their claim to our reverence and gratitude rests on the fact that they fulfilled their high task incomparably well. The Greeks gave us art, the Romans gave us law, the Hebrews gave us faith. Multitudes of men have not yet entered into their heritage; but God's purpose of grace embraces mankind; and "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea."[3]

XXIII.

DISCIPLINE.

GEN. XXII. 1–3.

"Pain is the deepest thing we have in our nature, and union through pain has always seemed more real and more holy than any other."

A. H. HALLAM.

STYLE. — The narrative of the offering up of Isaac is of surpassing interest as a tradition, and it embodies many of the great ideas which dominated the minds and hearts of the Hebrews. Like most of the narratives in Genesis it is written in a purely objective, calmly historical style. Much of the pathos of the perfect tale lies in its reticence. Tenderness, passion, and emotion are understood rather than expressed. From first to last not a word is said of the feelings of the father and the son. When "Abraham rose early in the morning," after receiving the divine command to offer up his son, there was under his calm exterior a world of trouble—a mind bewildered and amazed, a heart wrung with anguish, a will divided by the con-

[1] John 8^{32}. [2] John 17^{17}. [3] Hab. 2^{14}; Isa. 11^{9}.

flicting claims of love and duty. But of this we are told nothing. What the narrative says is that Abraham rose up early in the morning, saddled his ass, and clave the wood. The historian's complete silence regarding the storm of feeling which swept through the patriarch's mind is more moving than any words could have been. A great narrator rarely attempts the minute delineation of feeling. He increases his power by reserve, and expresses more than he seems actually to say. He knows how to enlist the reflective imagination and sympathy of his hearer or reader, and to create an atmosphere in which the commonest words tingle with emotion. Thought is much swifter than language; and the imagination, stirred by sympathy, fills up a bare outline instantaneously. The power to produce the deepest impression by the simplest means, whereby the half says more than the whole, is the highest kind of art. The story of Isaac has all the elements of fateful tragedy, yet it is pervaded by an atmosphere of spiritual peace which was peculiarly Hebrew in the ancient world, being the reflection of a perfect trust in God. It has the repose without which no work of art can be great;[1] yet the writer can scarcely have had a thought of art. His style was himself, and his own characteristics were the product of his faith.

PERFECTING. — "After all these things God did tempt Abraham" (22[1]). "All these things" were the trials—numerous, varied, and severe, yet comparatively minor — by which his faith had been already proved and disciplined, and which brought him unto this last. The supreme test of his submission to the divine will was to be the complement of all his spiritual experiences. When he was full of years, and might have flattered himself that he had entered on a period of perfect peace, the LORD subjected his faith to the fieriest trial of all. But thanks to the preliminary and preparatory work of his lifetime, his character had ripened into such strength, that he

[1] Ruskin.

was now able to bear the severest test to which man could be subjected, and fit to graduate in the school of suffering. God understands how to time and grade men's trials. He works by weight and measure. He sends "afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes." [1] He knows our strength or frailty, and does not lay too heavy burdens on young shoulders. "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it." [2] "He adjusts our trials to our strength by the care of His providence, and our strength to our trials by the power of His grace." [3] Temptations are not accidents in a man's life; each of them is part of a plan, a step in the progress to a higher life. Abraham's life was a long succession of trials, each of which increased his faith and displayed it in some new aspect. "The obedience of faith," says Delitzsch, "drew him into a strange land; by the humility of faith he gave way to his nephew Lot; strong in faith he fought four kings of the heathen; firm in faith he rested in the word of promise; bold in faith he entreated the preservation of Sodom; joyful in faith he received the child of promise; with the loyalty of faith he expelled Hagar and Ishmael; with the gratitude of faith he planted a tamarisk to the Everlasting God. Now his faith was to be put to the severest test, to prove itself victorious, and to be rewarded accordingly."

PROBATION.—The Authorised Version says, "God did tempt Abraham." The Revised Version has "God did prove Abraham." The temptation was appointed by God's holy will; but God tempts only in a beneficent way. He never allures a man into moral evil — never deceives his judgment, or seduces his affections, or perverts his will. He brings men into temptation for the purpose of testing their latent capabilities, exercising and strengthening their graces, and proving the sincerity of

[1] G. Herbert. [2] 1 Cor. 10[13]. [3] Matthew Henry.

their faith in Himself. Our enemies tempt us for the purpose of bringing out the evil that is in our hearts; God tries us to bring out the good. He desires nothing except our perfecting. "There is no way to self-knowledge but through trial," said Augustine. "Temptation," said Luther, "is the best school into which a Christian can enter." Trial is a sacred privilege of all the sons of God. It is a man's temptations that make his life profitable to himself and interesting to others. All that is best in us is developed by struggle. Battles make the soldier, storms the seaman, conflicts the hero, and temptations the saint. "Talent is formed in solitude, character in the stream of the world." [1] More is required than mere seclusion from evil to make us truly good; there is needed the contact of evil, the struggle with evil, the victory over evil. An untried, undisciplined life were flat, stale, and unprofitable. Brave spirits learn to welcome the storm and stress of temptation, knowing that, while God loves innocence, He prizes still more highly the strength of character which comes from the formed habit of resistance to evil. Untried innocence is not so grandly beautiful as tempted but untainted virtue. "Count it all joy when ye fall into manifold temptations. . . . Blessed is the man that endureth temptations." [2]

DISCIPLINE. — Abraham was commanded to take his only and well-beloved son and offer him for a burnt-offering (22^2). Isaac was the son of his old age, his heir, his pride, his hope, the delight and laughter of his life. Isaac was also the hope of the world, the visible pledge of the promises, to whose person God had annexed the assurance of blessing to mankind. The command to sacrifice this tenderly loved son—to lay him on the altar, slay him, and burn his body—struck like a knife through the father's own heart. The narrator does not attempt to describe his grief; as the ancient painter who had to represent the Greek hero preparing to sacrifice his

[1] Goethe, [2] Jas. $1^{2.12}$.

own fair daughter, put a veil on his face, to signify that it was impossible to depict such a degree of sorrow. The human mind is bewildered when in the course of nature the hand of death strikes down the young and good, whom the world seems to need the most. But for a father to be commanded to take the life of a beloved son with his own hand, to plunge the knife into the dearest heart in the world, was enough to make reason reel on its throne. Nevertheless, God does all things well, and it is better to be purified through suffering than to be spared pain. Sooner than disobey God and lose His blessing, wise men cry, "Come suffering to the uttermost." "O Lord, give us more grace, and never mind the trials," was Whitefield's brave petition; and one of the gayest and gravest spirits of our time, expert in the lore of pain, prayed thus to the Celestial Surgeon:

> "Lord, Thy most pointed pleasure take,
> And stab my spirit broad awake;
> Or, Lord, if still obdurate I,
> Seize Thou, before that spirit die,
> A piercing pain, a killing sin,
> And to my dead heart run it in."[1]

SACRIFICE.—The practice of human sacrifice, which was widespread in ancient nations, and exercised a strange fascination over the Hebrews, was a perversion of two great truths: that God deserves the best that man can offer Him, and that man needs an atonement for his sin. (1) It is man's duty to dedicate himself and his property to God the Giver. "The best to God" is the heart of all true religion. A living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, is His reasonable service.[2] This sacred truth was perverted into the horrible error that to sacrifice a precious life was to destroy it; to devote an innocent child to God was to slay him on the altar,—as if one could gratify God with massacre and murder. That Hebrew parents had once the power of life and death over their children is proved by Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter, and by the cruel practice of offering

[1] R. L. Stevenson. [2] Rom. 12[1].

children to Moloch. (2) Deep down in the human heart there is the craving for atonement. That we need to be reconciled unto God is as certain as that we sin. This fact was distorted into the terrible, barbarous, detestable idea that God could be appeased—made merciful—by the offering of human blood; and that the greater joy the sacrificer had in his possession, the greater pleasure the offended God had in its destruction. Men were slow to agree with the prophet who asked, "Shall I give my firstborn for my trangression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" [1] The Hebrew conscience needed to be enlightened on this subject. God's people had to learn that He would neither require nor accept human sacrifice at their hands. Abraham was accustomed to witness this awful rite. He knew that in Chaldea and Canaan the sacrifice of the firstborn was counted the highest act of worship. He saw other parents offer their children to their gods, and the question would force itself upon his mind, "Couldst thou do as much for the true God as they for their false gods? Wilt thou give as much for love as they for fear?" The command to offer up Isaac would connect itself with such natural self-questioning. It was in accordance with the spirit of the times. While it would lacerate a father's heart, it would not violate his conscience. God, to whom all human sacrifice was abhorrent, gave the command as a test of Abraham's faith, with the unexpressed purpose of preventing the completion of the sacrifice. He gives many experimental, educative commands; He addresses trials to the human heart with the intention of filling it with greater blessing when the trials have been endured. "God's design was to disentangle the true idea of sacrifice from the false—to emphasise the truth that human life ought to be consecrated to God, and to condemn and reject the hideous distortion of this truth which had arisen in heathenism." [2] Abraham's experience would establish a precedent for the guidance of all God's people, and transform the bloody sacrifice

[1] Mic. 6[7]. [2] Oehler.

of the firstborn into a bloodless and holy consecration. "After the greatest pains and dangers, the hero victoriously attains the higher truth and blessedness, which, as soon as they have once been reached by one man, must become the common possession of all who behold this model." [1]

FAITH.—God promised to Abraham, "I will establish My covenant with Isaac for an everlasting covenant for his seed after him" (17^{19}). But now He commands him, "Take thy son, and offer him for a burnt-offering" (22^{2}). The command seems to cancel the promise. If Abraham's hopes are wrapped up in Isaac, they cannot be fulfilled when he is dead. The promises will be buried with the child of promise. On this passage Chrysostom says, "God seems to contradict God"; Calvin, "God in a sense assumes a double character"; Delitzsch, "the God who requires Abraham to sacrifice his only son after the manner of the Canaanites is only apparently the true God." The apparent inconsistencies of God's Providence are the trial of man's faith. "Sometimes He condescends to look mutable and fickle. He shows His face and then He hides it. He puzzles us as to His will. He lets half words fall into our heart. He sends us what look like leadings, and are not so. He lets us think He has contradicted Himself, who is eternal truth, unchangeable simplicity." [2] When He promises a lifetime of love, and quickly makes the heart desolate; when He shatters the hopes He has built; when He quenches the light He has kindled, His character seems to be at stake. "One while He is the most indulgent of fathers, another while the least forbearing of masters; now the most patient of teachers, and again the sharpest of critics; here the most gracious of sovereigns, there the most exacting of despots." [2] "Providence is a daily mystery, and often a daily torment, even to the most reverently studious minds." [3] But here comes the opportunity of faith. To believe when

[1] Ewald. [2] Faber. [3] Joseph Parker.

we cannot see; to trust God where we cannot trace Him; to be willing that He should have His way and vindicate His reputation in His own time—that is faith. Come whatever may, God has given us sufficient grounds for believing that He is infinitely good; that suffering is not the contradiction of love, but one of its methods; that "He causes suffering for reasons of the highest, purest, and kindest import, such as when understood must be absolutely satisfactory to the sufferers themselves";[1] that there is no pang or pain or sorrow which He does not feel with a sympathy infinitely greater than we can understand; and that in spite of the apparently monstrous contradictions of life there is a harmony in His Providence like the music of the spheres. The children of faithful Abraham do not challenge God to give an account of His matters, but trust Him when He frowns as when He smiles, believing that He has in His hand the solution of every mystery, and that He will be His own interpreter. "Heroism feels and never reasons, and therefore is always right."[2] The highest moments in a man's life are those in which the action of the believing heart supersedes all other action.

DILIGENCE.—When "Abraham rose early in the morning" (22^3), there was but one thought in his mind—the doing of God's will. His early rising for the same purpose is mentioned in two other places (19^{27} 21^{14}). It was habitual. We read that many servants of God—Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, Job, and others—rose early. We do not read of any who, having work to do for God, rose late to do it. The early hours were regarded as the best. The Psalmist "prevented the dawning of the morning."[3] "Awake up, my glory, I myself will awake right early."[4] Jesus, "rising up a great while before day . . . prayed."[5] There is a charm about the first moments of the day which should not be broken by the intrusion of common things; it is a time too sacred for

[1] George Macdonald. [2] Emerson. [3] Ps. 119^{147}.
[4] Ps. 57^8. [5] Mk. 1^{35}.

anything but communion with God. "When I awake, I am still with Thee."[1] "Knowest thou not, O man," said Ambrose, "that thou owes the daily first-fruits of thy heart and voice to God." God's presence at the beginning consecrates the whole day for zealous and faithful service. To do a thing "rising up early" was a Hebrew synonym for doing it earnestly, strenuously, thoroughly. Even God was frequently said to do things "rising up early."[2] This meant that the Hebrews had a working God, ever intent on the fulfilment of His great designs; that He who needed nothing yet worked, because all His creatures needed Him. Men are called to be diligent fellow-workers with God, and nothing mars their service more than indolence. "He that chooses to enlarge the slothful indulgence of sleep, rather than be early at his devotions to God, chooses the dullest refreshment of the body, before the highest, noblest refreshment of the soul; he chooses that state which is a reproach to mere animals, rather than that exercise which is the glory of angels. . . . This is the right way of judging the crime of wasting a great part of your time in bed."[3] The time is precious because it is so short. The morning cometh, and also the night; and soon the long night cometh, in which no man can work.

OBEDIENCE.—Abraham "went unto the place of which God had told him" (22^3). God required him to go to the mount of sacrifice and offer up his dearest possession, and he did not shirk the awful task. (1) He obeyed *in faith.* He at once acknowledged the authority of the supreme Lawgiver. He might have expostulated, pleaded, objected, cried out in despair; but he was absolutely silent. He did not charge God foolishly. God's will was painful, but without abatement he would carry it through. This is true religion, "to obey, no matter how you feel." When a brave and faithful man knows God's requirements, he does not reason or reply; he gives himself no time for

[1] Ps. 139^{18}. [2] Eleven times in Jeremiah. [3] William Law.

reflection; he knows that first thoughts are best; he makes haste, and delays not to keep God's commandments. Abraham had schooled himself to go anywhere and do anything at the divine bidding. He obeyed in no resentful spirit. He believed that God had a wise plan for him, and he would not change the purpose of unerring love.

> "All is right that seems most wrong,
> If it be God's sweet will." [1]

He did not defer obedience till he should understand God's secret counsels. He knew that God desired, not his comprehension, but his confidence. Commands are simple, positive, practical; reasons are difficult, abstruse, metaphysical. Duties are man's, reasons and results are God's. (2) Abraham obeyed *in love*. His obedience was possible only because his heart was aglow. Strength of will depends on depth of feeling. The heart fired with love is equal to any task, and much as Abraham loved his son he loved God more. Love made him one in will with God. In a sense his own will merged and lost itself in God's will. But he was not on that account willless and merely passive. On the contrary, the will that is yielded to God is far more active than the will which obeys the lower and selfish inclinations. When the will receives a new and right direction, it receives a new and supernatural power. Love energises it for obedience, duty, and sacrifice even to the uttermost. Abraham's life is thus designed to be a perfect illustration of two things: the believer's personal, conscious, unquestioning, unreserved surrender of himself to God; and God's personal, conscious, and constant possession, mastery, and use of the believer for His own high ends. The ideal presented to us is the figure of a man who is in action a hero because he is in faith a little child.

[1] Faber.

XXIV.

SACRIFICE.

GEN. XXII. 4-19.

"Thou hast been as one,
In suffering all, that sufferest nothing."—SHAKESPEARE.

FORTITUDE. — From the camp at Beersheba Abraham journeyed to the land of Moriah (22[2]), to the mount of the LORD (v.[14])—the holy hill on which the Temple was afterwards built. He was to be additionally tried by the great distance he had to travel before he came to the place of sacrifice. The deed was to be done, not on the impulse of the moment, but after days of reflection. During the journey no word or look betrayed his secret; he controlled his emotion and went quietly forward, seeming to perform the most difficult task without an effort. Nothing relaxed the tension of his purpose. Even his son's naïve and infinitely pathetic question, "Where is the lamb?" left him outwardly unmoved. He retained complete mastery over his feelings. This was the calmness, not of stoical apathy, but of implicit trust in God. The Stoic sullenly submits to the inevitable, acts as if he had no feelings, triumphs over pain by sheer power of will. The believer wins his victory over suffering, not by denying pain, defying fate, affecting insensibility, but by confiding in a God of love whose will is always wise and good. The Stoic submits because all is law, the believer because all is love. "A man's mind will be bright and calm even at the moment he is going to fearful misery, if he does but know that his suffering is his duty, and that his trial is his heavenly Father's will."[1] God is honoured, not by the stern and stubborn spirit which submits to an irrevocable decree, but by the meek faith which accepts His good pleasure, and in the hour of greatest darkness clings to Him as a Friend. Confidence in Him is the secret of perfect peace—"peace subsisting at the heart of endless

[1] Charles Kingsley.

agitation," like the calm at the centre of a whirlwind. The believer's "heart is fixed, trusting in the LORD . . . he shall not be afraid."[1] "Acquaint thyself with Him, and be at peace."[2]

PROPHECY.—When Abraham came to the land of Moriah, and began to prepare for the dread sacrifice, he left his servants behind, telling them that he and Isaac would go to worship on the mount and come again (22^5). A German scholar[3] says that Abraham here makes "an untrue statement," which he compares with Gen. 12^{30} and 20^{12}. But that is taking a superficial view of the matter. The promise, "we will come again," was not an attempt to deceive; it was the expression, if not of an assured confidence, at least of a trembling hope, that God would intervene to make Isaac's safe return possible. The answer to Isaac's question about the lamb for the burnt-offering is of the same kind. Never renouncing hope, the father cries out, as if involuntarily, yet by a true prophetic impulse, "God will provide Himself the lamb" (22^8). It is a heart-cry of faith, an expression of heroic confidence in God, bursting from a believer's lips before the light bursts upon his soul. In the appalling darkness he never loses his conviction that God is with him, God is his Friend, God is providing. "True believers are never left without such a presence and support of the Spirit of God as keeps them from sinking into utter despair."[4] Everything is bearable but one thing—to be without God.

> "It is better to walk in the dark with God than to walk alone in the light;
> It is better to walk in the dark by faith than to walk alone by sight."

Faith resting on the omnipotent love of God has a prophetic power; and when the worst comes to the worst, hope is still the highest reason. "By faith Abraham offered up Isaac . . . accounting that God was able to raise him up even from the

[1] Ps. 112^7. [2] Job 22^{21}. [3] Knobel. [4] Larger Catechism.

dead."[1] St. Paul says that those who are of the faith of Abraham believe in a God "who quickeneth the dead, and calleth the things that are not as though they were."[2] The believer who stays himself on God—*El Shaddai*, the All-sufficient—will unhesitatingly prophesy a happy issue out of all the ills that flesh is heir to.

SONSHIP.—Nowhere in the Bible is there a more winsome picture of filial reverence, obedience, and love than is found in the story of the offering of Isaac. Nothing finer could be conceived than the tender colloquy between the father and son as "they went both of them together" to the place of sacrifice. The gravity of age and experience, and the simplicity and innocence of youth, are knit together by the tie of holy love. Father and son could scarcely be more unlike one another in nature, or more united in affection. Abraham's love for his son was divinely recognised (22[2]); no trait of his character was more marked than his paternal affection; and this constituted the crux of his trial. Isaac was worthy of his father's love. All the most beautiful traits of filial devotion are seen in his character —responsiveness to strong and tender love, recognition of the claims of age and wisdom, openness of mind, wondering eagerness to learn, and obedience even unto death. "The glory of children are their fathers."[3] Abraham and Isaac "went both of them together" in their walk with God, in their faith and obedience. Abraham's obedience was active, Isaac's passive, both perfect. Isaac's age at the time of his great renunciation is not stated; but he was old enough to walk from Beersheba to Moriah, and to carry uphill the wood for the burnt-offering (22[3-6]). He was old enough to understand God's will; and when the hour of trial suddenly came, it found him ready to die. Life is sweet to everybody, especially delicious to the young; and few youths have ever had brighter prospects than Isaac. It is appalling to think of being cut off in early manhood,

[1] Heb. 11[19]. [2] Rom. 4[17]. [3] Prov. 17[6].

when one's lifework and enterprises are scarely begun. Isaac might, had he so pleased, have resisted his father's will, and asserted his right to live and enjoy life. But he meekly allowed himself to be bound on the altar, and lay unresisting till the sacrificial knife was raised to slay him. In its great gallery of portraits the Bible has nothing finer than this thoughtful, reverent, believing, obedient boy, so gentle and beautiful and innocent, yet in the grasp of God's grace so calm, so submissive, so strong to endure. Unless piety had struck its roots in him when he was a child, and grown with his growth and strengthened with his strength, he could never have endured this fiery trial. To find another instance of a Son voluntarily surrendering His life and laying Himself upon the altar at a Father's bidding, we have to go from Moriah to Calvary.

SACRIFICE. — "By faith Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac."[1] The deed was virtually done when he raised his hand to slay his son. In spirit and intention he had sacrificed the life that was dearer to him than his own. He had endured all the pain of parting and the bitterness of death. He had given infallible evidence that he loved God sincerely and supremely. His faith was tried and approved. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, in that he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar?"[2] More than this could not be required of him. The spirit of the act, the all-surrendering faith, was acceptable to God; the deed itself, a human sacrifice, was abhorrent to Him. He could not allow the projected offering to be completed. He permits trial no further than moral perfecting requires. There was no effusion of blood. The angel of God arrested the uplifted hand (22^{12}), and the father received back his son as from the dead.[3] The eternally valid and imperishable meaning of sacrifice — the surrender of the will to God—was clearly illustrated. The immolation of human life was reprobated. At

[1] Heb. 11^{17}. [2] Jas. 2^{21}. [3] Heb. 11^{19}.

the same time there was ideally instituted—by the offering of a sheep instead of a man (22[13])—that kind of sacrifice which was destined to keep alive in Hebrew hearts the sense of sin and of the need of atonement, until "one full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction" should be made for the sin of the whole world.

SYMPATHY.—The Angel of the LORD—*i.e.* God in self-manifestation—said to Abraham, "*Now I know* that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me" (22[12]). This is one of the many instances in which God is represented as speaking in a human fashion, as if He were not omniscient. When the cry of Sodom came up to heaven, the LORD said, "I will go down and see . . . and *I will know*." To Abraham He said, "*If I find* in Sodom fifty righteous men, I will spare it." The Infinite voluntarily approximates the ways and thoughts of finite beings. He is above all limitations, and to Him nothing is ever unknown. "I am God," He said, "and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning."[1] But if He were to speak to men in terms of His foreknowledge absolute, they would "find no end, in wandering mazes lost." The All-wise in His intercourse with men is represented as like a human father conversing with his children. He speaks very simply, that He may be understood. Every teacher knows that he must sympathise with his pupils' ignorance, else they will never understand his knowledge. He must condescend to their condition, place himself alongside of them, study their limitations, take into account their inexperience. He has to bridge over the gulf that separates his mind from theirs. Unless he can express his ideas, not in his own language, but in theirs, their ears might as well be closed, and all his wisdom will be lost upon them. That is the principle on which the Divine Teacher of the human race acted in His Revelation. He made His meaning intelligible by translating His great thoughts into

[1] Isa. 46[10].

simple forms of speech. He spake to men in the language of earth, that they might learn the laws of Heaven.

REVERENCE.—Having done his duty under great temptation and at great sacrifice, proving that the LORD was the supreme object of his love, Abraham was commended and accepted for his *fear of God* (22^{12}). This fear is a very different thing from the natural, slavish, tormenting fear which it displaces. It is a grace in which God delights. It is a holy fear begotten in hearts renewed and reconciled to God. It resembles the fear of a loving child who would not in anything offend his parents. It is the fear of grieving the Spirit, and incurring the displeasure, of a God of love. It implies a quick sensibility to discover sin and an intense shrinking from its contact. "To fear God and to love Him with the whole heart and soul are feelings indissolubly connected."[1] "Among the children of God," says Ruskin, "there is always that fearful and bowed apprehension of His majesty, and that sacred dread of all offence to Him, which is called the fear of God." It is an abiding characteristic of the believer's life. He never ceases to be penetrated by a subduing sense of religious awe, to be moved by a holy dread of wounding the love of God and violating the law of righteousness. Every step in holiness is measured by the increase in this fear, and the best men are the most full of it. But holy fear is consistent with intense delight in God; and "happy is the man that feareth alway." The profoundest reverence is compatible with the most trusting confidence. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;[2] to fear God and keep His commandments is the whole duty of man;[3] all God's servants are devoted to His fear;[4] and holiness is perfected in the fear of God,[5] which is akin to the holy reverence that befits even the angels of God in heaven.

PROVIDENCE.—After his trial was over, Abraham gave a new

[1] Schultz. [2] Prov. 1^{7}. [3] Eccles. 12^{13}. [4] Ps. 119^{38}. [5] 2 Cor. 7^{1}.

name to Mount Moriah which made it a memorial of God's providence. He called it *Jahveh-jireh*, "the LORD will see or provide." This was the thought which fortified his mind during the whole ordeal. He could not see, and had not wisdom to conjecture, how the trial would end, but he was confident that God would provide. Though he was at his own wits' end, he knew that God would not be baffled. His extreme necessity threw him back on the thought of the variety and fulness of the resources of his God. When God is regarded as exercising foresight, care, and direction for and over His creatures, He is often called by the beautiful name of *Providence*. When we are fulfilling His behests, we may transfer all the pressure of forethought to Him. The whole responsibility of the issues of our conduct rests upon Him whom we obey. Our difficulties are His as well as ours, and we have no need to carry His anxieties and cares. "Roll thy burden on the LORD, and He shall sustain thee; He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved."[1] By renaming the spot where God was a Providence to him, Abraham made it easier to all future generations in Canaan to trust in God. He left "footprints on the sands of time" which would give heart to other tried and tempted men. Canaan was by this process gradually to be filled with sacred names, memories, and associations which would make it a Holy Land.

REVELATION.—Abraham's experience of God's goodness on Moriah also gave rise to a Hebrew proverb, which may be translated in two ways: "In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen," or "In the mount the LORD appeareth" (22^{14}). One man's happy experience was generalised for the encouragement of benighted souls in all ages. Painful trials bring men into great darkness, but to all earnest and obedient servants of God there come times of surprising insight —moments on the mount—in which they suddenly see the

[1] Ps. 55^{22}.

hidden things of God so clearly that they can only call the experience a revelation.

> "God be praised that to believing souls
> Gives light in darkness, comfort in despair."[1]

Moriah became the mount of vision to many Hebrews. Asaph found the sanctuary on God's holy hill the place of solved problems.[2] Beautiful prospects are to be had from "Mount Clear." But it is especially on the mount of sacrifice that "the LORD appeareth." His best revelations come to the soul which has been cleansed by the last agony of self-denial. To the man who lays his most cherished possessions on the altar He shows all the riches of His grace. Selfishness necessarily shuts us out from all communion with a God of love; but let His people deny themselves, and a celestial light will surprise them—"God in His glory shall appear."

> "No cloud across the sun
> But passes at the last, and gives us back
> The face of God once more."[3]

ASSURANCE.—Abraham was confirmed in the grace of God at a time when he had proved his fidelity and loyalty by obeying to the uttermost. All who follow him in the path of real sacrifice experience the same deliverance from misgivings, doubts, and fears. Full assurance is the reward of perfect obedience. We rise to confidence, not when we are painfully examining ourselves and searching for evidences, but when we are earnestly doing the will of God in the face of difficulties and temptations. To make men's assurance doubly sure, the LORD bound Himself to them with an oath (22^{16}). "When He made promise to Abraham, since He could sware by none greater, He sware by Himself."[4] He pledged His word by His own person and nature, "that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation." The phrase, "in blessing I will bless thee" (v.[17]),

[1] Shakespeare. [2] Ps. 73^{16}. [3] Kingsley. [4] Heb. 6^{18}.

is the Hebrew way of saying, "I will verily, richly, abundantly bless thee." God would shower blessings on Abraham as the rewards of obedience. Six times the promise had already been given.[1] This is the seventh and last time; and as the final victory of Abraham's faith was the most glorious, so the last promise is the most splendid. This was "a point of unprecedented lustre in the Old Testament. The form as well as the contents of the promise is exuberant. For the victor of Moriah is higher than the victor of Dan."[2] The divine Mind which conceives and utters the promise (22^{16-18}) seems to burn and glow. Supreme sacrifice is crowned with rapturous blessing. God has purposes so gracious and promises so generous that the grandest similes are required to express them. Abraham's seed shall be as the stars of heaven and as the sand upon the seashore; they shall be victorious over all their enemies; and in them shall all the families of the earth be blessed. The friend of God has done supremely well, and his obedience wins the most emphatic testimony of God's approbation. "Surely," He said, "I will bless thee . . . because thou hast obeyed My voice." No Hebrew could ever hear or read the story without learning that the spirit of obedience gives more joy to God than anything else on earth. "For Thou delightest not in sacrifice, else would I give it; Thou hast no pleasure in burnt-offering."[3] "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice."[4]

XXV.

PILGRIMAGE.

GEN. XXIII.

"They were strangers to the world, neighbours and familiar friends to God."—THOMAS À KEMPIS.

SORROW.—Sarah died in Hebron in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for her and to weep for her (23^{2}).

[1] Gen. 12^{1-3} 12^{7} 13^{14-16} 15^{18} 17^{8} 18^{10}.
[2] Delitzsch.
[3] Ps. 51^{16}.
[4] 1 Sam. 15^{22}.

Reverently he bowed before her, and gave way for a time to the rush of sorrow. She had been the companion of his youth, and the partner of all his fortunes. They had toiled, planned, hoped, suffered, rejoiced together during a long life. Now she was silent in death, and Abraham shed natural tears in which there was no bitterness or remorse. The unspoken memories of a lifetime were in those tears. The strong man's heart was true and tender, and he was not unmanned, but more truly man, for weeping. True religion neither eradicates nor reproves sorrow, but tempers and hallows it, and binds up the broken heart. The Hebrews were not ashamed of their emotions, and did not take pride in repressing them. It is no part of heroism to affect insensibility to suffering. The strongest manhood has its roots in tender feeling. The ideal man's emotional nature is as quick, powerful, urgent, undeniable as his intellect is lofty and his will unbending. The patriarchs are all represented as men of tender feeling. "Abraham came to weep." "Jacob lifted up his voice and wept." "Joseph fell upon his father's face and wept." But genuine sorrow does not parade or indulge itself. It was in the stillness of the death-chamber that Abraham wept. When he "rose up from before his dead" and went to purchase a grave, the Hittites saw no tears. Among them he spoke only of burying his dead out of his sight, the strong man using cold words to shield himself from his own surging emotion. Isaac's grief for his mother was no less keen than his father's. For three years his gentle heart continued to mourn its loss.[1] The woman who inspired an affection so tender and lasting in the two men who knew her best, her husband and her son, needed no other praise.

PILGRIMAGE.—The presence of death drew from Abraham the pathetic confession, "I am a stranger and a sojourner with you" (23^4). When he was reminded of the uncertainty of his tenure of all earthly things, he was more heartsick and homesick than ever he had felt before. He had never been able to say in

[1] Gen. 23^1 24^{67} 25^{20}.

Canaan, "I am at home." He left his one home in Chaldea, and never found another. Wherever he went he built an altar to God, but never a house for himself. He was encamped in many places, but naturalised and domesticated in none. He roamed hither and thither without forming a deep-rooted attachment for any one locality. He saw no spot of earth in which he felt disposed to settle down and live out his life. If he paused for a time in any green valley, and established friendly relations with the natives, they found some morning on awaking that he had folded his tents and silently passed away. He was always an outlander. In Canaan, in Egypt, in Gerar—wherever he went, he sought in vain for a place of rest, till he came to the conclusion that he must always be a stranger and sojourner in the earth. The thought of life as a pilgrimage sank deep into the Hebrew mind; and even after the Children of Israel had conquered Canaan, and were wanderers no more, but settled owners of the soil, they were still but strangers and pilgrims with God.[1] They lived their life on earth in fellowship with God, without thinking much about a life to come. They had not our Christian knowledge of the future; but they had our faith in the goodness of God. They were like little children who are sure of their father's love, but are not able to conceive the future, and do not trouble themselves about it. Still it is impossible to doubt that *some* idea of another state of existence underlies their habitual description of life as a pilgrimage. "For," as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews urges, "they that say such things make it manifest that they are seeking after a country of their own."[2]

COURTESY.—Those who have witnessed bargain-making in the East say that Gen. 23 depicts it to a nicety. The seller opens the transaction by assuring you, with an expressive *salaam*, that everything he has is yours, and bidding you take just what you want. You return the salutation, and protest against such kindness; he continues to urge you to oblige him

[1] Ps. 39[12], 1 Chron. 29[15]. [2] Heb. 11[14].

by taking whatever you desire. That is etiquette, meaning no more than, "I am at your service, command me." When you at length get nearer business, and your friend condescends to name a price, which he does in an off hand way as a matter of no importance, it is sure to be six times the real value; "but what," he asks "is that between thee and me?" With much manœuvring, and a leisurely disregard of time, the negotiation then proceeds, till the seller is brought to reasonable terms and a bargain is struck. The author of *The Land and the Book* regards the courtesy of the Hittites in this light. It was mere palaver; the generous phrases were idle compliments; the noble offer "meant nothing whatever," as Abraham knew quite well, but "as he was in no mood to chaffer with the owner, whatever the price might be, he proceeded forthwith to weigh out the money." Dr. Thomson may be right, but most readers of the narrative will prefer another view: that the sons of Heth, impressed by Abraham's noble character, touched by his lonely sorrow, and moved by his pathetic appeal, sincerely desired to pay him a tribute of respect; in all good faith offered him the gift of a field and a sepulchre; and only when they were convinced of his resolution to decline a present and his desire to pay for the ground at its full market value, consented to bargain with him and to convey the property to him with all legal ceremony. On this theory the story is designed to teach a lesson of genuine reverence for true greatness. It seems more natural to read the narrative in this light than to compare the manners of a simple primitive age with the inanities of the modern bazaars. "Courtesy is not a falsehood or a grimace. 'Bending before men' is a recognition that there does dwell in that presence of our Brother something divine."[1]

SENTIMENT.—Abraham's anxiety about the possession of a sepulchre may seem to have been a matter of sentiment rather than of reason. But sentiment plays a great and important part in human affairs, and no sentiment is more sacred or potent than

[1] Carlyle.

that which is connected with the ashes of our beloved dead. The last resting-place of a household is holy ground, and it is a proverb that the graves of the dead mark the homes of the living. "Our father's sepulchres are here, . . . how should we love another land so well?" Reason concurred with sentiment in Abraham's decision that he and his people must be separate from the heathen in death as well as in life. Events proved how wisely he was guided in the matter. In later ages the holy sepulchre of Machpelah was the magnet which drew the hearts of the Hebrews back from distant lands. At the present day scarcely any shrine is more devoutly hallowed or more jealously guarded than the cave which Abraham purchased as a burying-place for his wife. Dr. Thomson calls it "the most interesting of all spots on the face of the earth." It is at present in the possession of the Turks, and for many centuries not more than half a dozen "unbelievers"—our King and Dean Stanley being two of them—have seen so much as the outer enclosure built over the cave. No Christian eyes ever see the actual tomb. What it may contain is a mystery which future events will disclose.

BUSINESS.—The account of the transference of the property which Abraham bought of the sons of Heth at the gates of Hebron reads like a legal document ($23^{17.\ 18}$). The conveyance was carried out with scrupulous care. The purchase was completed, the bargain attested, the title "made sure." The man of faith was as attentive to business as to devotion, and sought the glory of God in both. It is extremely misleading to draw a sharp line of demarcation between sacred and secular duties. All duties are duties to God. We are in the habit of saying that religion is religion and business is business, as if they were to be kept separate and conducted on different principles; but a believer's life is too full of God to allow such a cleavage. A man can only have one character. "True religion, which is to obey God, mixes itself up with all the cares and business of this mortal

life, this work-day world."[1] All secular things—business, art, science, politics, war, labour, pleasure—instead of being detached from religion, have such intimate relations with it that they are, or may be, and ought to be, essentially religious. There is not the lowliest task which may not be undertaken with prayer and performed to the glory of God, and so made sacred. Religion is not satisfied with a limited sphere ; it controls the whole domain of life ; and the servant of God who carries his religious principles into all human affairs cannot but be the ideal man of business.

NOBILITY.—Abraham was not excelled in politeness, chivalry, high-breeding by the children of Heth. Touched by their generous kindness, he twice "rose up and bowed himself before the people of the land" ($23^{7, 12}$). "There is something pleasing in the courteousness of the Hittites to Abraham ; and inexpressibly affecting are the noble, graceful, and dignified returns of his obeisance."[2] No one suggests that *his* courtesy was unreal. Had there been a Hebrew word for "gentleman" he would have borne it without abuse ; he was the personification of the gentle and manly graces. The Hittites, searching for a word to characterise him, found one which hit the mark. They called him a "prince of God" (23^{6}). He was a dweller in tents, with no claim to high or long descent ; yet he was princely in his whole bearing, address, and character. "Abraham," says Charles Kingsley, "was a prince in manners and a prince in heart." The Hittites partly divined his secret. His personality was grandly impressive to them. He rose in uncrowned sovereignty above them all, the strongest, noblest, gentlest man ; and they saw that he was a prince of God's own making. He owed his power and charm, not so much to natural endowment, as to the transforming and ennobling influence of divine grace. Great aspirations and ideals created his great character. He kept company with God till he became a partaker of the divine nature. Beginning as a man of God, he ended as a

[1] Kingsley. [2] Chalmers.

prince of God. True religion develops the highest kind of manhood. Under its influence a common man becomes princely in soul, unconsciously regnant among his fellow-men, and does the most common things in a noble, gentle, royal spirit. Being to God what the wax is to the seal, he is stamped with the image of God.

> "Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,
> These three alone lead life to sovereign power."[1]

XXVI.

LOVE.

GEN. XXIV.

> "For all love greatens and glorifies,
> Till God's aglow to the loving eyes
> In what was mere earth before,"—BROWNING.

IDYLLIC.—Gen. 24 is one of the sweetest idylls ever penned. It is interesting as a picture of the primitive manners and customs of a great race. It is charming as a revelation of the beauty of common things and the dignity of homely life. It is delightful as a study of human characters—the wise and venerable master, the shrewd and faithful steward, the careful and covetous guardian brother, the lissome and winsome maiden, the pious and pensive bridegroom. It is impressive as a delineation of the manner in which Providence brings the counsels of good and devout men to a happy issue. The whole tale is warm and throbbing with humanity, rich in colour and incident, affording bright glimpses of a sunny and natural, sweet and believing life in the far past. We prize it not only for what is said, but for the manner in which it is said. The style of the narrative may well be called perfect. Its homely ease is the consummation of unconscious art. The Hebrews had their ideals of beautiful form in writing, and inspiration made them all the more skilful in fitting aptest

[1] Tennyson.

words to things. It would have been strange if they had been blind to the fascination of literary form or deaf to the music of words. We cannot, however, as Newman observes, imagine great minds "accustomed to aim at diction for its own sake." We must rather think of them as "being inspired with their subject, and pouring forth beautiful words because they have beautiful thoughts." The Hebrew traditions, refined and sifted by frequent repetition, became perfect in point of form. Nothing could exceed the dignity, elevation, and beauty of this tale of Isaac and Rebekah, which satisfies alike the religious, the moral, and the æsthetic sense. The chapter is a casket of gems, which one is afraid to touch. To paraphrase Scripture is always to court humiliation. It is like gilding refined gold, or painting the lily. The great authors of the Bible have "the charm of an incommunicable simplicity."[1] To see the beauty, to feel the charm, to catch the secret of their writing—all so closely allied with noble living and thinking—were to have the highest culture.

MARRIAGE.—Abraham made his steward swear that he would not take a daughter of the Canaanites as a wife for his son Isaac (24^3), and the solemnity of his words indicates the great importance of the injunction. There are many evidences that Abraham lived on amicable terms with his heathen neighbours. He made leagues with them, fought side by side with them, transacted business with them, and treated them with princely courtesy. Nevertheless he lived in a world of ideas to which they were complete strangers. He never forgot that he was divided from them by the barrier of religion. He saw that a marriage connection with a princely heathen family would be no real benefit, but rather a deadly injury, to true religion; it would mean an alliance between the young Faith and the old Paganism; and it would defeat the purpose for which God called the Hebrews to be a separate people in the world. A true marriage was, in the beautiful Hebrew phrase, "a covenant of God,"[2] that is, a sacred

[1] Newman. [2] Prov. 2^{17}.

promise mutually given in the presence of God as Witness.[1] God would not suffer any of His people to form a sacred alliance with His enemies; He could not witness it without displeasure; He could not give it His benediction. The "holy seed" must not "mingle themselves with the peoples of the lands."[2] It was not mere pride of race, it was the sense of a divine calling, that made the Hebrews shun alliances by marriage with surrounding tribes. There was an inexorable rigour as well as a divine pitifulness in true religion. Holiness was intolerant of sin. It did not confound charity with indifference. While it was far removed from contempt of any men, it necessarily created antagonisms. Those who love God will never seek a love which is inconsistent with their supreme affection. The distinction between the children of God and the children of the world is ancient and vital. Paul was simply echoing Abraham's words when he said, "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers: for what communion hath light with darkness?"[3] A true marriage implies an affinity of heart and mind, an identity of aim and purpose, a community of faith and worship. It is a union of souls; and God will not "to the marriage of true minds admit impediment." The narrative teaches that holy wedlock is a sacred contract in the making of which God is consulted, which God approves and blesses, which none but God can break, and He by death.

FIDELITY. — "It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful."[4] Abraham's steward perfectly fulfilled this requirement. His name is not mentioned in Gen. 24, but he is naturally regarded as the same servant who in Gen. 15 is called Eliezer. His ideal is his master, from whom he has received his knowledge of the true God, and whom in return he serves with a self-forgetfulness as beautiful as it is rare. He prays to the God of his master on behalf of his master (24^{12}); he gives thanks to the God of his master for kindness to his master (v.^{27}); when he becomes eloquent it is in the praise of his master; and his

[1] Mal. 2^{14}. [2] Ezra $9^{2.\ 3}$. [3] 2 Cor. 6^{14}. [4] 1 Cor. 4^{2}.

favourite expression, "my master," occurs eighteen times in one chapter. He finds in the words a sweet savour and holy gladness. So reverent, so chivalrous is he that he all but worships his master. He and George Herbert are of one mind:

> "How sweetly doth 'my Master' sound! 'my Master!'
> As ambergris leaves a rich scent
> Unto the taster,
> So doth these words a sweet content,
> An oriental fragrancy, 'my Master.'"

For himself Eliezer has never a name or title but "Abraham's servant." He does not call himself the elder or ruler of Abraham's house (v.[2]), and he never breathes the fact that he was once the heir-elect of Abraham's whole fortune (15[2]). The interests of Isaac, his younger "master" (v.[65]), so absorb his attention, that at the end of a long journey he refuses to touch food till he has told his errand and despatched his business. And when his mission is crowned with success, he desires nothing so much as to return without delay and announce the good tidings to his master (v.[56]). His master's happiness is all the reward he seeks. In this man self is dead. He is not his own, he is his master's, he is God's, and not a trace of egoism remains in his character. The goods of his master are in his hand (v.[10]), the cause of his master is in his heart, the God of his master is above him, and he is perfectly content. His watchwords are kindness and truth (or love and faith). Kindness is what he prays to God for (vv.[12. 14]); kindness and truth are what he thanks God for (v.[27]); kindness and truth[1] are what he asks from his master's relatives (v.[49]). Leal love and faithfulness are evidently his own characteristics. Shrewd and practical as he is, he has the guileless simplicity of a child. No Hebrew servant could have been more ready than he to say, "I love my master, I love his house, I love his service, I will not go free, I will serve him for ever."[2] At the end he could wish nothing

[1] "Deal kindly and truly" is literally "show kindness and truth."
[2] See Ex. 21[5. 6].

better than to hear his Divine Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant"; and for a place of reward there was nought like "Abraham's bosom."

> "O good old man! how well in thee appears
> The constant service of the antique world,
> When service sweat for honour, not for meed."[1]

WOMANHOOD. — The narrative gives a lifelike picture of a Hebrew maiden. The salient features of her character are sketched in the fewest and aptest words. (1) Reference is made to Rebekah's *beauty*. She "was very fair to look upon" (24^{16}). The Bible always speaks quite naturally of the charm of personal grace. Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel were all lovely women. Sarah is portrayed in the beauty and power of ripened womanhood. Rebekah is radiant with the loveliness of early youth; she has the freshness of springtime and the prime; her presence is bright and exhilarating as sunshine. Beauty in its essence is the form of the true and the good. Milton speaks of the "human face divine." All pure eyes are keenly susceptible to beauty, as it is a revelation of the beauty of the God in whose image we are made, and a prophecy of the glory of the children of God. "All partial beauty is a pledge of beauty in its plenitude." But because in itself "favour is deceitful and beauty vain,"[2] the narrative passes lightly from the comeliness of face and form to the loveliness of perfect deeds, without which the spell of physical beauty soon becomes powerless. The finest beauty is a radiation from character. "There is no beautifier of complexion, or form, or behaviour, like the wish to scatter joy and not pain around us."[3] (2) Reference is made to Rebekah's *industry*. She was coming to draw water when Eliezer first saw her. In Hebrew homes high-born girls were taught to prefer work to idleness. The Hebrews believed that beauty was never so attractive as when it was combined with active usefulness. Rebekah belonged to a wealthy family, and

[1] Shakespeare. [2] Prov. 31^{30}. [3] Emerson.

had maids of her own to wait upon her (v.[61]); yet she busied herself with household tasks, "deeming it," as Dr. Guthrie says, "no more dishonour to bake bread than to eat it, to draw water than to drink it, to make a dress than to wear it." If we admire her jewellery, we must not forget her earthenware. The artist's eye overlooks her ring and bracelets, and rests with delight upon her pitcher, the work of the hands of the potter, which she carries gracefully poised on her shoulder. She has the spirit of service by which woman is the queen of the beautiful realm called home. (3) Rebekah enjoys *liberty*. She appears in public alone and unveiled. She converses freely with a man, a complete stranger. We see—

> "Her household motions light and free,
> And steps of virgin liberty."

Nowhere is the influence of true religion more apparent than in its effect upon the position of woman. Eastern women have always been morally and intellectually degraded. They are regarded without respect or chivalrous sentiment. They have not the qualities which would fit them to be the companions, friends, and advisers of men. Nothing is expected of them but extreme ignorance and frivolity. Man's licence everywhere ends in woman's bondage. But among the Hebrews true religion emancipated woman, and won for her a high position, a commanding influence, a chivalrous regard. Man's virtue and woman's liberty go hand in hand. To the present day nothing but pure and undefiled religion gives woman safety and freedom. "Show me ten square miles," said Lowell, "outside of Christianity, where the life of man and the purity of woman are safe, and I will give up Christianity." (4) The story refers to Rebekah's *chastity*. She guarded a love that was virginal and pure. She was undefiled for the undefiled. Her innocence was her strength: "she that has that is clad in complete steel."[1]

[1] Milton.

Matthew Arnold chooses her as his ideal of stainless maidenhood:

"What girl
Now reads in her bosom as clear
As Rebekah read, when she sate
At eve by the palm-shaded well?
Who guards in her breast
As deep, as pellucid, a spring
Of feeling, as tranquil, as sure?"

(5) The story lingers over Rebekah's *courtesy* to a stranger and *kindness* to animals. These were the qualities by which Eliezer hoped to discover Isaac's destined bride. He asked God to send him, not the loveliest girl in Haran,—though Rebekah was no doubt that girl,—but the kindest. When she comes to the well, she finds an unknown traveller resting there, who begs a little water to drink. She lowers her pitcher, puts it to his lips, and bids him drink. Her word for "drink" is different from his: he asks a little water "to sip"; she bids him "drink abundantly." But she goes further; unasked, she finds out ways of doing deeds of kindness. A glance at the kneeling camels tells her that they too are thirsty, and she volunteers to draw water for them till they have done drinking (v.[19]). This is no easy task, for a camel drinks enough at a time to last three days, and the well is down a flight of steps; but Rebekah is as good as her word. Gliding down with the empty pitcher and returning with it filled, repeating the action times without number, glowing the while with the healthy exertion, she never pauses till the last of the ten thirsty beasts has raised his head content. While Eliezer looks on in silent admiration (v.[21]), she is unconscious of having done anything remarkable. The beauty of such actions as hers lies in the fact that the doer of them sees nothing to admire. They are little nothings—"nameless unremembered acts of kindness and of love." But some day they fix one's destiny. Trivial things both make and reveal character. "Trifles!" said a very great man, "perfection

is made out of trifles, and perfection is not a trifle."[1] Rebekah was never more lovely than when she was completing her self-imposed task at the well. Kindness in the heart is light in the eyes, music in the voice, grace in the motions. The first element of vital beauty, as Ruskin says, is "the kindness and unselfish fulness of heart which receives the utmost amount of pleasure from the happiness of all things." (6) The story refers to Rebekah's *hospitality*. She would be no true daughter of an Eastern chieftain if she did not remember that a stranger must never look in vain for shelter and rest and food. Without consulting anybody she invites Eliezer and his men to enter her brother's house. The fare she first offers and the right she assumes to offer it indicate her practical and independent habit of mind. "We have," she assures Eliezer, "straw and provender and room to lodge in." This beautiful, high-spirited maiden, throbbing with fulness of life, gifted with the charm of perfect freedom, nimble intelligence, and eager vivacity, hasting (v.[18]), running (v.[28]), leaping down from her camel (v.[64]), yet always quiet and self-possessed, saying the right word and doing the right deed, naturally captivates all hearts. Eliezer wonders at her (v.[21]), all her friends bless her (v.[60]), Isaac loves her (v.[67]). Sincere and ardent, she reaches right conclusions as by instinct, has no affectations, and wastes no time or words. Oriental custom has always given a father the right to dispose of his daughter's hand as he sees fit. But to a maiden of Rebekah's spirit this would have been intolerable. The narrative shows that among the ancient Hebrews "regard was had to the personal inclinations and wishes of the young people."[2] Asked if she will go with Eliezer, Rebekah answers with prompt decision, "I will go," which in her own Hebrew is one short word. We naturally ask what made her so willing to leave her father's house, to go on a long and venturous journey, to become a pilgrim in a strange land. Some will suggest the spirit of romance; others will see the glint of the stranger's gold. But

[1] Michael Angelo. [2] Benzinger.

it was Eliezer's prayer. When Rebekah stood at the well, and heard this traveller from a far country thanking and praising God, in the twinkling of an eye she looked into the clear depths of a guileless soul, felt the thrill of awe which always passes through a pure young heart in the presence of a saint, and after that she was ready to put her life in his hand and follow him to the ends of the earth.

PROVIDENCE.—While Eliezer was shrewd and cautious in fulfilling the delicate commission with which he was charged, he ascribed all his success in finding a bride for his young master, not to his own intelligence, but to God's guiding hand. Before he set out for Syria of the Two Rivers, the difficulties which naturally presented themselves to his mind were overcome by his master's assurance that the LORD would send His angel with him (v.[7]). When he came to Haran he sought divine guidance. "O LORD, the God of my master Abraham," he said, "send me, I pray Thee, good speed this day" (v.[12]). He had no doubt that God intervened in human affairs to make a plain path for the feet of devout men. He confidently sought to learn God's will; he knew that he would not ask in vain; and when his petition was answered to the letter, he became eloquent as he told, with delightful epic repetitions, how the LORD had prospered his way (24[35-49]). He was certain that it was not his own sagacity, but God's providence, that led him to success. He was not wise enough to find a way for himself; he would have despaired of his own judgment and foresight; but he believed in a God who beset him behind and before, and laid His hand upon him. This does not mean that he expected God to lead him independently of the exercise of his own faculties. He used his reason, experience, and common sense. God's influence did not suspend, but intensified and quickened his mental energies. At the same time God's providence controlled both his movements and those of others whom he was destined to meet. Everybody knows that there is an element

in earthly affairs which is beyond all human foresight and skill. "Shallow men believe in luck," says Emerson. They enlarge on happy accidents and undesigned coincidences. Or they talk of a blind irresistible power which they call fate. But others, far wiser, say "there's a divinity which shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will."[1] "In what unbelief regards as chance, faith sees an act of God."[2] Our times are in the hands of One who superintends the issues of the moral life, and watches over all the fortunes of His children.

> "Great works, the secret and sublime, forsooth,
> Let others prize! . . . what are these at best,—beside
> God helping, God directing everywhere?"[3]

Eliezer clung to his master's belief that the LORD would send His guiding angel with him. That was entirely a matter of faith. Eliezer has no visible supernatural guide at his side in his journey. "The angel of the LORD is perhaps a poetical and realistic conception of the special providence of God."[4] In any case Eliezer—who is a type of every believer—did not doubt that God was guiding him and working with and for him; and if he did not say in so many words that a true marriage—like that of Isaac and Rebekah—is made in heaven, that was exactly what he meant.

FAREWELL.—Rebekah has to forget her own people and her father's house.[5] A friendly discussion arises as to the time of her departure for the new country. Laban's household and Eliezer take opposite sides ($24^{54.55}$). Rebekah's mother and brother naturally wish that she should "wait a few days, at least ten." Faithful Eliezer, however, is inexorable. In his eagerness to announce at home how the LORD has prospered his journey, he begs leave to depart with Rebekah without delay, that he may go to his master (v.^{56}). Rebekah settles

[1] Shakespeare. [2] Schultz. [3] Browning.
[4] A. B. Davidson. [5] Ps. 45^{10}.

the matter to his satisfaction, and the preparations for departure have to be hurried through. Rebekah's maidens are to go with her, and Deborah her nurse—the busy *bee* of the household, as her name signifies—cannot be left behind. Deborah will be her lifelong friend, and see her children's children (35[8]). The parting with kindred is pathetic. In moments of farewell bursting hearts seek relief in the utterance of boundless good wishes; such ideals as good people chance to cherish must find expression; everybody craves from Heaven something infinite for the loved one who will be seen no more. Language is taxed for hyperboles, and yet scarcely a tithe is said of what is felt and meant. The conquest of the world is not too good for Rebekah. "Our sister," cry the daughters of Haran as they wave their last adieus, "be thou the mother of thousands of ten thousands"; "and," shout the warlike youths, "let thy seed possess the gates of them that hate thee" (v.[60]). Next to the favour of God, the blessing of beloved friends is the sweetest thing in the world. With this hearty God-speed ringing in her ears and making music in her heart, Rebekah, bidding adieu for ever to the home of her youth, and wrapped in a dream of wonder and hope, rides away with her train of maidens into the strange wide world.

MEDITATION.—The scene suddenly changes to "the land of the south," where Isaac is meditating in the field at the eventide (v.[63]). The son of a strong man of action is often a quiet man of thought, and Isaac is seen at his best in meditation. This is the attitude in which we naturally portray him. His life was spent in still retirement; he was a gentle presence, a gracious influence, rather than an active force in the life of the world. It was not in him to summon a council of war, to head a midnight charge, to silence a king with a word. It was not his fault that he was not cast in heroic mould. He had the constitutional delicacy of a child of old age, the gentleness of an only son tenderly mothered, the shyness of a boy who

has never known brothers and sisters, the passiveness of a youth who has the misfortune never to learn the meaning of hardship, and the air of abstraction from the world which is natural to one who has been laid on the altar and has in a sense come back from the dead. All his days his gentle spirit was in love with solitude. He lived remote from the haunts of men, on the very edge of the wilderness, by Hagar's quiet well. Let him be among green fields and beside still waters, and he was content. But quiet, reserved, unobtrusive, unambitious as he was, Isaac had a joy all his own. No happiness is more real than that of the meditative spirit which reaps "the harvest of the quiet eye." The calm brooding soul has depths of thought and secret experience which are unfathomable to restless minds. Our English Bible says, "Isaac went out to meditate at the eventide." Luther's Bible (and our margin) has "he went out to pray." The word has both meanings, and in that sentence Isaac's character is enshrined. He needed no oratory but the green fields, no incense but the falling dew, no dim religious light but nature's holy twilight, no candles but the lamps of heaven. There he had whole-hearted undisturbed fellowship with God. "I meditate on all Thy doings; I muse on the work of Thy hands; I stretch forth my hands unto Thee."[1] Isaac did not altogether, or perhaps at all, belie the happy name of *Laughter* which his fond parents gave him. In his reverential musing there was a radiance of heaven-born joy.

> "Alway his downcast eye
> Was laughing silently,
> As if he found some jubilee in thinking;
> For his one thought was God,
> In that one thought he abode,
> For ever in that thought more deeply sinking."[2]

Isaac as well as Abraham is a true Hebrew type. His character ranks as a great creation. Walking in the fields at eventide,

[1] Ps. 143[5]. [2] Faber.

praying, musing, adoring, Isaac lives for ever in the imagination of mankind. The nation which cherished such an ideal was destined to be pre-eminent in the best things, and to have the task of teaching a restless and noisy world the secret of peace, leading it back to the green fields and the still dews.

LOVE.—The closing scene is depicted in few words, but it belongs to the great literature of the world. God had prepared another joy for Isaac. As he came from "the well of the living God that seeth me," his meditation was cut short. He was suddenly in the charmed realm of romance. A fair picture painted itself in the setting sun. Isaac "lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, there were camels coming." The dumb creatures again play their part in the story. Rebekah's kindness to them had won her a husband; they fetch her across the desert to her future home; and in the golden twilight the approaching cavalcade makes an imperishable image in Isaac's heart. Rebekah leaps lightly down from her camel and glides into his life. They twain were destined for one another. Each was the counterpart and fulfilment of the other. "The happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give." [1]

> "He is the half part of a blessed man,
> Left to be finished by such as she;
> And she a fair divided excellence
> Whose fulness of perfection lies in him." [2]

"Each fulfils defect in each"—the passive, pensive, patient Isaac; the ardent, active, eager Rebekah. *L'allegra* weds *il penseroso*. The providence of God, the sanction of parents, the approval of friends, community of faith, manly virtues, maidenly graces, conspire to bless their union; Heaven's gift of love makes them one; and they are faithful unto death. Nothing could more clearly indicate the essential greatness of the Hebrew race than the fact that such pure and lofty ideals

[1] Ruskin. [2] Shakespeare.

were conceived and realised. "The fair type of matrimony presented in the story of Isaac and Rebekah does no more than represent with little alteration marriage as it really existed in the majority of families in the best days of the nation. . . . And here we may clearly see the mighty working of an elevated religion."[1]

COMFORT.—There are volumes in the simple words, "And Isaac brought Rebekah into his mother's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (v.[67]). Isaac's chief characteristic is a fine sensibility. He is keenly alive both to the joys and the sorrows of life. His spirit is like a sensitive plant, which responds to the touch of the softest light. He is from first to last essentially and unalterably a lover; for him to live is to love. And love is the secret of all that is best and strongest in him. His emotions are tremulously intense, and it is his happiness that his love is from the first directed to the right objects. Love misdirected is the sum of misery. Isaac is a lover of God, a lover of nature, a lover of home, and his spiritual love keeps his other affections pure. Like a delicate musical instrument, he answers every touch and breath of love. He so loves God that he is willing to lay down his life at His command. He so loves nature that a summer evening stirs him to high and reverent ecstasy. He so loves his mother that when she is taken from him time brings him no surcease of sorrow; he loves her all the more that he sees her in the light of memory; in his rich and deep nature love burns long and fervently; and after three years his grief is still fresh and keen. He is not comforted till he feels the transforming power of a new and altogether different affection—a love strong as death, which many waters cannot quench, neither can the floods drown.[2]

HARMONIES.—Nothing could be more beautiful than the way in which nature, religion, and love are blended in the story of

[1] Ewald. [2] Song of Sol. 8[6, 7].

Isaac and Rebekah. God inspires the author to hallow and glorify love. *Nature* helps him to realise it. The magnificence of sunset and the stillness of twilight form a fit environment for it. The great things of the world, of which love is the greatest, have a natural affinity. "The lover sees no resemblance except to summer evenings and diamond mornings, rainbows and the song of birds."[1]

"Your love? That's high as you shall go;
For it is true as Gospel text,
Not noble then is never so,
Either in this world or the next."

Religion does still more to make love what God designed it to be. The author surrounds Isaac with an atmosphere of meditation and prayer before he introduces him to his bride. Isaac will love Rebekah the more purely and chivalrously because he already loves God so well. His love will be a light to lead him, not away from, but nearer to God. "That man knows little either of love or of religion who imagines they ought to be kept apart. Of what sort is either if it is unfit to approach the other? Has God decreed, created a love which must separate from Himself? Is Love then divided? Or shall not the heart created lift up the heart to the Heart creating?"[2]

"Thrice blest whose lives are faithful prayers,
Whose loves in higher love endure."[3]

XXVII.

HEAVEN.

GEN. XXV. 1–11.

"On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round."
BROWNING.

OLD AGE.—Abraham was old, and well stricken in years (24[1]). But of his old age three things are said which redeem it from sadness and make it beautiful, noble, venerable. (1) It

[1] Emerson. [2] George Macdonald. [3] Tennyson.

was "a good old age" (25[8]), such as only a good man could have. The Hebrews regarded life as visibly and ideally complete when it was full of days, riches, and honour. They believed that righteousness lengthened life and glorified it at the end. "The hoary head is a crown of glory; it shall be found in the way of righteousness."[1] Age being a sign of divine favour, the good man's days were long in the land, while the wicked man was cut off by a premature and miserable death.

> "What man is he that desireth life,
> And loveth many days that he may *see good*?
> Keep thy tongue from evil,
> And thy lips from speaking guile;
> Depart from evil, and *do good*."[2]

The heathen made pathetic attempts to render age endurable and even desirable; but in the ideal old age of the Hebrews one discerns a grandeur, a meekness, and a mellowness which are unique. Advancing life was made good by increasing brightness and honour—"Thy age shall be clearer than the noonday; thou shalt shine forth, and be as the morning";[3] by increasing fruitfulness—"They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and green";[4] by the continual presence of God—"Even to old age I am He; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you."[5] "At evening-time there shall be light."[6] The memory of an active past, the sense of victory over trials, the silent waiting for the great change, made the sunset of life tranquil and beautiful. As even the lovely springtime of the year has not the charm of mellow autumn, so no beauty of youth can rival the features of old age which have been purified by time and trial and sorrow. Browning begins his finest poem with the words—

> "Grow old along with me,
> The best is yet to be,
> The last of life for which the first was planned."

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[1] Prov. 16[31]. [2] Ps. 34[12-14]. [3] Job 11[17].
[4] Ps. 92[14]. [5] Isa. 46[4]. [6] Zech. 14[7].

And Arnold speaks of the "solemn peace" of the evening of life—

> "As the stars come out, and the night-wind
> Brings up the stream
> Murmurs and scents of the infinite sea."

(2) Abraham was "full of years," or "satisfied with life" (25^8). He had seen, felt, laboured, loved, suffered enough; he knew all the contents of time; earth had no more to offer him; and so the years brought him a sense of completeness. Ripened by divine grace, satisfied but not sated, enjoying life to the last, yet willing to let it go—that is how we picture an aged servant of God. He will be—

> "With ease gathered, not harshly plucked, for death mature."[1]

(3) The LORD had blessed him in all things (24^1). To one who looked back upon the joys and sorrows, sins and sufferings of a long life, that was a splendid conclusion of the whole matter. Through God's loving-kindness he had found good in everything. He was rich, and riches were not a curse to him; he suffered, and trial was a blessing to him; he sinned, and by God's wonderful grace he got good out of evil. Every aged believer can say, as he reviews the past—

> "I have seen God's hand through a lifetime, and all is for best."[2]

REUNION.—When Abraham died, "Isaac and Ishmael, his sons, buried him in the cave of Machpelah" (25^9). This is the only transaction in which the brothers are ever mentioned together. They had never met since the day on which Ishmael, a lad of some fifteen years of age, was banished from home as a scapegrace for mocking his infant half-brother. Now they are both bearded men, and they stand side by side at the entrance of a rock-hewn sepulchre, and bear into its shadows the lifeless form of their father. The heroic huntsman from the steppes of Arabia and the gentle shepherd from the pasture-

[1] Milton. [2] Browning.

lands of the South vie with each other in paying the last honours to the beloved dead. They are both dutiful sons. Neither of them can ever forget how much their father loved them; neither of them ever cease to revere his name and memory. Death brings estranged brothers together to drink the cup of a common sorrow; they look at each other with tear-dimmed eyes; they see, in the light of eternity, how paltry are all causes of earthly strife; and they cannot return to their homes with hard hearts. When all other means of reconciliation fail, death makes kindred and brethren kind. The last enemy is a friend; the great divider is a mighty reconciler.

IMMORTALITY.—When Abraham died, he "was gathered to his fathers" (25^8), as God had promised, "in peace" (15^{15}). The phrase "gathered to his fathers" cannot mean that his body was laid to rest where the dust and ashes of his ancestors reposed. He died far away from the home of his fathers, and was interred in a new sepulchre, where only the remains of Sarah had been buried. The statement that he "was gathered to his fathers" is quite different from the preceding one, that he "gave up the ghost" (25^8), and from the succeeding one, that "Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah" (25^9). The gathering-place was neither in Chaldea nor in Canaan, but in the unseen world. The words imply a certain doctrine of another life, though what that was it is not easy to say. The old Shemitic idea was that all the dead, good and bad alike, went to the spectral realm of Sheol, "the congregation of shades," "the land of darkness and forgetfulness," "the house appointed for all living," where men were but feeble, flaccid semblances of their former selves, life was a pale image of the activities of the upper world, and fellowship with God was for ever at an end. But this cheerless prospect could not satisfy men who believed in a living, personal, gracious God; and it was here that inspired idealism achieved its most splendid results. "For

all that appears, the idea that any human person could become extinguished or be annihilated never occurred to the prophets and saints of the Old Testament."[1] On the contrary, men of faith were enabled to apprehend and proclaim the truth that their communion with God would never cease;[2] that they would overleap Sheol;[3] that they would see God's face and be satisfied;[4] that they would dwell in the house of the LORD for ever;[5] that, though their flesh and heart failed, God would be the strength of their heart, and their portion for ever.[6] How far this was believed by the writers of Genesis we can hardly know. But the argument for immortality, with special reference to the patriarchs, has been stated by the highest Authority. The words, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," contain the doctrine of immortality, since "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."[7] "As soon as the expressions 'communion with God' and 'life' begin to be at all synonymous, the foundation is laid of a true religious assurance of immortality, even although the doctrine itself is not yet consciously held."[8] Men who have lived in covenant and fellowship with God cannot dissolve into a handful of dust and cease to be. The desires which God has implanted in their hearts will be satisfied; their ideals are prophecies of their possessions. The Almighty will not forsake His friends. He does not call, and justify, and sanctify men, and then extinguish them. Machpelah does not hold the patriarchs. The Syrian stars look down on their sepulchre; *they* look down on the Syrian stars.

HEAVEN.—An exiled patriot has said, "Love and reverence above everything the ideal. The ideal is superior to every country, superior to humanity; it is the country of the spirit, the city of the soul."[9] When Abraham left Chaldea, he was allured

[1] A. B. Davidson. [2] Ps. $73^{23.24}$. [3] Ps. 49^{15}.
[4] Ps. 17^{15}, Job 19^{26}. [5] Ps. 23^{6}. [6] Ps. 73^{26}.
[7] Matt. 22^{32}. [8] Schultz. [9] Kossuth.

by the hope of finding a country of his own; and when he entered Canaan, the land was promised him for a possession (12[7]). But his hope was never literally fulfilled. "In the land of promise he sojourned as in a strange country." [1] He obtained no inheritance there, "no, not so much as to set his foot on." [2] Still he was not disappointed, and never complained of being deceived. His ideals were unrealised, but not shattered. He knew that all his expectations would be fulfilled in some grander way than he had ever imagined. His hope was unquenchable, and he never supposed that the unattained was unattainable. He so identified himself with the future of his people, that he rejoiced in it as if it were his own. He and all his children "saw the promises and greeted them from afar." [3] Many things in the future were mysterious to him; but all the ideals of the Hebrews were prophetic of Christ, and to cherish them was to have a certain vision of the Fulfiller. "Abraham," said Jesus, "rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." [4] For himself Abraham continued to cherish the ardent desire for a country. This was not the Chaldean's longing for the well-watered plains of Shinar. Had he pleased, he could easily have recrossed the Euphrates and ceased to be a Hebrew.[5] His sense of exile ever increased, but his *Heimweh* was not for the country from which he came out. Nor was it any longer the mere desire to possess the land of Canaan, where he knew that he must always be a stranger and sojourner (23[4]). Even in Canaan he suffered the pain of an unfulfilled ideal; his reach always exceeded his grasp; he had in his heart a divine discontent; he was conscious of "moving about in worlds not realised." Herein was his greatness; for it is not what a man achieves, but what he believes and strives for, that makes him noble and great. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews interprets the thoughts of the people of God. "Now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly." [6] "By faith Abraham

[1] Heb. 11[8]. [2] Acts 7[5]. [3] Heb. 11[13].
[4] John 8[56]. [5] Heb. 11[15]. [6] Heb. 11[16].

sojourned in the land of promise as in a land not his own, dwelling in tents, . . . for he looked for the city which hath foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God."[1] The man who was a pattern to all the Hebrew race lived believing, hoping, aspiring, but unsatisfied. When at length his exile and pilgrimage were ended, his hope was fulfilled, his ideal realised, in the presence of God.[2]

> "All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good, shall exist;
> Not the semblance, but itself . . .
> When eternity confirms the conception of an hour."[3]

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[1] Heb. 11[9]. [2] Compare Ps. 16[10. 11]. [3] Browning.

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