

Alexander Maclaren-Sermons on Judges

A Summary of Israel's Faithlessness and God's Patience Judges 2:1-10

The Book of Judges begins a new era, the development of the nation in its land. Chapters i. to iii. 6 contain two summaries: first, of the progress of the conquest; and second, of the history about to be unfolded in the book. The first part of this passage (verses 1-5) belongs to the former, and closes it; the second (verses 6-10) introduces the latter, and contrasts it with the state of things prevailing as long as the soldiers of Joshua lived.

I. 'Angel of the LORD' had appeared to Joshua in Gilgal at the beginning of the war, and issued his orders as 'Captain of the Lord's host.'

Now He reappears to ask why his orders had not been carried out, and to announce that victory was no longer to attend Israel's arms. Nothing can be plainer than that the Angel speaks as one in whom the divine name dwells. His reiterated 'I's' are incomprehensible on any other hypothesis than that He is that mysterious person, distinct from and yet one with Jehovah, whom we know as the 'Word made flesh.' His words here are stern. He enumerates the favours which He had showed to Israel, and which should have inspired them to glad obedience. He recalls the conditions on which they had received the land; namely, that they were to enter into no entangling alliances with the remnant of the inhabitants, and especially to have no tolerance for their idolatry. Here we may observe that, according to Joshua's last charge, the extermination of the native peoples was not contemplated, but that there should be no such alliances as would peril Israel's observance of the covenant (Joshua 22:7, 12 - see Maclaren's sermon Joshua 21:43-45, 22:1-9 The End of the War). He charges them with disobedience, and asks the same question as had been asked of Eve, 'What is this ye have done?' And He declares the punishment about to follow, in the paralysing of Israel's conquering arm by the withdrawal of His conquering might, and in the seductions from the native inhabitants to which they would fall victims.

Note, then, how God's benefits aggravate our disobedience, and how He bases His right to command on them. Further, note how His promises are contingent on our fulfilment of their conditions, and how a covenant which He has sworn that He will never break He does count as non-existent when men break it. Again, observe the sharp arraignment of the faithless, and the forcing of them to bethink themselves of the true character of their deeds, or, if we adopt the Revised Version's rendering, of the unreasonableness of departing from God. No man dare answer when God asks, 'What hast thou done?' No man can answer reasonably when He asks, 'Why hast thou done it?' Once more, note that His servants sin when they allow themselves to be so mixed up with the world that they are in peril of learning its ways and getting a snare to their souls. We have all unconquered 'Canaanites' in our hearts, and amity with them is supreme folly and crying wickedness. 'Thorough' must be our motto. Many times have the conquered overcome their conquerors, as in Rome's conquest of Greece, the Goths' conquest of Rome, the Normans' conquest of England. Israel was in some respects conquered by Canaanites and other conquered tribes. Let us take care that we are not overcome by our inward foes, whom we fancy we have subdued and can afford to treat leniently.

Again, God punishes our making truce with our spiritual foes by letting the effects of the truce work themselves out. He said to Israel, in effect: 'If you make alliances with the people of the land, you shall no longer have power to cast them out. The swift rush of the stream of victory shall be stayed. You have chosen to make them your friends, and their friendship shall produce its natural effects, of tempting you to imitation.' The increased power of our unsubdued evils is the punishment, as it is the result, of tolerance of them. We wanted to keep them, and dreamed that we could control them. Keep them we shall, control them we cannot. They will master us if we do not expel them. No wonder that the place was named Bochim ('Weepers'), when such stern words were thundered forth. Tears flow easily; and many a sin is wept for once, and afterwards repeated often. So it was with Israel, as the narrative goes on to tell. Let us take the warning, and give heed to make repentance deep and lasting.

II. Judges 2:6-10 go back to an earlier period than the appearance of the Angel.

We do not know how long the survivors of the conquering army lived in sufficient numbers to leaven opinion and practice. We may, however, roughly calculate that the youngest of these would be about twenty when the war began, and that about fifty years would see the end of the host that had crossed Jordan and stormed Jericho. If Joshua was of about the same age as Caleb, he would be about eighty at the beginning of the conquest, and lived thirty years afterwards, so that about twenty years after his death would be the limit of 'the elders that outlived Joshua.'

Judges 2:6-9 substantially repeat Joshua 24:28-31 (See Maclaren's sermon on Joshua 24:19-28 The National Oath at Shechem) , and are here inserted to mark not only the connection with the former book, but to indicate the beginning of a new epoch. The facts

narrated in this paragraph are but too sadly in accord with the uniform tendencies of our poor weak nature. As long as some strong personality leads a nation or a church, it keeps true to its early fervour. The first generation which has lived through some great epoch, when God's arm has been made bare, retains the impression of His power. But when the leader falls, it is like withdrawing a magnet, and the heap of iron filings tumbles back to the ground inert. Think of the post-Apostolic age of the Church, of Germany in the generation after Luther, not to come nearer home, and we must see that Israel's experience was an all but universal one. It is hard to keep a community even of professing Christians on the high level. No great cause is ever launched which does not lose 'way' as it continues. 'Having begun in the Spirit,' all such are too apt to continue 'in the flesh.' The original impulses wane, friction begins to tell. Custom clogs the wheels. The fiery lava-stream cools and slackens. So it always has been. Therefore God has to change His instruments, and churches need to be shaken up, and sometimes broken up, 'lest one good,' when it has degenerated into 'custom,' should 'corrupt the world.'

But we shall miss the lesson here taught if we do not apply it to tendencies in ourselves, and humbly recognise that we are in danger of being 'hindered,' however 'well' we may have begun to 'run,' and that our only remedy is to renew continually our first-hand vision of 'the great works of the Lord,' and our consecration to His service. It is a poor affair if, like Israel, our devotion to God depends on Joshua's life, or, like King Joash, we do that which is 'right in the eyes of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest.'

Israel's Obstinacy and God's Patience

Judges 2:11-23

This passage sums up the Book of Judges, and also the history of Israel for over four hundred years. Like the overture of an oratorio, it sounds the main themes of the story which follows. That story has four chapters, repeated with dreary monotony over and over again. They are: Relapse into idolatry, retribution, respite and deliverance, and brief return to God. The last of these phases soon passes into fresh relapse, and then the old round is gone all over again, as regularly as the white and red lights and the darkness reappear in a revolving lighthouse lantern, or the figures recur in a circulating decimal fraction. That sad phrase which begins this lesson, 'The children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord,' is repeated at the beginning of each new record of apostasy, on which duly follow, as outlined here, the oppression by the enemy, the raising up of a deliverer, the gleam of brightness which dies with him, and then, *da capo*, 'the children of Israel did evil,' and all the rest as before. The names change, but the incidents are the same. There is something extremely impressive in this uniformity of the plan of the book, which thus sets in so strong light the persistence through generations of the same bad strain in the nation's blood, and the unwearying patience of God. The story of these successive recurrences of the same sequence of events occupies the book to the end of chapter xvi., and the remainder of it is taken up with two wild stories deeply stained with the lawlessness and moral laxity of these anarchic times. We may best bring out the force of this summary by considering in their order the four stages signalised.

I. The first is the continual tendency to relapse into idolatry.

The fact itself, and the frank prominence given to it in the Old Testament, are both remarkable. As to the latter, certainly, if the Old Testament histories have the same origin as the chronicles of other nations, they present most anomalous features. Where do we find any other people whose annals contain nothing that can minister to national vanity, and have for one of their chief themes the sins of the nation? The history of Israel, as told in Scripture, is one long indictment of Israel. The peculiarity is explicable, if we believe that, whoever or how numerous soever its authors, God was its true Author, as He is its true theme, and that the object of its histories is not to tell the deeds of Israel, but those of God for Israel.

As to the fact of the continual relapses into idolatry, nothing could be more natural than that the recently received and but imperfectly assimilated revelation of the one God, with its stringent requirements of purity, and its severe prohibition of idols, should easily slip off from these rude and merely outward worshippers. Joshua's death without a successor, the dispersion of the tribes, the difficulty of communication when much of the country was still in the hands of its former possessors, would all weaken the sense of unity, which was too recent to be firm, and would expose the isolated Israelites to the full force of the temptation to idolatry. It is difficult for us fairly to judge the immense strain required for resistance to it. The conception of one sole God was too high to be easily retained. A shrine without a deity seemed bare and empty. The Law stringently bridled passions which the hideous worship of the Canaanites stimulated. No wonder that, when the first generation of the conquerors had passed away, their successors lapsed into the universal polytheism, with its attendant idolatry and immorality. Instead of thinking of the Israelites as monsters of ingratitude and backsliding, we come nearer the truth, and make a better use of the history, when we see in it a mirror which shows us our own image. The strong earthward pull is ever acting on us, and, unless God hold us up, we too shall slide downwards. 'Hath a nation changed their gods, which yet are no gods? but My people hath changed their glory for that which doth not profit.' Idolatry and worldliness are persistent; for they are natural. Firm adherence to God is less common, because it goes against the strong forces, within and without, which bind us to earth.

Apparently the relapses into idolatry did not imply the entire abandonment of the worship of Jehovah, but the worship of Baalim and Ashtaroth along with it. Such illegitimate mixing up of deities was accordant with the very essence of polytheism, and repugnant to that of the true worship of God. The one may be tolerant, the other cannot be. To unite Baal with Jehovah was to forsake Jehovah.

These continual relapses have an important bearing on the question of the origin of the 'Jewish conception of God.' They are intelligible only if we take the old-fashioned explanation, that its origin was a divine revelation, given to a rude people. They are unintelligible if we take the new-fashioned explanation that the monotheism of Israel was the product of natural evolution, or was anything but a treasure put by God into their hands, which they did not appreciate, and would willingly have thrown away. The foul Canaanitish worship was the kind of thing in which, if left to themselves, they would have wallowed. How came such people by such thoughts as these? The history of Israel's idolatry is not the least conclusive proof of the supernatural revelation which made Israel's religion.

II. Note the swift-following retribution.

We have two sections in the context dealing with this, each introduced by that terrible phrase, which recurs so often in the subsequent parts of the book, 'The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.' That phrase is no sign of a lower conception of God than that which the gospel brings. Wrath is an integral part of love, when the lover is perfectly righteous and the loved are sinful. The most terrible anger is the anger of perfect gentleness, as expressed in that solemn paradox of the Apostle of love, when he speaks of 'the wrath of the Lamb.' God was angry with Israel because He loved them, and desired their love for their own good. The fact of His choice of the nation for His own and the intensity of His love were shown no less by the swift certainty with which suffering dogged sin, than by the blessings which crowned obedience. The first section, referring to the punishment, is in Judges 2:14 and 15, which seems to describe mainly the defeats and plunderings which outside surrounding nations inflicted. The brief description is extraordinarily energetic. It ascribes all their miseries to God's direct act. He 'delivered' them over, or, as the next clause says still more strongly, 'sold' them, to plunderers, who stripped them bare. Their defeats were the result of His having thus ceased to regard them as His. But though He had 'sold' them, He had not done with them; for it was not only the foeman's hand that struck them, but God's 'hand was against them,' and its grip crushed them. His judgments were not occasional, but continuous, and went with them 'whithersoever they went out.' Everything went wrong with them; there were no gleams breaking the black thunder-cloud. God's anger darkened the whole sky, and blasted the whole earth. And the misery was the more miserable and awful because it had all been foretold, and in it God was but doing 'as He had said' and sworn. It is a dreadful picture of the all-withering effect of God's anger,—a picture which is repeated in inmost verity in many an outwardly prosperous life to-day.

The second section is in Judges 2:20-23, and describes the consequence of Israel's relapse in reference to the surviving Canaanite and other tribes in the land itself. Note that 'nation' in Judges 2:20 is the term usually applied, not to Israel, but to the Gentile peoples; and that its use here seems equivalent to canceling the choice of Israel as God's special possession, and reducing them to the level of the other nations in Canaan, to whom the same term is applied in Judges 2:21. The stern words which are here put into the mouth of God may possibly refer to the actual message recorded in the first verses of the chapter; but, more probably, 'the Lord said' does not here mean any divine communication, but only the divine resolve, conceived as spoken to himself. It embodies the divine *lex talionis*. The punishment is analogous to the crime. Israel had broken the covenant; God would not keep His promise. That involves a great principle as to all God's promises,—that they are all conditional, and voidable by men's failure to fulfil their conditions. Observe, too, that the punishment is the retention of the occasions of the sin. Is not that, too, a law of the divine procedure to-day? Whips to scourge us are made of our pleasant vices. Sin is the punishment of sin. If we yield to some temptation, part of the avenging retribution is that the temptation abides by us, and has power over us. The 'Canaanites' whom we have allowed to lead us astray will stay beside us when their power to seduce us is done, and will pull off their masks and show themselves for what they are, our spoilers and foes.

The rate of Israel's conquest was determined by Israel's faithful adherence to God. That is a standing law. Victory for us in all the good fight of life depends on our cleaving to Him, and forsaking all other.

The divine motive, if we may so say, in leaving the unsubdued nations in the land, was to provide the means of proving Israel. Would it not have been better, since Israel was so weak, to secure for it an untempted period? Surely, it is a strange way of helping a man who has stumbled, to make provision that future occasions of stumbling shall lie in his path. But so the perfect wisdom which is perfect love ever ordains. There shall be no unnatural greenhouse shelter provided for weak plants. The liability to fall imposes the necessity of trial, but the trial does not impose the necessity of falling! The Devil tempts, because he hopes that we shall fall. God tries, in order that we may stand, and that our feet may be strengthened by the trial. 'I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for,—not without dust and heat.'

III. Respite and deliverance are described in Judges 2:16, 18.

The Revised Version has wisely substituted a simple 'and' for 'nevertheless' at the beginning of verse 16 . The latter word implies that the raising up of the judges was a reversal of what had gone before; 'and' implies that it was a continuation. And its use here is not merely an instance of inartificial Hebrew style, but carries the lesson that God's judgment and deliverance come from the same source, and are harmonious parts of one educational process. Nor is this thought negated by the statement in Judges 2:18 that **'it repented the Lord.'**

That strong metaphorical ascription to Him of human emotion simply implies that His action, which of necessity is the expression of His will, was changed. The will of the moment before had been to punish; the will of the next moment was to deliver, because their 'groaning' showed that the punishment had done its work. But the two wills were one in ultimate purpose, and the two sets of acts were equally and harmoniously parts of one design. The surgeon is carrying out one plan when he cuts deep into the quivering flesh, and when he sews up the wounds which he himself has made. God's deliverances are linked to His chastisements by 'and,' not by 'nevertheless.' We need not discuss that remarkable series of judges, who were champions rather than the peaceful functionaries whom we understand by the name. The vivid and stirring stories associated with their names make the bulk of this book, and move the most peace-loving among us like the sound of a trumpet. These wild warriors, with many a roughness and flaw in their characters, of whom no saintly traits are recorded, are yet treated in this section as directly inspired, and as continually upheld by God. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews claims some of them as heroes of 'faith.' And one chief lesson for us to learn, as we look on the strange garb in which in them faith has arrayed itself, and the strange work which it does in nerving hands to strike with sharp swords, is the oneness of the principle amid the most diverse manifestations, and the nobleness and strength which the sense of belonging to God and reliance on His help breathe into the rudest life and shed over the wildest scenes.

These judges were raised up indiscriminately from different tribes. They belonged to different ranks, and were of different occupations. One of them was a woman. The when and the where and the how of their appearance were incalculable. They authenticated their commission by no miracles except victory. For a time they started to the front, and then passed, leaving no successors, and founding no dynasty. They were an entirely unique order, plainly raised up by God, and drawing all their power from Him. Let us be thankful for the weaknesses, and even sins, recorded of some of them, and for the boldness with which the book traces the physical strength of a Samson, in spite of his wild animalism, and the bravery of a Jephthah, notwithstanding his savage vow and subsequent lapse into idolatry, to God's inspiration. Their faith was limited, and acted but imperfectly on their moral nature; but it was true faith, in the judgment of the Epistle to the Hebrews . Their work was rough and bloody, and they were rough tools, as such work needed; but it was God's work, and He had made them for His instruments, in the judgment of the Book of Judges. If we try to understand the reasons for such judgments, we may learn some useful lessons.

IV. A word only can be given to the last stage in the dreary round.

It comes back to the first. The religion of the delivered people lasted as long as the judge's life. When he died, it died. There is intense bitterness in the remark to that effect in Judges 2:19 . Did God then die with the judge? Was it Samson, or Jehovah, that had delivered? Why should the death of the instrument affect gratitude to the hand that gave it its edge? What a lurid light is thrown back on the unreality of the people's return to God by their swift relapse! If it needed a human hand to keep them from departing, had they ever come near? We may press the questions on ourselves; for none of us knows how much of our religion is owing to the influence of men upon us, or how much of it would drop away if we were left to ourselves.

This miserable repetition of the same weary round of sin, punishment, respite, and renewed sin, sets in a strong light the two great wonders of man's obstinate persistency in unfaithfulness and sin, and of God's unwearied persistency in discipline and patient forgiveness. His charity 'suffers long and is kind, is not easily provoked.' We can weary out all forbearance but His, which is endless. We weary Him indeed, but we do not weary Him out, with our iniquities. Man's sin stretches far; but God's patient love overlaps it. It lasts long; but God's love is eternal. It resists miracles of chastisement and love; but He does not cease His use of the rod and the staff. We can tire out all other forbearance, but not His. And however old and obstinate our rebellion, He waits to pardon, and smites but to heal.

Recreant Reuben Judges 5:16

'Why satest then among the sheepfolds, to hear the pipings for the flocks? At the watercourses of Reuben there were great searchings of heart.'— Judges 5:16 (R.V.)

I. The fight.

The warfare is ever repeated, though in new forms. In the highest form it is Christ versus the World, And that conflict must be fought out in our own souls first. Our religion should lead not only to accept and rely on what Christ does for us, but to do and dare for Christ. He has given Himself for us, and has thereby won the right to recruit us as His soldiers. We have to fight against ourselves to establish His reign over ourselves.

And then we have to give our personal service in the great battle for right and truth, for establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. There come national crises when every man must take up arms, but in Christ's kingdom that is a permanent obligation. There the nation is the army. Each subject is not only His servant but His soldier. The metaphor is well worn, but it carries everlasting truth, and to take it seriously to heart would revolutionize our lives.

II. The reason for standing aloof. Reuben 'abode in the sheepfolds to hear the pipings to the flocks.'

For Dan his ships, for Asher his havens held them apart. Reuben and the other trans-Jordanic tribes held loosely by the national unity. They had fallen in love with an easy life of pastoral wealth, they did not care to venture anything for the national good. It is still too true that like reasons are largely operative in producing like results. It is seldom from the wealthy and leisurely classes that the bold fighters for great social reformations are recruited. Times of commercial prosperity are usually times of stagnation in regard to these. Reuben lies lazily listening to the 'drowsy tinklings' that 'lull' not only 'the distant folds' but himself to inglorious slumber, while Zebulon and Naphtali are 'venturing their lives on the high places of the field.' The love of ease enervates many a one who should be doing valiantly for the 'Captain of his salvation.' The men of Reuben cared more for their sheep than for their nation. They were not minded to hazard these by listening to Deborah's call. And what their flocks were to that pastoral tribe, their business is to shoals of professing Christians. The love of the world depletes the ranks of Christ's army, and they are comparatively few who stick by the colours and are 'ready, aye ready' for service, as the brave motto of one English regiment has it. The lives of multitudes of so-called Christians are divided between strained energy in their business or trade or profession and self-regarding repose. No doubt competition is fierce, and, no doubt, a Christian man is bound, 'whatsoever his hand finds to do, to do it with his might,' and, no doubt, rest is as much a duty as work. But must not loyalty to Jesus have become tepid, if a servant of His has so little interest in the purposes for which He gave His life that he can hear no call to take active part in promoting them, nor find rest in the work by which he becomes a fellow-worker with his Lord?

III. The recreant's brave resolves which came to nothing.

The indignant question of our text is, as it were, framed between two clauses which contrast Reuben's indolent holding aloof with his valorous resolves. 'By the watercourses of Reuben there were great resolves of heart.' ... 'At the watercourses of Reuben there were great searchings of heart.' Resolves came first, but they were not immediately acted on, and as the Reubenites sate among the sheepfolds and felt the charm of their peaceful lives, the 'native hue of resolution was sicklied o'er,' and doubts of the wisdom of their gallant determination crept in, and their valour oozed out. And so for all their fine resolves, they had no share in the fight nor in the triumph.

So let us lay the warning of that example to heart, and if we are stirred by noble impulses to take our place in the ranks of the fighters for God, let us act on these at once. Emotions evaporate very soon if they are not used to drive the wheels of conduct. The Psalmist was wise who 'delayed not, but made haste and delayed not to keep God's commandments.' Many a man has over and over again resolved to serve God in some specific fashion, and to enlist in the 'effective force' of Christ's army, and has died without ever having done it.

IV. The question in the hour of victory. 'Why?'

Deborah asks it with vehement contempt.

That victory is certain. Are you to have part in it?

The question will be asked on the judgment day by Christ, and by our own consciences. 'And he was speechless.'

To be neutral is to be on the side of the enemy, against whom the 'stars fight,' and whom Kishon sweeps away.

'Who is on the Lord's side?'—Who?

All Things Are Yours
Judges 5:20

‘They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera.’— JUDGES 5:20

‘For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.’— JOB 5:23 .

These two poetical fragments present the same truth on opposite sides. The first of them comes from Deborah's triumphant chant. The singer identifies God with the cause of Israel, and declares that heaven itself fought against those who fought against God's people. There may be an allusion to the tempest which Jewish tradition tells us burst over the ranks of the enemy, or there may be some trace of ancient astrological notions, or the words may simply be an elevated way of saying that Heaven fought for Israel. The silent stars, as they swept on their paths through the sky, advanced like an avenging host embattled against the foes of Israel and of God. All things fight against the man who fights against God.

The other text gives the other side of the same truth. One of Job's friends is rubbing salt into his wounds by insisting on the commonplace, which needs a great many explanations and limitations before it can be accepted as true, that sin is the cause of sorrow, and that righteousness brings happiness; and in the course of trying to establish this heartless thesis to a heavy heart he breaks into a strain of the loftiest poetry in describing the blessedness of the righteous. All things, animate and inanimate, are upon his side. The ground, which Genesis tells us is ‘cursed for his sake,’ becomes his ally, and the very creatures whom man's sin set at enmity against him are at peace with him. All things are the friends and servants of him who is the friend and servant of God.

I. So, putting these two texts together, we have first the great conviction to which religion clings, that God being on our side all things are for us, and not against us.

Now, that is the standing faith of the Old Testament, which no doubt was more easily held in those days, because, if we accept its teaching, we shall recognise that Israel lived under a system in so far supernatural as that moral goodness and material prosperity were a great deal more closely and indissolubly connected than they are to-day. So, many a psalmist and many a prophet breaks out into apostrophes, warranted by the whole history of Israel, and declaring how blessed are the men who, apart from all other defences and sources of prosperity, have God for their help and Him for their hope.

But we are not to dismiss this conviction as belonging only to a system where the supernatural comes in, as it does in the Old Testament history, and as antiquated under a dispensation such as that in which we live. For the New Testament is not a whit behind the Old in insisting upon this truth. ‘All things work together for good to them that love God.’ ‘All things are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's.’ ‘Who is he that will harm you if ye be followers of that which is good?’ The New Testament is committed to the same conviction as that to which the faith of Old Testament saints clung as the sheet anchor of their lives.

That conviction cannot be struck out of the creed of any man, who believes in the God to whom the Old and the New Testament alike bear witness. For it rests upon this plain principle, that all this great universe is not a chaos, but a cosmos, that all these forces and creatures are not a rabble, but an ordered host.

What is the meaning of that great Name by which, from of old, God in His relations to the whole universe has been described—the ‘Lord of Hosts’? Who are the ‘hosts’ of which He is ‘the Lord,’ and to whom, as the centurion said, He says to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goeth; and to another, ‘Come!’ and he cometh; and to another, ‘Do this!’ and he doeth it? Who are ‘the hosts’? Not only these beings who are dimly revealed to us as rational and intelligent, who ‘excel in strength,’ because they ‘hearken to the voice of His word,’ but in the ranks of that great army are also embattled all the forces of the universe, and all things living or dead. ‘All are Thy servants; they continue this day’—angels, stars, creatures of earth—‘ according to Thine ordinances.’

And if it be true that the All is an ordered whole, which is obedient to the touch and to the will of that divine Commander, then all His servants must be on the same side, and cannot turn their arms against each other. As an old hymn says with another reference—

‘All the servants of our King

In heaven and earth are one,’

and none of them can injure, wound, or slay a fellow-servant. If all are travelling in the same direction there can be no collision. If all are enlisted under the same standard they can never turn their weapons against each other. If God sways all things, then all things which God sways must be on the side of the men that are on the side of God. ‘Thou shalt make a league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.’

II, Note the difficulties arising from experience, in the way of holding fast by this conviction of faith.

The grim facts of the world, seen from their lowest level, seem to shatter it to atoms. Talk about ‘the stars in their courses fighting’ for or against anybody! In one aspect it is superstition, in another aspect it is a dream and an illusion. The prose truth is that they shine down silent, pitiless, cold, indifferent, on battlefields or on peaceful homes; and the moonlight is as pure when it falls upon broken

hearts as when it falls upon glad ones. Nature is utterly indifferent to the moral or the religious character of its victims. It goes on its way unswerving and pitiless; and whether the man who stands in its path is good or bad matters not. If he gets into a typhoon he will be wrecked; if he tumbles over Niagara he will be drowned. And what becomes of all the talk about an embattled universe on the side of goodness, in the face of the plain facts of life—of nature's indifference, nature's cruelty which has led some men to believe in two sovereign powers, one beneficent and one malicious, and has led others to say, 'God is a superfluous hypothesis, and to believe in Him brings more enigmas than it solves,' and has led still others to say, 'Why, if there is a God, does it look as if either He was not all-powerful, or was not all-merciful?' Nature has but ambiguous evidence to give in support of this conviction.

Then, if we turn to what we call Providence and its mysteries, the very book of Job, from which my second text is taken, is one of the earliest attempts to grapple with the difficulty and to untie the knot; and I suppose everybody will admit that, whatever may be the solution which is suggested by that enigmatical book, the solution is by no means a complete one, though it is as complete as the state of religious knowledge at the time at which the book was written made possible to be attained. The seventy-third psalm shows that even in that old time when, as I have said, supernatural sanctions were introduced into the ordinary dealings of life, the difficulties that cropped up were great enough to bring a devout heart to a stand, and to make the Psalmist say, 'My feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped.' Providence, with all its depths and mysteries, often to our aching hearts seems in our own lives to contradict the conviction, and when we look out over the sadness of humanity, still more does it seem impossible for us to hold fast by the faith 'that all which we behold is full of blessings.'

I doubt not that there are many of ourselves whose lives, shadowed, darkened, hemmed in, perplexed, or made solitary for ever, seem to them to be hard to reconcile with this cheerful faith upon which I am trying to insist. Brethren, cling to it even in the darkness. Be sure of this, that amongst all our mercies there are none more truly merciful than those which come to us shrouded in dark garments, and in questionable shapes. Let nothing rob us of the confidence that 'all things work together for good.'

III. I come, lastly, to consider the higher form in which this conviction is true for ever.

I have said that the facts of life seem often to us, and are felt often by some of us, to shatter it to atoms; to riddle it through and through with shot. But, if we bring the Pattern-life to bear upon the illumination of all life, and if we learn the lessons of the Cradle and the Cross, and rise to the view of human life which emerges from the example of Jesus Christ, then we get back the old conviction, transfigured indeed, but firmer than ever. We have to alter the point of view. Everything always depends on the point of view. We have to alter one or two definitions. Definitions come first in geometry and in everything else. Get them right, and you will get your theorems and problems right.

So, looking at life in the light of Christ, we have to give new contents to the two words 'good' and 'evil,' and a new meaning to the two words 'for' and 'against.' And when we do that, then the difficulties straighten themselves out, and there are not any more knots, but all is plain; and the old faith of the Old Testament, which reposed very largely upon abnormal and extraordinary conditions of life, comes back in a still nobler form, as possible to be held by us amidst the commonplace of our daily existence.

For everything is my friend, is for me and not against me, that helps me nearer to God. To live for Him, to live with Him, to be conscious ever of communion with Himself, to feel the touch of His hand on my hand, and the pressure of His breast against mine, at all moments of my life, is my true and the highest good. And if it is true that the 'river of the water of life' which 'flows from the Throne of God' is the only draught that can ever satisfy the immortal thirst of a soul, then whatever drives me away from the cisterns and to the fountain, is on my side. Better to dwell in a 'dry and thirsty land, where no water is,' if it makes me long for the water that rises at the gate of the true Bethlehem—the house of bread—than to dwell in a land flowing with milk and honey, and well watered in every part! If the cup that I would fain lift to my lips has poison in it, or if its sweetness is making me lose my relish for the pure and tasteless river that flows from the Throne of God, there can be no truer friend than that calamity, as men call it, which strikes the cup from my hands, and shivers the glass before I have raised it to my lips. Everything is my friend that helps me towards God.

Everything is my friend that leads me to submission and obedience. The joy of life, and the perfection of human nature, is an absolutely submitted will, identified with the divine, both in regard to doing and to enduring. And whatever tends to make my will flexible, so that it corresponds to all the sinuosities, so to speak, of the divine will, and fits into all its bends and turns, is a blessing to me. Raw hides, stiff with dirt and blood, are put into a bath of bitter infusion of oak-bark. What for? For the same end as, when they are taken out, they are scraped with sharp steels,—that they may become flexible. When that is done the useless hide is worth something.

'Our wills are ours, we know not how;

Our wills are ours, to make them Thine.'

And whatever helps me to that is my friend.

Everything is a friend to the man that loves God, in a far sweeter and deeper sense than it can ever be to any other. Like a sudden

burst of sunshine upon a gloomy landscape, the light of union with God and friendship with Him flooding my daily life flashes it all up into brightness. The dark ribbon of the river that went creeping through the black corses, when the sun glints upon it, gleams up into links of silver, and the trees by its bank blaze out into green and gold. Brethren! 'Who follows pleasure follows pain'; who follows God finds pleasure following him. There can be no surer way to set the world against me than to try to make it for me, and to make it my all. They tell us that if you want to count those stars that 'like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid' make up the Pleiades, the surest way to see the greatest number of them is to look a little on one side of them. Look away from the joys and friendships of creatural things right up to God, and you will see these sparkling and dancing in the skies, as you never see them when you gaze at them only. Make them second and they are good and on your side. Make them first, and they will turn to be your enemies and fight against you.

This conviction will be established still more irrefragably and wonderfully in that future. Nothing lasts but goodness. 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.' To oppose it is like stretching a piece of pack-thread across the rails before the express comes; or putting up some thin wooden partition on the beach on one of the Western Hebrides, exposed to the whole roll of the Atlantic, which will be battered into ruin by the first winter's storm. Such is the end of all those who set themselves against God.

But there comes a future in which, as dim hints tell us, these texts of ours shall receive a fulfilment beyond that realised in the present condition of things. 'Then comes the statelier Eden back to man,' and in a renewed and redeemed earth 'they shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain'; and the ancient story will be repeated in higher form. The servants shall be like the Lord who, when He had conquered temptation, 'was with the wild beasts' that forgot their enmity, and 'angels ministered unto Him.' That scene in the desert may serve as a prophecy of the future when, under conditions of which we know nothing, all God's servants shall, even more markedly and manifestly than here, help each other; and every man that loves God will find a friend in every creature.

If we take Him for our Commander, and enlist ourselves in that embattled host, then all weathers will be good; 'stormy winds, fulfilling His word,' will blow us to our port; 'the wilderness will rejoice and blossom as the rose'; and the whole universe will be radiant with the light of His presence, and ringing with the music of His voice. But if we elect to join the other army—for there is another army, and men have wills that enable them to lift themselves up against God, the Ruler of all things—then the old story, from which my first text is taken, will fulfil itself again in regard to us—'the stars in their courses will fight against' us; and Sisera, lying stiff and stark, with Jael's tent-peg through his temples, and the swollen corpses being swirled down to the stormy sea by 'that ancient river, the river Kishon,' will be a grim parable of the end of the men that set themselves against God, and so have the universe against them. 'Choose ye this day whom ye will serve.'

Judges 5:51 Love Makes Suns

'Let them that love Him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.'— JUDGES v. 51

These are the closing words of Deborah, the great warrior-prophetess of Israel. They are in singular contrast with the tone of fierce enthusiasm for battle which throbs through the rest of the chant, and with its stern approval of the deed of Jael when she slew Sisera. Here, in its last notes, we have an anticipation of the highest and best truths of the Gospel. 'Let them that love Him be as the sun when he goeth forth in His might.' If we think of the singer, of the age and the occasion of the song, such purely spiritual, lofty words must seem very remarkable.

I. Note, then, first of all, how here we have a penetrating insight into the essence of religion.

This woman had been nourished upon a more or less perfect edition of what we know as the 'Mosaic Law.' Her faith had been fed by forms. She moved amidst a world full of the cruelties and dark conceptions of a mysterious divine power which torture heathenism apart from Christianity. She had forced her way through all that, and laid hold of the vital centre. And there, a way out amidst cruelty and murder, amidst the unutterable abominations and terrors of heathenism, in the centre of a rigid system of ceremonial and retaliation, the woman's heart spoke out, and taught her what was the great commandment. Prophetess she was, fighter she was, she could burst into triumphant approval of Jael's bloody deed; and yet with the same lips could speak this profound word. She had learned that 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind,' summed up all duty, and was the beginning of all good in man. That precept found an echo in her heart. Whatever part in her religious development may have been played by the externalisms of ceremonial, she had pierced to the core of religion. Advanced modern critics admit the antiquity of Deborah's song, and this closing stanza witnesses to the existence, at that early period, of a highly spiritual conception of the bond between God and man. Deborah had got as far, in a moment of exaltation and insight, as the teaching of the Apostle John, although her thought was strangely blended with the fierceness of the times in which she lived. Her approval of Jael's deed by no means warrants our approving it, but we may thankfully see that though she felt the fierce throbbing of desire for vengeance, she also felt this—'Them that love Him; that is the Alpha and the Omega of all.'

Our love must depend on our knowledge. Deborah's knowledge was a mere skeleton outline as compared with ours. Contrast the fervour of emotional affection that manifestly throbbed in her heart with the poor, cold pulsations which we dignify by the name of love, and the contrast may put us to shame. There is a religion of fear which dominates hundreds of professing Christians in this land of ours. There is a religion of duty, in which there is no delight, which has many adherents amongst us. There is a religion of form, which contents itself with the externals of Christianity, and that is the religion of many men and women in all our churches. And I may further say, there is a religion of faith, in its narrower and imperfect sense, which lays hold of and believes a body of Christian truth, and has never passed through faith into love. Not he who 'believes that God is,' and comes to Him with formal service and an alienated or negligent heart; not he who recognises the duty of worship, and discharges it because his conscience pricks him, but has no buoyancy within bearing him upwards towards the object of his love; not he who cowers before the dark shadow which some call God; but he who, knowing, trusts, and who, knowing and trusting 'the love which God hath to us,' pulses back the throbs of a recipient heart, and loves Him in return—he, and he only, is a worshipper. Let us learn the lesson that Deborah learnt below the palm-trees of Lapidoth, and if we want to understand what a religious man is, recognise that he is a man who loves God.

II. Further, note the grand conception of the character which such a love produces.

'Let them be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.' Think of the fierce Eastern sun, with 'sunbeams like swords,' that springs up from the East, and rushes to the zenith, and 'nothing is hid from the heat thereof'—a sun the like of which we, in our cloudy skies, never see nor feel, but which, to the Oriental, is the very emblem of splendour and of continuous, victorious power. There are two things here, radiance and energy, light and might.

'As the sun when he goeth forth in his strength.' Deborah was a 'prophetess,' and people say, 'What did she prophesy?' Well, she prophesied the heart of religion—as I have tried to show—in reference to its essence, and, as one sees by this phrase, in reference to its effects. What is her word but a partial anticipation of Christ's saying, 'Ye are the light of the world'; and of His disciple's utterance, 'Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light'?

It is too plain to need any talking about, that the direct tendency of what we venture to call love to God, meaning thereby the turning of the whole nature to Him, in aspiration, admiration, longing for likeness, and practical imitation, is to elevate, ennoble, and illuminate the whole character. It was said about one woman that 'to love her was an education.' That was exaggeration; but it is below the truth about God. The true way to refine and elevate and educate is to cultivate love to God. And when we get near to Him, and hold by Him, and are continually occupied with Him; when our being is one continual aspiration after union with Him, and we experience the glow and rapture included in the simple word 'love,' then it cannot but be that we shall be like Him.

That is what Paul meant when he said, 'Now are ye light in the Lord.' Union with Him illuminates. The true radiance of saintly character will come in the measure in which we are in fellowship with Jesus Christ. Deborah's astronomy was not her strong point. The sun shines by its own light. We are planets, and are darkness in ourselves, and it is only the reflection of the central sun that ever makes us look silvery white and radiant before men. But though it be derived, it is none the less our light, if it has passed into us, as it surely will, and if it streams out from us, as it no less surely will, in the measure in which love to God dominates our whole lives.

If that is so, dear brethren, is not the shortest and the surest way to have our faces shining like that of Moses when he came down from the mountain, or like Stephen's when he 'saw the heavens opened,' to keep near Jesus Christ? It is slow work to hammer bits of ore out of the rock with a chisel and a mallet. Throw the whole mass into the furnace, and the metal will come out separated from the dross. Get up the heat, and the light, which is the consequence of the heat, will take care of itself. 'In the Lord' ye shall be 'light.'

Is Deborah's aspiration fulfilled about me? Let each of us ask that. 'As the sun when he goeth forth in his strength'—would anybody say that about my Christian character? Why not? Only because the springs have run low within is the stream low through the meadows. Only because the love is cold is the light feeble.

There is another thought here. There is power in sunlight as well as radiance. On that truth the prophetess especially lays a finger; 'as the sun when he goeth forth in his strength.' She did not know what we know, that solar energy is the source of all energy on this earth, and that, just as in the deepest spiritual analysis 'there is no power but of God,' so in the material region we may say that the only force is the force of the sun, which not only stimulates vegetation and brings light and warmth—as the pre-scientific prophetess knew—but in a hundred other ways, unknown to her and known to modern science, is the author of all change, the parent of all life, and the reservoir of all energy.

So we come to this thought: The true love of God is no weak, sentimental thing, such as narrow and sectional piety has often represented it to be, but it is a power which will invigorate the whole of a man, and make him strong and manly as well as gentle and gracious; being, indeed, the parent of all the so-called heroic and of all the so-called saintly virtues.

The sun 'goeth forth in his strength,' rushing through the heavens to the zenith. As one of the other editions of this metaphor in the

Old Testament has it, 'The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more until the noontide of the day.' That light, indeed, declines, but that fact does not come into view in the metaphor of the progressive growth towards perfection of the man in whom is the all-conquering might of the true love of Jesus Christ.

Note the context of these words of our text, which, I said, presents so singular a contrast to them. It is a strange thing that so fierce a battle-chant should at the end settle down into such a sweet swan-song as this. It is a strange thing that in the same soul there should throb the delight in battle and almost the delight in murder, and these lofty thoughts. But let us learn the lesson that true love to God means hearty hatred of God's enemy, and that it will always have to be militant and sometimes stern and what people call fierce. Amidst the amenities and sentimentalities of modern life there is much necessity for remembering that the Apostle of love was a 'son of thunder,' and that it was the lips which summoned Israel to the fight, and chanted hymns of triumph over the corpses borne down by the rushing Kishon, which also said: 'Let them that love Him be as the sun when he shineth forth in his strength.' If you love God, you will surely be a strong man as well as an emotional and affectionate Christian.

That energy is to be continuous and progressive. The sun that Deborah saw day by day spring from his station in the east, and climb to his height in the heavens, and ray down his beams, has been doing that for millions of years, and it will probably keep doing it for uncounted periods still. And so the Christian man, with continuity unbroken and progressive brilliance and power, should shine 'more and more till the unsetting noontide of the day.'

III. That brings me to the last thought, which passes beyond the limits of the prophetic vision. Here is a prophecy of which the utterer was unaware.

There is a contrast drawn in the words of our text and in those immediately preceding. "So," says Deborah, after the fierce description of the slaughter of Sisera—"So let all Thine enemies perish, O Lord! but let them that love Thee be as the sun when he shineth in his strength.' She contrasts the transiency of the lives that pit themselves against God with the perpetuity that belongs to those which are in harmony with Him. The truth goes further than she probably knew; certainly further than she was thinking when she chanted these words. Let us widen them by other words which use the same metaphor, and say, 'they that be wise'—that is a shallower word than 'them that love Thee'—"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.' Let us widen and deepen them by sacred words still; for Jesus Christ laid hold of this old metaphor, and said, describing the time when all the enemies shall have perished, and the weeds have been flung out of the vineyard, 'Then shall the righteous shine forth like the sun, in the Kingdom of their Father,' with a brilliancy that will fill heaven with new splendours, bright beyond all that we see here amidst the thick atmosphere and mists and clouds of the present life!

Nor need we stop even there, for Jesus Christ not only laid hold of this metaphor in order to describe the eternal glory of the children of the Kingdom, but at the last time that human eyes on earth saw Him, the glorified Man Christ Jesus is thus described: 'His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.' Love always tends to likeness; and love to Christ will bring conformity with Him. The perfect love of heaven will issue in perfect and perpetual assimilation to Him. Science tells us that the light of the sun probably comes from its contraction; and that that process of contraction will go on until, at some point within the bounds of time, though far beyond the measure of our calculations, the sun himself shall die, the ineffectual beams will be paled, and there will be a black orb, with neither life nor light nor power. And then, then, and after that for ever, 'they that love Him' shall continue to be as that dead sun once was, when he went forth in his hot might.

Judges 6:24 Gideon's Altar

**'Then Gideon built an altar there unto the Lord, and called it Jehovah-shalom [God is peace].'—
JUDGES vi. 24 .**

I need not tell over again, less vividly, the picturesque story in this chapter, of the simple husbandman up in the hills, engaged furtively in threshing out a little wheat in some hollow in the rock where he might hide it from the keen eyes of the oppressors; and of how the angel of the Lord, unrecognised at first, appeared to him; and gradually there dawned upon his mind the suspicion of who He was who spoke. Then follow the offering, the discovery by fire, the shrinking of the man from contact with the divine, the wonderfully tranquillizing and condescending assurance, cast into the form of the ordinary salutation of domestic life: 'And the Lord said unto him Peace be unto thee!'—as any man might have said to any other—"fear not! thou shalt not die.' Then Gideon piles up the unhewn stones on the hillside into a rude altar, apparently not for the purpose of offering sacrifice, but for a monument, to which is given this strange name, strange upon such warrior lips, and strange in contemplation of the fierce conflict into which he was immediately to plunge, 'the Lord is peace.'

How I think that this name, imposed for such a reason and under such circumstances, may teach us a good many things.

I. The first thing that it seems to me to suggest is the great discovery which this man had made, and in the rapture of which he named his altar,—that the sight of God is not death, but life and peace.

Gideon was a plain, rude man, with no very deep religious experience. Apparently up to the moment of this vision he had been contentedly tolerating the idolatrous practices which had spread over all the country. He had heard of 'Jehovah.' It was a name, a tradition, which his fathers had told him. That was all that he knew of the God of Israel. Into this hearsay religion, as in a flash, while Gideon is busy about his threshing floor, thinking of his wheat or of the misery of his nation, there comes, all at once, this crushing conviction,—'the hearsay God is beside you, speaking to you! You have personal relations to Him, He is nearer you than any human being is, He is no mere Name, here He stands!'

And whenever the lightning edge of a conviction like that cuts its way through the formalisms and traditionalisms and hearsay repetitions of conventional religion, then there comes what came to Gideon, the swift thought, 'And if this be true, if I really do touch, and am touched by, that living Person whose name is Jehovah, what is to become of me? Shall I not shrivel up when His fiery finger is laid upon me? I have seen Him face to face, and I must die.'

I believe that, in the case of the vast majority of men, the first living, real apprehension of a real, living God is accompanied with a shock, and has mingled with it something of awe, and even of terror. Were there no sin there would be no fear, and pure hearts would open in silent blessedness and yield their sweetest fragrance of love and adoration, when shone on by Him, as flowers do to the kiss of the sunbeams. But, taking into account the sad and universal fact of sin, it is inevitable that men should shrink from the Light which reveals their evil, and that the consciousness of God's presence should strike a chill. It is sad that it should be so. But it is sadder still when it is not so, but when, as is sometimes the case, the sight of God produces no sense of sin, and no consciousness of discord, or foreboding of judgment. For, only through that valley of the shadow of death lies the path to the happy confidence of peace with God, and unless there has been trembling at the beginning, there will be no firm and reasonable trust afterwards.

For Gideon's terror opened the way for the gracious proclamation, which would have been needless but for it—

'Peace be unto thee; fear not, thou shalt not die.'

The sight of God passes from being a fear to a joy, from being a fountain of death to a spring of life, Terror is turned to tranquil trust. The narrow and rough path of conscious unworthiness leads to the large place of happy peace. The divine word fits Gideon's condition, and corresponds to his then deepest necessity; and so he drinks it in as the thirsty ground drinks in the water; and in the rapture of the discovery that the Name, that had come down from his fathers to him, was the Name of a real Person, with whom he stood in real relationships, and those of simple friendship and pure amity, he piles up the rough stones of the place, and makes the name of his altar the echo of the divine voice. It is as if he had said with rapture of surprise, 'Then Jehovah is peace; which I never dreamed of before.'

Dear friends, do you know anything of such an experience? Can you build your altar, and give it this same name? Can you write upon the memorial of your experiences, 'The Lord is my peace'? Have you passed from hearsay into personal contact? Can you say, 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee'? Do you know the further experience expressed in the subsequent words of the same quotation: 'Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes'? And have you passed out of that stormy ocean of terror and self-condemnation into the quiet haven of trust in Him in whom we have peace with God, where your little boat lies quiet, moored for ever to the Rock of Ages, to 'Jehovah, who is Peace'?

In connection with this rapturous discovery, and to Gideon strange new thought, we may gather the lesson that peace with God will give peace in all the soul. The 'peace with God' will pass into a wider thing, the 'peace of God.' There is tranquillity in trust. There is rest in submission. There is repose in satisfied desires. When we live near Him, and have ceased from our own works, and let Him take control of us and direct us in all our ways, then the storms abate. The things that disturb us are by no means so much external as inward; and there is a charm and a fascination in the thought, 'the Lord is peace,' which stills the inward tempest, and makes us quiet, waiting upon His will and drawing in His grace. The secret of rest is to cease from self, from self as guide, from self as aim, from self as safety. And when self-will is cast out, and self-dependence is overcome, and self-reliance is sublimed into hanging upon God's hand, and when He, not mine own inclination, is my Director, and the Arbiter of my fate, then all the fever of unrest is swept wholly out of my heart, and there is nothing left in it on which the gnawing tooth of anxiety or of care can prey. God being my peace, and I yielding myself to Him, 'in quietness and confidence' is my 'strength.' 'Thou shalt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed upon Thee, because he trusteth in Thee.'

II. We may look upon this inscription from another point of view, as suggesting the thought that God's peace is the best preparation for, and may be experienced in the midst of, the intensest conflict.

Remember what the purpose of this vision was,—to raise up a man to fight an almost desperate fight, no metaphorical war, but one

with real sharp swords, against real strong enemies. The first blow in the campaign was to be struck that night. Gideon was being summoned by the vision, to long years of hardship and bitter warfare, and his preparation for the conflict consisted largely in the revelation to his inmost spirit that 'Jehovah is peace.' We might rather have looked for a manifestation of the divine nature as ready to go forth to battle with the raw levies of timid peasants. We should have expected the thought which inspired their captain to have been 'The Lord is a man of war,' rather than 'The Lord is peace.' But it is not so—and therein lies the deep truth that the peace of God is the best preparation for strife. It gives courage, it leaves the heart at leisure to fling all its power into the conflict, it inspires with the consciousness of a divine ally. As Paul puts it, in his picture of the fully-armed Christian soldier, the feet are 'shod with the preparedness of alacrity which is produced by the gospel of peace.' That will make us 'ready, aye ready' for the roughest march, and enable us to stand firm against the most violent charges of the enemy. There is no such preparation for the conflict of life, whether it be waged against our own inward evil, or against opposing forces without, as to have deep within the soul the settled and substantial peace of God. If we are to come out of the battle with victory sitting on our helmets, we must go into it with the Dove of God brooding in our hearts. As the Lord said to Gideon, 'Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel, ... have not I sent thee?'

But, besides this thought that the knowledge of Jehovah as peace fits us for strife, that hastily-reared altar with its seemingly inappropriate name, may remind us that it is possible, in the midst of the deadliest hand-to-hand grip with evil, and whilst fighting the 'good fight of faith' with the most entire self-surrender to the divine will, to bear within us, deeper than all the surface strife, that inward tranquillity which knows no disturbance, though the outward life is agitated by fierce storms. Deep in the centre of the ocean the waters lie quiet, though the wildest tempests are raging above, and the fiercest currents running. Over the tortured and plunging waters of the cataract there lies unmoving, though its particles are in perpetual flux, the bow of promise and of peace. So over all the rush and thunder of life there may stretch, radiant and many-coloured, and dyed with beauty by the very sun himself, the abiding bow of beauty, the emblem and the reality of the divine tranquillity. The Christian life is continual warfare, but in it all, 'the peace of God which passeth understanding' may 'garrison our hearts and minds.' In the inmost keep of the castle, though the storm of war may be breaking against the walls, there will be a quiet chamber where no noise of the archers can penetrate, and the shouts of the fight are never heard. Let us seek to live in the 'secret place of the Most High'; and in still communion with Him, keep our inmost souls in quiet, while we bravely front difficulties and enemies. You are to be God's warriors; see to it that on every battlefield there stands the altar 'Jehovah Shalom.'

III. Lastly, we may draw yet another lesson, and say that that altar, with its significant inscription, expressed the aim of the conflict and the hope which sustains in the fight.

Gideon was fighting for peace, and what he desired was that victory should bring tranquillity. The hope which beckoned him on, when he flung himself into his else desperate enterprise, was that God would so prosper his work that the swords might be beaten into ploughshares, and the spears into pruning hooks. Which things may stand as an allegory, and suggest to us that the Christian warfare, whilst it rests upon, and is prompted by, the revelation of God who is peace, aims in all its blows, at the conquering of that sure and settled peace which shall be broken by no rebellious outbursts of self-will, nor by any risings of passions and desires. The aim of our warfare should ever be that the peace of God may be throned in our hearts, and sit there a gentle queen. The true tranquillity of the blessed life is the prize of conflict. David, 'the man of war from his youth,' prepares the throne for Solomon, in whose reign no alarms of war are heard. If you would enter into peace, you must fight your way to it, and every step of the road must be a battle. The land of peace is won by the good fight of faith.

But Gideon's altar not only expressed his purpose in his taking up arms, but his confidence of accomplishing it, based upon the assurance that the Lord would give peace. It was a trophy erected before the fight, and built, not by arrogant presumption or frivolous underestimate of the enemy's strength, but by humble reliance on the power of that Lord who had promised His presence, and had assured triumph. So the hope that named this altar was the hope that war meant victory, and that victory would bring peace. That hope should animate every Christian soldier. Across the dust of the conflict, the fair vision of unbroken and eternal peace should gleam before each of us, and we should renew fainting strength and revive drooping courage by many a wistful gaze.

We may realise that hope in large measure here. But its fulfilment is reserved for the land of peace which we enter by the last conflict with the last enemy.

Every Christian man's gravestone is an altar on which is written 'Our God is peace'; in token that the warrior has passed into the land where 'violence shall no more be heard, wasting, nor destruction within its borders,' but all shall be deep repose, and the unarmed, because unattacked, peace of tranquil communion with, and likeness to, 'Jehovah our Peace.' (See related resources - [Jehovah Shalom -Pt1: The LORD our Peace](#) ; Jehovah Shalom - Pt2)

So, dear brethren, let us pass from tradition and hearsay into personal intercourse with God, and from shrinking and doubt into the sunshine of the conviction that He is our peace. And then, with His tranquility in our hearts let us go out, the elect apostles of the peace of God, and fight for Him, after the pattern of the Captain of our salvation, who had to conquer peace through conflict; and was 'first of all King of Righteousness, and after that also King of Peace.'

Judges 6:37 Gideon's Fleece

'Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that Thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as Thou hast said.'—
JUDGES vi. 37

The decisive moment had come when Gideon, with his hastily gathered raw levies, was about to plunge down to the plain to face immensely superior forces trained to warfare. No wonder that the equally untrained leader's heart beat faster. Many a soldier, who will be steadfastly brave in the actual shock of battle, has tremors and throbbings on its eve. Gideon's hand shook a little as he drew his sword.

I. Gideon's request.

His petition for a sign was not the voice of unbelief or of doubt or of presumption, but in it spoke real, though struggling faith, seeking to be confirmed. Therefore it was not regarded by God as a sin. When a 'wicked and adulterous generation asked for a sign,' no sign was given it, but when faith asks for one to help it to grasp God's hand, and to go on His warfare in His strength and as His instrument, it does not ask in vain.

Gideon's prayer was wrapped, as it were, in an enfolding promise, for it is preceded and followed by the quotation of words of the Angel of the Lord who had 'looked on him,' and said, 'Go in this thy might and save Israel from the hand of Midian: have not I sent thee?' Prayers that begin and end with 'as Thou hast spoken' are not likely to be repulsed.

II. God's answer.

God wonderfully allows Gideon to dictate the nature of the sign. He stoops to work it both ways, backwards and forwards, as it were. First the fleece is to be wet and the ground to be dry, then the fleece is to be dry and the ground wet. Miracle was a necessary accompaniment of revelation in those early days, as picture-books are of childhood. But, though we are far enough from being 'men' in Christ, yet we have not the same need for 'childish things' as Gideon and his contemporaries had. We have Christ and the Spirit, and so have a 'word made more sure' than to require signs. But still it is true that the same gracious willingness to help a tremulous faith, which carries its tremulousness to God in prayer, moves the Father's heart to-day, and that to such petitions the answer is given even before they are offered: 'Ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.' No sign that eyes can see is given, but inward whispers speak assurance and communicate the assurance which they speak.

III. The meaning of the sign.

Many explanations have been offered. The main point is that the fleece is to be made different from the soil around it. It is to be a proof of God's power to endow with characteristics not derived from, and resulting in qualities unlike, the surroundings.

Gideon had no thought of any significance beyond that. But we may allowably let the Scripture usage of the symbol of dew influence our reading into the symbol a deeper meaning than it bore to him.

God makes the fleece wet with dew, while all the threshing-floor is dry. Dew is the symbol of divine grace, of the silently formed moisture which, coming from no apparent source, freshens by night the wilted plants, and hangs in myriad drops, that twinkle into green and gold as the early sunshine strikes them, on the humblest twig. That grace is plainly not a natural product nor to be accounted for by environment. The dew of the Spirit, which God and God only, can give, can freshen our worn and drooping souls, can give joy in sorrow, can keep us from being touched by surrounding evils, and from being parched by surrounding drought, can silently 'distil' its supplies of strength according to our need into our else dry hearts.

The wet fleece on the dry ground was not only a revelation of God's power, but may be taken as a pattern of what God's soldiers must ever be. A prophet long after Gideon said: 'The remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples as dew from the Lord,' bringing to others the grace which they have received that they may diffuse it, and turning the dry and thirsty land where no water is into fertility, and the 'parched ground' into a 'pool.'

We have said that the main point of Gideon's petition was that the fleece should be made unlike the threshing-floor, and that that unlikeness, which could obviously not be naturally brought about, was to be to him the sure token that God was at work to produce it. The strongest demonstration that the Church can give the world of its really being God's Church is its unlikeness to the world. If it is wet with divine dew when all the threshing-floor is dry, and if, when all the floor is drenched with poisonous miasma, it is dry from the diffused and clinging malaria, the world will take knowledge of it, and some souls be set to ask how this unlikeness comes. When Haman has to say: 'There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples ... and their laws are diverse from those of every people,' he may meditate murder, but 'many from among the people of the land' will join their ranks.

Gideon may or may not have thought of the fleece as a symbol of his little host, but we may learn from it the old lesson, 'Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds.'

Judges 7:1-8 Fit Though Few '

Gideon is the noblest of the judges. Courage, constancy, and caution are strongly marked in his character. The youngest son of an obscure family in a small tribe, he humbly shrinks from the task imposed on him,—not from cowardice or indolence, but from conscious weakness. Men who are worthy to do such work as his are never forward to begin it, nor backward in it when they are sure that it is God's will. He began his war against Midian by warring against Baal, whose worship had brought the oppressor. If any thorough deliverance from the misery which departure from God has wrought is to be effected, we must destroy the idols before we attack the spoilers. Cast out sin, and you cast out sorrow. So he first earns his new name of Jerubbaal ('Let Baal plead'), and is known as Baal's antagonist, before he blows the trumpet of revolt. The name is an omen of victory. The hand that had smitten the idol, and had not been withered, would smite Midian. Therefore that new name is used in this chapter, which tells of the preparations for the fight and its triumphant issue. From his home among the hills, he had sent the fiery cross to the three northern tribes, who had been the mainstay of Deborah's victory, and who now rallied around Gideon to the number of thirty-two thousand. The narrative shows us the two armies confronting each other on the opposite slopes of the valley of Jezreel, where it begins to dip steeply towards the Jordan. Gideon and his men are on the south side of the valley, above the fountain of Harod, or 'Trembling,' apparently so called from the confessed terror which thinned his army. The word 'is afraid,' in verse 3, comes from the same root. On the other side of the glen, not far from the site of the Philistine camp on the day of Saul's last defeat, lay the far-stretching camp of the invaders, outnumbering Israel by four to one. For seven years these Midianite marauders had paralysed Israel, and year by year had swarmed up this valley from the eastern desert, and thence by the great plain had penetrated into every corner of the land, as far south as Gaza, devouring like locusts. It is the same easy route by which, to this day, the Bedouin find their way into Palestine, whenever the weak Turkish Government is a little weaker or more corrupt than usual. Apparently, the Midianites were on their homeward march, laden with spoil, and very contemptuous of the small force across the valley, who, on their part, had not shaken off their terror of the fierce nomads who had used them as they pleased for seven years.

I. Note, as the first lesson taught here, the divinely appointed disproportion between means and end, and its purpose.

Many an Israelite would look across to the long lines of black tents, and think, 'We are too few for our task'; but to God's eye they were too many, and the first necessity was to weed them out. The numbers must be so reduced that the victory shall be unmistakably God's, not theirs. The same sort of procedure, and for the same reason, runs through all God's dealings. It is illustrated in a hundred Scripture instances, and is stated most plainly by Paul in his triumphant eloquence. He revels in telling how foolish, weak, base things, that are no things in the world's estimate, have been chosen to cover with shame wise, strong, honoured things, which seem to be somewhat; and he gives the same reason as our lesson does, 'that no flesh should glory in His presence.' Eleven poor men on one side, and all the world on the other, made fearful odds. The more unevenly matched are the respective forces, the more plainly does the victory of the weaker demand for its explanation the intervention of God. The old sneer, that 'Providence is always on the side of the strongest battalions,' is an audacious misreading of history, and is the very opposite of the truth. It is the weak battalions which win in the long run, for the history of every good cause is the same. First, it kindles a fire in the hearts of two or three nobodies, who are burned in earlier times, and laughed at as fools, fanatics, impracticable dreamers, in later ages, but whose convictions grow till, one day, the world wakes up to find that everybody believes them, and then it 'builds the tombs of the prophets.'

Why should God desire that there shall be no mistake as to who wins the battle? The answer may very easily be so given as to make what is really a token of His love become an unlovely and repellent trait in His character. It is not eagerness for praise that moves Him, but longing that men may have the blessedness of recognising His hand fighting for them. It is for Israel's sake that He is so solicitous to deliver them from the delusion of their having won the victory. It is because He loves us and would fain have us made restful, confident, and strong, in the assurance of His fighting for us, that He takes pains so to order the history of His Church in the world, that it is one long attestation of the omnipotence of weakness when His power flows through it. To say 'Mine own hand hath saved me,' is to lose unspeakable peace and blessing; to say 'Not I, but the grace of God in me,' is to be serene and of good cheer in the face of outnumbering foes, and sure of victory in all conflicts. Therefore God is careful to save us from self-gratulation and self-confidence.

One lesson we may learn from this thinning of the ranks; namely, that we need not be anxious to count heads, when we are sure that we are doing His work, nor even be afraid of being in a minority. Minorities are generally right when they are the apostles of new thoughts, though the minorities which cleave to some old fossil are ordinarily wrong. The prophet and his man were alone and ringed around with enemies, when he said, 'They that be with us are more than they that be with them'; and yet he was right, for the

mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire. Let us be sure that we are on God's side, and then let us not mind how few are in the ranks with us, nor be afraid, though the far-extended front of the enemy threatens to curl around our flanks and enclose us. The three hundred heroes had God with them, and that was enough.

II. Note the self-applied test of courage which swept away so much chaff.

According to Deuteronomy xx. 8, the standing enactment was that such a proclamation as that in verse 3 should precede every battle. Much difficulty has been raised about the mention of Mount Gilead here, as the only Mount Gilead otherwise mentioned in Scripture lay to the east of Jordan. But perhaps the simplest solution is the true one, -that there was another hilly region so named on the western side. The map of the Palestine Exploration Fund attaches the name to the northern slopes of the western end of Gilboa, where Gideon was now encamped, and that is probably right. Be that as it may, the effect of the proclamation was startling. Two-thirds of the army melted away. No doubt, many who had flocked to Gideon's standard felt their valour oozing out at their finger ends, when they came close to the enemy, and saw their long array across the valley. It must have required some courage to confess being afraid, but the cowards were numerous enough to keep each other in countenance. Two out of three were panic-struck. I wonder if the proportion would be less in Christ's army to-day, if professing Christians were as frank as Gideon's men?

Why were the 'fearful' dismissed? Because fear is contagious; and, in undisciplined armies like Gideon's, panic, once started, spreads swiftly, and becomes frenzied confusion. The same thing is true in the work of the Church to-day. Who that has had much to do with guiding its operations has not groaned over the dead weight of the timid and sluggish souls, who always see difficulties and never the way to get over them? And who that has had to lead a company of Christian men has not often been ready to wish that he could sound out Gideon's proclamation, and bid the 'fearful and afraid' take away the chilling encumbrance of their presence, and leave him with thinned ranks of trusty men? Cowardice, dressed up as cautious prudence, weakens the efficiency of every regiment in Christ's army.

Another reason for getting rid of the fearful is that fear is the opposite of faith, and that therefore, where it is uppermost, the door by which God's power can enter to strengthen is closed. Not that faith must be free of all admixture of fear, but that it must subdue fear, if a man is to be God's warrior, fighting in His strength. Many a tremor would rock the hearts of the ten thousand who remained, but they so controlled their terror that it did not overcome their faith. We do not need, for our efficiency in Christ's service, complete exemption from fear, but we do need to make the psalmist's resolve ours: 'I will trust, and not be afraid.' Terror shuts the door against the entrance of the grace which makes us conquerors, and so fulfils its own forebodings; faith opens the door, and so fulfils its own confidences.

III. Note the final test. God required but few men, but He required that these should be fit. The first test had sifted out the brave and willing. The liquor was none the less, though so much froth had been blown off. As Thomas Fuller says, there were 'fewer persons, but not fewer men,' after the poltroons had disappeared. The second test, 'a purgatory of water,' as the same wise and witty author calls it, was still more stringent. The dwindled ranks were led down from their camp on the slopes to the fountain and brook which lay in the valley near the Midianites' camp. Gideon alone seems to have known that a test was to be applied there; but he did not know what it was to be till they reached the spring, and the soldiers did not know that they were determining their fate when they drank. The two ways of drinking clearly indicated a difference in the men. Those who glued their lips to the stream and swilled till they were full, were plainly more self-indulgent, less engrossed with their work, less patient of fatigue and thirst, than those who caught up enough in their curved palms to moisten their lips without stopping in their stride or breaking rank. The former test was self-applied, and consciously so. This is no less self-applied, though unconsciously. God shuts out no man from His army, but men shut themselves out; sometimes knowingly, by avowed disinclination for the warfare, sometimes unknowingly, by self-indulgent habits, which proclaim their unfitness.

The great lesson taught here is that self-restraint in the use of the world's goods is essential to all true Christian warfare. There are two ways of looking at and partaking of these. We may either 'drink for strength' or 'for drunkenness'. Life is to some men first a place for strenuous endeavour, and only secondly a place of refreshment. Such think of duty first and of water afterwards. To them, all the innocent joys and pleasures of the natural life are as brooks by the way, of which Christ's soldier should drink, mainly that he may be re-invigorated for conflict. There are others whose conception of life is a scene of enjoyment, for which work is unfortunately a necessary but disagreeable preliminary. One does not often see such a character in its pure perfection of sensualism; but plenty of approximations to it are visible, and ugly sights they are. The roots of it are in us all; and it cannot be too strongly insisted on that, unless it be subdued, we cannot enlist in Christ's army, and shall never be counted worthy to be His instruments. Such self-restraint is especially needful to be earnestly inculcated on young men and women, to whom life is opening as if it were a garden of delight, whose passions are strong, whose sense is keen, whose experience is slender, and to whom all earth's joys appeal more strongly than they do to those who have drunk of the cup, and know how bitter is its sediment. It is especially needful to be pealed into the ears of a generation like ours, in which senseless luxury, the result of wealth which has increased faster than the power of rightly using it, has attained such enormous proportions, and is threatening, in commercial communities especially, to drown all noble aspirations, and Spartan simplicity, and Christian self-devotion, in its muddy flood. Surely never was Gideon's test more wanted for

the army of the Lord of hosts than it is to-day.

Such self-restraint gives double sweetness to enjoyments, which, when partaken of more freely, pall on the jaded palate. 'The full soul loatheth a honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet.' The senses are kept fine-edged, and the rare holidays are sweeter because they are rare. The most refined prudence of the mere sensualist would prescribe the same regimen as the Christian moralist does. But from how different a motive! Christ calls for self-restraint that we may be fit organs for His power, and bids us endure hardness that we may be good soldiers of His. If we know anything of the true sweetness of His fellowship and service, it will not be hard to drink sparingly of earthly fountains, when we have the river of His pleasures to drink from; nor will it be painful sacrifice to cast away imitation jewels, in order to clasp in our hands the true riches of His love and imparted life.

Judges 7:13-23 A Battle Without a Sword

To reduce thirty-two thousand to three hundred was a strange way of preparing for a fight; and, no doubt, the handful left felt some sinking of their courage when they looked on their own small number and then on the widespread Midianite host. Gideon, too, would need heartening. So the first thing to be noted is the encouragement given him. God strengthens faith when it needs strengthening, and He has many ways of doing so. Note that Gideon's visit to the Midianite camp was on 'the same night' on which his little band was left alone after the ordeal by water. How punctually to meet our need, when it begins to be felt, does God's help come! It was by God's command that he undertook the daring adventure of stealing down to the camp. We can fancy how silently he and Phurah crept down the hillside, and, with hushed breath and wary steps, lest they should stumble on and wake some sleeper, or even rouse some tethered camel, picked their way among the tents. But they had God's command and promise, and these make men brave, and turn what would else be foolhardy into prudence. He put his ear to the black camel's-hair wall of one tent, and heard what his faith could not but recognise as God's message to him.

The soldier's dream was just such as such a man would dream in such circumstances. A round loaf of barley (the commonest kind of bread) was dreamed of as rolling down from a height and upsetting 'the tent.' The use of the definite article seems to point to some particular tent, perhaps simply the one in which the dreamer lay, or perhaps the general's; but the noun may be used as a collective, and what is meant may be that the loaf went through the camp, overturning all the tents in its way. The interpretation needed no Daniel, but the immediate explanation given, shows not only the transparency of the symbol, but the dread in the Midianite ranks of Gideon's prowess. A nameless awe, which goes far to produce the defeat it dreads, was beginning to creep over them. It finds utterance both in the dream and in its translation. The tiny loaf worked effects disproportioned to its size. A rock thundering down the hillside might have mass and momentum enough to level a line of tents, but one poor loaf to do it! Some mightier than human hand must have set it going on its career. So the soldier interprets that God had delivered the army into Gideon's hand.

This dream suggests two or three considerations. In several instances we find God speaking to those outside Israel by dreams; for example, to Pharaoh and his two officers, Nebuchadnezzar, Pilate's wife. It is the lowest form of divine communication, and, like other lower forms, is not to be looked for when the higher teaching of the Spirit of Christ is open to us all.

Again, while both dream and interpretation might be accounted for on simply natural grounds, a deeper insight into the so-called 'natural' brings us to see it as all penetrated by the operations of the ever-present God. And the coincidences which brought Gideon to just that tent among the thousands along the valley at just the moment when the two startled sleepers were talking, might well strike Gideon, as they did, as being God's own fulfilment of the promise that 'what they say' would strengthen his hands for the attack (v. 11).

Further, Gideon had already had the sign of the fleece and the dew; but God does not disdain to let him have an additional encouragement, and to let him draw confirmation of his own token from the talk of two Midianites. Faith may be buttressed by men's words, albeit its only foundation is God's.

Gideon has a place in the muster-roll of heroes of faith in Hebrews xi. , and his whole conduct in this incident proves his right to stand there. 'He worshipped,' for his soul went out in trust to God, whose voice he heard through the two Midianites, and bowed in thankfulness and submissive obedience. There could be no outward worship there, with an army of sleepers close by, but the silent uplifting of confidence and desire reaches God and strengthens the man. So he went back with new assurance of victory, and roused his sleeping band.

Mark his words as another token of his faith. The Midianite interpreter had said, 'God has delivered'; Gideon says, 'The Lord has delivered.' The former name is the more general, and is natural on the lips of a heathen; the latter is the covenant name, and to use it implies reliance on the Jehovah revealed by His acts to Israel. The Midianite had said that the host was delivered into Gideon's

hand; he says that it is delivered into the hands of the three hundred, suppressing himself and honouring them. God's soldiers must be willing to 'esteem others better than themselves,' and to fight for God's glory, not their own. The Midianite had said, 'This is ... the sword of Gideon'; he bid his men cry 'the sword of the Lord, and of Gideon.' It was God's cause for which they were contending, not his; and yet it was his, inasmuch as he was God's instrument. 'Excellent mixture,' says Thomas Fuller, 'both joined together; admirable method, God put in the first place. Where divine blessing leads up the van, and man's valour brings up the battle, must not victory needs follow in the rear?'

Gideon does not seem to have been divinely directed to the stratagem by which the Midianites were thrown into panic. He had been promised victory, but that does not lead him to idle waiting for fulfilment of the promise. 'To wait for God's performance in doing nothing is to abuse that divine providence, which will so work that it will not allow us to idle' (Bishop Hall). True faith will wisely adopt means to reach promised ends, and, having used brain and hand as if all depended on ourselves, will look to Him, as if nothing depended on us, but all on Him.

There was strong faith as well as daring and skilful generalship in leading down the three hundred, with no weapons but trumpets and pitchers, to close quarters with an armed enemy so superior in numbers. And did it not need some faith, too, not only in Gideon but in God, on the part of his band, to plunge down the hill on such an errand, each man with both his hands full, and so unable to strike a blow? The other three hundred at Thermopylae have been wept over and sung; were not these three hundred as true heroes? Let us not count heads when we are called on to take God's side. His soldiers are always in the minority, but, if He is reckoned in, the minority becomes the majority. 'They that be with us are more than they that be with them.'

One can fancy the sleepers starting up dazed by the sudden bray of the trumpets and the wild shout of that war-cry yelled from every side. As they stumbled out of their tents, without leaders, without knowledge of the numbers of their foe, and saw all around the flaring torches, and heard the trumpet-blasts, which seemed to speak of an immense attacking force, no wonder that panic shook them, and they fled. Huge mobs of undisciplined men, as Eastern armies are, and these eminently were, are especially liable to such infectious alarms; and the larger the force, the faster does panic spread, the more unmanageable does the army become, and the more fatal are the results. Each man reflects, and so increases, his neighbour's fear. 'Great armies, once struck with amazement, are like wounded whales. Give them but line enough, and the fishes will be the fishermen to catch themselves.'

So the host broke up in wild disorder, and hurried in fragments towards the Jordan fords, trampling each other down as they raced through the darkness, and each man, as he ran, dreading to feel the enemy's sword in his back next moment. 'The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous is bold as a lion.' Thus without stroke of weapon was the victory won. The battle was the Lord's.

And the story is not antiquated in substance, however the form of the contests which God's soldiers have to-day to fight has changed. Still it is true that we shall only wage war aright when we feel that it is His cause for which we contend, and His sword which wins the victory. If Gideon had put himself first in his warcry, or had put his own name only in it, the issue would have been different.

May we not also venture to apply the peculiar accoutrements of the victorious three hundred to ourselves? Christ's men have no weapons to wield but the sounding out from them, as from a trumpet, of the word of the Lord, and the light of a Christian life shining through earthen vessels. If we boldly lift up our voices in the ancient war-cry, and let that word peal forth from us, and flash the light of holy lives on a dark world, we may break the sleeper's slumbers to a glad waking, and win the noblest of victories by leading them to enlist in the army of our Captain, and to become partakers of His conquests by letting Him conquer, and thereby save them.

Judges 16:21-31 Strength Profaned and Lost

Nobody could be less like the ordinary idea of an Old Testament 'saint' than Samson. His gift from 'the spirit of the Lord' was simply physical strength, and it was associated with the defects of his qualities. His passions were strong, and apparently uncontrolled. He had no moral elevation or religious fervour. He led no army against the Philistines, nor seems to have had any fixed design of resisting them. He seeks a wife among them, and is ready to feast and play at riddles with them. When he does attack them, it is because he is stung by personal injuries; and it is only with his own arm that he strikes. His exploits have a mixture of grim humour and fierce hatred quite unlike anything else in Scripture, and more resembling the horse-play of Homeric or Norse heroes than the stern purpose and righteous wrath of a soldier who felt that he was God's instrument. We seem to hear his loud laughter as he ties the firebrands to the struggling jackals, or swings the jaw-bone. A strange champion for Jehovah! But we must not leave out of sight, in estimating his character, the Nazarite vow, which his parents had made before his birth, and he had endorsed all his life.

That supplies the substratum which is lacking, The unshorn hair and the abstinence from wine were the signs of consecration to

God, which might often fail of reaching the deepest recesses of the will and spirit, but still was real, and gave the point of contact for the divine gift of strength. Samson's strength depended on his keeping the vow, of which the outward sign was the long, matted locks; and therefore, when he let these be shorn, he voluntarily cast away his dependence on and consecration to God, and his strength ebbed from him. He had broken the conditions on which he received it, and it disappeared. So the story which connects the loss of his long hair with the loss of his superhuman power has a worthy meaning, and puts in a picturesque form an eternal truth.

We see here, first, Samson the prisoner. Milton has caught the spirit of the sad picture in verses 21 and 22, in that wonderful line,

'Eyeless, in Gaza, at the mill, with slaves,'

in which the clauses drop heavily like slow tears, each adding a new touch of woe. The savage manners of the times used the literal forcing out of the eyes from their sockets as the easiest way of reducing dangerous enemies to harmlessness. Pitiably as the loss was, Samson was better blind than seeing. The lust of the eye had led him astray, and the loss of his sight showed him his sin. Fetters of brass betrayed his jailers' dread of his possibly returning strength; and the menial task to which he was set was meant as a humiliation, in giving him woman's work to do, as if this were all for which the eclipsed hero was now fit. Generous enemies are merciful; the baser sort reveal their former terror by the indignities they offer to their prisoner.

In Samson we see an impersonation of Israel. Like him, the nation was strong so long as it kept the covenant of its God. Like him, it was ever prone to follow after strange loves. Its Delilahs were the gods of the heathen, in whose laps it laid its anointed head, and at whose hands it suffered the loss of its God-given strength; for, like Samson, Israel was weak when it forgot its consecration, and its punishment came from the objects of its infatuated desires. Like him, it was blinded, bound, and reduced to slavery, for all its power was held, as was his, on condition of loyalty to God. His life is as a mirror, in which the nation might see their own history reflected; and the lesson taught by the story of the captive hero, once so strong, and now so weak, is the lesson which Moses taught the nation: 'Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things: therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the Lord shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things, and He shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck' (Deut. xxviii. 47, 48). The blind Samson, chained, at the mill, has a warning for us, too. That is what God's heroes come to, if once they prostitute the God-given strength to the base loves of self and the flattering world. We are strong only as we keep our hearts clear of lower loves, and lean on God alone. Delilah is most dangerous when honeyed words drop from her lips. The world's praise is more harmful than its censure. Its favours are only meant to draw the secret of our strength from us, that we may be made weak; and nothing gives the Philistines so much pleasure as the sight of God's warriors caught in their toils and robbed of power.

But Samson's misery was Samson's blessedness. The 'howbeit' of verse 22 is more than a compensation for all the wretchedness. The growth of his hair is not there mentioned as a mere natural fact, nor with the superstitious notion that his hair made him strong. God made him strong on condition of his keeping his vow of consecration. The long matted locks were the visible sign that he kept it. Their loss was the consequence of his own voluntary breach of it. So their growth was the visible token that the fault was being repaired. Chastisement wrought sorrow; and in the bondage of the prison he found freedom from the worse chains of sin, and in its darkness felt the dawning of a better light. As Bishop Hall puts it: 'His hair grew together with his repentance, and his strength with his hair.' The cruelties of the Philistines were better for him than their kindness. The world outwits itself when it presses hard on God's deserters, and thus drives them to repent. God mercifully takes care that His wandering children shall not have an easy time of it; and his chastisements, at their sharpest, are calls to us to come back to Him. Well for those, even if in chains, who know their meaning, and yield to it.

II. We have here Samson,—the occasion of godless triumph.

The worst consequence of the fall of a servant of God is that it gives occasion for God's enemies to blaspheme, and reflects discredit on Him, as if He were vanquished. Samson's capture is Dagon's glory. The strife between Philistia and Israel was, in the eyes of both combatants, a struggle between their gods; and so the men of Gaza lit their sacrificial fires and sent up their hymns to their monstrous deity as victor. What would Samson's bitter thoughts be, as the sound of the wild rejoicings reached him in his prison? And is not all this true to-day? If ever some conspicuous Christian champion falls into sin or inconsistency, how the sky is rent with shouts of malicious pleasure! What paragons of virtue worldly men become all at once! How swiftly the conclusion is drawn that all Christians are alike, and none of them any better than the non-Christian world! How much more harm the one flaw does than all the good which a life of service has done! The faults of Christians are the bulwarks of unbelief. 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you.' The honour of Christ is a sacred trust, and it is in the keeping of us His followers. Our sins do not only darken our own reputation, but they cloud His. Dagon's worshippers have a right to rejoice when they have Samson safe in their prison, with his eyes out.

III. We have Samson made a buffoon for drunkards.

The feasts of heathenism were wild orgies, very unlike the pure joy of the sacrificial meals in Jehovah's worship. Dagon's temple

was filled with a drunken crowd, whose mirth would be made more boisterous by a spice of cruelty. So, a roar of many voices calls for Samson, and this deepest degradation is not spared him. The words employed for 'make sport' seem to require that we should understand that he was not brought out to be the passive object of their gibes and drunken mockery, but was set to play the fool for their delectation. They imply that he had to dance and laugh, while three thousand gaping Philistines, any one of whom would have run for his life if he had been free, fed their hatred by the sight. Perhaps his former reputation for mirth and riddles suggested this new cruelty. Surely there is no more pathetic picture than that of the blind hero, with such thoughts as we know were seething in him, dragged out to make a Philistine holiday, and set to play the clown, while the bitterness of death was in his soul. And this is what God's soldiers come down to, when they forget Him: 'they that wasted us required of us mirth.'

Wearied with his humiliating exertions, the blind captive begs the boy who guided him to let him lean, till he can breathe again, on the pillars that held up the light roof. We need not discuss the probable architecture of Dagon's temple, of which we know nothing. Only we may notice that it is not said that there were only two pillars, but rather necessarily implied that there were more than two, for those against which he leaned were 'the two middle' ones. It is quite easy to understand how, if there were a row of them, knocking out the two strongest central ones would bring the whole thing down, especially when there was such a load on the flat roof. Apparently the principal people were in the best places on the ground floor, sheltered from the sun by the roof, on which the commonalty were clustered, all waiting for what their newly discovered mountebank would do next, after he had breathed himself. The pause was short, and they little dreamed of what was to follow.

IV. We have the last cry and heroic death of Samson.

It is not to be supposed that his prayer was audible to the crowd, even if it were spoken aloud. It is not an elevated prayer, but is, like all the rest of his actions at their best, deeply marked with purely personal motives. The loss of his two eyes is uppermost in his mind, and he wants to be revenged for them. Instead of trying to make a lofty hero out of him, it is far better to recognise frankly the limitations of his character and the imperfections of his religion. The distance between him and the New Testament type of God's soldier measures the progress which the revelation of God's will has made, and the debt we owe to the Captain of the host for the perfect example which He has set. The defects and impurity of Samson's zeal, which yet was accepted of God, preach the precious lesson that God does not require virtues beyond the standard of the epoch of revelation at which His servants stand, and that imperfection does not make service unacceptable. If the merely human passion of vengeance throbbed fiercely in Samson's prayer, he had never heard 'Love your enemies'; and, for his epoch, the destruction of the enemies of God and Israel was duty. He was not the only soldier of God who has let personal antagonism blend with his zeal for God; and we have less excuse, if we do it, than he had.

But there is the true core of religion in the prayer. It is penitence which pleads, 'Remember me, O Lord God!' He knows that his sin has broken the flow of loving divine thought to him, but he asks that the broken current may be renewed. Many a silent tear had fallen from Samson's blind eyes, before that prayer could have come to his lips, as he leaned on the great pillars. Clear recognition of the Source of his strength is in the prayer; if ever he had forgotten, in Delilah's lap, where it came from, he had recovered his conscious dependence amid the misery of the prison. There is humility in the prayer 'Only this once.' He feels that, after such a fall, no more of the brilliant exploits of former days are possible. They who have brought such despite on Jehovah and such honour to Dagon may be forgiven, and even restored to much of their old vigour, but they must not be judges in Israel any more. The best thing left for the penitent Samson is death.

He had been unconscious of the departure of his strength, but he seems to have felt it rushing back into his muscles; so he grasps the two pillars with his mighty hands; the crowd sees that the pause for breath is over, and prepares to watch the new feats. Perhaps we may suppose that his last words were shouted aloud, 'Let me die with the Philistines!' and before they have been rightly taken in by the mob, he sways himself backwards for a moment, and then, with one desperate forward push, brings down the two supports, and the whole thing rushes down to hideous ruin amid shrieks and curses and groans. But Samson lies quiet below the ruins, satisfied to die in such a cause.

He 'counted not his life dear' unto himself, that he might be God's instrument for God's terrible work. The last of the judges teaches us that we too, in a nobler cause, and for men's life, not their destruction, must be ready to hazard and give our lives for the great Captain, who in His death has slain more of our foes than He did in His life, and has laid it down as the law for all His army, 'He that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.'

How beautifully the quiet close of the story follows the stormy scene of the riotous assembly and the sudden destruction. The Philistines, crushed by this last blow, let the dead hero's kindred search for his body amid the chaos, and bear it reverently up from the plain to the quiet grave among the hills of Dan, where Manoah his father slept. There they lay that mighty frame to rest. It will be troubled no more by fierce passions or degrading chains. Nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it. The penitent heroism of its end makes us lenient to the flaws in its course; and we leave the last of the judges to sleep in his grave, recognising in him, with all his faults and grossness, a true soldier of God, though in strange garb.

Judges 16:3 Our Champion

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“And Samson lay till midnight, and arose at midnight, and took the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts, and went away with them, bar and all, and put them upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of an hill that is before Hebron” — Judges 16:3.

Poor Samson! We cannot say much about him as an example to believers. We must hold him up in two lights, — as a beacon, and as a prodigy. He is a beacon to us all, for he shows us that no strength of body can suffice to deliver from weakness of mind. Here was a man whom no fellow-man could overcome, but he lost his eyes through a woman; — a man mighty enough to rend a lion like a kid, yet, in due time, thought himself stronger than a lion, he was bound with fetters of brass. When I think of the infatuation of which Samson was the subject, and remember that we are men of like passions with him can only, for myself, put up the prayer, “Lord, hold thou me up, and I shall be safe;” and urge you to do likewise.

And Samson is also a prodigy. He is more a wonder as a believer than he is even as a man. It is marvellous that a man could smite thousands of Philistines with no better weapon than the jaw-bone of a newly-killed ass; but it is still more marvellous that Samson should be a saint, ranked among those illustrious ones saved by faith, though such a sinner. The apostle Paul has put him among the worthies in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and Paul wrote by inspiration; therefore there can be no mistake about the fact that Samson was saved. Indeed, when I see his childlike faith, and note the way in which he dashed against the Philistines, and smote them, hip and thigh, with a great slaughter, — the way in which he cast aside all reckonings and probabilities, and in simple confidence in his God achieved the most tremendous feats of valor, — when I see this, I cannot but wonder and admire.

The Old Testament biographies were never written for our imitation, but they were written for our instruction. Upon this one matter, what a volume of force there is in such lessons! “See,” says God, “what faith can do. Here is a man, full of infirmities, a sorry fool; yet, through his childlike faith, he lives. ‘The just shall live by faith.’ He has many sad flaws and failings, but his heart is right towards his God; he does trust in the Lord, and he does give himself up as a man consecrated to his Lord’s service, and, therefore, he is saved.” I look upon Samson’s case as a great wonder, put in Scripture for the encouragement of great sinners.

If such a man as Samson, nevertheless, prevails by faith to enter the kingdom of heaven, so shall you and I. Though our characters may have been disfigured by many vices, and we may have committed a multitude of sins, if we can but trust Christ to save us, he will purge us with hyssop, and we shall be clean; he will wash us, and we shall be whiter than snow; and in our death we shall fall asleep in the arms of sovereign mercy to wake, up in the likeness of Christ.

But now I am going to leave Samson alone, except as he may furnish us with a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ. Samson, like many other Old Testament heroes, was a type of our Lord. He is specially so in this case, and I shall invite you to look at Christ rather than at Samson. First, come and behold our Champion at his work; then, let us go and survey the work when he has accomplished it; and, thirdly, let us enquire what use we can make of the work which he has performed.

I. Come with me, then, brethren, and look At Our Mighty Champion At His Work.

You remember when our Samson, our Lord Jesus, came down to the Gaza of this world, ’twas love that brought him; love to a most unworthy object, for he loved the sinful church which had gone astray from him many and many a time; yet he came from heaven, and left the ease and delights of his Father’s palace to put himself among the Philistines, the sons of sin and Satan here below.

It was rumoured among men that the Lord of glory was in the world, and straightway they took counsel together how they should slay him. Herod makes a clean sweep of all the children of two years old and under, that he may be sure to slay the newborn Prince. Afterwards, scribes and priests and lawyers hunt and hound him. Satan tempts him in the wilderness, and provokes him when in public. Death also pursues him, for he has marked him as his prey. At last, the time comes when the triple host of the Savior’s foes has fairly environed him, and shut him in. They have dragged him before Pilate; they have scourged him on the pavement; they drag him to the place called Calvary, while his blood drips upon the stones of Jerusalem’s streets; they pierce his hands and his feet; they lift him up, a spectacle of scorn and suffering; and now, while dying in pangs extreme, and especially when he closes his eyes, and

cries out, "It is finished," sin, Satan, and death all feel that they have the Champion safe. There he lies silently in the tomb. He, who is to bruise the old serpent's head, is himself bruised. O thou who art the world's great Deliverer there thou liest, as dead as any stone! Surely thy foes have led thee captive, O thou mighty Samson!

He sleeps; but think not, that he is unconscious of what is going on. He knows everything. He sleeps till the proper moment comes, and then our Samson awakes; and what happens now? He is in the tomb, and his foes have set a guard and a seal that they may keep him there. Will any help him now to escape out of their charge? Is there any man who will aid him now? No, there is none! If the Champion escapes, it must be by his own single-handed valor. Will he make a clear way for himself, and come up from the midst of his foes? You know he will, my brethren, for the moment the third day comes, he touches the stone, and it is rolled away. He has defeated death; he has pulled up the posts of the grave, and taken away its gates and bars. As for sin, he treads that beneath his feet: he has utterly overthrown it; and Satan, too, lies broken beneath the heel that once was bruised; he has broken the old dragon's head, and cut his power in pieces for ever. Solitary and alone, his own arm brings: salvation unto him, and his righteousness sustains him. Methinks I see him now as he goes up that hill which is before Hebron — the hill of God. He bears upon his shoulders the uplifted gates of the grave, — the tokens of his victory over death and hell. Doors and posts, and bar and all, he bears them up to heaven. In sacred triumph he drags his enemies behind him. Sing to him! Angels, praise him in your hymns! Exalt him, cherubim and seraphim! Our mightier Samson hath gotten to himself the victory, and cleared the road to heaven and eternal life for all his people. You know the story. I have told it ill, but, it is the most magnificent of all stories that ever were told. "Arms, and the man, I sing," said one of the great classic poets of old; but I can say, 'The cross and the Christ, I sing.' 'Tis my delight to tell of him who espoused the cause of his people, and, though for a while a captive, broke the green withs and fettors of brass; and, having gained the victory for himself, liberated others also, then goes, at the head of his emancipated people, along the way which he has opened, — the new way which he leadeth to the right hand of God.

II. Let us go now, dear brethren, and calmly Survey The Work Which Christ Has Accomplished.

We will stand at the gates of old Gaza, and see what the champion has done. Those are ponderous hinges, and they must have held up huge doors. We will look at these doors, and posts, and this bar. Why, it is a mass of iron that ten men could hardly lift, and it might take fifty more to carry those huge doors. They were scarcely moved, even on their hinges, without the efforts of a dozen men; and yet this one man carried them all, and I read not that his shoulders were bent, or that he grew weary. Seven miles at least Samson carried that tremendous load, up hill all the way, too! Still he bore it all without staggering, nor do I find that he was faint as he was aforesaid at Ramath-lehi.

I will not linger upon Samson's exploits, rather would I lift up your thoughts to the great Captain of our salvation. See what Christ has carried away. I said that he had three enemies. The three beset him, and he has achieved a threefold victory over them.

There was death. My dear friends, Christ, in being first overcome by death, made himself Conqueror over death, and he hath given us also the victory; for, concerning death, we may truly say that Christ has not only opened the gates, but he has taken them away; and not the gates only, but the very posts, and the bar, and all. Christ hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality be light."

He hath abolished it in this sense, — that, in the first place, the curse of death is gone. Believers die, but they do not die for their sins. "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." We die, but it is not any longer as a punishment. It, is the fruit of sin, but it: is not the curse of sin that makes the believer die. To other men, death is a curse; to the believer, I may almost put it among his covenant blessings, for to sleep in Jesus Christ is one of the greatest mercies that the Lord can give to his believing people. The curse of death, then, being taken away, we may say that the posts are pulled up.

Christ has also taken away the after results of death, the soul's exposure to the second death. Unless Christ had redeemed us, death, indeed, would have been terrible; for it would have been the shore of the great lake of fire. When the wicked die, their punishment at once begins; and when they rise again, at, the general resurrection, it is but to receive in their bodies and in their souls the due reward of their sins. The sting of death is the second death, — that which is to come afterwards.

**"To die; — to sleep: —
To sleep! perchance, to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come!"**

said the world's poet; — nay, not what "dreams" may come, but what substantial pains, what dread miseries, what everlasting sorrows will come! these are not for Christians. There is no hell for you, believer. Christ has taken away posts, and bar, and all. Death is not to you any longer the gate of torment, but the gate of paradise.

Moreover, Christ has not only taken away the curse, and the after results of death, but from many of us he has taken away even the

fear of death. He came on purpose to “deliver them, who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” There are not a few here who could conscientiously say that they do not dread death; nay, but rather look forward to it with joyful expectation. We have become so accustomed to think of our last hours that we die daily; and when the last hour shall arrive, we shall only say, “Our marriage day has come.”

“Welcome, sweet hour of full discharge, That let my lodging soul at large.”

We shall joyfully hail the summons to mount beyond this land of woes, and sighs, and tears to be present with our God. The fear of death having been taken away, we may truly say that Christ has taken away posts, and bar, and all.

Besides, beloved, there is a sense in which it may be said that Christians never die at all. Jesus said to Martha, “He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” Saints do not die; they do but

“Sleep in Jesus, and are blessed.”

But the main sense in which Christ has pulled up the posts of the gates of death is that he has brought in a glorious resurrection. O grave, thou canst not hold thy prisoners; for they must rise! O death, thy troops of worms may seem to devastate that fair land human flesh and blood; but that body shall rise again blooming with more beauty than that with which it fell asleep. It shall upstart from its bed of dust, and silent clay, to dwell in realms of everlasting day. Conceive the picture if you can! If you have imagination, let the scene now present itself before your eyes. Christ, the greater Samson, sleeping in the dominions of death; death boasting and glorifying itself that now it has conquered the Wines of life; Christ waking, striding to that gate, dashing it aside taking it upon his shoulders, carrying it away, and saying as he mounts to heaven, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”

Another host which Christ had to defeat was the army of sin. Christ had come among sinners, and sins beset him round. Your sins and my sins beleaguered the Savior till he became their captive. “In him was no sin” yet sins “compassed him about like bees.” Sin was imputed to him; the sins of all his people stood in his way to keep him as well as them out of heaven. When Christ was on the cross, my brethren, he was looked upon by God as a sinner, though he never had been a sinner; and when in the grave, he could not rise until he was justified. Christ must be justified as well as his people. He was justified not as we are, but by his own act. We are not justified by acts of our own as he was. All the sin of the elect was laid upon Christ; he suffered its full penalty, and so was justified. The token of his justification lay in his resurrection. Christ was justified by rising from the deed, and in him all his people were justified too. I may say, therefore, that all our sins stood in the way of Christ’s resurrection; they were the great iron gate, and they were the bar of brass, that shut him. Out from heaven. Doubtless, we might have thought that Christ would be a prisoner for ever under the troops of sin; but, oh, see firm, my brethren! See how the mighty Conqueror, as he bears our sins “in his own body on the tree,” stands with unbroken bones beneath the enormous load-bearing —

“All that incarnate God could bear,

With strength enough, but none to spare.”

See how he takes those sins of ours upon his shoulders, and carries them right up from his tomb, and hurls them away into the deep abyss of forgetfulness, where, if they be sought for, they shall not be found any more for ever. As for the sins of all God’s people, they are not partly taken away, but they are as clean removed as ever the gates of Gaza were, — posts, gates, bar, and all; that is to say, every sin of God’s people is forgiven.

“There’s pardon for transgressions past, It matters not how black their cast; And, oh, my soul, with wonder view, For sins to come there’s pardon too!”

Every sin that all the elect ever did commit, are now committing, or ever shall commit, was taken away by Christ, taken upon his shoulders in his great atoning sacrifice, and carried away. There is no sin in God’s book against any of his people; he seeth no sin in Jacob, neither iniquity in Israel; they are justified in Christ for ever.

Moreover, as the guilt of sin was taken away, the punishment of sin was consequently taken away too. For the Christian there is no stroke from God’s angry hand; nay, not so much as a single frown of punitive justice. The believer may be chastised by a Father’s hand; but God, the Judge of all, has nothing to say to the Christian, except, “I have absolved thee: thou art acquitted.” For the Christian, there is no hell, no penal death, much less any second death. He is completely freed from all the punishment as well as the guilt of sin, and the power of sin is removed too. It may stand in our way to keep us in perpetual warfare; but, oh, my brethren, sin is to us a conquered foe. There is no sin which a Christian cannot overcome if he will only rely upon his God to enable him to do so. They who wear their white robes in heaven overcame through the blood of the Lamb, and you and I may do the same. There is no lust too mighty, no besetting sin too strongly entrenched; we can drive these Canaanites out; though they have cities walled unto heaven, we can pull their cities down, and overcome them through the power of Christ. Do believe, Christian, that thy sin is virtually a

dead thing. It may kick and struggle. There is force enough in it for that, but it is a dead thing. God has written condemnation across its brow. Christ has crucified it, “nailing it to his cross.” Do you go now and bury it for ever, and the Lord help you to live to his praise! Oh, blessed be his name, sin, with the guilt, the power, the shame, the fear, the terror of it, is gone. Christ has taken poets, and bar, and all up to the top of the hill.

Then there was a third enemy, and he also has been destroyed, — that was Satan. Our Savior’s sufferings were not only an atonement for sin, but they were a conflict with Satan, and a conquest over him. Satan is a defeated foe. The gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church of Christ, but Christ has prevailed against the gates of hell. As for Satan, the posts, and bar, and all have been plucked up from his citadel in this sense, — that Satan has new no reigning power over believers. He may bark at us like a dog, and he may go about like a roaring lion, but to rend and to devour us are not in his power. There is a chain about the devil’s neck, and he can only go as far as God likes, but no further. He could not tempt Job without first asking God’s leave, and he cannot tempt you without first getting God’s permission. There is a permit needed before the devil dares so much as look on a believer; and so, being under divine permission, he will not be allowed to tempt us above what we are able to bear.

Moreover, the exceeding terror of Satan is also taken away. A Man has met Apollyon foot to foot, and overcome him. That Man in death triumphed over Satan; so may you and I. The prestige of the old enemy is gone. The dragon’s head has been broken, and you and I need not fear to fight with a broken-headed adversary. When I read John Bunyan’s description of Christian’s fight with Apollyon, I am struck with the beauty and truth of the description, but I cannot help thinking, “If Christian had but known how thoroughly Apollyon had been thrashed in days gone by, by his Master, he would have thrown that in his face, and made short work of him.” Never encounter Satan without recollecting that great victory that Christ achieved on the tree. Do not be, afraid, Christian, of Satan’s devices or threatenings. Be on your watch-tower against him. Strive against him, but fear him not. Resist him, being bold in the faith, for it is not in his power to keep the feeblest saint out of heaven, for all the gates which he has put up to impede our march have been taken away, posts, and bar, and all, and our God the Lord has gotten to himself the victory over all the hosts of hell.

III. We will now see How We Can Use This Victory

Surely there is some comfort here, — comfort for you, dear friend, over yonder. You have a desire to be saved; God has impressed you with a deep sense of sin; the very strongest wish of your soul is that, you might have peace with God. But you think there are so many difficulties in the way, — Satan, your sins, and I know not what. Beloved, let me tell thee, in God’s name, there is no difficulty whatever in the way except in thine own heart for Christ has taken away the gates of Gaza, — posts, bar, and all. Mary Magdalene said to the other Mary, or the women said to one another, when they went to the sepulcher, “Who shall roll us away the stone?” “That is what you are saying. And when they came to the place, the stone was rolled away. That is; your case, poor troubled conscience; the stone is rolled away. What! you cannot believe it? Here is God’s testimony for it: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as whiter as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” You want an atonement for your sins, do you? “It is finished.” You want someone to speak for you. “He is able to save unto the uttermost, seeing he even liveth to make intercession for us.” Canst thou believe in the mercy of God in Christ, and rest thy poor guilty soul upon the merit of his doing and the virtue of his dying? If thou canst, God is reconciled to thee. There may have been great mountains between thee and God, but they are all gone. There may have been the Red Sea of thy sins rolling between thee and thy Father.

That Red Sea is dried up. I tell thee, soul, if thou believes in Christ Jesus, not only is there a way of access between thy soul and God, but, there is a clear way. You remember, when Christ died, the veil of the temple was rent in twain. There was not a little slit for sinners to creep through, but it was rent, in twain, from the top to the bottom, so that big sinners might come, just in the same way as when Samson pulled up gates, posts, bar, and all, there was a clear way out into the country for all who were locked up in the town. Prisoner, the prison doors are open. Captive, loose the bonds on thy neck; be free! I sound the trumpet of jubilee. Band-slaves, Christ hath redeemed you. Ye who have sold —

**“Your heritage for nought,
Shall have it back unbought,
The gift of Jesus’ love.”**

The Lord hath anointed his Son Jesus “to preach deliverance to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.” Trust thou him. May his mercy lead thee to trust him now, for there is really nothing to prevent thy salvation if thou retest in him. Between thy soul and God, I tell thee, there is no dividing wall. “He is our peace, who hath made both one; ... and came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.” May these precious words be treasured up by such as need them! Some of you need them. May the Spirit of God put them into your hearts, and lay them up there, that you may find comfort in Christ!

But is there not something more here? Is there not here a ground of exhortation to Christians? Brethren, have not some of you been

tolerating some sin, — some besetting sin, which you think you cannot overcome? You would be more holy, but the thought that you are not able to overcome it makes your arm nerveless against your own sin. So you think that Christ has left the poets, do you? I tell you, not; "whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." He that is born of God sinneth not with allowance; he sinneth not with constancy; and it is in his power, with the Holy Spirit's aid, to overcome his sin; and it is his duty, as well as his privilege, to go to war against the stoutest of his corruptions till he shall tread thee under foot. Now, will you believe, brethren, that, in the blood of Christ, and in the water that flowed with it from his side, there is a sovereign virtue to kill your sins? There is nothing standing between you and the pardon of your sins but your unbelief; and if you will but shake that off, you shall march triumphantly through the gate of glory.

Once more, and I have done. Is not this an incentive for us, who profess to be servants of Christ, to go out and fight with the world, and overcome it for Christ? Brethren, where Jesus leads us, it needs not much courage for us to follow. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." Let us go and take it for him! Nations that sit in darkness shall see a great, light. Satan may have locked up the world with bigotry, with idolatry, and with superstition, as with posts and bars, but the kingdom is the Lord's; and if we will but rouse ourselves to preach the Word, we shall find that the Breaker has gone up before us, and broken and torn away the gates, and posts, and bar, and all; and we have nothing to do but to enjoy an early victory. God help us to do so!

And now, as we come to the Lord's table, let us have before us this vision of our glorious Samson achieving his mighty victory; and, while we weep for sin, let us praise his superlative power and love that have wrought such marvels for us. The Lord give us to enjoy his presence at his table, and he shall have the praise! Amen.

Judges 9:9 The Faithful Olive Tree

But the olive tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honor God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? — Judges 9:9

THE fable teaches that temptations will come to us all, however sweet, or useful, or fruitful, even as they came to the fig, the olive, and the vine. These temptations may take the shape of proffered honors; if not a crown, yet some form of preferment or power may be the bribe. The trees were under God's government and wanted no king; but in this fable they "went forth" and so quitted their true place. Then they sought to be like men, forgetting that God had not made them to be conformed to a fallen race. Revolting themselves, they strove to win over those better trees which had remained faithful.

No wonder they chose the olive, so rich and honored; for it would give their kingdom respectability to have such a monarch; but the olive wisely declined, and gave its reason.

I. APPARENT PROMOTIONS ARE NOT TO BE SNATCHED AT.

The question is to be asked, Should I? Let us never do what would be unbecoming, unsuitable, unwise (Gen. 39:9).

Emphasis is to be laid on the I Should I? If God has given me peculiar gifts or special grace, does it become me to trifle with these endowments? Should I give them up to gain honor for myself (Neh. 6:11)?

A higher position may seem desirable, but would it be right to gain it by such cost (Jer. 45:5)?

It will involve duties and cares. "Go up and down among the trees" implies that there would be care, oversight, traveling, etc.

These duties will be quite new to me; for, like an olive, I have been hitherto planted in one place. Should I run into new temptations, new difficulties, etc., of my own wanton will?

Can I expect God's blessing upon such strange work? Put the question in the case of wealth, honor, power, which are set before us. Should we grasp at them at the risk of being less at peace, less holy, less prayerful, less useful?

II. ACTUAL ADVANTAGES ARE NOT TO BE TRIFLED WITH.

"Should I leave my fatness?" I have this great boon, should I lightly lose it?

It is the greatest advantage in life to be useful both to God and man "By me they honor God and man." We ought heartily to prize this high privilege.

To leave this for anything which the world can offer would be great loss. "Will a man leave the snow of Lebanon?" etc., (Jer. 18:14; 2:13).

Our possession of fatness meets the temptation to become a king. We are happy enough in Christ, in his service, with his people, and in the prospect of the reward. We cannot better ourselves by the move; let us stay as we are.

We may also meet it by the reflection.

That the prospect is startling — "Shall I leave my fatness?" For an olive to do this would be unnatural: for a believer to leave holy living would be worse (John 6:68).

That the retrospect would be terrible—"leave my fatness." What must it be to have left grace, and truth, and holiness, and Christ? Remember Judas.

That even an hour of such leaving would be a loss. What would an olive do even for a day if it left its fatness?

That it would all end in disappointment; for nothing could compensate for leaving the Lord. All else is death (Jer. 17:13).

That to abide firmly and reject all baits is like the saints, the martyrs, and their Lord; but to prefer honor to grace is a mere bramble folly.

III. TEMPTATION SHOULD BE TURNED TO ACCOUNT.

Let us take deeper root. The mere proposal to leave our fatness should make us hold the faster to it.

Let us be on the watch that we lose not our joy, which is our fatness. If we would not leave it, neither can we bear that it should leave us.

Let us yield more fatness, and bear more fruit: he who gains largely is all the further removed from loss. The more we increase in grace the less are we likely to leave it.

Let us feel the more content, and speak the more lovingly of our gracious state, that none may dare to entice us. When Satan sees us happily established he will have the less hope of overthrowing us.

Memoranda

Many to obtain a higher wage have left holy companionships, and sacred opportunities for hearing the word and growing in grace. They have lost their Sabbaths, quitted a soul-feeding ministry, and fallen among worldlings, to their own sorrowful loss. Such persons are as foolish as the poor Indians who gave the Spaniards gold in exchange for paltry beads. Riches procured by impoverishing the soul are always a curse. To increase your business so that you cannot attend week-night services is to become really poorer; to give up heavenly pleasure, and receive earthly cares in exchange is a sorry sort of barter.

Sir Edward Coke, Chief Justice of England in the time of James I., was a man of noble spirit, and often incurred the displeasure of the king by his

patriotism. On one occasion, when an unworthy attempt was made to influence his conduct, he replied, "When the case happens I shall do that which shall be fit for a judge to do." Oh, that all Christians in trying moments would act as shall be fit for followers of Christ to do!

In Tennyson's story of the village maiden, who became the wife of the Lord of Burleigh, we see how burdensome worldly honors may prove, even when though unsought they have been honorably gained:

"But a trouble weighed upon her,
And perplexed her, night and morn,
With the burthen of an honor
Unto which she was not born.

"Were it not better to bestow
Some place and power on me?
Then should thy praises with me grow,
And share in my degree.

"How know I, if thou shouldst me raise,
That I should then raise thee?

Perhaps great places and thy praise

Do not so well agree"

—George Herbert

Say not this calling and vocation to which God has appointed me is too small and insignificant for me. God's will is the best calling, and to be faithful to it is the worthiest. God often places great blessings in little things. Should thy proud heart learn humility and resignation by this humble work, wouldest thou not have high wages for thy low service? —From the German