

Maclaren on Proverbs

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Sermons by Alexander Maclaren on Proverbs

Proverbs 1:1-19: A YOUNG MAN'S BEST COUNSELOR

This passage contains the general introduction to the book of Proverbs. It falls into three parts—a statement of the purpose of the book (vs. 1-6); a summary of its foundation principles, and of the teachings to which men ought to listen (vs. 7-9); and an antithetic statement of the voices to which they should be deaf (vs. 10-19).

I. The aim of the book is stated to be twofold—to enable men, especially the young, to ‘know wisdom,’ and to help them to ‘discern the words of understanding’; that is, to familiarise, by the study of the book, with the characteristics of wise teachings, so that there may be no mistaking seducing words of folly for these. These two aims are expanded in the remaining verses, the latter of them being resumed in Proverbs 1:6 , while the former occupies the other verses.

We note how emphatically the field in which this wisdom is to be exercised is declared to be the moral conduct of life. ‘Righteousness and judgment and equity’ are ‘wise dealing,’ and the end of true wisdom is to practise these. The wider horizon of modern science and speculation includes much in the notion of wisdom which has no bearing on conduct. But the intellectual progress (and conceit) of to-day will be none the worse for the reminder that a man may take in knowledge till he is ignorant, and that, however enriched with science and philosophy, if he does not practise righteousness, he is a fool.

We note also the special destination of the book—for the young. Youth, by reason of hot blood and inexperience, needs such portable medicines as are packed in these proverbs, many of them the condensation into a vivid sentence of world-wide truths. There are few better guides for a young man than this book of homely sagacity, which is wisdom about the world without being tainted by the bad sort of worldly wisdom. But unfortunately those who need it most relish it least, and we have for the most part to rediscover its truths for ourselves by our own, often bitter, experience.

We note, further, the clear statement of the way by which incipient ‘wisdom’ will grow, and of the certainty of its growth if it is real. It is the ‘wise man’ who will ‘increase in learning,’ the ‘man of understanding’ who ‘attains unto sound counsels.’ The treasures are thrown away on him who has no heart for them. You may lavish wisdom on the ‘fool,’ and it will run off him like water off a rock, fertilising nothing, and stopping outside him.

The Bible would not have met all our needs, nor gone with us into all regions of our experience, if it had not had this book of shrewd, practical common-sense. Christianity is the perfection of common sense. ‘Godliness hath promise of the life which now is.’ The wisdom of the serpent, which Jesus enjoins, has none of the serpent’s venom in it. It is no sign of spirituality of mind to be above such mundane considerations as this book urges. If we hold our heads too high to look to our road and our feet, we are sure to fall into a pit.

II. Proverbs 1:7-9 may be regarded as a summary statement of the principle on which the whole book is based, and of the duty which it enjoins. The principle is that true wisdom is based on religion, and the duty is to listen to parental instruction. ‘My son,’ is the address of a teacher to his disciples, rather than of a father to his child. The characteristic Old Testament designation of religion as ‘the fear of Jehovah’ corresponds to the Old Testament revelation of Him as the Holy One,—that is, as Him who is infinitely separated from creatural being and limitations. Therefore is He ‘to be had in reverence of all’ who would be ‘about Him’; that fear of reverential awe in which no slavish dread mingles, and which is perfectly consistent with aspiration, trust, and love. The

Old Testament reveals Him as separate from men; the New Testament reveals Him as united to men in the divine man, Christ Jesus. Therefore its keynote is the designation of religion as 'the love of God'; but that name is no contradiction of the earlier, but the completion of it.

That fear is the beginning or basis of wisdom, because wisdom is conceived of as God's gift, and the surest way to get it is to 'ask of God' (Jas. i. 5). Religion is, further, the foundation of wisdom, inasmuch as irreligion is the supreme folly of creatures so dependent on God, and so hungering after Him in the depths of their being, as we are. In whatever directions a godless man may be wise, in the most important matter of all, his relations to God, he is unwise, and the epitaph for all such is 'Thou fool!'

Further, religion is the fountain of wisdom, in the sense of the word in which this book uses it, since it opens out into principles of action, motives, and communicated powers, which lead to right apprehension and willing discharge of the duties of life. Godless men may be scientists, philosophers, encyclopaedias of knowledge, but for want of religion, they blunder in the direction of their lives, and lack wisdom enough to keep them from wrecking the ship on the rocks.

The Israelitish parent was enjoined to teach his or her children the law of the Lord. Here the children are enjoined to listen to the instruction. Reverence for traditional wisdom was characteristic of that state of society, and since a divine revelation stood at the beginning of the nation's history, it was not unreasonable to look back for light. Nowadays, a belief's being our fathers' is with many a reason for not making it ours. But perhaps that is no more rational than the blind adherence to the old with which this emancipated generation reproaches its predecessors. Possibly there are some 'old lamps' better than the new ones now hawked about the streets by so many loud-voiced vendors. The youth of this day have much need of the exhortation to listen to the 'instruction' (by which is meant, not only teaching by word, but discipline by act) of their fathers, and to the gentler voice of the mother telling of law in accents of love. These precepts obeyed will be fairer ornaments than jewelled necklaces and wreathed chaplets.

III. On one side of the young man are those who would point him to the fear of Jehovah; on the other are seducing whispers, tempting him to sin. That is the position in which we all stand. It is not enough to listen to the nobler voice. We have resolutely to stop our ears to the baser, which is often the louder. Facile yielding to the cunning inducements which strew every path, and especially that of the young, is fatal. If we cannot say 'No' to the base, we shall not say 'Yes' to the noble voice. To be weak is generally to be wicked; for in this world the tempters are more numerous, and to sense and flesh, more potent than those who invite to good.

The example selected of such enticers is not of the kind that most of us are in danger from. But the sort of inducements held out are in all cases substantially the same. 'Precious substance' of one sort or another is dangled before dazzled eyes; jovial companionship draws young hearts. The right or wrong of the thing is not mentioned, and even murder and robbery are presented as rather pleasant excitement, and worth doing for the sake of what is got thereby. Are the desirable consequences so sure? Is there no chance of being caught red-handed, and stoned then and there, as a murderer? The tempters are discreetly silent about that possibility, as all tempters are. Sin always deceives, and its baits artfully hide the hook; but the cruel barb is there, below the gay silk and coloured dressing, and it—not the false appearance of food which lured the fish—is what sticks in the bleeding mouth.

The teacher goes on, in Proverbs 1:15-19 , to supply the truth which the tempters tried to ignore. He does so in three weighty sentences, which strip the tinsel off the temptation, and show its real ugliness. The flowery way to which they coax is a way of 'evil'; that should be enough to settle the question. The first thing to ask about any course is not whether it is agreeable or disagreeable, but Is it right or wrong? Proverbs 1:17 is ambiguous, but probably the 'net' means the tempters' speech in Proverbs 1:11-14 , and the 'bird' is the young man supposed to be addressed. The sense will then be, 'Surely you are not foolish enough to fly right into the meshes, and to go with your eyes open into so transparent sin!'

Proverbs 1:18 points to the grim possibility already referred to, that the would-be murderers will be caught and executed. But its lesson is wider than that one case, and declares the great solemn truth that all sin is suicide. Who ever breaks God's law slays himself.

What is true about 'covetousness,' as Proverbs 1:19 tells, is true about all kinds of sin—that it takes away the life of those who yield to it, even though it may also fill their purses, or in other ways may gratify their desires. Surely it is folly to pursue a course which, however it may succeed in its immediate aims, brings real death, by separation from God, along with it. He is not a very wise man who ties his gold round him when the ship founders. He is not parted from his treasure certainly, but it helps to sink him. We may get what we want by sinning, but we get also what we did not want or reckon on—that is, eternal death. 'This their way is their folly.' Yet, strange to tell, their posterity 'approve their sayings,' and follow their doings.

Proverbs 1:20-33: WISDOM'S CALL

Our passage begins with a striking picture. A fair and queenly woman stands in the crowded resorts of men, and lifts up a voice of sweet entreaty—authoritative as well as sweet. Her name is Wisdom. The word is in the plural in the Hebrew, as if to teach that in this serene and lovely form all manifold wisdoms are gathered and made one. Who then is she? It is easy to say ‘a poetical personification,’ but that does not add much to our understanding. It is clear that this book means much more by Wisdom than a human quality merely; for august and divine attributes are given to her, and she is the co-eternal associate of God Himself. Dwelling in His bosom, she thence comes forth to inspire all human good deeds, to plead evermore with men, to enrich those who listen to her with choicest gifts. Intellectual clearness, moral goodness, religious devotion, are all combined in the idea of Wisdom as belonging to men.

The divine source of all, and the correspondence between the human and the divine nature, are taught in the residence of this personified Wisdom with God before she dwelt with men. The whole of the manifold revelations, by which God makes known any part of His will to men, are her voice. Especially the call contained in the Old Testament revelation is the summons of Wisdom. But whether the writer of this book had any inkling of deeper truth still, or not, we cannot but connect the incomplete personification of divine Wisdom here with its complete incarnation in a Person who is ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God,’ and who embodies the lineaments of the grand picture of a Wisdom crying in the streets, even while it is true of Him that ‘He does not strive nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets’; for the crying, which is denied to be His, is ostentatious and noisy, and the crying which is asserted to be hers is the plain, clear, universal appeal of divine love as well as wisdom. The light of Christ ‘lighteth every man that cometh into the world.’

The call of Wisdom in this passage begins with remonstrance and plain speech, giving their right names to men who neglect her voice. The first step in delivering men from evil—that is, from foolish—courses is to put very clearly before them the true character of their acts, and still more of their inclinations. Gracious offers and rich promises come after; but the initial message of Wisdom to such men as we are must be the accusation of folly. ‘When she is come, she will convict the world of sin.’

The three designations of men in Proverbs 1:22 are probably arranged so as to make a climax. First come ‘the simple,’ or, as the word means, ‘open.’ There is a sancta simplicitas, a holy ignorance of evil, which is sister to the highest wisdom. It is well to be ignorant as well as ‘innocent of much transgression’; and there is no more mistaken and usually insincere excuse for going into foul places than the plea that it is best to know the evil and so choose the good. That knowledge comes surely and soon enough without our seeking it. But there is a fatal simplicity, open-eared, like Eve, to the Tempter’s whisper, which believes the false promises of sin, and as Bunyan has taught us, is companion of sloth and presumption.

Next come ‘scorners,’ who mock at good. A man must have gone a long way down hill before he begins to gibe at virtue and godliness. But the descent is steep, though the distance is long; and the ‘simple’ who begins to do what is wrong will come to sneer at what is right.

Then last comes the ‘fool,’ the name which, in Proverbs, is shorthand for mental stupidity, moral obstinacy, and dogged godlessness,—a foul compound, but one which is realised oftener than we think. A great many very superior intellects, cultivated ladies and gentlemen, university graduates, and the like, would be unceremoniously set down by divine wisdom as fools; and surely if account is taken of the whole compass and duration of our being, and of all our relations to things and persons seen and unseen, nothing can be more stupid than godlessness, however cultured. The word literally means coarse or thick, and may suggest the idea of stolid insensibility as the last stage in the downward progress.

But note that the charge is directed, not against deeds, but dispositions. Perverted love and perverted hatred underlie acts. The simple love simplicity, preferring to be unwarned against evil; the scorner finds delight in letting his rank tongue blossom into speech; and the false direction given to love gives a fatal twist to its corresponding hate, so that the fool detests ‘knowledge’ as a thief the policeman’s lantern. You cannot love what you should loathe, without loathing what you should love. Inner longings and revulsions settle character and acts.

Proverbs 1:23 passes into entreaty; for it is vain to rouse conscience by plain speech, unless something is offered to make better life possible. The divine Wisdom comes with a rod, but also with gifts; but if the rod is kissed, the rewards are possessed. The relation of clauses in Proverbs 1:23 is that the first is the condition of the fulfilment of the second and third. If we turn at her reproof, two great gifts will be bestowed. Her spirit within will make us quick to hear and receive her words sounding without. Whatever other good follows on yielding to the call of divine Wisdom (and the remaining early chapters of Proverbs magnificently detail the many rich gifts that do follow), chief of all are spirits swift to hear and docile to obey her voice, and then actual communications to purged ears. Outward revelation without prepared hearts is water spilt upon rock. Prepared hearts without a message to them would be but multiplication of vain longings; and God never stultifies Himself, or gives mouths without sending meat to fill them. To the submissive spirit, there will not lack either disposition to hear or clear utterance of His will.

But now comes a pause. Wisdom has made her offers in the crowded streets, and amid all the noise and bustle her voice has rung

out. What is the result? Nothing. Not a head has been turned, nor an eye lifted. The bustle goes on as before. 'They bought, they sold,' as if no voice had spoken. So, after the disappointed waiting of Wisdom, her voice peals out again, but this time with severity in its tones. Note how, in Proverbs 1:24 and 25, the sin of sins against the pleading Wisdom of God is represented as being simple indifference. 'Ye refused,' 'no man regarded,' 'set at nought,' 'would none of'—these are the things which bring down the heavy judgments. It does not need violent opposition or black crime to wreck a soul. Simply doing nothing when God speaks is enough to effect destruction. There is no need to lift up angry arms in hostility. If we keep them hanging listless by our sides, it is sufficient. The gift escapes us, if we simply keep our hands shut or held behind our backs. Alas, for ears which have not heard, for seeing eyes which have not seen because they loved evil simplicity and hated knowledge!

Then note the terrible retribution. That is an awful picture of the mocking laughter of Wisdom, accompanying the rush of the whirlwind and the groans of anguish and shrieks of terror. It is even more solemn and dreadful than the parallel representations in Psalm ii., for there the laughter indicates God's knowledge that the schemes of opponents are vain, but here it figures pleasure in calamities. Of course it is to be remembered that the Wisdom thus represented is not to be identified with God; but still the imagery is startling, and needs to be taken along with declarations that God has 'no pleasure in the death of the sinner,' and to be interpreted as indicating, with daring anthropomorphism, the inevitable character of the 'destruction,' and the uselessness of appeals to the Wisdom once despised. But we joyfully remember that the Incarnate Wisdom, fairer than the ancient personification, wept over the city which He knew must perish.

Proverbs 1:28-31 carry on the picture of too late repentance and inevitable retribution. They who let Wisdom cry, and paid no heed, shall cry to her in their turn, and be unnoticed. They whom she vainly sought shall vainly seek for her. Actions have their consequences, which are not annihilated because the doers do not like them. Thoughts have theirs; for the foolish not only eat of the fruit of their ways or doings, but are filled with their own devices or counsels. 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' That inexorable law works, deaf to all cries, in the field of earthly life, both as regards condition and character; and that field of its operation is all that the writer of this book has in view. He is not denying the possibility of forgiveness, nor the efficacy of repentance, nor is he asserting that a penitent soul ever seeks God in vain; but he is declaring that it is too late to cry out for deliverance from consequences of folly when the consequences have us in their grip, and that wishes for deliverance are vain, though sighs of repentance are not. We cannot reap where we have not sowed. We must reap what we have. If we are such sluggards that we will 'not plough in winter by reason of the cold,' we shall 'beg in harvest and have nothing.'

But though the writer had probably only this life in view, Jesus Christ has extended the teaching to the next, when He has told of those who will seek to enter in and not be able. The experience of the fruits of their godlessness will make godless men wish to escape eating the fruits—and that wish shall be vain. It is not for us to enlarge on such words, but it is for us all to lay them to heart, and to take heed that we listen now to the beseeching call of the heavenly Wisdom in its tenderest and noblest form, as it appeared in Christ, the Incarnate Word.

Proverbs 1:32 and 33 generalise the preceding promises and warnings in a great antithesis. 'The backsliding [or, turning away] of the simple slays them.' There is allusion to Wisdom's call in Proverbs 1:23. The simple had turned, but in the wrong direction—away from and not towards her. To turn away from heavenly Wisdom is to set one's face toward destruction. It cannot be too earnestly reiterated that we must make our choice of one of two directions for ourselves—either towards God, to seek whom is life, to find whom is heaven; or away from Him, to turn our backs on whom is to embrace unrest, and to be separate from whom is death. 'The security of fools,' by which is meant, not their safety, but their fancy that they are safe, 'destroys them.' No man is in such danger as the careless man of the world who thinks that he is all right. A traveller along the edge of a precipice in the night, who goes on as if he walked a broad road and takes no heed to his footing, will soon repent his rashness at the bottom, mangled and bruised. A man who in this changing world fancies that he sits as a king, and sees no sorrow, will have a rude awakening. A moment's heed saves hours of pain.

The alternative to this suicidal folly is in listening to Wisdom's call. Whoever does that will 'dwell safely,' not in fancied but real security; and in his quiet heart there need be no unrest from feared evils, for he will have hold of a charm which turns evils into good, and with such a guide he cannot go astray, nor with such a defender be wounded to death, nor with such a companion ever be solitary. If Christ be our Light, we shall not walk in darkness. If He be our Wisdom, we shall not err. If He be our Life, we shall never see death. If He is our Good, we shall fear no evil.

Proverbs 3:1-10: THE SECRET OF WELL-BEING

The first ten verses of this passage form a series of five couplets, which enforce on the young various phases of goodness by their tendency to secure happiness or blessedness of various sorts. The underlying axiom is that, in a world ruled by a good Being, obedience must lead to well-being; but while that is in the general true, exceptions do occur, and good men do encounter evil times. Therefore the glowing promises of these verses are followed by two verses which deal with the explanation of good men's afflictions, as being results and tokens of God's fatherly love.

The first couplet is general in character. It inculcates obedience to the precepts of the teacher, and gives as reason the assurance that thereby long life and peace will be secured. True to the Old Testament conception of revelation as a law, the teacher sets obedience in the forefront. He is sure that his teaching contains the sufficient guide for conduct, and coincides with the divine will. He calls, in the first instance, for inward willing acceptance of His commandments; for it is the heart, not primarily the hands, which he desires should 'keep' them. The mother of all graces of conduct is the bowing of the will to divine authority. The will is the man, and where it ceases to lift itself up in self-sacrificing and self-determining rebellion, and dissolves into running waters of submission, these will flow through the life and make it pure. To obey self is sin, to obey God is righteousness. The issues of such obedience are 'length of days ... and peace.'

Even if we allow for the difference between the Old and the New Testaments, it remains true that a life conformed to God's will tends to longevity, and that many forms of sin do shorten men's days. Passion and indulged appetites eat away the very flesh, and many a man's 'bones are full of the sin of his youth.' The profligate has usually 'a short life,' whether he succeeds in making it 'merry' or not.

'Peace' is a wide word, including all well-being. Ease-loving Orientals, especially when living in warlike times, naturally used the phrase as a shorthand expression for all good. Busy Westerns, torn by the distractions and rapid movement of modern life, echo the sigh for repose which breathes in the word. 'There is no joy but calm,' and the sure way to deepest peace is to give up self-will and live in obedience.

The second couplet deals with our relations to one another, and puts forward the two virtues of 'loving-kindness and truth'—that is truth, or faithfulness—as all-inclusive. They are the two which are often jointly ascribed to God, especially in the Psalms. Our attitude to one another should be moulded in God's to us all. The tiniest crystal has the same facets and angles as the largest. The giant hexagonal pillars of basalt, like our Scottish Staffa, are identical in form with the microscopic crystals of the same substance. God is our Pattern; goodness is likeness to Him.

These graces are to be bound about the neck, perhaps as an ornament, but more probably as a yoke by which the harnessed ox draws its burden. If we have them, they will fit us to bear one another's burdens, and will lead to all human duties to our fellows.

These graces are also to be written on the 'table of the heart'; that is, are to be objects of habitual meditation with aspiration. If so, they will come to sight in life. He who practises them will 'find favour with God and man,' for God looks with complacency on those who display the right attitude to men; and men for the most part treat us as we treat them. There are surly natures which are not won by kindness, like black tarns among the hills, that are gloomy even in sunshine, and requite evil for good; but the most of men reflect our feelings to them.

'Good understanding' is another result. It is 'found' when it is attributed to us, so that the expression substantially means that the possessors of these graces will win the reputation of being really wise, not only in the fallible judgment of men, but before the pure eyes of the all-seeing God. Really wise policy coincides with loving-kindness and truth.

The remaining couplets refer to our relations to God. The New Testament is significantly anticipated in the pre-eminence given to trust; that is, faith. Nor less significant and profound is the association of self-distrust with trust in the Lord. The two things are inseparable. They are but the under and upper sides of one thing, or like the two growths that come from a seed—one striking downwards becomes the root; one piercing upwards becomes the stalk. The double attitude of trust and distrust finds expression in acknowledging Him in all our ways; that is, ordering our conduct under a constant consciousness of His presence, in accordance with His will, and in dependence on His help.

Such a relation to God will certainly, and with no exceptions, issue in His 'directing our paths,' by which is meant that He will be not only our Guide, but also our Roadmaker, showing us the way and clearing obstacles from it. Calm certitude follows on willingness to accept God's will, and whoever seeks only to go where God sends him will neither be left doubtful whither he should go, nor find his road blocked.

The fourth couplet is, in its first part, in inverted parallelism with the third; for it begins with self-distrust, and proceeds thence to 'fear of the Lord,' which corresponds to, and is, in fact, but one phase of, trust in Him. It is the reverent awe which has no torment, and is then purest when faith is strongest. It necessarily leads to departing from evil. Morality has its roots in religion. There is no such magnet to draw men from sin as the happy fear of God, which is likewise faith. Whoever separates devoutness from purity of life, this teacher does not. He knows nothing of religion which permits association with iniquity. Such conduct will tend to physical well-being, and in a deeper sense will secure soundness of life. Godlessness is the true sickness. He only is healthy who has a healthy, because healed, soul.

The fifth couplet appears at first as being a drop to a lower region. A regulation of the Mosaic law may strike some as out of place here. But it is to be remembered that our modern distinction of ceremonial and moral law was non-existent for Israel, and that the

command has a wider application than to Jewish tithes. To 'honour God with our substance' is not necessarily to give it away for religious purposes, but to use it devoutly and as He approves.

Christianity has more to say about the distribution, as well as the acquisition, of wealth, than professing Christians, especially in commercial communities, practically recognise. This precept grips us tight, and is much more than a ceremonial regulation. Many causes besides the devout use of property tend to wealth in our highly artificial state of society. The world tries to get it by shrewdness, unscrupulousness, and by many other vices which are elevated to the rank of virtues; but he who honours the Lord in getting and spending will generally have as much as his true needs and regulated desires require.

Proverbs 3:11-24: THE GIFTS OF HEAVENLY WISDOM

The repetition of the words 'my son' at the beginning of this passage marks a new section, which extends to verse 20, inclusively, another section being similarly marked as commencing in verse 21. The fatherly counsels of these early chapters are largely reiterations of the same ideas, being line upon line. 'To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.' Many strokes drive the nail home. Exhortations to get Wisdom, based upon the blessings she brings, are the staple of the whole. If we look carefully at the section (vers. 11-20), we find in it a central core (vers. 13-18), setting forth the blessings which Wisdom gives, preceded by two verses, inculcating the right acceptance of God's chastisements which are one chief means of attaining Wisdom, and followed by two verses (vers. 19, 20), which exalt her as being divine as well as human. So the portraiture of her working in humanity is framed by a prologue and epilogue, setting forth two aspects of her relation to God; namely, that she is imparted by Him through the discipline of trouble, and that she dwells in His bosom and is the agent of His creative work.

The prologue, then, points to sorrow and trouble, rightly accepted, as one chief means by which we acquire heavenly Wisdom. Note the profound insight into the meaning of sorrows. They are 'instruction' and 'reproof.' The thought of the Book of Job is here fully incorporated and assimilated. Grievings and pains are not tokens of anger, nor punishments of sin, but love-gifts meant to help to the acquisition of wisdom. They do not come because the sufferers are wicked, but in order to make them good or better. Tempests are meant to blow us into port. The lights are lowered in the theatre that fairer scenes may become visible on the thin screen between us and eternity. Other supports are struck away that we may lean hard on God. The voice of all experience of earthly loss and bitterness is, 'Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get Wisdom.' God himself becomes our Schoolmaster, and through the voice of the human teacher we hear His deeper tones saying, 'My son, despise not the chastening.'

Note, too, the assurance that all discipline is the fruit of Fatherly love. How many sad hearts in all ages these few words have calmed and braced! How sharp a test of our childlike spirit our acceptance of them, when our own hearts are sore, is! How deep the peace which they bring when really believed! How far they go to solve the mystery of pain, and turn darkness into a solemn light!

Note, further, that the words 'despise' and 'be weary' both imply rather rejection with loathing, and thus express unsubmissive impatience which gets no good from discipline. The beautiful rendering of the Septuagint, which has been made familiar by its adoption in Hebrews, makes the two words express two opposite faults. They 'despise' who steel their wills against the rod, and make as if they did not feel the pain; they 'faint' who collapse beneath the blows, which they feel so much that they lose sight of their purpose. Dogged insensibility and utter prostration are equally harmful. He who meets life's teachings, which are a Father's correction, with either, has little prospect of getting Wisdom.

Then follows the main part of this section (vers. 13-18),—the praise of Wisdom as in herself most precious, and as bestowing highest good. 'The man that findeth Wisdom' reminds us of the peasant in Christ's parable, who found treasure hidden in a field, and the 'merchandise' in verse 14, of the trader seeking goodly pearls. But the finding in verse 13 is not like the rustic's in the parable, who was seeking nothing when a chance stroke of his plough or kick of his heel laid bare the glittering gold. It is the finding which rewards seeking. The figure of acquiring by trading, like that of the pearl-merchant in the companion parable, implies pains, effort, willingness to part with something in order to attain.

The nature of the price is not here in question. We know who has said, 'I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire.' We buy heavenly Wisdom when we surrender ourselves. The price is desire to possess, and willingness to accept as an undeserved, unearned gift. But that does not come into view in our lesson. Only this is strongly put in it—that this heavenly Wisdom outshines all jewels, outweighs all wealth, and is indeed the only true riches. 'Rubies' is probably rather to be taken as 'corals,' which seem to have been very highly prized by the Jews, and, no doubt, found their way to them from the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea. The word rendered 'things thou canst desire' is better taken as meaning 'jewels.'

This noble and conclusive depreciation of material wealth in comparison with Wisdom, which is not merely intellectual, but rests on the fear of the Lord, and is goodness as well as understanding, never needed preaching with more emphasis than in our day, when more and more the commercial spirit invades every region of life, and rich men are the aristocrats and envied types of success. When will England and America believe the religion which they profess, and adjust their estimates of the best things accordingly?

How many so-called Christian parents would think their son mad if he said, 'I do not care about getting rich; my goal is to be wise with God's Wisdom'? How few of us order our lives on the footing of this old teacher's lesson, and act out the belief that Wisdom is more than wealth! The man who heaps millions together, and masses it, fails in life, however a vulgar world and a nominal church may admire and glorify him. The man who wins Wisdom succeeds, however bare may be his cupboard, and however people may pity him for having failed in life, because he has not drawn prizes in the Devil's lottery. His blank is a prize, and their prizes are blanks. This decisive subordination of material to spiritual good is too plainly duty and common sense to need being dwelt upon; but, alas! like a great many other most obvious, accepted truths, it is disregarded as universally as believed.

The inseparable accompaniments of Wisdom are next eloquently described. The picture is the poetical clothing of the idea that all material good will come to him who despises it all and clasps Wisdom to his heart. Some things flow from Wisdom possessed as usual consequences; some are inseparable from her. The gift in her right hand is length of days; that in her left, which, by its position, is suggested as inferior to the former, is wealth and honour—two goods which will attend the long life. No doubt such promises are to be taken with limitations; but there need be no doubt that, on the whole, loyal devotion to and real possession of heavenly Wisdom do tend in the direction of lengthening lives, which are by it delivered from vices and anxieties which cut many a career short, and of gathering round silver hairs reverence and troops of friends.

These are the usual consequences, and may be fairly brought into view as secondary encouragements to seek Wisdom. But if she is sought for the sake of getting these attendant blessings, she will not be found. She must be loved for herself, not for her dowry, or she will not be won. At the same time, the overstrained and fantastic morality, which stigmatises regard to the blessed results of a religious life as selfishness, finds no support in Scripture, as it has none in common sense. Would there were more of such selfishness!

Sometimes Wisdom's hands do not hold these outward gifts. But the connection between her and the next blessings spoken of is inseparable. Her ways are pleasantness and peace. 'In keeping'—not for keeping—'her commandments is great reward.' Inward delight and deep tranquillity of heart attend every step taken in obedience to Wisdom. The course of conduct so prescribed will often involve painful crucifying of the lower nature, but its pleasure far outweighs its pain. It will often be strewn with sharp flints, or may even have red-hot ploughshares laid on it, as in old ordeal trials; but still it will be pleasant to the true self. Sin is a blunder as well as a crime, and enlightened self-interest would point out the same course as the highest law of Wisdom. In reality, duty and delight are co-extensive. They are two names for one thing—one taken from consideration of its obligation; the other, from observation of its issues. 'Calm pleasures there abide.' The only complete peace, which fills and quiets the whole man, comes from obeying Wisdom, or what is the same thing, from following Christ. There is no other way of bringing all our nature into accord with itself, ending the war between conscience and inclination, between flesh and spirit. There is no other way of bringing us into amity with all circumstances, so that fortunate or adverse shall be recognised as good, and nothing be able to agitate us very much. Peace with ourselves, the world, and God, is always the consequence of listening to Wisdom.

The whole fair picture is summed up in verse 18 : 'She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her.' This is a distinct allusion to the narrative of Genesis. The flaming sword of the cherub guard is sheathed, and access to the tree, which gives immortal life to those who eat, is open to us. Mark how that great word 'life' is here gathering to itself at least the beginnings of higher conceptions than those of simple existence. It is swelling like a bud, and preparing to open and disclose the perfect flower, the life which stands in the knowledge of God and the Christ whom He has sent. Jesus, the incarnate Wisdom, is Himself 'the Tree of Life in the midst of the paradise of God.' The condition of access to it is 'laying hold' by the outstretched hand of faith, and keeping hold with holy obstinacy of grip, in spite of all temptations to slack our grasp. That retaining is the condition of true blessedness.

Verses 19 and 20 invest the idea of Wisdom with still loftier sublimity, since they declare that it is an attribute of God Himself by which creation came into being. The meaning of the writer is inadequately grasped if we take it to be only that creation shows God's Wisdom. This personified Wisdom dwells with God, is the agent of creation, comes with invitations to men, may be possessed by them, and showers blessings on them. The planet Neptune was divined before it was discovered, by reason of perturbations in the movements of the exterior members of the system, unaccountable unless some great globe of light, hitherto unseen, were swaying them in their orbits. Do we not see here like influence streaming from the unrisen light of Christ? Personification prepares for Incarnation. There is One who has been with the Father from the beginning, by whom all things came into being, whose voice sounds to all, who is the Tree of Life, whom we may all possess, and with whose own peace we may be peaceful and blessed for evermore.

Verses 21-24 belong to the next section of the great discourse or hymn. They add little to the preceding. But we may observe the earnest exhortation to let wisdom and understanding be ever in sight. Eyes are apt to stray and clouds to hide the sun. Effort is needed to counteract the tendency to slide out of consciousness, which our weakness imposes on the most certain and important truths. A Wisdom which we do not think about is as good or as bad as non-existent for us. One prime condition of healthy spiritual life is the habit of meditation, thereby renewing our gaze upon the facts of God's revelation and the bearing of these on our conduct.

The blessings flowing from Wisdom are again dilated on, from a somewhat different point of view. She is the giver of life. And then she adorns the life she gives. One has seen homely faces so refined and glorified by the fair soul that shone through them as to be, 'as it were, the face of an angel.' Gracefulness should be the outward token of inward grace. Some good people forget that they are bound to 'adorn the doctrine.' But they who have drunk most deeply of the fountain of Wisdom will find that, like the fabled spring, its waters confer strange loveliness. Lives spent in communion with Jesus will be lovely, however homely their surroundings, and however vulgar eyes, taught only to admire staring colours, may find them dull. The world saw 'no beauty that they should desire Him,' in Him whom holy souls and heavenly angels and the divine Father deemed 'fairer than the sons of men'!

Safety and firm footing in active life will be ours if we walk in Wisdom's ways. He who follows Christ's footsteps will tread surely, and not fear foes. Quiet repose in hours of rest will be his. A day filled with happy service will be followed by a night full of calm slumber, 'Whether we sleep or wake, we live' with Him; and, if we do both, sleeping and waking will be blessed, and our lives will move on gently to the time when days and nights shall melt into one, and there will be no need for repose; for there will be no work that wearies and no hands that droop. The last lying down in the grave will be attended with no terrors. The last sleep there shall be sweet; for it will really be awaking to the full possession of the personal Wisdom, who is our Christ, our Life in death, our Heaven in heaven.

Proverbs 4:10-19 THE TWO PATHS

This passage includes much more than temperance or any other single virtue. It is a perfectly general exhortation to that practical wisdom which walks in the path of righteousness. The principles laid down here are true in regard to drunkenness and abstinence, but they are intended to receive a wider application, and to that wider application we must first look. The theme is the old, familiar one of the two paths, and the aim is to recommend the better way by setting forth the contrasted effects of walking in it and in the other.

The general call to listen in verse 10 is characteristically enforced by the Old Testament assurance that obedience prolongs life. That is a New Testament truth as well; for there is nothing more certain than that a life in conformity with God's will, which is the same thing as a life in conformity with physical laws, tends to longevity. The experience of any doctor will show that. Here in England we have statistics which prove that total abstainers are a long-lived people, and some insurance offices construct their tables accordingly.

After that general call to listen comes, in verse 11, the description of the path in which long life is to be found. It is 'the way of Wisdom'—that is, that which Wisdom prescribes, and in which therefore it is wise to walk. It is always foolish to do wrong. The rough title of an old play is *The Devil is an Ass*, and if that is not true about him, it is absolutely true about those who listen to his lies. Sin is the stupidest thing in the universe, for it ignores the plainest facts, and never gets what it flings away so much to secure.

Another aspect of the path is presented in the designation 'paths of uprightness,' which seems to be equivalent to those which belong to, or perhaps which consist of, uprightness. The idea of straightness or evenness is the primary meaning of the word, and is, of course, appropriate to the image of a path. In the moral view, it suggests how much more simple and easy a course of rectitude is than one of sin. The one goes straight and unswerving to its end; the other is crooked, devious, intricate, and wanders from the true goal. A crooked road is a long road, and an up-and-down road is a tiring road. Wisdom's way is straight, level, and steadily approaches its aim.

In verse 13 the image of the path is dropped for the moment, and the picture of the way of uprightness and its travellers is translated into the plain exhortation to keep fast hold of 'instruction,' which is substantially equivalent to the queenly Wisdom of these early chapters of Proverbs. The earnestness of the repeated exhortations implies the strength of the forces that tend to sweep us, especially those of us who are young, from our grasp of that Wisdom. Hands become slack, and many a good gift drops from nerveless fingers; thieves abound who will filch away 'instruction,' if we do not resolutely hold tight by it. Who would walk through the slums of a city holding jewels with a careless grasp, and never looking at them? How many would he have left if he did? We do not need to do anything to lose instruction. If we will only do nothing to keep it, the world and our own hearts will make sure that we lose it. And if we lose it, we lose ourselves; for 'she is thy life,' and the mere bodily life, that is lived without her, is not worth calling the life of a man.

Verses 14 to 17 give the picture of the other path, in terrible contrast with the preceding. It is noteworthy that, while in the former the designation was the 'path of uprightness' or of 'wisdom,' and the description therefore was mainly of the characteristics of the path, here the designation is 'the path of the wicked,' and the description is mainly of the travellers on it. Righteousness was dealt with, as it were, in the abstract; but wickedness is too awful and dark to be painted thus, and is only set forth in the concrete, as seen in its doers. Now, it is significant that the first exhortation here is of a negative character. In contrast with the reiterated exhortations to keep wisdom, here are reiterated counsels to steer clear of evil. It is all about us, and we have to make a strong effort to keep it at arm's-length. 'Whom resist' is imperative. True, negative virtue is incomplete, but there will be no positive virtue

without it. We must be accustomed to say 'No,' or we shall come to little good. An outer belt of firs is sometimes planted round a centre of more tender and valuable wood to shelter the young trees; so we have to make a fence of abstinences round our plantation of positive virtues. The decalogue is mostly prohibitions. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God' must be our motto. In this light, entire abstinence from intoxicants is seen to be part of the 'way of Wisdom.' It is one, and, in the present state of England and America, perhaps the most important, of the ways by which we can 'turn from' the path of the wicked and 'pass on.'

The picture of the wicked in verses 16 and 17 is that of very grossly criminal sinners. They are only content when they have done harm, and delight in making others as bad as themselves. But, diabolical as such a disposition is, one sees it only too often in full operation. How many a drunkard or impure man finds a fiendish pleasure in getting hold of some innocent lad, and 'putting him up to a thing or two,' which means teaching him the vices from which the teacher has ceased to get much pleasure, and which he has to spice with the condiment of seeing an unaccustomed sinner's eagerness! Such people infest our streets, and there is only one way for a young man to be safe from them,—'avoid, pass not by, turn from, and pass on.' The reference to 'bread' and 'wine' in verse 17 seems simply to mean that the wicked men's living is won by their 'wickedness,' which procures bread, and by their 'violence,' which brings them wine. It is the way by which these are obtained that is culpable. We may contrast this foul source of a degraded living with verse 13, where 'instruction' is set forth as 'the life' of the upright.

Verses 18 and 19 bring more closely together the two paths, and set them in final, forcible contrast. The phrase 'the perfect day' might be rendered, vividly though clumsily, 'the steady of the day'—that is, noon, when the sun seems to stand still in the meridian. So the image compares the path of the just to the growing brightness of morning dawn, becoming more and more fervid and lustrous, till the climax of an Eastern midday. No more sublime figure of the continuous progress in goodness, brightness, and joy, which is the best reward of walking in the paths of uprightness, can be imagined; and it is as true as it is sublime. Blessed they who in the morning of their days begin to walk in the way of wisdom; for, in most cases, years will strengthen their uprightness, and to that progress there will be no termination, nor will the midday sun have to decline westward to diminishing splendour or dismal setting, but that noontide glory will be enhanced, and made eternal in a new heaven. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. That blaze of growing glory, possible for us all, makes the tragic gloom to which evil men condemn themselves the thicker and more doleful, as some dungeon in an Eastern prison seems pitch dark to one coming in from the blaze outside. 'How great is that darkness!' It is the darkness of sin, of ignorance, of sorrow, and what adds deeper gloom to it is that every soul that sits in that shadow of death might have been shining, a sun, in the spacious heaven of God's love.

Proverbs 4:12 MONOTONY AND CRISES

The old metaphor likening life to a path has many felicities in it. It suggests constant change, it suggests continuous progress in one direction, and that all our days are linked together, and are not isolated fragments; and it suggests an aim and an end. So we find it perpetually in this Book of Proverbs. Here the 'way' has a specific designation, 'the way of Wisdom'—that is to say, the way which Wisdom teaches, and the way on which Wisdom accompanies us, and the way which leads to Wisdom. Now, these two clauses of my text are not merely an instance of the peculiar feature of Hebrew poetry called parallelism, in which two clauses, substantially the same, occur, but with a little pleasing difference. 'When thou goest'—that is, the monotonous tramp, tramp, tramp of slow walking along the path of an uneventful daily life, the humdrum 'one foot up and another foot down' which makes the most of our days. 'When thou runnest'—that points to the crises, the sudden spurts, the necessarily brief bursts of more than usual energy and effort and difficulty. And about both of them, the humdrum and the exciting, the monotonous and the startling, the promise comes that if we walk in the path of Wisdom we shall not get disgusted with the one and we shall not be overwhelmed by the other. 'When thou walkest, thy steps shall not be straitened; when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.'

But before I deal with these two clauses specifically, let me recall to you the condition, and the sole condition, upon which either of them can be fulfilled in our daily lives. The book from which my text is taken is probably one of the very latest in the Old Testament, and you catch in it a very significant and marvellous development of the Old Testament thought. For there rises up, out of these early chapters of the Book of Proverbs, that august and serene figure of the queenly Wisdom, which is more than a personification and is less than a person and a prophecy. It means more than the wise man that spoke it saw; it means for us Christ, 'the Power of God and the Wisdom of God.' And so instead of keeping ourselves merely to the word of the Book of Proverbs, we must grasp the thing that shines through the word, and realise that the writer's visions can only become realities when the serene and august Wisdom that he saw shimmering through the darkness took to itself a human Form, and 'the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.'

With that heightening of the meaning of the phrase, 'the path of Wisdom' assumes a heightened meaning too, for it is the path of the personal Wisdom, the Incarnate Wisdom, Christ Himself. And what does it then come to be to obey this command to walk in the way of Wisdom? Put it into three sentences. Let the Christ who is not only wise, but Wisdom, choose your path, and be sure that by the submission of your will all your paths are His, and not only yours. Make His path yours by following in His steps, and do in your place what you think Christ would have done if He had been there. Keep company with Him on the road. If we will do these

three things—if we will say to Him, ‘Lord, when Thou sayest go, I go; when Thou biddest me come, I come; I am Thy slave, and I rejoice in the bondage more than in all licentious liberty, and what Thou biddest me do, I do’—if you will further say, ‘As Thou art, so am I in the world’—and if you will further say, ‘Leave me not alone, and let me cling to Thee on the road, as a little child holds on by her mother’s skirt or her father’s hand,’ then, and only then, will you walk in the path of Wisdom.

Now, then, these three things—submission of will, conformity of conduct, closeness of companionship—these three things being understood, let us look for a moment at the blessings that this text promises, and first at the promise for long uneventful stretches of our daily life. That, of course, is mainly the largest proportion of all our lives. Perhaps nine-tenths at least of all our days and years fall under the terms of this first promise, ‘When thou walkest.’ For many miles there comes nothing particular, nothing at all exciting, nothing new, nothing to break the plod, plod, plod along the road. Everything is as it was yesterday, and the day before that, and as it will be to-morrow, and the day after that, in all probability. ‘The trivial round, the common task’ make up by far the largest percentage of our lives. It is as in wine, the immense proportion of it is nothing but water, and only a small proportion of alcohol is diffused through the great mass of the tamer liquid.

Now, then, if Jesus Christ is not to help us in the monotony of our daily lives, what, in the name of common sense, is His help good for? If it is not true that He will be with us, not only in the moments of crisis, but in the long commonplace hours, we may as well have no Christ at all, for all that I can see. Unless the trivial is His field, there is very little field for Him, in your life or mine. And so it should come to all of us who have to take up this daily burden of small, monotonous, constantly recurring, and therefore often wearisome, duties, as even a more blessed promise than the other one, that ‘when thou walkest, thy steps shall not be straitened.’

I remember hearing of a man that got so disgusted with having to dress and undress himself every day that he committed suicide to escape from the necessity. That is a very extreme form of the feeling that comes over us all sometimes, when we wake in a morning and look before us along the stretch of dead level, which is a great deal more wearisome when it lasts long than are the cheerful vicissitudes of up hill and down dale. We all know the deadening influence of a habit. We all know the sense of disgust that comes over us at times, and of utter weariness, just because we have been doing the same things day after day for so long. I know only one infallible way of preventing the common from becoming commonplace, of preventing the small from becoming trivial, of preventing the familiar from becoming contemptible, and it is to link it all to Jesus Christ, and to say, ‘For Thy sake, and unto Thee, I do this’; then, not only will the rough places become plain, and the crooked things straight, and not only will the mountains be brought low, but the valleys of the commonplace will be exalted. ‘Thy steps shall not be straitened.’ ‘I will make his feet as hind’s feet,’ says one of the old prophets. What a picture of light, buoyant, graceful movement that is! And each of us may have that, instead of the grind, grind, grind! tramp, tramp, tramp! along the level and commonplace road of our daily lives, if we will. Walk in the path of Christ, with Christ, towards Christ, and ‘thy steps shall not be straitened.’

Now, there is another aspect of this same promise—viz. if we thus are in the path of Incarnate Wisdom, we shall not feel the restrictions of the road to be restraints. ‘Thy steps shall not be straitened’; although there is a wall on either side, and the road is the narrow way that leads to life, it is broad enough for the sober man, because he goes in a straight line, and does not need half the road to roll about in. The limits which love imposes, and the limits which love accepts, are not narrowing. ‘I will walk at liberty, for—I do as I like.’ No! that is slavery; but, ‘I will walk at liberty, for I keep Thy precepts’; and I do not want to go vagrantising at large, but limit myself thankfully to the way which Thou dost mark out. ‘Thy steps shall not be straitened.’ So much for the first of these promises.

Now what about the other one? ‘When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.’

As I have said, the former promise applies to the hours and the years of life. The latter applies to but a few moments of each man’s life. Cast your thoughts back over your own days, and however changeable, eventful, perhaps adventurous, and as we people call it, romantic, some parts of our lives may have been, yet for all that you can put the turning-points, the crises that have called for great efforts, and the gathering of yourselves up, and the calling forth of all your powers to do and to dare, you can put them all inside of a week, in most cases. ‘When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.’ The greater the speed, the greater the risk of stumbling over some obstacle in the way. We all know how many men there are that do very well in the uneventful commonplaces of life, but bring them face to face with some great difficulty or some great trial, and there is a dismal failure. Jesus Christ is ready to make us fit for anything in the way of difficulty, in the way of trial, that can come storming upon us from out of the dark. And He will make us so fit if we follow the injunctions to which I have already been referring. Without His help it is almost certain that when we have to run, our ankles will give, or there will be a stone in the road that we never thought of, and the excitement will sweep us away from principle, and we shall lose our hold on Him; and then it is all up with us.

There is a wonderful saying in one of the prophets, which uses this same metaphor of my text with a difference, where it speaks of the divine guidance of Israel as being like that of a horse in the wilderness. Fancy the poor, nervous, tremulous creature trying to keep its footing upon the smooth granite slabs of Sinai. Travellers dare not take their horses on mountain journeys, because they are highly nervous and are not sure-footed enough. And, so says the old prophet, that gracious Hand will be laid on the bridle, and

hold the nervous creature's head up as it goes sliding over the slippery rocks, and so He will bring it down to rest in the valley. 'Now unto Him that is able to keep us from stumbling,' as is the true rendering, 'and to present us faultless ... be glory.' Trust Him, keep near Him, let Him choose your way, and try to be like Him in it; and whatever great occasions may arise in your lives, either of sorrow or of duty, you will be equal to them.

But remember the virtue that comes out victorious in the crisis must have been nourished and cultivated in the humdrum moments. For it is no time to make one's first acquaintance with Jesus Christ when the eyeballs of some ravenous wild beast are staring into ours, and its mouth is open to swallow us. Unless He has kept our feet from being straitened in the quiet walk, He will not be able to keep us from stumbling in the vehement run.

One word more. This same distinction is drawn by one of the prophets, who adds another clause to it. Isaiah, or the author of the second portion of the book which goes by his name, puts in wonderful connection the two thoughts of my text with analogous thoughts in regard to God, when he says, 'Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?' and immediately goes on to say, 'They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' So it is from God, the unfainting and the unwearied, that the strength comes which makes our steps buoyant with energy amidst the commonplace, and steadfast and established at the crises of our lives. But before these two great promises is put another one: 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles,' and therefore both the other become possible. That is to say, fellowship with God in the heavens, which is made possible on earth by communion with Christ, is the condition both of the unwearied running and of unfainting walking. If we will keep in the path of Christ, He will take care of the commonplace dreary tracts and of the brief moments of strain and effort, and will bring us at last where He has gone, if, looking unto Him, we 'run with patience the race,' and walk with cheerfulness the road, 'that is set before us.'

Proverbs 4:18 FROM DAWN TO NOON

'Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their father.'—MATT. 13: 43 .

The metaphor common to both these texts is not infrequent throughout Scripture. In one of the oldest parts of the Old Testament, Deborah's triumphal song, we find, 'Let all them that love Thee be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.' In one of the latest parts of the Old Testament, Daniel's prophecy, we read, 'They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.' Then in the New Testament we have Christ's comparison of His servants to light, and the great promise which I have read as my second text. The upshot of them all is this—the most radiant thing on earth is the character of a good man. The world calls men of genius and intellectual force its lights. The divine estimate, which is the true one, confers the name on righteousness.

But my first text follows out another analogy; not only brightness, but progressive brightness, is the characteristic of the righteous man.

We are to think of the strong Eastern sun, whose blinding light steadily increases till the noontide. 'The perfect day' is a somewhat unfortunate translation. What is meant is the point of time at which the day culminates, and for a moment, the sun seems to stand steady, up in those southern lands, in the very zenith, raying down 'the arrows that fly by noonday.' The text does not go any further, it does not talk about the sad diminution of the afternoon. The parallel does not hold; though, if we consult appearance and sense alone, it seems to hold only too well. For, sadder than the setting of the suns, which rise again to-morrow, is the sinking into darkness of death, from which there seems to be no emerging. But my second text comes in to tell us that death is but as the shadow of eclipse which passes, and with it pass obscuring clouds and envious mists, and 'then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.'

And so the two texts speak to us of the progressive brightness, and the ultimate, which is also the progressive, radiance of the righteous.

I. In looking at them together, then, I would notice, first, what a Christian life is meant to be.

I must not linger on the lovely thoughts that are suggested by that attractive metaphor of life. It must be enough, for our present purpose, to say that the light of the Christian life, like its type in the heavens, may be analysed into three beams—purity, knowledge, blessedness. And these three, blended together, make the pure whiteness of a Christian soul.

But what I wish rather to dwell upon is the other thought, the intention that every Christian life should be a life of increasing lustre, uninterrupted, and the natural result of increasing communion with, and conformity to, the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance.

Remember how emphatically, in all sorts of ways, progress is laid down in Scripture as the mark of a religious life. There is the emblem of my text. There is our Lord's beautiful one of vegetable growth: 'First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.' There is the other metaphor of the stages of human life, 'babes in Christ,' young men in Him, old men and fathers. There is the

metaphor of the growth of the body. There is the metaphor of the gradual building up of a structure. We are to 'edify ourselves together,' and to 'build ourselves up on our most holy faith.' There is the other emblem of a race—continual advance as the result of continual exertion, and the use of the powers bestowed upon us.

And so in all these ways, and in many others that I need not now touch upon, Scripture lays it down as a rule that life in the highest region, like life in the lowest, is marked by continual growth. It is so in regard to all other things. Continuity in any kind of practice gives increasing power in the art. The artisan, the blacksmith with his hammer, the skilled artificer at his trade, the student at his subject, the good man in his course of life, and the bad man in his, do equally show that use becomes second nature. And so, in passing, let me say what incalculable importance there is in our getting habit, with all its mystical power to mould life, on the side of righteousness, and of becoming accustomed to do good, and so being unfamiliar with evil.

Let me remind you, too, how this intention of continuous growth is marked by the gifts that are bestowed upon us in Jesus Christ. He gives us—and it is by no means the least of the gifts that He bestows—an absolutely unattainable aim as the object of our efforts. For He bids us not only be 'perfect, as our Father in Heaven is perfect,' but He bids us be entirely conformed to His own Self. The misery of men is that they pursue aims so narrow and so shabby that they can be attained, and are therefore left behind, to sink hull down on the backward horizon. But to have before us an aim which is absolutely unreachable, instead of being, as ignorant people say, an occasion of despair and of idleness, is, on the contrary, the very salt of life. It keeps us young, it makes hope immortal, it emancipates from lower pursuits, it diminishes the weight of sorrows, it administers an anaesthetic to every pain. If you want to keep life fresh, seek for that which you can never fully find.

Christ gives us infinite powers to reach that unattainable aim, for He gives us access to all His own fullness, and there is more in His storehouses than we can ever take, not to say more than we can ever hope to exhaust. And therefore, because of the aim that is set before us, and because of the powers that are bestowed upon us to reach it, there is stamped upon every Christian life unmistakably as God's purpose and ideal concerning it, that it should for ever and for ever be growing nearer and nearer, as some ascending spiral that ever circles closer and closer, and yet never absolutely unites with the great central Perfection which is Himself.

So, brethren, for every one of us, if we are Christian people at all, 'this is the will of God, even your perfection.'

II. Consider the sad contrast of too many Christian lives.

I would not speak in terms that might seem to be reproach and scolding. The matter is far too serious, the disease far too widespread, to need or to warrant any exaggeration. But, dear brethren, there are many so-called and, in a fashion, really Christian people to whom Christ and His work are mainly, if not exclusively, the means of escaping the consequences of sin—a kind of 'fire-escape.' And to very many it comes as a new thought, in so far as their practical lives are concerned, that these ought to be lives of steadily increasing deliverance from the love and the power of sin, and steadily increasing appropriation and manifestation of Christ's granted righteousness. There are, I think, many of us from whom the very notion of progress has faded away. I am sure there are some of us who were a great deal farther on on the path of the Christian life years ago, when we first felt that Christ was anything to us, than we are to-day. 'When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you which be the first principles of the oracles of God.'

There is an old saying of one of the prophets that a child would die a hundred years old, which in a very sad sense is true about very many folk within the pale of the Christian Church who are seventy-year-old babes still, and will die so. Suns 'growing brighter and brighter until the noonday!' Ah! there are many of us who are a great deal more like those strange variable stars that sometimes burst out in the heavens into a great blaze, that brings them up to the brightness of stars of the first magnitude, for a day or two; and then they dwindle until they become little specks of light that the telescope can hardly see.

And there are hosts of us who are instances, if not of arrested, at any rate of unsymmetrical, development. The head, perhaps, is cultivated; the intellectual apprehension of Christianity increases, while the emotional, and the moral, and the practical part of it are all neglected. Or the converse may be the case; and we may be full of gush and of good emotion, and of fervour when we come to worship or to pray, and our lives may not be a hair the better for it all. Or there may be a disproportion because of an exclusive attention to conduct and the practical side of Christianity, while the rational side of it, which should be the basis of all, and the emotional side of it, which should be the driving power of all, are comparatively neglected.

So, dear brethren! what with interruptions, what with growing by fits and starts, and long, dreary winters like the Arctic winters, coming in between the two or three days of rapid, and therefore brief and unwholesome, development, we must all, I think, take to heart the condemnation suggested by this text when we compare the reality of our lives with the divine intention concerning them. Let us ask ourselves, 'Have I more command over myself than I had twenty years ago? Do I live nearer Jesus Christ today than I did yesterday? Have I more of His Spirit in me? Am I growing? Would the people that know me best say that I am growing in the grace and knowledge of my Lord and Saviour?' Astronomers tell us that there are dark suns, that have burnt themselves out, and

are wandering unseen through the skies. I wonder if there are any extinguished suns of that sort listening to me at this moment.

III. How the divine purpose concerning us may be realised by us.

Now the Alpha and the Omega of this, the one means which includes all other, is laid down by Jesus Christ Himself in another metaphor when He said, 'Abide in Me, and I in you; so shall ye bring forth much fruit.' Our path will brighten, not because of any radiance in ourselves, but in proportion as we draw nearer and nearer to the Fountain of heavenly radiance.

The planets that move round the sun, further away than we are on earth, get less of its light and heat; and those that circle around it within the limits of our orbit, get proportionately more. The nearer we are to Him, the more we shall shine. The sun shines by its own light, drawn indeed from the shrinkage of its mass, so that it gives away its very life in warming and illuminating its subject-worlds. But we shine only by reflected light, and therefore the nearer we keep to Him the more shall we be radiant.

That keeping in touch with Jesus Christ is mainly to be secured by the direction of thought, and love, and trust to Him. If we follow close upon Him we shall not walk in darkness. It is to be secured and maintained very largely by what I am afraid is much neglected by Christian people of all sorts nowadays, and that is the devotional use of their Bibles. That is the food by which we grow. It is to be secured and maintained still more largely by that which I, again, am afraid is but very imperfectly attained to by Christian people now, and that is, the habit of prayer. It is to be secured and maintained, again, by the honest conforming of our lives, day by day, to the present amount of our knowledge of Him and of His will. Whosoever will make all his life the manifestation of his belief, and turn all his creed into principles of action, will grow both in the comprehensiveness, and in the depths of his Christian character. 'Ye are the light in the Lord.' Keep in Him, and you will become brighter and brighter. So shall we 'go from strength to strength, till we appear before God in Zion.'

IV. Lastly, what brighter rising will follow the earthly setting?

My second text comes in here. Beauty, intellect, power, goodness; all go down into the dark. The sun sets, and there is left a sad and fading glow in the darkening pensive sky, which may recall the vanished light for a little while to a few faithful hearts, but steadily passes into the ashen grey of forgetfulness.

But 'then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun, in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.' The momentary setting is but apparent. And ere it is well accomplished, a new sun swims into the 'ampler ether, the diviner air' of that future life, 'and with new spangled beams, flames in the forehead of the morning sky.'

The reason for that inherent brightness suggested in our second text is that the soul of the righteous man passes from earth into a region out of which we 'gather all things that offend, and them that do iniquity.' There are other reasons for it, but that is the one which our Lord dwells on. Or, to put it into modern scientific language, environment corresponds to character. So, when the clouds have rolled away, and no more mists from the undrained swamps of selfishness and sin and animal nature rise up to hide the radiance, there shall be a fuller flood of light poured from the re-created sun.

That brightness thus promised has for its highest and most blessed character that it is conformity to the Lord Himself. For, as you may remember, the last use of this emblem that we find in Scripture refers not to the servant but to the Master, whom His beloved disciple in Apocalyptic vision saw, with His 'countenance as the sun shining in his strength.' Thus 'we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' And therefore that radiance of the sainted dead is progressive, too. For it has an infinite fulness to draw upon, and the soul that is joined to Jesus Christ, and derives its lustre from Him, cannot die until it has outgrown Jesus and emptied God. The sun will one day be a dark, cold ball. We shall outlast it.

But, brethren, remember that it is only those who here on earth have progressively appropriated the brightness that Christ bestows who have a right to reckon on that better rising. It is contrary to all probability to believe that the passage from life can change the ingrained direction and set of a man's nature. We know nothing that warrants us in affirming that death can revolutionise character. Do not trust your future to such a dim peradventure. Here is a plain truth. They who on earth are as 'the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day,' shall, beyond the shadow of eclipse, shine on as the sun does, behind the opaque, intervening body, all unconscious of what looks to mortal eyes on earth an eclipse, and 'shall blaze out like the sun in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.' For all that we know and are taught by experience, religious and moral distinctions are eternal. 'He that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still.'

Proverbs 4:23: KEEPING AND KEPT

The former of these texts imposes a stringent duty, the latter (1Peter 1:6) promises divine help to perform it. The relation between them is that between the Law and the Gospel. The Law commands, the Gospel gives power to obey. The Law pays no attention to man's weakness, and points no finger to the source of strength. Its office is to set clearly forth what we ought to be, not to aid us in becoming so. 'Here is your duty, do it' is, doubtless, a needful message, but it is a chilly one, and it may well be doubted if it ever

rouses a soul to right action. Moralists have hammered away at preaching self-restraint and a close watch over the fountain of actions within from the beginning, but their exhortations have little effect unless they can add to their icy injunctions the warmth of the promise of our second text, and point to a divine Keeper who will make duty possible. We must be kept by God, if we are ever to succeed in keeping our wayward hearts.

I. Without our guarding our hearts, no noble life is possible.

The Old Testament psychology differs from our popular allocation of certain faculties to bodily organs. We use head and heart, roughly speaking, as being respectively the seats of thought and of emotion. But the Old Testament locates in the heart the centre of personal being. It is not merely the home of the affections, but the seat of will, moral purpose. As this text says, 'the issues of life' flow from it in all the multitudinous variety of their forms. The stream parts into many heads, but it has one fountain. To the Hebrew thinkers the heart was the indivisible, central unity which manifested itself in the whole of the outward life. 'As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.' The heart is the man. And that personal centre has a moral character which comes to light in, and gives unity and character to, all his deeds.

That solemn thought that every one of us has a definite moral character, and that our deeds are not an accidental set of outward actions but flow from an inner fountain, needs to be driven home to our consciences, for most of the actions of most men are done so mechanically, and reflected on so little by the doers, that the conviction of their having any moral character at all, or of our incurring any responsibility for them, is almost extinct in us, unless when something startles conscience into protest.

It is this shrouded inner self to which supreme care is to be directed. All noble ethical teaching concurs in this—that a man who seeks to be right must keep, in the sense both of watching and of guarding, his inner self. Conduct is more easily regulated than character—and less worth regulating. It avails little to plant watchers on the stream half way to the sea. Control must be exercised at the source, if it is to be effectual. The counsel of our first text is a commonplace of all wholesome moral teaching since the beginning of the world. The phrase 'with all diligence' is literally 'above all guarding,' and energetically expresses the supremacy of this keeping. It should be the foremost, all-pervading aim of every wise man who would not let his life run to waste. It may be turned into more modern language, meaning just what this ancient sage meant, if we put it as, 'Guard thy character with more carefulness than thou dost thy most precious possessions, for it needs continual watchfulness, and, untended, will go to rack and ruin.' The exhortation finds a response in every heart, and may seem too familiar and trite to bear dwelling on, but we may be allowed to touch lightly on one or two of the plain reasons which enforce it on every man who is not what Proverbs very unpolitely calls 'a fool.'

That guarding is plainly imposed as necessary, by the very constitution of our manhood. Our nature is evidently not a republic, but a monarchy. It is full of blind impulses, and hungry desires, which take no heed of any law but their own satisfaction. If the reins are thrown on the necks of these untamed horses, they will drag the man to destruction. They are only safe when they are curbed and bitted, and held well in. Then there are tastes and inclinations which need guidance and are plainly meant to be subordinate. The will is to govern all the lower self, and conscience is to govern the will. Unmistakably there are parts of every man's nature which are meant to serve, and parts which are appointed to rule, and to let the servants usurp the place of the rulers is to bring about as wild a confusion within as the Ecclesiast lamented that he had seen in the anarchic times when he wrote—princes walking and beggars on horseback. As George Herbert has it—

'Give not thy humours way;

God gave them to thee under lock and key.'

Then, further, that guarding is plainly imperative, because there is an outer world which appeals to our needs and desires, irrespective altogether of right and wrong and of the moral consequences of gratifying these. Put a loaf before a starving man and his impulse will be to clutch and devour it, without regard to whether it is his or no. Show any of our animal propensities its appropriate food, and it asks no questions as to right or wrong, but is stirred to grasp its natural food. And even the higher and nobler parts of our nature are but too apt to seek their gratification without having the license of conscience for doing so, and sometimes in defiance of its plain prohibitions. It is never safe to trust the guidance of life to tastes, inclinations, or to anything but clear reason, set in motion by calm will, and acting under the approbation of 'the Lord Chief Justice, Conscience.'

But again, seeing that the world has more evil than good in it, the keeping of the heart will always consist rather in repelling solicitations to yielding to evil. In short, the power and the habit of sternly saying 'No' to the whole crowd of tempters is always the main secret of a noble life. 'He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down and without walls.'

II. There is no effectual guarding unless God guards.

The counsel in Proverbs is not mere toothless moral commonplace, but is associated, in the preceding chapter, with fatherly advice to 'let thine heart keep my commandments' and to 'trust in the Lord with all thine heart.' The heart that so trusts will be safely

guarded, and only such a heart will be. The inherent weakness of all attempts at self-keeping is that keeper and kept being one and the same personality, the more we need to be kept the less able we are to effect it. If in the very garrison are traitors, how shall the fortress be defended? If, then, we are to exercise an effectual guard over our characters and control over our natures, we must have an outward standard of right and wrong which shall not be deflected by variations in our temperature. We need a fixed light to steer towards, which is stable on the stable shore, and is not tossing up and down on our decks. We shall cleanse our way only when we 'take heed thereto, according to Thy word.' For even God's viceroy within, the sovereign conscience, can be warped, perverted, silenced, and is not immune from the spreading infection of evil. When it turns to God, as a mirror to the sun, it is irradiated and flashes bright illumination into dark corners, but its power depends on its being thus lit by radiations from the very Light of Life. And if we are ever to have a coercive power over the rebellious powers within, we must have God's power breathed into us, giving grip and energy to all the good within, quickening every lofty desire, satisfying every aspiration that feels after Him, cowing all our evil and being the very self of ourselves.

We need an outward motive which will stimulate and stir to effort. Our wills are lamed for good, and the world has strong charms that appeal to us. And if we are not to yield to these, there must be somewhere a stronger motive than any that the sorceress world has in its stores, that shall constrainingly draw us to ways that, because they tend upward, and yield no pabulum for the lower self, are difficult for sluggish feet. To the writer of this Book of Proverbs the name of God bore in it such a motive. To us the name of Jesus, which is Love, bears a yet mightier appeal, and the motive which lies in His death for us is strong enough, and it alone is strong enough, to fire our whole selves with enthusiastic, grateful love, which will burn up our sloth, and sweep our evil out of our hearts, and make us swift and glad to do all that may please Him. If there must be fresh reinforcements thrown into the town of Mansoul, as there must be if it is not to be captured, there is one sure way of securing these. Our second text tells us whence the relieving force must come. If we are to keep our hearts with all diligence, we must be 'kept by the power of God,' and that power is not merely to make diversion outside the beleaguered fortress which may force the besiegers to retreat and give up their effort, but is to enter in and possess the soul which it wills to defend. It is when the enemy sees that new succours have, in some mysterious way, been introduced, that he gives up his siege. It is God in us that is our security.

III. There is no keeping by God without faith.

Peter was an expert in such matters, for he had had a bitter experience to teach him how soon and surely self-confidence became self-despair. 'Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I,' was said but a few hours before he denied Jesus. His faith failed, and then the divine guard that was keeping his soul passed thence, and, left alone, he fell.

That divine Power is exerted for our keeping on condition of our trusting ourselves to Him and trusting Him for ourselves. And that condition is no arbitrary one, but is prescribed by the very nature of divine help and of human faith. If God could keep our souls without our trust in Him He would. He does so keep them as far as is possible, but for all the choicer blessings of His giving, and especially for that of keeping us free from the domination of our lower selves, there must be in us faith if there is to be in God help. The hand that lays hold on God in Christ must be stretched out and must grasp His warm, gentle, and strong hand, if the tingling touch of it is to infuse strength. If the relieving force is victoriously to enter our hearts, we must throw open the gates and welcome it. Faith is but the open door for God's entrance. It has no efficacy in itself any more than a door has, but all its blessedness depends on what it admits into the hidden chambers of the heart.

I reiterate what I have tried to show in these poor words. There is no noble life without our guarding our hearts; there is no effectual guarding unless God guards; there is no divine guarding unless through our faith. It is vain to preach self-governing and self-keeping. Unless we can tell the beleaguered heart, 'The Lord is thy Keeper; He will keep thee from all evil; He will keep thy soul,' we only add one more impossible command to a man's burden. And we do not apprehend nor experience the divine keeping in its most blessed and fullest reality, unless we find it in Jesus, who is 'able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.'

Proverbs 5:22 THE CORDS OF SIN

'His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins.'— PROVERBS v. 22 .

In Hosea's tender picture of the divine training of Israel which, alas! failed of its effect, we read, 'I drew them with cords of a man,' which is further explained as being 'with bands of love.' The metaphor in the prophet's mind is probably that of a child being 'taught to go' and upheld in its first tottering steps by leading-strings. God drew Israel, though Israel did not yield to the drawing. But if these gentle, attractive influences, which ever are raying out from Him, are resisted, another set of cords, not now sustaining and attracting, but hampering and fettering, twine themselves round the rebellious life, and the man is like a wild creature snared in the hunter's toils, enmeshed in a net, and with its once free limbs restrained. The choice is open to us all, whether we will let God draw us to Himself with the sweet manlike cords of His educative and forbearing love, or, flinging off these, which only foolish self-will construes into limitations, shall condemn ourselves to be prisoned within the narrow room of our own sins. We may choose which

condition shall be ours, but one or other of them must be ours. We may either be drawn by the silken cord of God's love or we may be 'holden by the cords' of our sins.

In both clauses of our text evil deeds done are regarded as having a strange, solemn life apart from the doer of them, by which they become influential factors in his subsequent life. Their issues on others may be important, but their issues on him are the most important of all. The recoil of the gun on the shoulder of him who fired it is certain, whether the cartridge that flew from its muzzle wounded anything or not. 'His own iniquities shall take the wicked'—they ring him round, a grim company to whom he has given an independent being, and who have now 'taken' him prisoner and laid violent hands on him. A long since forgotten novel told of the fate of 'a modern Prometheus,' who made and put life into a dreadful creature in man's shape, that became the curse of its creator's life. That tragedy is repeated over and over again. We have not done with our evil deeds when we have done them, but they, in a very terrible sense, begin to be when they are done. We sow the seeds broadcast, and the seed springs up dragon's teeth.

The view of human experience set forth, especially in the second clause of this text, directs our gaze into dark places, into which it is not pleasant to look, and many of you will accuse me of preaching gloomily if I try to turn a reflective eye inwards upon them, but no one will be able to accuse me of not preaching truly. It is impossible to enumerate all the cords that make up the net in which our own evil doings hold us meshed, but let me point out some of these.

I. Our evil deeds become evil habits.

We all know that anything once done becomes easier to do again. That is true about both good and bad actions, but 'ill weeds grow apace,' and it is infinitely easier to form a bad habit than a good one. The young shoot is green and flexible at first, but it soon becomes woody and grows high and strikes deep. We can all verify the statement of our text by recalling the tremors of conscience, the self-disgust, the dread of discovery which accompanied the first commission of some evil deed, and the silence of undisturbed, almost unconscious facility, that accompanied later repetitions of it. Sins of sense and animal passion afford the most conspicuous instances of this, but it is by no means confined to these. We have but to look steadily at our own lives to be aware of the working of this solemn law in them, however clear we may be of the grosser forms of evil deeds. For us all it is true that custom presses on us 'with a weight, heavy as frost and deep almost as life,' and that it is as hard for the Ethiopian to change his skin or the leopard his spots as for those who 'are accustomed to do evil' to 'do good.'

But experience teaches not only that evil deeds quickly consolidate into evil habits, but that as the habit grips us faster, the poor pleasure for the sake of which the acts are done diminishes. The zest which partially concealed the bitter taste of the once eagerly swallowed morsel is all but gone, but the morsel is still sought and swallowed. Impulses wax as motives wane, the victim is like an ox tempted on the road to the slaughter-house at first by succulent fodder held before it, and at last driven into it by pricking goads and heavy blows. Many a man is so completely wrapped in the net which his own evil deeds have made for him, that he commits the sin once more, not because he finds any pleasure in it, but for no better reason than that he has already committed it often, and the habit is his master.

There are many forms of evil which compel us to repeat them for other reasons than the force of habit. For instance, a fraudulent book-keeper has to go on making false entries in his employer's books in order to hide his peculations. Whoever steps on to the steeply sloping road to which self-pleasing invites us, soon finds that he is on an inclined plane well greased, and that compulsion is on him to go on, though he may recoil from the descent, and be shudderingly aware of what the end must be. Let no man say, 'I will do this doubtful thing once only, and never again.' Sin is like an octopus, and if the loathly thing gets the tip of one slender filament round a man, it will envelop him altogether and drag him down to the cruel beak.

Let us then remember how swiftly deeds become habits, and how the fetters, which were silken at first, rapidly are exchanged for iron chains, and how the craving increases as fast as the pleasure from gratifying it diminishes. Let us remember that there are many kinds of evil which seem to force their own repetition, in order to escape their consequences and to hide the sin. Let us remember that no man can venture to say, 'This once only will I do this thing.' Let us remember that acts become habits with dreadful swiftness, and let us beware that we do not forge chains of darkness for ourselves out of our own godless deeds.

II. Our evil deeds imprison us for good.

The tragedy of human life is that we weave for ourselves manacles that fetter us from following and securing the one good for which we are made. Our evil past holds us in a firm grip. The cords which confine our limbs are of our own spinning. What but ourselves is the reason why so many of us do not yield to God's merciful drawings of us to Himself? We have riveted the chains and twined the net that holds us captive, by our own acts. It is we ourselves who have paralysed our wills, so that we see the light of God but as a faint gleam far away, and dare not move to follow the gleam. It is we who have smothered or silenced our conscience and perverted our tastes, and done violence to all in us that 'thirsteth for God, even the living God.' Alas! how many of us have let some strong evil habit gain such a grip of us that it has overborne our higher impulses, and silenced the voice within us

that cries out for the living God! We are kept back from Him by our worse selves, and whoever lets that which is lowest in him keep him from following after God, who is his 'being's end and aim,' is caught and prisoned by the cords woven and knitted out of his sins. Are there none of us who know, when they are honest with themselves, that they would have been true Christians long since, had it not been for one darling evil that they cannot make up their minds to cast off? Wills disabled from strongly willing the good, consciences silenced as when the tongue is taken out of a bell-buoy on a shoal, tastes perverted and set seeking amid the transitory treasures of earth for what God only can give them, these are the 'cords' out of which are knotted the nets that hold so many of us captive, and hinder our feet from following after God, even the living God, in following and possessing whom is the only liberty of soul, the one real joy of life.

III. Our evil deeds work their own punishment.

I do not venture to speak of the issues beyond the grave. It is not for a man to press these on his brethren. But even from the standpoint of this Book of Proverbs, it is certain that 'the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth, much more the wicked and the sinner.' Probably it was the earthly consequences of wrongdoing that were in the mind of the proverb-maker. And we are not to let our Christian enlightenment as to the future rob us of the certainty, written large on human life here and now, that with whatever apparent exceptions in regard to prosperous sin and tried righteousness, it is yet true that 'every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward.' Life is full of consequences of evil-doing. Even here and now we reap as we have sown. Every sin is a mistake, even if we confine our view to the consequences sought for in this life by it, and the consequences actually encountered. 'A rogue is a roundabout fool.' True, we believe that there is a future reaping so complete that it makes the partial harvests gathered here seem of small account. But the framer of this proverb, who had little knowledge of that future, had seen enough in the meditative survey of this present to make him sure that the consequences of evil-doing were certain, and in a very true sense, penal. And leaving out of sight all that lies in the dark beyond, surely if we sum up the lamed aspirations, the perverted tastes, the ossifying of noble emotions, the destruction of the balance of the nature, the blinding of the eye of the soul, the lowering and narrowing of the whole nature, and many another wound to the best in man that come as the sure issue of evil deeds, we do not need to doubt that every sinful man is miserably 'holden with the cords of his sin.' Life is the time for sowing, but it is a time for reaping too, and we do not need to wait for death to experience the truth of the solemn warning that 'he who soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption.' Let us, then, do no deeds without asking ourselves, What will the harvest be? and if from any deeds that we have done we have to reap sorrow or inward darkness, let us be thankful that by experience our Father is teaching us how bitter as well as evil a thing it is to forsake Him, and cast off His fear from our wayward spirits.

IV. The cords can be loosened.

Bitter experience teaches that the imprisoning net clings too tightly to be stripped from our limbs by our own efforts. Nay rather, the net and the captive are one, and he who tries to cast off the oppression which hinders him from following that which is good is trying to cast off himself. The desperate problem that fronts every effort at self-emendation has two bristling impossibilities in it: one, how to annihilate the past; one, how to extirpate the evil that is part of my very self, and yet to keep the self entire. The very terms of the problem show it to be insoluble, and the climax of all honest efforts at making a clean thing of an unclean by means within reach of the unclean thing itself, is the despairing cry, 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?' But to men writhing in the grip of a sinful past, or paralysed beyond writhing, and indifferent, because hopeless, or because they have come to like their captivity, comes one whose name is 'the Breaker,' whose mission it is to proclaim liberty to the captives, and whose hand laid on the cords that bind a soul, causes them to drop harmless from the limbs and sets the bondsman free. Many tongues praise Jesus for many great gifts, but His proper work, and that peculiar to Himself alone, is His work on the sin and the sins of the world. He deals with that which no man can deal with for himself or by his own power. He can cancel our past, so that it shall not govern our future. He can give new power to fight the old habits. He can give a new life which owes nothing to the former self, and is free from taint from it. He can break the entail of sin, the 'law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus' can make any of us, even him who is most tied and bound by the chain of his sins, 'free from the law of sin and death.' We cannot break the chains that fetter us, and our own struggles, like the plungings of a wild beast caught in the toils, but draw the bonds tighter. But the chains that cannot be broken can be melted, and it may befall each of us as it befell the three Hebrews in the furnace, when the king 'was astonished' and asked, 'Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?' and wonderingly declared, 'Lo, I see four men loose walking in the midst of the fire, and the aspect of the fourth is like a son of the gods.'

Proverbs 8:21: WISDOM'S GIFT

'That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance.'— PROVERBS viii. 21 .

The word here rendered 'substance' is peculiar. Indeed, it is used in a unique construction in this passage. It means 'being' or 'existence,' and seems to have been laid hold of by the Hebrew thinkers, from whom the books commonly called 'the Wisdom Books' come, as one of their almost technical expressions. 'Substance' may be used in our translation in its philosophical meaning as the supposed reality underlying appearances, but if we observe that in the parallel following clause we find 'treasures,' it seems

more likely that in the text, it is to be taken in its secondary, and much debased meaning of wealth, material possessions. But the prize held out here to the lovers of heavenly wisdom is much more than worldly good. In deepest truth, the being which is theirs is God Himself. They who love and seek the wisdom of this book possess Him, and in possessing Him become possessed of their own true being. They are owners and lords of themselves, and have in their hearts a fountain of life, because they have God dwelling with and in them.

I. The quest which always finds.

'Those who love wisdom' might be a Hebrew translation of 'philosopher,' and possibly the Jewish teachers of wisdom were influenced by Greece, but their conception of wisdom has a deeper source than the Greek had, and what they meant by loving it was a widely different attitude of mind and heart from that of the Greek philosopher. It could never be said of the disciples of a Plato that their quest was sure to end in finding what they sought. Many a man then, and many a man since, and many a man to-day, has 'followed knowledge, like a sinking star,' and has only caught a glimmer of a far-off and dubious light. There is only one search which is certain always to find what it seeks, and that is the search which knows where the object of it is, and seeks not as for something the locality of which is unknown, but as for that which the place of which is certain. The manifold voices of human aims cry, 'Who will show us any good?' The seeker who is sure to find is he who prays, 'Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us.' The heart that truly and supremely affects God is never condemned to seek in vain. The Wisdom of this book herself is presented as proclaiming, 'They that seek me earnestly shall find me,' and humble souls in every age since then have set to their seal that the word is true to their experience. For there are two seekers in every such case, God and man. 'The Father seeketh such to worship Him,' and His love goes through the world, yearning and searching for hearts that will turn to Him. The shepherd seeks for the lost sheep, and lays it on his shoulders to bear it back to the fold. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the seeking love of God. And the human seeker finds God, or rather is found by God, for no aspiration after Him is vain, no longing unresponded to, no effort to find Him unresponded to. We have as much of God as we wish, as much as our desires have fitted us to receive. The all-penetrating atmosphere enters every chink open to it, and no seeking soul has ever had to say, 'I sought Him but found Him not.'

Is there any other quest of which the same can be said? Are not all paths of human effort strewn with the skeletons of men who have fretted and toiled away their lives in vain attempts to grasp aims that have eluded their grip? Do we not all know the sickness of disappointed effort, or the sadder sickness of successful effort, which has secured the apparent good and found it not so good after all? The Christian life is, amid all the failures of human effort, the only life in which the seeking after good is but a little less blessed than the finding of it is, and in which it is always true that 'he that seeketh findeth.' Nor does such finding deaden the spirit of seeking, for in every finding there is a fresh discovery of new depths in God, and a consequent quickening of desire to press further into the abyss of His Being, so that aspiration and fruition ever beget each other, and the upward, Godward progress of the soul is eternal.

II. The finding that is always blessed.

We have seen that being is the gift promised to the lovers of wisdom, and that the promise may either be referred to the possession of God, who is the fountain of all being, or to the true possession of ourselves, which is a consequence of our possession of Him. In either aspect, that possession is blessedness. If we have God, we have real life. We truly own ourselves when we have God. We really live when God lives in us, the life of our lives. We are ourselves, when we have ceased to be ourselves, and have taken God to be the Self of ourselves.

Such a life, God-possessing, brings the one good which corresponds to our whole nature. All other good is fragmentary, and being fragmentary is inadequate, as men's restless search after various forms of good but too sadly proves. Why does the merchantman wander over sea and land seeking for many goodly pearls? Because he has not found one of great price, but tries to make up by their number for the insufficiency of each. But the soul is made, not to find its wealth in the manifold but in the one, and no aggregation of incompletenesses will make up completeness, nor any number of partial satisfactions of this and the other appetite or desire make a man feel that he has enough and more than enough. We must have all good in one Person, if we are ever to know the rest of full satisfaction. It will be fatal to our blessedness if we have to resort to a hundred different sources for different supplies. The true blessedness is simple and yet infinitely complex, for it comes from possessing the one Person in whom dwell for us all forms of good, whether good be understood as intellectual or moral or emotional. That which cannot be everything to the soul that seeks is scarcely worth the seeking, and certainly is not wisely proposed as the object of a life's search, for such a life will be a failure if it fails to find its object, and scarcely less tragically, though perhaps less conspicuously, a failure if it finds it. All other good is but apparent; God is the one real object that meets all man's desires and needs, and makes him blessed with real blessedness, and fills the cup of life with the draught that slakes thirst and satisfies the thirstiest.

III. The blessedness that always lasts.

He who finds God, as every one of us may find Him, in Christ, has found a Good that cannot change, pass, or grow stale. His

blessedness will always last, as long as he keeps fast hold of that which he has, and lets no man take his crown.

For the Christian's good is the only one that does not intend to grow old and pall. We can never exhaust God. We need never grow weary of Him. Possession robs other wealth of its glamour, and other pleasures of their poignant sweetness. We grow weary of most good things, and those which we have long had, we generally find get somewhat faded and stale. Habit is a fatal enemy to enjoyment. But it only adds to the joy which springs from the possession of God in Christ. Swedenborg said that the oldest angels look the youngest, and they who have longest experience of the joy of fellowship with God are they who enjoy each instance of it most. We can never drink the chalice of His love to the dregs, and it will be fresh and sparkling as long as we have lips that can absorb it. He keeps the good wine till the last.

The Christian's good is the only good which cannot be taken away. Loss and change beggars the millionaire sometimes, and the possibility of loss shadows all earthly good with pale foreboding. Everything that is outside the substance of the soul can be withdrawn, but the possession of God in Christ is so intimate and inward, so interwoven with the very deepest roots of the Christian's personal being, that it cannot be taken out from these by any shocks of time or change. There is but one hand that can end that possession and that is his own. He can withdraw himself from God, by giving himself over to sin and the world. He can empty the shrine and compel the indwelling deity to say, as the legend told was heard in the Temple the night before Roman soldiers desecrated the Holy of Holies: Let us depart. But besides himself, 'neither things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature' has power to take away that faithful God to whom a poor soul clings, and in whom whoso thus clings finds its unchangeable good.

The Christian's good is the only one from which we cannot be taken. A grim psalm paints for us the life and end of men 'who trust in the multitude of their possessions,' and whose 'inward thought is that they have founded families that will last.' It tells how 'this their way is folly,' and yet is approved with acclamations by the crowd. It lets us see the founder of a family, the possessor of broad acres, going down to the grave, carrying nothing away, stripped of his glory and with Death for his shepherd, who has driven his flock from pleasant pastures here into the dreariness of Sheol. But that shepherd has a double office. Some he separates from all their possessions, hopes, and joys. Some he, stern though his aspect and harsh though his guidance, leads up to the green pastures of God, and as the last messenger of the love of God in Christ, unites the souls that found God amid the distractions of earth with the God whom they will know better and possess more fully and blessedly, amid the unending felicities and progressive blessednesses of Heaven.

Proverbs 8:30-31 WISDOM AND CHRIST

'Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; 31. Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men.'— PROVERBS viii. 30, 31

There is a singular difference between the two portions of this Book of Proverbs. The bulk of it, beginning with chapter x. , contains a collection of isolated maxims which may be described as the product of sanctified common sense. They are shrewd and homely, but not remarkably spiritual or elevated. To these is prefixed this introductory portion, continuous, lofty in style, and in its personification of divine wisdom, rising to great sublimity both of thought and of expression. It seems as if the main body of the book had been fitted with an introduction by another hand than that of the compilers of the various sets of proverbial sayings. It is apparently due to an intellectual movement, perhaps not uninfluenced by Greek thought, and chronologically the latest of the elements composing the Old Testament scriptures. In place of the lyric fervour of prophets, and the devout intuition of psalmists, we have the praise of Wisdom. But that noble portrait is no copy of the Greek conception, but contains features peculiar to itself. She stands opposed to blatant, meretricious Folly, and seeks to draw men to herself by lofty motives and offering pure delights. She is not a person, but she is a personification of an aspect of the divine nature, and seeing that she is held forth as willing to bestow herself on men, that queenly figure shadows the great truth of God's self-communication as being the end and climax of all His revelation.

We are on the wrong tack when we look for more or less complete resemblances between the 'Wisdom' of Proverbs and the 'Sophia' of Greek thinkers. It is much rather an anticipation, imperfect but real, of Jesus than a pale reflection of Greek thought. The way for the perfect revelation of God in the incarnation was prepared by prophet and psalmist. Was it not also prepared by this vision of a Wisdom which was always with God, and yet had its delights with the sons of men, and whilst 'rejoicing always before Him,' yet rejoiced in the habitable parts of the earth?

Let us then look, however imperfect our gaze may be, at the self-revelation in Proverbs of the personified divine Wisdom, and compare it with the revelation of the incarnate divine Word.

I. The Self-revelation of Wisdom.

The words translated in Authorised Version, 'As one brought up with him,' are rendered in Revised Version, 'as a master workman,'

and seem intended to represent Wisdom—that is, of course, the divine Wisdom—as having been God’s agent in the creative act. In the preceding context, she triumphantly proclaims her existence before His ‘works of old,’ and that she was with God, ‘or ever the earth was.’ Before the everlasting mountains she was, before fountains flashed in the light and refreshed the earth, her waters flowed. But that presence is not all, Wisdom was the divine agent in creation. That thought goes beyond the ancient one: ‘He spake and it was done.’ Genesis regards the divine command as the cause of creatural being. God said, ‘Let there be—and there was’: the forthputting of His will was the impulse to which creatures sprang into existence at response. That is a great thought, but the meditative thinker in our text has pondered over the facts of creation, and notwithstanding all their apparent incompletenesses and errors, has risen to the conclusion that they can all be vindicated as ‘very good.’ To him, this wonderful universe is not only the product of a sovereign will, but of one guided in its operations by all-seeing Wisdom.

Then the relation of this divine Wisdom to God is represented as being a continual delight and a childlike rejoicing in Him, or as the word literally means, a ‘sporting’ in Him. Whatever energy of creative action is suggested by the preceding figure of a ‘master workman,’ that energy had no effort. To the divine Wisdom creation was an easy task. She was not so occupied with it as to interrupt her delight in contemplating God, and her task gave her infinite satisfaction, for she ‘rejoiced always’ before Him, and she rejoiced in His habitable earth. The writer does not shrink from ascribing to the agent of creation something like the glow of satisfaction that we feel over a piece of well-done work, the poet’s or the painter’s rapture as he sees his thoughts bodied forth in melody or glowing on canvas.

But there is a greater thought than these here, for the writer adds, ‘and my delight was with the sons of men.’ It is noteworthy that the same word is used in the preceding verse. The ‘delight of the heavenly Wisdom in God’ is not unlike that directed to man. ‘The sons of men’ are the last, noblest work of Creation, and on them, as the shining apex, her delight settles. The words describe not only what was true when man came into being, as the utmost possible climax of creatural excellence, but are the revelation of what still remains true.

One cannot but feel how in all this most striking disclosure of the depths of God, a deeper mystery is on the verge of revelation. There is here, as we have said, a personification, but there seems to be a Person shining through, or dimly discerned moving behind, the curtain. Wisdom is the agent of creation. She creates with ease, and in creating delights in God as well as in her work, which calls for no effort in doing, and done, is all very good. She delights most of all in the sons of men, and that delight is permanent. Does not this unknown Jewish thinker, too, belong, as well as prophet and psalmist, to those who went before crying, Hosanna to Him that cometh in the name of the Lord? Let us turn to the New Testament and find an answer to the question.

II. The higher revelation of the divine Word.

There can be no doubt that the New Testament is committed to the teaching that the Eternal Word of God, who was incarnate in Jesus, was the agent of creation. John, in his profound prologue to the Gospel, utters the deepest truths in brief sentences of monosyllables, and utters them without a trace of feeling that they needed proof. To him they are axiomatic and self evident. ‘All things were made by Him.’ The words are the words of a child; the thought takes a flight beyond the furthest reach of the mind of men. Paul, too, adds his Amen when he proclaims that ‘All things have been created through Him and unto Him, and He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.’ The writer of Hebrews declares a Son ‘through whom also He made the worlds, and who upholds all things by the word of His power’ and does not scruple at transferring to Jesus the grand poetry of the Psalmist who hymned ‘Thou, Lord, in the beginning, hast laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands.’ We speak of things too deep for us when we speak of persons in the Godhead, but yet we know that the Eternal Word, which was from the beginning, was made flesh and dwelt among us. The personified Wisdom of Proverbs is the personal Word of John’s prologue. John almost quotes the former when he says ‘the same was in the beginning with God.’ for his word recalls the grand declaration, ‘The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way ... I was set up in the beginning or ever the earth was.’ Then there are two beginnings, one lost in the depths of timeless being, one, the commencement of creative activity, and that Word was with God in the remotest, as in the nearer, beginning.

But the ancient vision of the Jewish thinker anticipated the perfect revelation of the New Testament still further, in its thought of an unbroken communion between the personified Wisdom and God. That dim thought of perfect communion and interchange of delights flashes into wondrous clearness when we think of Him who spake of ‘the glory which I had with Thee before the foundation of the world,’ and calmly declared: ‘Thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.’ Into that depth of mutual love we cannot look, and our eyes are too dim-sighted to bear the blaze of that flashing interchange of glory, but we shall rob the earthly life of Jesus of its pathos and saving power, if we do not recognise that in Him the personification of Proverbs has become a person, and that when He became flesh, He not only took on Him the garment of mortality, but laid aside ‘the visible robes of His imperial majesty,’ and that His being found in fashion as a man was humbling Himself beyond all humiliation that afterwards was His.

But still further, the Gospel reality fills out and completes the personification of Proverbs in that it shows us a divine person who so turned to ‘the sons of men’ that He took on Him their nature and Himself bore their sicknesses. The Jewish writer had great

thoughts of the divine condescension, and was sure that God's love still rested on men, sinful as they were, but not even he could foresee the miracle of long-suffering love in the Incarnate Jesus, and he had no power of insight into the depths of the heart of God, that enabled him to foresee the sufferings and death of Jesus. Till that supreme self-sacrifice was a fact, it was inconceivable. Alas, now that it is a fact, to how many hearts that need it most is it still incredible. But passing all anticipation as it is, it is the root of all joy, the ground of all hope, and to millions of sinful souls it is their only refuge, and their sovereign example and pattern of life.

The Jewish thinker had a glimpse of a divine wisdom which delighted in man, but he did not dream of the divine stooping to share in man's sorrows, or of its so loving humanity as to take on itself its limitations, not only to pity these as God's images, but to take part of the same and to die. That man should minister to the divine delight is wonderful, but that God should participate in man's grief passes wonder. Thereby a new tenderness is given to the ancient personification, and the august form of the divine Wisdom softens and melts into the yet more august and tender likeness of the divine Love. Nor is there only an adumbration of the redeeming love of Jesus as He dwells among us here, but we have to remember that Jesus delights in the sons of men when they love Him back again. All the sweet mysteries of our loving communion with Him, and of His joy in our faith, love, and obedience, all the secret treasures of His self-impartment to, and abiding in, souls that open themselves to His entrance, are suggested in that thought. We can minister to the joy of Jesus, and when He is welcomed into any heart, and any man's love answers His, He sees of the travail of His soul and is satisfied.

III. The call of the personal Word to each of us.

The Wisdom of Proverbs is portrayed in her queenly dignity, as calling men to herself, and promising them the satisfaction of all their needs. She describes herself that the description may draw men to her. The self-revelation of God is His mightiest means of attracting men to Him. We but need to know Him as He really is, in order to love Him and cling to Him. A fairer form than hers has drawn near to us, and calls us with tenderer invitations and better promises. The divine Wisdom has become Man with 'sweet human hands and lips and eyes.' Such was His delight in the sons of men that He emptied Himself of His glory, and finished a greater work than that over which he presided when the mountains were settled and the hills brought forth. Now He calls us, and His summons is tenderer, and gives promise of loftier blessings than the call of Wisdom was and did. She called to the simple, 'Come eat ye of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled.' He invites us: 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink,' and He furnishes a table for us, and calls us to eat of the bread which is His body broken for us, and to drink of the wine which is His blood shed for many for the remission of sins. She promises 'riches and honour, yea, durable riches and righteousness.' His voice vibrates with sympathy, and calls the weary and heavy laden, of whom she scarcely thinks, and offers to them a gift, which may seem humble enough beside her more dazzling offers of fruit, better than gold and revenues, better than choice silver, but which come closer to universal wants, the gift of rest, which is really what all men long for, and none but they who take His yoke upon them possess. 'See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh,' for if they escaped not when they refused her that spake through the Jewish thinker's lips of old, 'much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him that beseecheth us from heaven.' Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God, and it is in Him crucified that our weakness and our folly are made strong and wise, and Wisdom's ancient promise is fulfilled: 'Whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord.'

Proverbs 10:29 THE TWO-FOLD ASPECT OF THE DIVINE WORKING

'The way of the Lord is strength to the upright: but destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity.'— PROVERBS x. 29 .

You observe that the words 'shall be,' in the last clause, are a supplement. They are quite unnecessary, and in fact they rather hinder the sense. They destroy the completeness of the antithesis between the two halves of the verse. If you leave them out, and suppose that the 'way of the Lord' is what is spoken of in both clauses, you get a far deeper and fuller meaning. 'The way of the Lord is strength to the upright; but destruction to the workers of iniquity.' It is the same way which is strength to one man and ruin to another, and the moral nature of the man determines which it shall be to him. That is a penetrating word, which goes deep down. The unknown thinkers, to whose keen insight into the facts of human life we are indebted for this Book of Proverbs, had pondered for many an hour over the perplexed and complicated fates of men, and they crystallised their reflections at last in this thought. They have in it struck upon a principle which explains a great many things, and teaches us a great many solemn lessons. Let us try to get a hold of what is meant, and then to look at some applications and illustrations of the principle.

I. First, then, let me just try to put clearly the meaning and bearing of these words.

'The way of the Lord' means, sometimes in the Old Testament and sometimes in the New, religion, considered as the way in which God desires a man to walk. So we read in the New Testament of 'the way' as the designation of the profession and practice of Christianity; and 'the way of the Lord' is often used in the Psalms for the path which He traces for man by His sovereign will.

But that, of course, is not the meaning here. Here it means, not the road in which God prescribes that we should walk, but that road in which He Himself walks; or, in other words, the sum of the divine action, the solemn footsteps of God through creation, providence, and history. 'His goings forth are from everlasting.' 'His way is in the sea.' 'His way is in the sanctuary.' Modern

language has a whole set of phrases which mean the same thing as the Jew meant by 'the way of the Lord,' only that God is left out. They talk about the 'current of events,' 'the general tendency of things,' 'the laws of human affairs,' and so on. I, for my part, prefer the old-fashioned 'Hebraism.' To many modern thinkers the whole drift and tendency of human affairs affords no sign of a person directing these. They hear the clashing and grinding of opposing forces, the thunder as of falling avalanches, and the moaning as of a homeless wind, but they hear the sounds of no footfalls echoing down the ages. This ancient teacher had keener ears. Well for us if we share his faith, and see in all the else distracting mysteries of life and history, 'the way of the Lord!'

But not only does the expression point to the operation of a personal divine Will in human affairs, but it conceives of that operation as one, a uniform and consistent whole. However complicated, and sometimes apparently contradictory, the individual events were, there was a unity in them, and they all converged on one result. The writer does not speak of 'ways,' but of 'the way,' as a grand unity. It is all one continuous, connected, consistent mode of operation from beginning to end.

The author of this proverb believed something more about the way of the Lord. He believed that although it is higher than our way, still, a man can know something about it; and that whatever may be enigmatical, and sometimes almost heart-breaking, in it, one thing is sure—that as we have been taught of late years in another dialect, it 'makes for righteousness.' 'Clouds and darkness are round about Him,' but the Old Testament writers never falter in the conviction, which was the soul of all their heroism and the life blood of their religion, that in the hearts of the clouds and darkness, 'Justice and judgment are the foundations of His throne.' The way of the Lord, says this old thinker, is hard to understand, very complicated, full of all manner of perplexities and difficulties, and yet on the whole the clear drift and tendency of the whole thing is discernible, and it is this: it is all on the side of good. Everything that is good, and everything that does good, is an ally of God's, and may be sure of the divine favour and of the divine blessing resting upon it.

And just because that is so clear, the other side is as true; the same way, the same set of facts, the same continuous stream of tendency, which is all with and for every form of good, is all against every form of evil. Or, as one of the Psalmists puts the same idea, 'The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their cry. The face of the Lord is against them that do evil.' The same eye that beams in lambent love on 'the righteous' burns terribly to the evil doer. 'The face of the Lord' means the side of the divine nature which is turned to us, and is manifested by His self-revealing activity, so that the expression comes near in meaning to 'the way of the Lord,' and the thought in both cases is the same, that by the eternal law of His being, God's actions must all be for the good and against the evil.

They do not change, but a man's character determines which aspect of them he sees and has to experience. God's way has a bright side and a dark. You may take which you like. You can lay hold of the thing by whichever handle you choose. On the one side it is convex, on the other concave. You can approach it from either side, as you please. 'The way of the Lord' must touch your 'way.' You cannot alter that necessity. Your path must either run parallel in the same direction with His, and then all His power will be an impulse to bear you onward; or it must run in the opposite direction, and then all His power will be for your ruin, and the collision with it will crush you as a ship is crushed like an egg-shell, when it strikes an iceberg. You can choose which of these shall befall you.

And there is a still more striking beauty about the saying, if we give the full literal meaning to the word 'strength.' It is used by our translators, I suppose, in a somewhat archaic and peculiar signification, namely, that of a stronghold. At all events the Hebrew means a fortress, a place where men may live safe and secure; and if we take that meaning, the passage gains greatly in force and beauty. This 'way of the Lord' is like a castle for the shelter of the shelterless good man, and behind those strong bulwarks he dwells impregnable and safe. Just as a fortress is a security to the garrison, and a frowning menace to the besiegers or enemies, so the 'name of the Lord is a strong tower,' and the 'way of the Lord' is a fortress. If you choose to take shelter within it, its massive walls are your security and your joy. If you do not, they frown down grimly upon you, a menace and a terror. How differently, eight hundred years ago, Normans and Saxons looked at the square towers that were built all over England to bridle the inhabitants! To the one they were the sign of the security of their dominion; to the other they were the sign of their slavery and submission. Torture and prison-houses they might become; frowning portents they necessarily were. 'The way of the Lord' is a castle fortress to the man that does good, and to the man that does evil it is a threatening prison, which may become a hell of torture. It is 'ruin to the workers of iniquity.' I pray you, settle for yourself which of these it is to be to you.

II. And now let me say a word or two by way of application, or illustration, of these principles that are here.

First, let me remind you how the order of the universe is such that righteousness is life and sin is death. This universe and the fortunes of men are complicated and strange. It is hard to trace any laws, except purely physical ones, at work. Still, on the whole, things do work so that goodness is blessedness, and badness is ruin. That is, of course, not always true in regard of outward things, but even about them it is more often and obviously true than we sometimes recognise. Hence all nations have their proverbs, embodying the generalised experience of centuries, and asserting that, on the whole, 'honesty is the best policy,' and that it is always a blunder to do wrong. What modern phraseology calls 'laws of nature,' the Bible calls 'the way of the Lord'; and the

manner in which these help a man who conforms to them, and hurt or kill him if he does not, is an illustration on a lower level of the principle of our text. This tremendous congeries of powers in the midst of which we live does not care whether we go with it or against it, only if we do the one we shall prosper, and if we do the other we shall very likely be made an end of. Try to stop a train, and it will run over you and murder you; get into it, and it will carry you smoothly along. Our lives are surrounded with powers, which will carry our messages and be our slaves if we know how to command nature by obeying it, or will impassively strike us dead if we do not.

Again, in our physical life, as a rule, virtue makes strength, sin brings punishment. 'Riotous living' makes diseased bodies. Sins in the flesh are avenged in the flesh, and there is no need for a miracle to bring it about that he who sows to the flesh shall 'of the flesh reap corruption.' God entrusts the punishment of the breach of the laws of temperance and morality in the body to the 'natural' operation of such breach. The inevitable connection between sins against the body and disease in the body, is an instance of the way of the Lord—the same set of principles and facts—being strength to one man and destruction to another. Hundreds of young men in Manchester—some of whom are listening to me now, no doubt—are killing themselves, or at least are ruining their health, by flying in the face of the plain laws of purity and self-control. They think that they must 'have their fling,' and 'obey their instincts,' and so on. Well, if they must, then another 'must' will insist upon coming into play—and they must reap as they have sown, and drink as they have brewed, and the grim saying of this book about profligate young men will be fulfilled in many of them. 'His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth, which shall lie down with him in the grave.' Be not deceived, God is not mocked, and His way avenges bodily transgressions by bodily sufferings.

And then, in higher regions, on the whole, goodness makes blessedness, and evil brings ruin. All the powers of God's universe, and all the tenderness of God's heart are on the side of the man that does right. The stars in their courses fight against the man that fights against Him; and on the other side, in yielding thyself to the will of God and following the dictates of His commandments, 'Thou shalt make a league with the beasts of the field, and the stones of the field shall be at peace with thee.' All things serve the soul that serves God, and all war against him who wars against his Maker. The way of the Lord cannot but further and help all who love and serve Him. For them all things must work together for good. By the very laws of God's own being, which necessarily shape all His actions, the whole 'stream of tendency without us makes for righteousness.' In the one course of life we go with the stream of divine activity which pours from the throne of God. In the other we are like men trying to row a boat up Niagara. All the rush of the mighty torrent will batter us back. Our work will be doomed to destruction, and ourselves to shame. For ever and ever to be good is to be well. An eternal truth lies in the facts that the same word 'good' means pleasant and right, and that sin and sorrow are both called 'evil.' All sin is self-inflicted sorrow, and every 'rogue is a roundabout fool.' So ask yourselves the question: 'Is my life in harmony with, or opposed to, these omnipotent laws which rule the whole field of life?' Still further, this same fact of the two-fold aspect and operation of the one way of the Lord will be made yet more evident in the future. It becomes us to speak very reverently and reticently about the matter, but I can conceive it possible that the one manifestation of God in a future life may be in substance the same, and yet that it may produce opposite effects upon oppositely disposed souls. According to the old mystical illustration, the same heat that melts wax hardens clay, and the same apocalypse of the divine nature in another world may to one man be life and joy, and to another man may be terror and despair. I do not dwell upon that; it is far too awful a thing for us to speak about to one another, but it is worth your taking to heart when you are indulging in easy anticipations that of course God is merciful and will bless and save everybody after he dies. Perhaps—I do not go any further than a perhaps—perhaps God cannot, and perhaps if a man has got himself into such a condition as it is possible for a man to get into, perhaps, like light upon a diseased eye, the purest beam may be the most exquisite pain, and the natural instinct may be to 'call upon the rocks and the hills to fall upon them' and cover them up in a more genial darkness from that Face, to see which should be life and blessedness.

People speak of future rewards and punishments as if they were given and inflicted by simple and divine volition, and did not stand in any necessary connection with holiness on the one hand or with sin on the other. I do not deny that some portion of both bliss and sorrow may be of such a character. But there is a very important and wide region in which our actions here must automatically bring consequences hereafter of joy or sorrow, without any special retributive action of God's.

We have only to keep in view one or two things about the future which we know to be true, and we shall see this. Suppose a man with his memory of all his past life perfect, and his conscience stimulated to greater sensitiveness and clearer judgment, and all opportunities ended of gratifying tastes and appetites, whose food is in this world, while yet the soul has become dependent on them for ease and comfort, What more is needed to make a hell? And the supposition is but the statement of a fact. We seem to forget much; but when the waters are drained off all the lost things will be found at the bottom. Conscience gets dulled and sophisticated here. But the icy cold of death will wake it up, and the new position will give new insight into the true character of our actions. You see how often a man at the end of life has his eyes cleared to see his faults. But how much more will that be the case hereafter! When the rush of passion is past, and you are far enough from your life to view it as a whole, holding it at arm's length, you will see better what it looks like. There is nothing improbable in supposing that inclinations and tastes which have been nourished for a lifetime may survive the possibility of indulging them in another life, as they often do in this; and what can be worse than such a thirst for one drop of water, which never can be tasted more? These things are certain, and no more is needed to make

sin produce, by necessary consequence, misery, and ruin; while similarly, goodness brings joy, peace, and blessing.

But again, the self-revelation of God has this same double aspect.

‘The way of the Lord’ may mean His process by which He reveals His character. Every truth concerning Him may be either a joy or a terror to men. All His ‘attributes’ are builded into ‘a strong tower, into which the righteous runneth, and is safe,’ or else they are builded into a prison and torture-house. So the thought of God may either be a happy and strengthening one, or an unwelcome one. ‘I remembered God, and was troubled’ says one Psalmist. What an awful confession—that the thought of God disturbed him! The thought of God to some of us is a very unwelcome one, as unwelcome as the thought of a detective to a company of thieves. Is not that dreadful? Music is a torture to some ears: and there are people who have so alienated their hearts and wills from God that the Name which should be ‘their dearest faith’ is not only their ‘ghastliest doubt,’ but their greatest pain. O brethren, the thought of God and all that wonderful complex of mighty attributes and beauties which make His Name should be our delight, the key to all treasures, the end of all sorrows, our light in darkness, our life in death, our all in all. It is either that to us, or it is something that we would fain forget. Which is it to you?

Especially the Gospel has this double aspect. Our text speaks of the distinction between the righteous and evil doers; but how to pass from the one class to the other, it does not tell us. The Gospel is the answer to that question. It tells us that though we are all ‘workers of iniquity,’ and must, therefore, if such a text as this were the last word to be spoken on the matter, share in the ruin which smites the opponent of the divine will, we may pass from that class; and by simple faith in Him who died on the Cross for all workers of iniquity, may become of those righteous on whose side God works in all His way, who have all His attributes drawn up like an embattled army in their defence, and have His mighty name for their refuge.

As the very crown of the ways of God, the work of Christ and the record of it in the Gospel have most eminently this double aspect. God meant nothing but the salvation of the whole world when He sent us this Gospel. His ‘way’ therein was pure, unmingled, universal love. We can make that great message untroubled blessing by simply accepting it. Nothing more is needed but to take God at His word, and to close with His sincere and earnest invitation. Then Christ’s work becomes the fortress in which we are guarded from sin and guilt, from the arrows of conscience, and the fiery darts of temptation. But if not accepted, then it is not passive, it is not nothing. If rejected, it does more harm to a man than anything else can, just because, if accepted, it would have done him more good. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. The pillar which symbolised the presence of God sent down influences on either side; to the trembling crowd of the Israelites on the one hand, to the pursuing ranks of the Egyptians on the other; and though the pillar was one, opposite effects streamed from it, and it was ‘a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these.’ Everything depends on which side of the pillar you choose to see. The ark of God, which brought dismay and death among false gods and their worshippers, brought blessing into the humble house of Obed Edom, the man of Gath, with whom it rested for three months before it was set in its place in the city of David. That which is meant to be the savour of life unto life must either be that or the savour of death unto death.

Jesus Christ is something to each of us. For you who have heard His name ever since you were children, your relation to Him settles your condition and your prospects, and moulds your character. Either He is for you the tried corner-stone, the sure foundation, on which whosoever builds will not be confounded, or He is the stone of stumbling, against which whosoever stumbles will be broken, and which will crush to powder whomsoever it falls upon, ‘This Child is set for the rise’ or for the fall of all who hear His name. He leaves no man at the level at which He found him, but either lifts him up nearer to God, and purity and joy, or sinks him into an ever-descending pit of darkening separation from all these. Which is He to you? Something He must be—your strength or your ruin. If you commit your souls to Him in humble faith, He will be your peace, your life, your Heaven. If you turn from His offered grace, He will be your pain, your death, your torture. ‘What maketh Heaven, that maketh hell.’ Which do you choose Him to be?

Proverbs 12:1-15 THE MANY-SIDED CONTRAST OF WISDOM AND FOLLY

The verses of the present passage are a specimen of the main body of the Book of Proverbs. They are not a building, but a heap. The stones seldom have any mortar between them, and connection or progress is for the most part sought in vain. But one great antithesis runs through the whole—the contrast of wisdom or righteousness with folly or wickedness. The compiler or author is never weary of setting out that opposition in all possible lights. It is, in his view, the one difference worth noting between men, and it determines their whole character and fortunes. The book traverses with keen observation all the realm of life, and everywhere finds confirmation of its great principle that goodness is wisdom and sin folly.

There is something extremely impressive in this continual reiteration of that contrast. As we read, we feel as if, after all, there were nothing in the world but it and its results. That profound sense of the existence and far-reaching scope of the division of men into two classes is not the least of the benefits which a thoughtful study of Proverbs brings to us. In this lesson it is useless to attempt to classify the verses. Slight traces of grouping appear here and there; but, on the whole, we have a set of miscellaneous

aphorisms turning on the great contrast, and setting in various lights the characters and fates of the righteous and the wicked.

The first mark of difference is the opposite feeling about discipline. If a man is wise, he will love 'knowledge'; and if he loves knowledge, he will love the means to it, and therefore will not kick against correction. That is another view of trials from the one which inculcates devout submission to a Father. It regards only the benefits to ourselves. If we want to be taught anything, we shall not flinch from the rod. There must be pains undergone in order to win knowledge of any sort, and the man who rebels against these shows that he had rather be comfortable and ignorant than wise. A pupil who will not stand having his exercises corrected will not learn his faults. On the other hand, hating reproof is 'brutish' in the most literal sense; for it is the characteristic of animals that they do not understand the purpose of pain, and never advance because they do not. Men can grow because they can submit to discipline; beasts cannot improve because, except partially and in a few cases, they cannot accept correction.

The first proverb deals with wisdom or goodness in its inner source; namely, a docile disposition. The two next deal with its consequences. It secures God's favour, while its opposite is condemned; and then, as a consequence of this, the good man is established and the wicked swept away. The manifestations of God's favour and its opposite are not to be thrown forward to a future life. Continuously the sunshine of divine love falls on the one man, and already the other is condemned. It needs some strength of faith to look through the shows of prosperity often attending plain wickedness, and believe that it is always a blunder to do wrong.

But a moderate experience of life will supply many instances of prosperous villainy in trade and politics which melted away like mist. The shore is strewn with wrecks, dashed to pieces because righteousness did not steer. Every exchange gives examples in plenty. How many seemingly solid structures built on wrong every man has seen in his lifetime crumble like the cloud masses which the wind piles in the sky and then dissipates! The root of the righteous is in God, and therefore he is firm. The contrast is like that of Psalm i. —between the tree with strong roots and waving greenery, and the chaff, rootless, and therefore whirled out of the threshing-floor.

The universal contrast is next applied to women; and in accordance with the subordinate position they held in old days, the bearing of her goodness is principally regarded as affecting her husband. That does not cover the whole ground, of course. But wherever there is a true marriage, the wife will not think that woman's rights are infringed because one chief issue of her beauty of virtue is the honour and joy it reflects upon him who has her heart. 'A virtuous woman' is not only one who possesses the one virtue to which the phrase has been so miserably confined, but who is 'a woman of strength'—no doll or plaything, but

'A perfect woman, nobly planned

To warn, to comfort, and command.'

The gnawing misery of being fastened like two dogs in a leash to one who 'causes shame' is vividly portrayed by that strong figure, that she is like 'rottenness in his bones,' eating away strength, and inflicting disfigurement and torture.

Then come a pair of verses describing the inward and outward work of the two kinds of men as these affect others. The former verses dealt with their effects on the actors; the present, with their bearing on others. Inwardly, the good man has thoughts which scrupulously keep the balance true and are just to his fellows, while the wicked plans to deceive for his own profit. When thoughts are translated into speech, deceit bears fruit in words which are like ambushes of murderers, laying traps to destroy, while the righteous man's words are like angels of deliverance to the unsuspecting who are ready to fall into the snare. Selfishness, which is the root of wickedness, will be cruelty and injustice when necessary for its ends. The man who is wise because God is his centre and aim will be merciful and helpful. The basis of philanthropy is religion. The solemn importance attached to speech is observable. Words can slay as truly as swords. Now that the press has multiplied the power of speech, and the world is buzzing with the clatter of tongues, we all need to lay to heart the responsibilities and magic power of spoken and printed words, and 'to set a watch on the door of our lips.'

Then follow a couple of verses dealing with the consequences to men themselves of their contrasted characters. The first of these (verse 7) recurs to the thought of verse 3, but with a difference. Not only the righteous himself, but his house, shall be established. The solidarity of the family and the entail of goodness are strongly insisted on in the Old Testament, though limitations are fully recognised. If a good man's son continues his father's character, he will prolong his father's blessings; and in normal conditions, a parent's wisdom passes on to his children. Something is wrong when, as is so often the case, it does not; and it is not always the children's fault.

The overthrow of the wicked is set in striking contrast with their plots to overthrow others. Their mischief comes back, like an Australian boomerang, to the hand that flings it; and contrariwise, delivering others is a sure way of establishing one's self. Exceptions there are, for the world-scheme is too complicated to be condensed into a formula; but all proverbs speak of the average usual results of virtue and vice, and those of this book do the same. Verse 8 asserts that, on the whole, honour attends goodness, and contempt wickedness. Of course, companions in dissipation extol each other's vices, and launch the old threadbare

sneers at goodness. But if wisdom were not set uppermost in men's secret judgment, there would be no hypocrites, and their existence proves the truth of the proverb.

Verse 9 seems suggested by 'despised' in verse 8. There are two kinds of contempt—one which brands sin deservedly, one which vulgarly despises everybody who is not rich. A man need not mind, though his modest household is treated with contempt, if quiet righteousness reigns in it. It is better to be contented with little, and humble in a lowly place, than to be proud and hungry, as many were in the writer's time and since. A foolish world set on wealth may despise, but its contempt breaks no bones. Self-conceit is poor diet.

This seems to be the first of a little cluster of proverbs bearing on domestic life. It prefers modest mediocrity of station, such as Agur desired. Its successor shows how the contrasted qualities come out in the two men's relation to their domestic animals. Goodness sweeps a wide circle touching the throne of God and the stall of the cattle. It was not Coleridge who found out that 'He prayeth best who loveth best' but this old proverb-maker; and he could speak the thought without the poet's exaggeration, which robs his expression of it of half its value. The original says 'knoweth the soul' which may indeed mean, 'regardeth the life' but rather seems to suggest sympathetic interest in leading to an understanding of the dumb creature, which must precede all wise care for its well-being. It is a part of religion to try to enter into the mysterious feelings of our humble dependants in farmyard and stable. On the other hand, for want of such sympathetic interest, even when the 'wicked' means to be kind, he does harm; or the word rendered 'tender mercies' may here mean the feelings (literally, 'bowels') which, in their intense selfishness, are cruel even to animals.

Verse 11 has no connection with the preceding, unless the link is common reference to home life and business. It contrasts the sure results of honest industry with the folly of speculation. The Revised Version margin 'vain things' is better than the text 'vain persons,' which would give no antithesis to the patient tilling of the first clause. That verse would make an admirable motto to be stretched across the Stock Exchange, and like places on both sides of the Atlantic. How many ruined homes and heart-broken wives witness in America and England to its truth! The vulgar English proverb, 'What comes over the Devil's back goes under his belly,' says the same thing. The only way to get honest wealth is to work for it. Gambling in all its forms is rank folly.

So the next proverb (verse 12) continues the same thought, and puts it in a somewhat difficult phrase. It goes a little deeper than the former, showing that the covetousness which follows after vain things, is really wicked lusting for unrighteous gain. 'The net of evildoer's is better taken as in the margin (Rev. Ver.) 'prey' or 'spoil,' and the meaning seems to be as just stated. Such hankering for riches, no matter how obtained, or such envying of the booty which admittedly has been won by roguery, is a mark of the wicked. How many professing church members have known that feeling in thinking of the millions of some railway king! Would they like the proverb to be applied to them?

The contrast to this is 'the root of the righteous yields fruit,' or 'shoots forth,' We have heard (verse 3) that it shall never be moved, being fixed in God; now we are told that it will produce all that is needful. A life rooted in God will unfold into all necessary good, which will be better than the spoil of the wicked. There are two ways of getting on—to struggle and fight and trample down rivals; one, to keep near God and wait for him. 'Ye fight and war; ye have not, because ye ask not.'

The next two proverbs have in common a reference to the effect of speech upon the speaker. 'In the transgression of the lips is an evil snare'; that is, sinful words ensnare their utterer, and whoever else he harms, he himself is harmed most. The reflex influence on character of our utterances is not present to us, as it should be. They leave stains on lips and heart. Thoughts expressed are more definite and permanent thereby. A vicious thought clothed in speech has new power over the speaker. If we would escape from that danger, we must be righteous, and speak righteousness; and then the same cause will deepen our convictions of 'whatsoever things are lovely and of good report.'

Verse 14 insists on this opposite side of the truth. Good words will bring forth fruit, which will satisfy the speaker, because, whatever effects his words may have on others, they will leave strengthened goodness and love of it in himself. 'If the house be worthy, your peace shall rest upon it; if not, it shall return to you again.' That reaction of words on oneself is but one case of the universal law of consequences coming back on us. We are the architects of our own destinies. Every deed has an immortal life, and returns, either like a raven or a dove, to the man who sent it out on its flight. It comes back either croaking with blood on its beak, or cooing with an olive branch in its mouth. All life is at once sowing and reaping. A harvest comes in which retribution will be even more entire and accurate.

The last proverb of the passage gives a familiar antithesis, and partially returns to the thought of verse 1. The fool has no standard of conduct but his own notions, and is absurdly complacent as to all his doings. The wise seeks better guidance than his own, and is docile, because he is not so ridiculously sure of his infallibility. No type of weak wickedness is more abominable to the proverbialist than that of pert self-conceit, which knows so little that it thinks it knows everything, and is 'as untameable as a fly.' But in the wisest sense, it is true that a mark of folly is self-opinionativeness; that a man who has himself for teacher has a fool for scholar; that the test of wisdom is willingness to be taught; and, especially, that to bring a docile, humble spirit to the Source of all

wisdom, and to ask counsel of God, is the beginning of true insight, and that the self-sufficiency which is the essence of sin, is never more fatal than when it is ignorant of guilt, and therefore spurns a Saviour.