Maclaren on 1 Kings - Part 2

1 Kings

Sermons (Part 2)

by Alexander Maclaren

1 Kings 12:25-33 Political Religion

The details of this section need no long elucidation; for the one fact which it records, namely, the establishment of the calf worship in Israel, is the main point to consider. As for details, we need touch them lightly. The ‘building’ of Shechem and Penuel is probably to be understood as ‘fortifying’; for, in regard to the former town, we know from the preceding section that it was a town before the disruption, and the same is probably true of the latter. Two fortresses, one in the heart of his kingdom, one on the eastern border, where attack might be expected, were Jeroboam’s first care.

In estimating his conduct, the fact must be remembered that Ahijah had promised him God’s protection and the establishment of his kingdom in his family, on the sole condition of obedience. If he had believed the prophet, something else than building strongholds would have been his prime aim. But he evidently thought that promises were all very well, but thick walls were better. The two things recorded of him are quite of a piece; and the writer seems, by putting them thus side by side, to wish us to note their identity of motive and similarity in character.

The establishment of the calf worship was entirely due, according to this historian, to dread that religious unity would heal the schism of political duality, and that Jeroboam’s kingdom and life would be sacrificed to the magnetism which would draw the revolted northern tribes back to render allegiance, where they went up to worship. The calculation was reasonable: but why, in estimating chances, did Jeroboam leave out God’s promise? That should have kept him at ease. The calves and the castles were signs of fear and of slight regard to the prophet’s word. No doubt, when it suited him, he could vindicate rebellion on the plea of obeying God. The plea would have sounded more genuine if he had shown that he trusted God.

The calves were probably suggested by his Egyptian experiences, where he had seen sacred bulls worshipped living, and mummied dead. But the remembrance of Aaron and the golden calf was evidently present to him, as the almost verbal quotation of Aaron’s words shows. If so, the whole transaction is still more accentuated as a revolt against the ritual of the central sanctuary. ‘The much-calumniated Aaron is our example. He was mastered by his brother, but he was right, and we go back to the old original worship of our fathers.’

Jeroboam was among the first to employ the expedient, so often resorted to since, of white-washing old-world criminals, in order to provide an ancestry for modern heresies. The calves seem to have been doubled simply as a matter of convenience. When once the principle of saving trouble comes in, in religion, it generally plays a great part. If it were too much to go to Jerusalem, it would soon be too much to go to Bethel, and so Dan must be provided for the north. The calves were symbols of Jehovah, not of other gods, as must be carefully noted. The making of them implied all that followed; for a god must have shrine and priesthood and sacrifice and festivals. The Levites refusing to serve, and probably losing their inheritance, fled to Judah, and a new priesthood was made ‘from among all the people’ (Rev. Ver.), The Feast of Tabernacles was retained but its date shifted forward a month, perhaps because the harvest, which it closed, was later in the north, but evidently with the design of, as it were, underscoring the religious separation.

The latter part of this passage should perhaps be attached more closely to the next chapter, and understood as describing the one instance of Jeroboam’s sacrificing which was so grimly interrupted by the denunciation by the anonymous prophet from Judah. Such are the outlines of the facts. What are the lessons taught by them?

I. There is that one already mentioned,—the folly and sin of seeking to help God to fulfil His promises by our poor efforts at making their fulfilment sure to sense.

No doubt many of His promises are contingent on our activity in material things; and no man has a right to expect that’ his bread shall be given him,’ for instance, unless he contributes the ‘sweat of his brow’ towards it. But Jeroboam had had the conditions of safety and stability clearly laid down. They were, obedience after the pattern of David (1 Kings 11:38). So there was no need for building Shechem and Penuel, nor for casting calves and serving them. The heavens will stand without our rearing brickwork pillars to hold them up. But it takes much faith to trust God’s bare word, and we are all apt to feel safer if we have something for sense to grasp. On the open plain, God guards those who trust Him more securely than if they lay in cities ‘fenced up to heaven. ‘Jerusalem

shall be inhabited as towns without walls. . . . For I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about.'

II. Another lesson taught here is the sin of degrading religion to be a mere instrument for securing personal ends.

Jeroboam has had many followers among politicians, The average 'statesman' looks on all religions as equally true or untrue, and is ready to be polite to any of them, if he can carry his measures thereby. The long history of the relations of Church and State in the Old World has been little else than the State's hiring and muzzling the Church for its own advantage, and the protests of a faithful few against the degradation of State patronage and consequent control.

In England, Jeroboam and his calves used to be the favourite shocking example of the sin of schism, with which High Church orators were fond of pelting Nonconformists. The true lesson from him and them is precisely the opposite one; namely, the weakening of religion, when it is favoured and endowed by the civil power. The priests of Bethel, who were the creatures of Jeroboam, were not likely to be his or his successors rebukers. When Amos the prophet spoke bold words against a king, it was Amaziah the priest who gave the shameful counsel, 'O thou seer, flee into the land of Judah, and prophesy there; but prophesy no more at Bethel: for it is the king's sanctuary.' Is there no such thing known as a flaming profession of religion, because it is respectable, or opens the way to some good position? Does nobody pose in public, especially about election times, as a liberal supporter of Churches and a devout Church-member, with an eye mainly to votes? Do political parties think it a good thing to get the religious people to go for their ticket? Or, to take less base instances, is there not a whole school who estimate Christianity mainly as valuable as a social force, and, without any deep personal recognition of its loftier aspects, think it well that it should be generally accepted, especially by other people, as it makes them easier to govern, and cements the social fabric?

Christianity is something more than social cement. Jeroboam's policy was a great success, as policy. It both united his kingdom and definitively separated it from Judah. But it was a success purchased at the price of degrading religion into the lackey of a court. Samson went to sleep on Delilah's lap, and she cut off the clustering locks in which his strength lay.

III. The true nature of idolatry is brought out in the incident.

Jeroboam did not draw Israel away to worship other gods. No charge of that sort is ever made against the calf worship. The images were meant, just as Aaron's, of which they were a reproduction, was meant, to be symbols of Jehovah. The true object of worship was worshipped in a false way. No matter though the image represented Him, its worship was idol worship. There is no ground in the narrative for the surmise of Stanley,—who in this, as usual, simply says ditto to Ewald,—that Jeroboam's motive was the desire to prevent Israel's adopting false gods, and that the calves were a compromise by which he hoped to stem the tide of apostasy to Baal worship. The single motive stated in the text is policy inspired by fear. Jeroboam did not care enough about the worship of Jehovah to mould his statecraft with the view of conserving it. If he had so cared, he could not have set up the calves. His doing so is uniformly regarded in Scripture as idolatry pure and simple; and though it is clearly distinguished from the worship of false gods, it is none the less branded as rebellion against Jehovah.

A visible representation of Jehovah was as much an idol as a similar one of Baal would have been. It necessarily degraded the conception of Him. It brought sense into dangerous prominence as an aid to worship. The symbol might at first, and to the more devout, be a mere symbol, and transparent; but it would soon become opaque, and from symbol turn embodiment, and thence pass to being the very deity represented. It is a feat of abstraction impossible for the ordinary man, to worship before an idol, and not to worship the idol. The strange, awful fascination which idolatry exercised is perhaps gone now from the civilised world. But the lesson remains ever in season, that it is dangerous work to bring in sense as an ally of devotion, because outward things, which at first may be only symbols and helps, are almost certain to become something more.

IV. Jeroboam may stand, finally, as a type of the men who suppose themselves to be worshipping God when they are only following their own wills. All his ceremonial had this damning characteristic, that it was 'devised of his own heart'; and so it was himself that was enshrined in his new house of the high places, and himself to whom the sacrifices were offered. Absolute obedience to God's will, whatever perils may seem to attend it, is true worship. Wherever apparent devotion to Him is mingled with burning incense to our own net, the mixture ruins the devotion. 'Obedience is better than sacrifice.' Temptations to take our own way will often appear as the dictates of sound policy, and to neglect them as culpable carelessness. But such paltering with plain commandments is as ruinous as sinful, and is not to be atoned for by outward worship.

What did Jeroboam win by his intrusion of self-will into the region which ought to be sacred to perfect obedience? A troubled reign and the destruction of his house after one generation. One more thing he won; namely, that terrible epithet, which becomes almost a part of his name, 'Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin.' What a title to be branded on a man's forehead for ever! It is always a mistake to disobey God. Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. This only is the safe motto for churches and individuals, in all the details of worship and of life: 'Lo, I come to do Thy will, O Lord, and Thy law is within my heart.'

1 Kings 16:23-33 The Record of Two Kings

Jeroboam's son and successor was killed by Baasha, Baasha's son and successor was killed by Zimri, who reigned for a week, and then burned the palace and died in the flames. A struggle for the throne followed between Omri, the commander-in-chief, and Tibni, 'Tibni died, and Omri reigned.' So, in fifty years, the kingdom that was to relieve Israel from oppression staggered through seas of blood, and four kings, or would-be kings, died by violence.

Omri's dynasty lasted about as long, namely, through the reigns of four kings, and was then swept away like the others, in blood and fire. The text gives a meagre outline of the reigns of himself and his son Ahab, of which perhaps the meagreness is the most significant feature. The only fact told of the father is that he built Samaria, and his whole reign is summed up in the damning sentence that he 'walked in the way of Jeroboam.' We learn from the Moabite stone that he waged successful war against that country, and that it was tributary to Israel for forty years. In Micah vi. 16 , mention is made of the statutes of Omri, as if he had given edicts for idolatry. The reign of Ahab is similarly summarised. His marriage with Jezebel, and the flood of Baal worship which that let loose over the land, are told with horror, in preparation for Elijah's appearance like a dark background that throws up a brilliant figure.

The lessons to be drawn from these severely condensed records, cut down to the bone, as it were, are plain. The first of them is, that when a life is over, the one thing which lasts, or is worth thinking about, is the man's relation to God and His will. Here are twelve years' reign in the one case, and twenty-two in the other, all boiled down, so to speak, into half a dozen sentences, and estimated according to one standard only. What has become of all the eager strife, the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears, that burned so fiercely for awhile? All died down into a handful of grey ashes. And what lies in them like a lump of solid metal that has been melted out of the huge heap of days and deeds that fed the fire? The man's relation to God. That abides; that is recorded; that determines everything else about him. Waving forests that once had sunshine pouring down on their green fronds are represented in a thin seam of coal. Our lives will all come down to this at last. How did he stand towards God and His will is the final question that will be asked about each of us, and the answer to it is the only thing that concerns the dead—or the living either. Men write voluminous biographies of each other. How little their judgments matter to the dead men! Praise or blame are equally indifferent to them. But what matters is, whether God will have to record of us what is recorded of these two wretched kings, or whether He will recognise that the main drift of our poor lives was to serve Him and do His will. He was a great scholar; he made a huge fortune; he rose to be a peer; she was a noted beauty, a leader of fashion, a queen of society—what will all such epitaphs be worth, if God's finger carves silently below them, 'He did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord'?

Another lesson from these two reigns is the certain widening of the smallest departure from God. Jeroboam professed to retain the worship of Jehovah, and to introduce only a small alteration in setting up a symbol of Him. He would vehemently have asserted that he was no idolater, and would have shuddered at the very notion of bowing down to the gods of the nations, but in less than fifty years a temple to the Sidonian Baal rose in Samaria, and his worship, with its foul sensuality, was corrupting all Israel. However acute the angle of departure, the line has only to be prolonged, and the distance between it and that from which it diverged will be the distance between heaven and hell, Let no one say: 'Thus far and no farther will I go.' There is no stopping at will on that course, any more than a man sliding down a steeply sloping sheet of smooth ice can pull himself up before he plunges over the edge into the abyss below. That is true as to all departures from God and His law, but it is eminently true as to every tampering with the spirituality of worship. Jeroboam's symbolism led straight to Ahab's unblushing pagan worship of the hideous Sidonian Baal. The craving for symbolical and sensuous accessories of worship, which is strong in most Churches in this aesthetic generation, is perilous. Material aids to worship there must be, so long as we are in the flesh, but the fewer and simpler they are the better, for they are aids which very swiftly become hindrances.

Another lesson from Ahab's reign is the need of detachment from entangling alliances, if we would keep ourselves right with God. It was Israel's calling to be separate from the nations. It was Israel's temptation either to mix with them, or to keep aloof from them in contempt and hatred. Ahab's marriage with Jezebel was, no doubt, thought by his father a clever stroke of policy, assuring them of an ally. But it flooded the nation with the cruel and lustful cult of Baal, and that finally ruined Ahab and his house. God's servants can never mingle themselves with His enemies without harm, unless they mingle with them for the purpose of turning them into His servants. If we prefer the company of those who do not love Jesus, our love to Him must be faint, and will soon be fainter. If Ahab takes Jezebel for his wife, Ahab will soon take Jezebel's foul god for his god.

1 KINGS 17:1-16 A Prophet's Strange Providers

The worst times need the best men. The reign of Ahab brought a great outburst of Baal worship, imported by his Phoenician wife, which threatened to sweep away every trace of the worship of Jehovah. The feeble king was absolutely ruled by the strongwilled Jezebel, and everything seemed rushing down to ruin. One man arrests the downward movement, and with no weapon but his word, and no support but his own dauntless courage, which was the child of his faith, works a revolution in Israel. 'Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than' Elijah the Tishbite. Bugged, stern, solitary, he has no commission to reveal new truth. He is not a 'prophet,' like later ones whose words were revelation.

Little is preserved of his sayings. His task was to reform and restore, not to advance; and his endowments of 'spirit and power' corresponded to his work. The striking peculiarities of this heroic figure will appear as we go on with his history. For the present, we have to consider the three points of this narrative.

I. The Prophet and the King.—The startling suddenness of Elijah's leap into the arena, where he appears without preface or explanation, helps the impression of extraordinary force which his whole career makes. He crashes into the midst of Ahab's court like a thunderbolt. What did Jezebel think of this wild man from the other side of Jordan, with his long hair and his loose mantle, who thus fronted Ahab and her? Nothing is told us of his descent; it is even questionable whether the reading which calls him 'the Tishbite' is correct. We only know that he was of Gilead, and therefore used to a ruder, freer, simpler life than that in kings' palaces.

The natural conclusion from the narrative is that the prophet and the king had never met before; and, if so, the stern brevity of the threat is even more remarkable. In any case, the absence of explanation of reasons for the drought, or of credentials of Elijah, or of offers of mercy on condition of repentance, give a peculiarly grim aspect to the message, and make it a dangerous one to carry to such a hearer as Ahab, stirred up by Jezebel. When God commands us to speak, no thought of peril must make us dumb. If the 'word of the Lord' is to sound from our lips with power, it must first have absolute sway over ourselves. One man with God at his back, who fears nothing, can work marvels.

God's servant is men's master. The vision of God's Presence paled the splendour, and blunted the perils, of the court of Samaria. Ahab was but a poor puppet in the sight of eyes that 'saw the Lord sitting on His throne, high and lifted up.' So the very first words of Elijah lay bare the secret spring of his fiery energy and courage. 'Before whom I stand,'—that is the thought to put nerve, daring, and disregard of earth into a man.

James's comment on this incident assumes that the declaration to Ahab followed earnest prayer that it might not rain, and that the 'word' which should end the drought was also prayer. The truest lover of his country or of any men may sometimes have to wish for losses and sorrows. Elijah did not open and shut the heavens, but his prayer had power to move the Hand that 'openeth and no man shutteth.'

II. The Prophet and the Ravens.—One would like to know how Elijah made his escape from Ahab; but the whole story is marked by sudden appearances and disappearances. He flashes into sight and flames for a moment, and then is swallowed up in the dark again. The exact position of the brook Cherith is doubtful. It would seem most natural to look for it across Jordan, as safer and more familiar ground to Elijah than any of the tributaries on the western side. At all events, somewhere among the savage rocks in some wady with a trickle of water down it, and rank vegetation that would help to hide him, he lurked for an indefinite period, alone with God.

Why did he flee? Not only for safety, but that the period of the drought might be prolonged till it had done its work, and that the prophet might learn more lessons for his calling. Good Obadiah would have made a place for the chief of the prophets in his caves; but the man who is to do work like Elijah's must live in solitude. Cherith was part of the training for Carmel. The flight thither was as much an act of obedient faith as was the appearance before the king. However the necessity of flight was impressed on the prophet, it was impressed on him as manifestly not his own plan, but God's command; and though the journey was a weary one, and the appointed place of refuge inhospitable, the command was unhesitatingly obeyed. He was not left to wonder how he was to be fed when he got there, but God gave him, what He seldom gives—a previous assurance of miraculous provision, which obviously met some unspoken thought. We do not usually know how we are to be fed in the solitude till we get there; but if our doubting hearts object, 'But, Lord, there is nothing at Cherith but a brook and some ravens,' He sometimes gives us assurance that these will be enough. Whether or no, the duty is the same,—to follow God's voice, whether it take us face to face with Ahab and Jezebel or into the wild gorge.

Note that the same words are employed about the ravens and the widow: 'I have commanded the. . . to feed thee.' God has ways of reaching the mysterious animal instinct and the mysterious human will, and each, in its own way, obeys. It is needless to try to pare down the miracle by saying that, of course, ravens would haunt the water-courses in drought, and that the food which they brought might be for their young, and so on. The daily regularity of the supply takes it out of the natural category, to say nothing of the remarkable breed which the ravens must have been of, if they brought their young ones' food within reach and let the prophet take it.

People take offence at the abundance of miracles in the lives of Elijah and Elisha, and assert that some of them, this among the rest, are for unworthily trivial occasions. But the grave crisis in Israel is to be taken into account, which involved the necessity for unusual manifestations of divine power, and very evident credentials for the prophets; and the preparation of Elijah for his tremendous struggle was, even to our eyes, surely an adequate end for miracle. How could he doubt that God had sent him and would care for him, with such memories as those of his winged purveyors? How could he doubt future words which should come to him, when he recalled how marvellously this one had been fulfilled? The silence of the ravine, the long days and nights of solitude, the punctual

arrival of his food, would all tend to weld his faith into yet more close-knit strength. If we may so say, it was worth God's while to work miracles, to make Elijah. The highest end of creation is the production of God-fearing men. All things serve the soul that serves God.

III. The Prophet and the Widow.—The little stream that came down the wady dried up 'after a while'; and Elijah, no doubt, would wonder what was to be done next, as he saw it daily sending a thinner thread to Jordan. But he was not told till the channel was dry, and the pebbles in its bed bleaching in the sun. God makes us sometimes wait on beside a diminishing rivulet, and keeps us ignorant of the next step, till it is dry. Patience is an element in strength. It was a far cry from Cherith to Zarephath, right across the kingdom of Ahab; and to run for refuge to a dependency of Zidon, Jezebel's country, looked like putting his head in the lion's mouth. But the same 'command' which the ravens had obeyed had smoothed his way.

So he girded up his loins, and left, no doubt reluctantly, the brook for a city. How his heart would bow in adoring thankfulness, when the first person he saw outside the little 'city' was 'the widow'! He knew her; did she know him? The natural interpretation of verse 9 is that, at the time when God spoke to Elijah, he had already 'commanded' the woman. But the despondent tone of her answer seems against that idea; and perhaps we are to suppose that, just as the ravens were commanded and knew not by whom, so this woman received the command, when she saw the travel-stained and gaunt stranger, through her womanly impulses of compassion, not knowing who moved them nor what she did when she sheltered the man whose life was, at that moment, the most important in the world. The motions of pity and charity are of God, and He commands us to help when He sets before us those who need help.

The whole incident was a lesson to the prophet. He might well have thought that God had sent him to a strange helper in this poor widow with her empty cupboard; and it must have taken some faith on his part to reassure her with his cheery 'Fear not!' The prediction of the undiminishing stores demanded as much faith from its speaker as from its hearer.

It was a lesson in faith for the woman too. Her use of the phrase 'the Lord thy God' may imply some inclination to the worship of Jehovah, and so there may have been a little glimmer of faith in her; but she was full of sorrow and despair, and yet willing to help the stranger with the 'little water in a vessel,' though the 'morsel of bread in thine hand' was beyond her power. Elijah's apparently selfish demand that his wants should be looked after first was a test of her faith. Sometimes self-denying duty is made clearly imperative on us, before we hear the promise which, believed, will make it easy. They who have ears to hear the command, and hearts to obey, even if it seem to strip them of all, will soon hear the assurance that secures abundance. The barrel would have been empty by nightfall, if the meal in it had been used for the woman and her son. The continuance of supply depended on her obedience, which, in its turn, depended on faith in the prophet as a messenger of God. 'There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth.' The use of earthly goods for God's service may not be rewarded with the increase of them; but, if the barrel is not kept full of meal, the heart will be kept full of peace, which is better. No sacrifice for God is ever thrown away. He remains in no man's debt.

The incident has a further bearing, as an instance of a divine benediction resting on heathendom. The synagogue at Nazareth pointed that lesson for us. Elijah and the widow both learned that the God of Israel is the God of all the earth, and that His prophets have a mission to every race. The woman rebuked, by her pity and self-denying benevolence, the prejudices of Israel; the prophet foreshadowed, by his familiar abode with one won from idolatry to the worship of God, the universal aspect of the Jewish religion, and its destiny to overleap the narrow bounds of the nation. Charity and pity have no geographical limits. Much less can the love of God and the light of His revelation be bounded by any narrower circle than the circumference of the world.

1 Kings 17:1 Elijah Standing Before the LORD

This solemn and remarkable adjuration seems to have been habitual upon Elijah's lips in the great crises of his life. We never find it used by any but himself, and his scholar and successor, Elisha. Both of them employ it under similar circumstances, as if unveiling the very secret of their lives, the reason for their strength, and for their undaunted bearing and bold fronting of all antagonism. We find four instances in their two lives of the use of the phrase. Elijah bursts abruptly on the stage and opens his mouth for the first time to Ahab, to proclaim the coming of that terrible and protracted drought; and he bases his prophecy on that great oath, 'As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand.' And again, when he is sent to confront Ahab once more at the close of the period, the same mighty word comes, 'As the Lord of Hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself unto him this day.' And then again, Elisha, when he is brought before the three confederate kings, who taunt, and threaten, and flatter, to try to draw smooth things from his lips, and get his sanction to their mad warfare, turns upon the poor creature that called himself the King of Israel with a superb contempt that stayed itself on that same great name and tells him, 'As the Lord liveth before whom I stand, were it not that I had regard for the King of Judah, I would not look toward you or see you,' And lastly, when the grateful Naaman seeks to change the whole character of Elisha's miracle, and to turn it into the coarseness of a thing done for reward, once again the temptation is brushed aside with that solemn word, 'As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none.'

So at every crisis where these prophets were brought full front with hostile power; where a tremendous message was laid upon their hearts and lips to utter; where natural strength would fail; where they were likely to be daunted or dazzled by temptations, by either the sweetness or the terrors of material things, these two great heroes of the Old Covenant, out of sight the strongest men in the old

Jewish history, steady themselves by one thought,—God lives, and I am His servant.

For that phrase, 'before whom I stand,' obviously means chiefly 'whom I serve.' It is found, for instance, in Deuteronomy, where the priest's office is thus defined: 'The sons of Levi shall stand before the Lord to minister unto Him.' And in the same way, it is used in the Queen of Sheba's wondering exclamation to Solomon, 'Blessed are thy servants, and blessed are the men that stand before thy face continually.'

So that the consciousness that they were servants of the living God was the very secret of the power of these men. This expression, which thus started to their lips in moments of strain and trial, lets us see into the very inmost heart of their strength. These two great lives, which fill so large a apace in the records of the past, and will be remembered for ever, were braced and ennobled thus. The same grand thought is available to brace and ennoble our little lives, that will soon be forgotten but by a loving heart or two, and yet may be as full of God and of God's service as those of any of the great of old. We too may use this secret of power, 'The Lord liveth, before whom I stand.'

What thoughts then, which may tend to lift and invigorate our days, are included in these words? The first is surely this—Life a constant vision of God's presence.

How distinct and abiding must the vision of God have been, which burned before the inward eye of the man that struck out that phrase! 'Wherever I am, whatever I do, I am before Him. To my purged eye, there is the Apocalypse of heaven, and I behold the great throne, and the solemn ranks of ministering spirits, my fellow-servants, hearkening to the voice of His word.' No excitement of work, no strain of effort, no distraction of circumstances, no glitter of gold, no dazzle of earthly brightness, dimmed that vision for these prophets. In some measure, it was with them as it shall be perfectly with all one day, 'His servants serve Him, and see His face,'—action not interrupting vision, nor vision weakening action. To preserve thus fresh and unimpaired, amidst strenuous work and many temptations, the clear consciousness of being 'ever in the great Taskmaster's eye,' needs resolute effort and much self-restraint. It is hard to set the Lord always before us; but it is possible, and in the measure in which we do it, we shall not be moved.

How nobly the steadfastness and superiority to all temptations which such a vision gives, are illustrated by the occasions, in these prophets' lives, in which this expression came to their lips! The servant of the Heavenly King speaks from his present intuition. As he speaks, he sees the throne in the heavens, and the Sovereign Ruler there, and the sight bears him up from quailing before the earthly monarchs whom he had to beard, and in connection with whom three out of the four instances of the use of the phrase occur. How small Ahab and his court must have looked to eyes that were full of the undazzling brightness of the true King of Israel, and the ordered ranks of His attendants! How little the greatness! How tawdry the pomp! How impotent the power, and how toothless the threats! The poor show of the earthly king paled before that awful vision, as a dim candle will show black against the sun. 'I stand before the living God, and thou, O Ahab! art but a shadow and a noise.' Just as we may have looked upon some mountain scene, where all the highest summits were wrapt in mist, and the lower hills looked mighty and majestic, until some puff of wind came and rolled up the curtain that had shrined and hidden the icy pinnacles and peaks that were higher up. And as that solemn white apocalypse rose and towered to the heavens, we forgot all about the green hills below, because our eyes beheld the mighty summits that live amongst the stars, and sparkle white through eternity.

My brethren, here is our defence against being led away by the gauds and shows of earth's vulgar attractions, or being terrified by the poor terrors of its enmity. Go with that talisman in your hand, 'The Lord liveth, before whom I stand,' and everything else dwindles down into nothingness, and you are a free man, master and lord of all things, because you are God's servants, seeing all things aright, because you see them all in God, and God in them all.

Still further, we may say that this phrase is the utterance and expression of a consciousness that life was echoing with the voice of the divine command. Elijah stands before the Lord, not only feeling in his thrilling spirit that God is ever near him, but also that His word is ever coming forth to him, with imperative authority. That is the prophet's conception of life. Wherever he is, he hears a voice saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it.' Every place where he stands is as the very holy place of the oracles of the Most High, the spot in the innermost shrine where the voice of God is audible, All circumstances are the voice of God, commanding or restraining. He is evermore pursued, nay, rather upheld and guided, by an all-embracing law. That law is no mere utterance of cold impersonal duty,—a thought which may make men slaves, but never makes them good. But it is the voice of the living God, loving and beloved, whose tender care for His children modulates His tone, while He commands them for their good. He speaks because He loves; His law is life. The heart that hears Him speak is filled with music.

Ahab and Jehoram, and all the kings of the earth, may thunder and lighten, may threaten and flatter, may command and forbid, as they list. They and their words are nought to him whose trembling ears have heard, and whose obedient heart has received, a higher command, and to whom, 'across the storm,' comes the deeper voice of the one true Commander, whom alone it is a glory absolutely to obey, even 'the Lord, before whom I stand.' People talk about the consciousness of 'a mission.' The important point, on the settling of which depends the whole character of our lives, is—Who do you suppose gave you your 'mission'? Was it any person at all? or have you any consciousness that any will but your own has anything to say about your life? These prophets had found One

whom it was worth while to obey, whatever came of it, and whoever stood in the way. May it be so with you and me, my friend! Let us try always to feel that in the commonest things we may hear the command of God; that the trifles of each day—trifles though they be—vibrate and sound with the reverberation of His great voice; that in all the outward circumstances of our lives, as in all the deep recesses of our hearts, we may trace the indications and rudiments of His will concerning us, which He has perfectly given us in that Gospel which is 'the law of liberty,' and in Him who is the Gospel and the perfect Law. Then quietly, without bluster or mock-heroics, or making a fuss about our independence, we can put all other commands and commanders in their right place, with the old words, 'With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you, or of man's judgment; He that judgeth me,' and He that commandeth me, 'is the Lord,' In answer to all the noise about us we can face round like Elijah, and say, 'As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand.' He is my 'Imperator,' the Autocrat and Commander of my life; and Him, and Him only, must I serve. What calmness, what dignity that would put into our lives! The never-ceasing boom of the great ocean, as it breaks on the beach, drowns all smaller sounds. Those lives are noble and great in which that deep voice is ever dominant, sounding on through all lesser voices, and day and night filling the soul with command and awe.

Then, still further, we may take another view of these words. They are the utterance of a man to whom his life was not only bright with the radiance of a divine presence, and musical with the voice of a divine command, but was also, on his part, full of conscious obedience. No man could say such a thing of himself who did not feel that he was rendering a real, earnest, though imperfect obedience to God. So, though in one view the words express a very lowly sense of absolute submission before God, in another view they make a lofty claim for the utterer. He professes that he stands before the Lord, girt for His service, watching to be guided by His eye, and ready to run when He bids. It is the same lofty sense of communion and consecration, issuing in authority over others, which Elijah's true brother in later days, Paul the Apostle, put forth when he made known to his companions in shipwreck the will of 'the God, whose I am, and whom I serve.' We may well shrink from making that claim for ourselves, when we think of the poor, perfunctory service and partial consecration which our lives show. But let us rejoice that even we may venture to say, 'Truly I am Thy servant'; if only we, like the Psalmist, rest the confession on the perfectness of what He has done for us, rather than on the imperfection of what we have done for Him; and lay, as its foundation, 'Thou hast loosed my bonds.' Then, though we must ever feel how poor our service, and how unprofitable ourselves, how little we deserve the honour, and how impossible that we should ever earn the least mite of wages; yet we may, in all lowliness, think of ourselves as set free that we may serve, and lift our eyes, as the eyes of a servant turn towards his master, to 'the living Lord, before whom we stand.

Such a life is necessarily a happy life. The one misery of man is self-will, the one secret of blessedness is the conquest over our own wills. To yield them up to God is rest and peace. If we 'stand before God,' then that means that our wills are brought into harmony with His. And that means that the one poison drop is squeezed out of our lives, and that sweetness and joy are infused into them. For what disturbs us in this world is not 'trouble' but our opposition to trouble. The true source of all that frets and irritates, and wears away our lives, is not in external things, but in the resistance of our wills to the will of God expressed by external things. I suppose that we shall never here bring these wills of ours into perfect correspondence with His, any more than we shall ever, with our shaking hands and blunt pencils, draw a perfectly straight line. But if will and heart are brought even to a rude approach to parallelism with His, if we accept His voice when He takes away, and obey it when He commands, we shall be quiet and peaceful. We shall be strong and unwearied, freed from corroding cares and exhausting rebellions, which take far more out of a man than any work does. 'Thy word was found, and I did eat it.' When we thus take God's command into our spirits, and feed upon it with will and understanding, it becomes, as the Psalmist found it, the 'joy and rejoicing of our hearts.' Elijah-like, we shall 'go in the strength of that meat many days.' The secret of power and of calm is—yield your will to the loving Lord, and stand ever before Him with, 'Here am I, send me!'

We may add one more remark to these various views of the significance of this expression, to which the last instance of its use may help us. Here it is: 'And Naaman said, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant. But he said, As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none.'

The thought, which made all Elisha's life bright with the light of God's presence, which filled his ear with the unremitting voice of a Divine Law, which swayed and bowed his will to joyful obedience, chilled and deadened his desires for all earthly rewards. 'I am not thy servant. I am God's servant. It is not your business to pay my wages. I cannot dishonour my Master by taking payment from thee for doing His work. I look for everything from Him, for nothing from thee.'

And is there not a broad general truth involved there, namely, that such a life as we have been describing will find its sole reward where it finds its inspiration and its law? The Master's approval is the servant's best wages. If we truly feel that 'the Lord liveth , before whom we stand, 'we shall want nothing else for our work but His smile, and we shall feel that the light of His face is all that we need. That thought should deaden our love for outward things. How little we need to care about any payment that the world can give for anything we do! If we feel, as we ought, that we are God's servants, that will lift us clear above the low aims and desires which meet us. How little we shall care for money, for men's praise, for getting on in the world! How the things that we fever our souls by pursuing, and fret our hearts when we lose, will cease to attract! How small and vulgar the 'prizes' of life, as people call them, will appear! 'The Lord liveth, before whom I stand,' should be enough for us, and instead of all these motives to action drawn from the

rewards of this world, we ought to ‘labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him.’

Not the fading leaves of the victor’s wreath, laurel though they be, nor the corruptible things as silver and gold, whereof earth’s diadems and rewards are fashioned, but the incorruptible crown that fadeth not away, which His hand will give, should fire our hope, and shine before our faith. Not Naaman’s gifts but God’s approval is Elisha’s reward. Not the praise from lips that will perish, or the ‘hollow wraith of dying fame,’ but Christ’s ‘Well done! good and faithful servant,’ should be a Christian’s aim.

May we, brethren, possess the ‘spirit and the power of Elias’;—the spirit, in that we know ourselves to be the servants of the living God; and then we shall have some measure of his dauntless power and heroic unworldliness!

Still better, may we have the Spirit of Him who was ‘ the Servant of the Lord,’ diviner in His gentle meekness than the fiery prophet in his lonely strength! Make yours the mind that was in Christ, that you too may say, ‘Lo, I come! in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, yea, Thy law is within my heart.’

1 Kings 18:12: Obadiah: To the Young

This Obadiah is one of the obscurer figures in the Old Testament. We never hear of him again, for there is no reason to accept the Jewish tradition which alleges that he was Obadiah the prophet. And yet how distinctly he stands out from the canvas, though he is only sketched with a few bold outlines! He is the ‘governor over Ahab’s house,’ a kind of mayor of the palace, and probably the second man in the kingdom. But though thus high in that idolatrous and self-willed court, he has bravely kept true to the ancient faith. Neither Jezebel’s flatteries nor her frowns have moved him. But there, amid apostasy and idolatry he stands, probably all alone in the court, a worshipper of Jehovah. His name is his character, for it means ‘servant of Jehovah.’ It was not a light thing to be a worshipper of the God of Israel in Ahab’s court. The feminine rage of the fierce Sidonian woman, whom Ahab obeyed in most things, burned hot against the enemies of her father’s gods, and hotter, perhaps, against any one who thwarted her imperious will. Obadiah did both, in that audacious piece of benevolence when he sheltered the Lord’s prophets—one hundred of them—and saved them from her cruel search. The writer of the book very rightly marks this brave antagonism to the outburst of the queen’s wrath as a signal proof of a more than ordinary devotion to the worship and fear of Jehovah. His firmness and his religion did not prevent his retaining his place of honour and dignity. That says something for Ahab, and more perhaps for Obadiah.

Most of you believe that you ought to ‘fear the Lord’: but you are apt to put off, and so I wish to urge on you that you should give your hearts to Jesus Christ at once.

I. The blessedness of youthful religion.

(a) It guards from many temptations, and keeps a character innocent of much transgression.

Think of the dangers that lie thick in the streets of every great city, and of a lad coming up from a country home of godliness, where he was surrounded by a mother’s love and an atmosphere of purity, and launched into some lonely lodging, or some factory or warehouse with many tempters. Nothing will be such a help to resistance and victory as to be able to say, ‘So did not I because of the fear of the Lord.’

(b) It will save from remorse. Even if a man ‘sobers down’ after ‘sowing his wild oats,’ which is a very problematical ‘if,’ what bitter memories of wasted days, what polluting memories of filthy ones, will haunt him! And if he does not sober down, what then?

It is folly to begin life on a wrong tack, in regard to which the best that you can say is that you do not mean to continue it. If you do not, then the wise thing is to get at once on to the road on which you do mean to continue, and to save the weary work of retracing steps and the painful consciousness of having made a false start. Are you so sure that you will wish, or that it will be possible, to face right about and get on to a new line? Fishermen catch lobsters and the like by means of baskets with one opening, the withes of which are so set that the entrance is easy, but that a ring of sharp points oppose all attempts at turning back and getting out. The world lays ‘pots’ of that sort, and many a young man and woman glides smoothly in, and finds it impossible to get out.

(c) It usually leads to a deeper and more peaceful and harmonious religion than is attained by those who have given the world the better part of their days, and have only the last fragment of them to give to God. Obadiah had feared God from his youth, and that had a good deal to do with his brave stand against Jezebel. It is a grand thing to enlist habit on the side of godliness.

II. The foes of youthful religion.

There are foes within . . .. the strong self-reliance and bounding life proper to youth, without which at the opening of the flower, the bloom would be poor and the fruit little, . . . the power of appeals to the unjaded and physically strong senses, . . . the difficulty at such a stage of life of looking forward and soberly regarding the end.

There are foes without . . ..the crowds of tempters of both sexes, men and women who take a devilish pleasure in polluting innocent

minds, . . . the companions whose jeers are worse to face than a battery, . . . the inconsistencies of so-called Christians, the anti-Christian literature which is peculiarly fascinating to the young, with its brave show of breaking with mouldy tradition and enthroning reason and emancipating from rusty fetters.

III. The too probable alternative to youthful religion.

It is but too likely that, if a man does not 'fear the Lord' from 'his youth,' he will never fear Him. Thank God, there is no time nor condition of life in which the wicked man cannot 'forsake his way,' or 'the unrighteous man his thoughts,' and 'turn to the Lord' with the assurance that 'He will abundantly pardon.' But it is sadly too plain to observation, and to the experience of some of us, that obstacles grow with years, that habits and associations grip with increasing power, that in all things our natures become less flexible, the supple sapling becoming gnarled and tough, that a middle-aged or old man is more inextricably 'tied and bound by the cords of his sins,' than a young one is.

Sin lies to us by first saying, 'It is too soon to be religious,' and then it lies to us by saying, 'It is too late.'

The inclination diminishes. The Gospel long heard and long put aside, loses power.

Contrast the beauty of a course of life, begun on the same lines as those on which it ends, and being like 'the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the meridian of the day,' with one which gave the greater part of its years to 'the world, the flesh, and the devil,' or at least to one's godless self, and the dregs of it only to God.

1 Kings 18:25-39: The Trial by Fire

The place, the purpose, and the actors in this scene, make it among the grandest in history. A nation, with its king, has come together, at the bidding of one man, to settle no less a question than whom they shall worship. There, on the slope of Carmel, with the brassy heaven gleaming hard and dry above them, and the yellow, burnt-up plain of Jezreel at their feet, the expectant people stand. The assembly was a singular proof of Elijah's ascendency; for Ahab's bluster had sunk, cowed in his presence, and he had meekly done the prophet's bidding in summoning 'all Israel' and the eight hundred and fifty Baal and Asherah prophets, for an unexplained purpose. The false priests would come unwillingly; but they came.

Then Elijah takes the command, and, though utterly alone, towers above the crowd in the courage of his undaunted confidence in his message. His words have the ring of authority as he rebukes indecision, and calls for a clear adhesion to Baal or Jehovah. If the people had answered, the trial by fire would have been needless. But their silence shows that they waver, and therefore he makes his proposal to them.

Note that the priests are not consulted, nor is Ahab. The former would have had some excuse for shirking the sharp issue; but the people's assent forced them to accept the ordeal,—reluctantly enough, no doubt.

I. The vain cries to a deaf God.

It is strange that one of the parties to the test has power to determine its conditions, especially as Elijah's prophetic authority was one of the things in dispute; but it is a sign of the magnetic power which one bold man with absolute confidence in his own convictions exercises over men. The Baal prophets are given every advantage in priority of action. Error is best unmasked by being allowed free opportunity to do its best; for the more favourable the circumstances of trial, the more signal the defeat. God's servants must never be suspected of unfair tricks in their controversy with error. They can afford to let it try first. Notice the substitution of 'your god,' in the Revised Version, for 'your gods' in the Authorised Version. That is obviously right; for the only question was about one god,—namely, Baal.

So, in the early morning, with all the people gazing at them, the Baal priests or prophets begin their attempt. It was easy to prepare the sacrifice, and lay it on the altar,—though, no doubt, it was done sullenly, with foreboding of the coming exposure. The whole account of the wild invocations of the priests may suggest some of the characteristics of idolatry, and touch our hearts with pity, as well as with the sense of its absurdity, which animated Elijah's mockery.

Note, then, the vivid picture, in verse 27 , of the long hours of vain crying. On the one hand, we hear the wild chorus echoing among the rocks; on the other, we feel the dead silence in the heavens.

The monotonous and almost mechanical repetition of the invocation, prolonged till the syllables have no meaning to the yelling crowd, is characteristic of the frenzied excitement so common in idolatry. To call such howlings prayer, degrades the name. They are the very opposite of that sacred communion of a believing soul with the God whom it knows, trusts, and beseeches with submission. Neither knowledge nor trust is in these shrieks, which seek to propitiate the stern god by repeating his name as a kind of charm. Heathenism has no true prayer. Wild cries and passionate desires, flung upwards to an unloved god, are not prayer; and that solace and anchor of the troubled soul is wanting in all the dreary lands given up to idolatry.

The melancholy persistence of the unanswered cries may stand as a symbol of the tragic obstinacy with which their devotees cling to their vain gods,—a rebuke to us with a more enlightened faith. The silence, which was the only answer, is put in strong contrast with the continuous roar of the four hundred and fifty,—so long and loud the hoarse cries here, so unmoved the stillness in the careless heaven. That, too, is typical of heathenism, which is sad with unavailing cries and ignorant of answers to any. As the day wore on, and the voices grew hoarse, and hope declined, more violent bodily exercise was resorted to, and the shouting crowd danced (or, perhaps, as the margin says, 'limped,'—a picturesque and contemptuous word for the grotesque contortions around the altar), as if that might bring the answer. That again is a feature common to all heathenism. No wonder that Elijah's scorn broke forth vehemently at such a sight. Noon was the hour of the sun's greatest power, and, since Baal was probably a solar deity, it was the hour when, if ever, he would spare one of his abundant fiery beams to light the pyre. So Elijah's taunts came just when they were most biting, and none can say that they were undeserved. His fiery zeal and his naturally stern character broke out in the bitter irony with which he imagines a variety of undignified positions for Baal.

Sarcasm is not the highest weapon, and the 'spirit of Elijah' is not the spirit of Jesus; but the exposure of the absurdity of idolatry is legitimate, and even ridicule may have its place in pricking wind-distended bladders. A man throttling a serpent may be excused using anything that comes handy for the purpose. But, at the same time, the right attitude for us as Christians in the presence of that awful fact of idolatry, is neither contempt nor scientific curiosity, but pity deep as Christ's, and earnest resolve to help our darkened brethren. The taunts stirred to fiercer excitement and more extravagant acts, as ridicule is wont to do, and therein proves itself an unreliable instrument of controversy. Laughing at a man generally makes him more obstinate. The priests answered Elijah by savagely gashing their half-naked bodies with knives and lances,—a ready way to make blood come, but not to bring fire. The frenzy became wilder as the day declined, and at last, covered with blood, hoarse with shouting, panting with their gymnastics, they 'prophesied,' having wrought themselves into that state of excitement in which incoherent rhapsodies burst from their lips. What a scene to call worship! That is what millions of men are ready to practise to-day. And all the while there is no voice, no answer, no care for them, in the pitiless sky. The very genius of idolatry is set before us in that tumultuous crowd on Carmel.

II. The sacrifice of faith and the answer by fire.

We pass from a scene of wild commotion into an atmosphere of sacred calm in verse 30 . The contrast is striking. The fiery fervours of the day are past, and the sun is sinking behind the top of Carmel, and there is much to do before it sets. Elijah with his own hands, as would appear, repairs a ruined altar among the woods. Probably it had been erected for secret worship of Jehovah by some faithful amid the national apostasy, when access to Jerusalem was forbidden them, and had been destroyed by Ahab in his crusade against Jehovah worshippers. The selection of the twelve stones was symbolical of the unbroken unity of the nation, and was Elijah's protest against the very existence of the Northern kingdom, and its assumption of the name of 'Israel' The writer explains what was meant, when he reminds us that Israel was the name given to Jacob, and therefore, as he would have us infer, was the common property of all his descendants. Judah was a part of Israel, and Israel should be an undivided whole, uniting in all its tribes in bringing offerings to Jehovah.

It was a daring thing to do before Ahab's face; but the weak king was, for the time, subjugated by the imperious will and courage of Elijah. The building of the altar, with its mute witness to God's purpose, would touch some hearts in the gazing, silent crowd. The next step was, of course, meant to make the miracle more conspicuous by drenching everything with water, probably brought, even in that drought, from the perennial fountain near at hand. Perhaps, too, the number of barrels was intended, again, as symbolical of the twelve tribes.

One can fancy the wonder and eagerness of the people, and the dark frowns of the baffled and exhausted Baal priests, as they gradually came out of their frenzy, and knew that they had lost their opportunity. The tranquil though earnest prayer of the prophet is in sharpest contrast with the meaningless bellowings to Baal. Note in it the solemn invocation. The great Name, which all listening to him had deposed from rule over them, is set in the front; and the ancestral worship, as well as the divine gifts and dealings with the patriarchs, is pleaded with God as the reason for His answer now. The name of 'Israel' instead of the more common 'Jacob,' has the same force as in verse 31 .

Note the substance of the petitions. The deepest desire of a truly devout soul is that God would make His name known. Zeal for God's honour and love for men who have gone astray from Him, conspire to make that the head and front of His true servant's prayers. It is God, not his own credit, about which Elijah thinks first. For himself, all that he desires is to be known as an obedient servant, and as not having done anything at the bidding of his own will or judgment, but in accordance with the all-commanding Voice.

Clearly we must suppose that in all the ordering of this sublime trial by fire, Elijah had been acting 'at Thy word,' even though we have no other record of the fact. He had no right to expect an answer unless he had been bidden to propose the test. God will honour the drafts which He bids us draw on Him; but to suspend our own or other people's faith in Him, on the issue of some experiment whether He will answer prayers, is not faith, but rash presumption, unless it is in obedience to a distinct command. Elijah

had such a command, and therefore he could ask God to vindicate his action, and to prove that he was God's servant. His last petition is beautiful, both in its consciousness of power with God and recognition of his place as a prophet, and in its lowly subordination of all personal aims to the restoration of Israel to the true worship. He asks, with reiteration which is earnestness and faith, and therefore the sharpest contrast to the mechanical repetition by Baal's priests, that God would hear him; but his sole object in that prayer is, not that his name may be exalted as a prophet, or that any good may come to him, but that the blinded eyes may be opened, and the hearts, that have been so sadly led astray, be brought back to the worship of their fathers' God.

The whole brief prayer, in its calm confidence; its adoring recognition of the name and past dealings of Jehovah as the ground of trust; its throbbing of earnest desire for the manifestation of His character before men; its consciousness of personal relation to God, which humbles rather than puffs up; its beseeching for an answer, and its closing petition, which comes round again to its first, that men may know God, and fasten their hearts on Him,—may well stand as a pattern of prayer for us.

The short prayer of faith does in a moment what all the long day of crying could not do. The language in which the answer is described emulates the rapidity of the swift tongues of fire which licked up sacrifice, altar, and water. They were the tokens of acceptance, reminding of the consuming of the first sacrifices in the Tabernacle, and, like them, inaugurating a new beginning of the worship of God. The burning of the altar, as well as of the sacrifice, expressed the acceptance of the people whom it, by its twelve stones, symbolised. And the people, on their part, were—for the time, at all events—swept away by the miracle, and by the force of the prophet's example and authority. Short-lived their faith may have been, as certainly it was superficial; but the fire had for the time melted their hearts, and set them flowing in the ancient channels of devotion. The faith that is founded on miracle may be deepened into something better; but unless it is, it speedily dies away. The faith that is due to the influence of some strong personality may lead on to an independent faith, based on personal experience; but, unless it does, it too will perish.

We may find a modern reproduction of the test of Carmel in the impotence of all other schemes and methods of social and spiritual reformation and the power of the Gospel. In it and its effects God answers by fire. Let the opposers, who are so glib in demonstrating the failure of Christianity, do the same with their enchantments, if they can.

1 Kings 19:1-18 Elijah's Weakness and its Cure

The miracle on Carmel cowed, if it did not convince, Ahab, so that he did not oppose the slaughter of the Baal prophets; but Jezebel was made of sterner stuff, and her passionate idolatry was proof against even a sign from heaven. Obstinacy in error is often a rebuke to tremulous faith in God. She fiercely puts her back to the wall, and defies Elijah and his God. Her threat to the prophet has a certain audacity of frankness almost approaching generosity. She will give her victim fair play. This woman is 'magnificent in sin.' The Septuagint prefixes to her oath, 'As surely as thou art Elijah and I Jezebel,' which adds force to it. It also reads, by a very slight change in the Hebrew, in verse 3 , 'he was afraid,' for 'he saw,'—which is possibly right, as giving his motive for escape more distinctly.

I. We may note, first, the prophet's flight (verses 3-8).

Beersheba, on the southern border of the kingdom of Judah, was eloquent of memories of the patriarchs, but though it was nearly a hundred miles from Jezreel, Jezebel's arm was long enough to reach the fugitive there, and therefore he plunged deeper into the dreary southern desert. He left behind him his servant, his 'young man,' as the original has it, whom Rabbinical tradition identified with the miraculously resuscitated son of the widow of Zarephath, and supposed to become afterwards the prophet Jonah. Thus alone but for the company of his own gloomy thoughts, and wearied with toilsome travel in the sun-smitten waste, he took shelter under the shadow of a solitary shrub (the Hebrew emphatically calls it ' one juniper,' or rather 'broom-plant'), and there the waves of depression went over him.

His complaint is not to be wondered at, though it was wrong. The very overstrain of the scene on Carmel brought reaction. The height of the crest of one wave measures the depth of the trough of the next, and no mortal spirit can keep itself at the sublime elevation reached by Elijah when alone he fronted and converted a nation. The supposed necessity for flight, coming so immediately after apparent victory, showed him how hollow the change in the people was. What had become of all the fervency of their shout, 'The Lord, He is the God!' if they could leave Jezebel the power to carry out her threat? Solitude and the awful desert increased his gloom. The strong man had become weak, and it was ebb-tide with him. His prayer was petulant, impatient, presumptuous. What right had he to settle what was 'enough'? If he really wished to die, he could have found death at Jezreel, and had no need to travel a hundred miles to seek a grave. He was weary of his work, and profoundly disappointed by what he hastily concluded was its failure, and in a fit of faithless despondency he forgot reverence, submission, and obedience.

If Elijah can become weak, and his courage die out, and his zeal become torpid apathy and cowardly wish to shuffle off responsibility and shirk work, who shall stand? The lessons of self-distrust, of the nearness to one another of the most opposite emotions in our weak natures, of the depth of gloom into which the boldest and brightest servant of God may fall as soon as he loses hold of God's

hand, never had a more striking instance to point them than that mighty prophet, sitting huddled together in utter despondency below the solitary retem bush, praying his foolish prayer for death.

The meal to which an angel twice waked him was God's answer to his prayer, telling him both that his life was still needful and that God cared for him. Perhaps one of Elijah's reasons for taking to the desert was the thought that he might starve there, and so find death. At all events, God for the third time miraculously provides his food. The ravens, the widow of Zarephath, an angel, were his caterers; and, instead of taking away his life, God Himself sends the bread and water to preserve it. The revelation of a watchful, tender Providence often rebukes gloomy unbelief and shames us back to faith. We are not told whether the journey to Horeb was commanded, or, like the flight from Jezreel, was Elijah's own doing; but, in any case, he must have wandered in the desert, to have taken forty days to reach it.

II. The second stage is the vision at Horeb (verses 9-14).

The history of Israel has never touched Horeb since Moses left it, and it is not without significance that we are once more on that sacred ground. The parallel between Moses and Elijah is very real. These two names stand out above all others in the history of the theocracy, the one as its founder, the other as its restorer; both distinguished by special revelations, both endowed with exceptional force of character and power of the Spirit; the one the lawgiver, the other the head of the prophetic order; both having something peculiar in their departure, and both standing together, in witness of their supremacy in the past, and of their inferiority in the future, by Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. The associations of the place are marked by the use of the definite article, which is missed in the Authorised Version,—'the cave,' that same cleft in the rock where Moses had stood. Note, too, that the word rendered 'lodged' is literally 'passed the night,' and that therefore we may suppose that the vision came to Elijah in the darkness.

That question, 'What doest thou here?' can scarcely be freed from a tone of rebuke; but, like Christ's to the travellers to Emmaus, and many another interrogation from God, it is also put in order to allow of the loaded heart's relieving itself by pouring out all its griefs. God's questions are the assurance of His listening ear and sympathising heart. This one is like a little key which opens a great sluice. Out gushes a full stream. His forty days' solitude have done little for him. A true answer would have been, 'I was afraid of Jezebel.' He takes credit for zeal, and seems to insinuate that he had been more zealous for God than God had been for Himself. He forgets the national acknowledgment of Jehovah at Carmel, and the hundred prophets protected by good Obadiah. Despondency has the knack of picking its facts. It is colour-blind, and can only see dark tints. He accuses his countrymen, as if he would stir up God to take vengeance.

How different this weak and sinful wail over his solitude from the heroic mention of it on Carmel, when it only nerved his courage I (verse 22). The divine manifestation which followed is evidently meant to recall that granted to Moses on the same spot. 'The Lord passed by' is all but verbally quoted from Exodus xxxiv. 6 , and the truth that had been proclaimed in words to Moses was enforced by symbol to Elijah. If the vision was in the night, as verse 9 suggests, it becomes still more impressive. The fierce wind that roared among the savage peaks, the shock that made the mountains reel, and the flashing flames that lighted up the wild landscape, were all phenomena of one kind, and at once expressed God's lordship over all destructive agencies of nature, and symbolised the more vehement and disturbing forms of energy, used by Him for the furtherance of His purposes in the field of history or of revelation. Elijah's ministry was of such a sort, and he had now to learn the limitations of his work, and the superiority of another type, represented by the 'sound of gentle stillness.'

It is the same lesson which Moses learned there, when he heard that the Lord is 'a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth.' It was exemplified in the gentle Elisha, the successor of Elijah. It reached far beyond the time then present, and was indeed a Messianic prophecy, declaring the inmost character of Him in whom 'the Lord is,' in an altogether special sense. Elijah as a prophet brought no new knowledge, and uttered no far-reaching predictions; but he received one of the deepest and clearest prophecies of the gentleness of God's highest Messenger, and on Horeb saw afar off what he saw fulfilled on the Mountain of Transfiguration. Nor is his vision exhausted by its Messianic reference. It contains an eternal truth for all God's servants. Storm, earthquake, and fire may be God's precursors, and needed sometimes to prepare His way; but gentleness is 'the habitation of His throne,' and they serve Him best, and are nearest Him whom they serve, who are meek in heart and gentle among enemies, 'as a nurse cherisheth her children.' Love is the victor, and the sharpest weapons of the Christian are love and lowliness.

The lesson was not at first grasped by Elijah, as his repetition of his complaint, word for word, with almost dogged obstinacy, shows. The best of us are slow to learn God's lessons, and a habit of faithless gloom is not soon overcome. It is much easier to get down into the pit than to struggle out of it.

III. The commission for further service, which closes the scene, is a further rebuke to the prophet.

He is bidden to retrace his way and to take refuge in the desert lying to the south and east of Damascus, where he would be safe from Jezebel, and still not far from the scene of his activity. The instructions given to anoint a king of Syria and one of Israel were not

fulfilled by Elijah, but by his successor; and we have to suppose that further commands were given to him on that subject. The third injunction, to anoint his successor, was obeyed at once on his journey, though Ahelmeholah, on Gilboa, was dangerously near Jezreel. The designation of these future instruments of God's purpose was at once a sign to Elijah that his own task was drawing to a close (having reached its climax on Carmel), and that God had great designs beyond him and his service. The true conception of our work is that we sire only links in a chain, and that we can be done without. 'God removes the workers and carries on the work.' To anoint our successor is often a bitter pill; but self-importance needs to be taken down, and it is blessed to lose ourselves in gazing into the future of God's work, when we are gone from the field.

Further, the commissions met Elijah's despondency in another way; for they assured him of the divine judgments on the house of Ahab, and of the use of the Syrian king as a rod to chastise Israel. He had thought God too slow in avenging His dishonoured name, and had been taught the might of gentleness; but now he also learns the certainty of punishment, while the enigmatical promise that Elisha should 'slay' those who escaped the swords of Hazael and Jehu dimly points to the merciful energy of that prophet's word, his only sword, which shall slay but to revive, and wound to heal. 'I have hewed them by the . . . words of my mouth.'

Finally, the revelation of the seven thousand—a round number, which expresses the sacredness as well as the numerousness of the elect, hidden ones—rebukes the hasty assumption of his being left alone, 'faithful among the faithless.' God has more servants than we know of. Let us beware of feeding either our self-righteousness or our narrowness or our faint-heartedness with the fancy that we have a monopoly of faithfulness, or are left alone to witness for God.

1 Kings 20:11 Putting on the Armour

For the Young .

Ahab, King of Israel, was but a poor creature, and, like most weak characters, he turned out a wicked one, because he found that there were more temptations to do wrong than inducements to do right. Like other weak people, too, he was torn asunder by the influence of stronger wills. On the one side he had a termagant of a wife, stirring him up to idolatry and all evil, and on the other side Elijah thundering and lightning at him; so the poor man was often reduced to perplexity. Once in his lifetime he did behave like a king, with some flash of dignity. My text comes from that incident. His next neighbour, and, consequently, his continual enemy, was the king of Damascus. He had made a raid across the border and was dictating terms so severe as to invite even Ahab to courageous opposition. His back was at the wall, and he mustered up courage to say 'No!' That provoked a bit of blustering bravado from the enemy, who sent back a message, 'The gods do also unto me and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people that follow me.' And then Ahab replied in the words of our text. They have a dash of contempt and sarcasm, all the more galling because of their unanswerable common-sense. 'The time to crow and clap your wings is after you have fought. Samaria is not a heap of dust just yet. Threatened men live long.' The battle began, and the bully was beaten; and for once Ahab tasted the sweets of success.

Now, I have nothing more to do with Ahab and the immediate application of his message, but I wish to apply it to my young friends, whom I have taken it upon me to ask now to listen to two or three homely words to them in this sermon.

You are beginning the fight; some of us old people are getting very near the end of it. And I would fain, if I could, see successors coming to take the places which we shall soon have to vacate. So my message to you, dear friends, young men and young women, is this, 'Let not him that putteth on the harness boast himself as he that putteth it off.'

I. Now, look for a moment at the general view of life that is implied in this saying thus understood.

There is nothing that the bulk of people are more unwilling to do than steadily to think about what life as a whole, and in its deepest aspects, is. And that disinclination is strong, as I suppose, in the average young man or young woman. That comes, plainly enough, from the very blessings of your stage of life. Unworn health, a blessed inexperience of failures and limitations, the sense of undeveloped power within you, the natural buoyancy of early days, all tend to make you rather live by impulse than by reflection. And I should be the last man in the world to try to damp the noble, buoyant, beautiful enthusiasms with which Nature has provided that we should all begin our course. The world will do that soon enough; and there is no sadder sight than that of a bitter old man, who has outlived, and smiles sardonically at, his youthful dreams. But I do wish to press upon you all this question, Have you ever tried to think to yourself, 'Now what, after all, is this life that is budding within me and dawning before me—what is it, in its deepest reality, and what am I to do with it?'

There are some of us to whom, so far as we have thought at all, life presents itself mainly as a shop, a place where we are to 'buy and sell, and get gain,' and use our evenings, after the day's work is over, for such recreation as suits us. And there are young men among my hearers who, with the flush of their physical manhood upon them, and perhaps away from the restraints of home, and living in gloomy town lodgings, with no one to look after them, are beginning to think that life after all is a kind of pigs' trough, with plenty of foul wash in it for whoso chooses to suck it up—a garden of not altogether pure delights, a place where a man may gratify

the ‘lusts of the flesh.’

But, dear brethren, whilst there are many other noble metaphors under which we can set forth the essential character of this mysterious, tremendous life of ours, I do not know that there is one that ought to appeal more to the slumbering heroism which lies in every human soul, and to the enthusiasms which, unless you in your youth cherish, you will in your manhood be beggared indeed, than that which this picture of my text suggests. After all, life is meant to be one long conflict. We are like the fellahin that one sometimes sees in Eastern lands, who cannot go out to plough in their fields, or reap their harvests, without a gun slung on their backs; for the condition under which we work in this world is that everything worth doing has to be done at the cost of opposition and antagonism, and that no noble service or building is possible without brave, continuous conflict. Even upon the lower levels of life that is so. No man learns a science or a trade without having to fight for it. But high above these lower levels, there is the one on which we all are called to walk, the high level of duty, and no man does what his conscience tells him, or refrains from that which his conscience sternly forbids, without having to fight for it. We are in the lists and compelled to draw the sword. And if we do not realise this, that all nobility all greatness, all wisdom, all success, even of the lowest and most vulpine kind, are won by conflict, we shall never do anything in the world worth doing. You are a soldier, whether you will or no, and life is a fight, whether you recognise the fact or not.

So, standing at the beginning, do not fancy that there is opening before you a scene of enjoyment, or that you are stepping into a world in which you can take your ease, and come out successfully at the other end. It is not so; and you will find that out before long. Better that you should settle it in your minds at first. When you were born you were enrolled on the roll-call of the regiment; and now you have to do a man’s part in the battle.

II. Note the boastful temper which is sure to be beaten.

No doubt there is something inspiring in the spectacle of the young warrior standing there, chafing at the lists, eagerly pulling on his gauntlets, fitting on his helmet, and longing to be in the thick of the fight. No doubt, as I have already said, there is something in your early days which makes such buoyant hopes and anticipations of success natural, and which gives you, as a great gift, that expectation of victory. I do not wish to shatter any of your enthusiasms or ideals, but I do wish to suggest a consideration or two that may calm and sober them.

So I ask, have you ever estimated, are you now estimating rightly, what it is that you have to fight for? To make yourselves pure, wise, strong, self-governing, Christlike men, such as God would have you to be. That is not a small thing for a man to set himself to do. You may go into the struggle for lower purposes, for bread and cheese, or wealth or fame, or love, or the like, with a comparatively light heart; but if there once has dawned upon a young soul the whole majestic sweep of possibilities in its opening life, then the battle assumes an aspect of solemnity and greatness that silences all boasting. Have you considered what it is that you have to fight for?

Have you considered the forces that are arrayed against you? ‘What act is all its thought had been?’ Hand and brain are never paired. There is always a gap between the conception and its realisation. The painter stands before his canvas, and, while others may see beauty in it, he only sees what a small fragment of the radiant vision that floated before his eye his hand has been able to preserve. The author looks on his book and thinks what a poor, wretched transcript of the thoughts that inspired his pen it is. There is ever this same disproportion between the conception and accomplishment. Therefore, all we old people feel, more or less, that our lives have been failures. We set out as you do, thinking that we were going to build a tower whose top should reach to heaven, and we are contented if, at the last, we have scrambled together some little wooden shanty in which we can live. We thought as you do; you will come to think as we do. So you had better begin now, and not go into the fight boasting, or you will come out of it conscious of being beaten.

Have you realised how different it is to dream things and to do them? In our dreams we are, as it were, working in vacuo. When we come to acts, the atmosphere offers resistance. It is easy to imagine ourselves victorious in circumstances where things are all going rightly and are bending according to our own desires, but when we come to the grim world, where there are things that resist and people are not plastic, it is a very different matter. You do not yet understand, as you will some day, the fatal limitations of power that hem us all round and the obstinate way that circumstances have of not falling in with our wishes. And you have not yet learned how completely and constantly failure accompanies success, like its shadow. The old Egyptians had no need to put a skeleton at their tables, nor the Romans to set a mocker behind the hero as he rode in triumph up to the Capitol. The world provides the skeleton at the banquet, and circumstances supply the mocker to add a dash of failure to all our triumphs.

Have you ever realised how certainly, into the brightest and most buoyant and successful lives, there will come crushing sorrows, blows as from an unseen hand in the dark, that fell a man? O friend! when one thinks of the miseries and the misfortunes, the sorrows and the losses, the broken and bleeding hearts that began life buoyant, elastic, hopeful, perhaps boasting, like you, there ought to be a sobering tint cast over our brightest visions.

I suppose that our colleges are full of students who are going, to far outstrip their professors, that every life-school has a dozen lads who have just begun to handle brush and easel, and are going to put Raffaelle in the shade. I suppose that every lawyer's office has a budding Lord Chancellor or two in it. And I suppose that that sharp criticism of us fumblers in the field, and half-expressed thought, 'How much better I could do it!' belong to youth by virtue of its youth. It is a crude form of undeveloped power, but it wants a great deal of sobering down, and I am trying now to let out a little of the blood, and to bring you to a clear conception of the very limited success which is likely to attend you. All we old people, whose deficiencies and limitations you see so clearly, had the same dreams, impossible as it may appear to you, fifty years ago. We were going to be the men, and wisdom was going to die with us, and you see what we have made of it. You will not do much better.

Have you ever taken stock honestly of your own resources? 'What king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether with his ten thousand he can meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?' Boast if you like, but calculate first, and boast after that, if you can.

Your worst enemy is yourself. When you are counting your resources and saying, 'I have this, that, and the other thing,' do not forget to say, 'I have a part of me, that takes all the rest of me all its time to keep it down and prevent it from becoming master.' You have traitors in the fortress who are in communication with the enemy outside, and may go over to him openly in the very crisis of the fight. You have to take that fact into account, and it ought to suppress boasting whilst you are putting on the harness.

You are not old enough to remember, as some of us do, the delirious enthusiasm with which, in the last Franco-German war, the Emperor and the troops left Paris, and how, as the train steamed out of the station, shouts were raised, 'A. Berlin!' Ay! and they never got farther than Sedan, and there an Emperor and an army were captured. Go into the fight bragging, and you will come out of it beaten.

III. Note the confidence which is not boasting.

I can fancy some of you saying, 'These gloomy views of yours will lead to nothing but absolute despair. You have been telling us that success is impossible; that we are bound to fight, and are sure to be beaten. What are we to do? Throw up the sponge, and say, "Very well! then I may as well have my fling, and give up all attempts to be any better than my passions and my senses would lead me to be."' And if there is nothing more to be said about the fight than has been already said, that is the conclusion. 'Let us eat and drink,' not only 'for to-morrow we die,' but 'for to-day we are sure to be beaten.' But I have only been speaking about this self-distrust as preliminary to what is the main thing that I desire to urge upon you now, and it is this: You do not need to be beaten. There is no room for boasting, but there is room for absolute confidence. You, young men and women, standing at the entrance of the amphitheatre where the gladiators fight, may dash into the arena with the most perfect confidence that you will come out with your shield preserved and your sword unbroken.

There is one way of doing it. 'Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world.' That was not the boast of a man putting on the harness, but the calm utterance of the conquering Christ when He was putting it off. He has conquered that you may conquer. Remember how the Apostle, who has preserved for us that note of triumph at the end of Christ's life, has, like some musician with a favourite phrase, modulated and varied it in his letter written long after, when he says, 'This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.' My dear young friends, distrust yourselves utterly, and trust Jesus Christ absolutely, and give yourselves to Him, to be His servants and soldiers till your lives' end. Then you will not be beaten, for it is written of those who move in the light, wearing the victor's palm: 'These are they who overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of His testimony.' That blood secures our victory in a threefold fashion. By that great death of Jesus Christ all our past sins may be forgiven, and they no longer have power to tyrannise over us. In His sacrifice for us there are motives given to us for noble, grateful, Godlike living, stronger than all the temptations that can arise from our own hearts, or from the evils around us. And if we put our humble trust in Him, then that faith opens the door for the entrance into our hearts, in simple reality, of a share in His conquering life which will make us victorious over the world, the flesh, and the devil.

'This is the victory that overcometh the world,' and the youngest, feeblest Christian who lays his or her hand in Christ's strong hand, may look out upon all the embattled antagonisms that front them, and say, 'He will cover my head in the day of battle, and teach my hands to war and my fingers to fight.'

Dear young friends, people sometimes preach to you that you should be Christians, because life is uncertain and death is drawing near, and after death the judgment. I preach that too; but the gospel that I seek to press upon you now is not merely a thing to die by, but it is the thing to live by; and it is the only power by which we shall be sure of overcoming the armies of the aliens. This confidence in Christ will take away from you no shred of your natural, youthful, buoyant elasticity, but it will save you from much transgression and from bitter regrets.

One last word. There is possible a triumph which is not boasting, for him who puts off the harness. The war-worn soldier has little heart for boasting, but he may be able to say, 'I have not been beaten.' The best of us, when we come to the end, will have to

recognise in retrospect failures, deficiencies, palterings with evil, yieldings to temptation, sins of many sorts, that will put all boasting out of our thoughts. But, whilst that is so, there is sometimes granted to the man, who has been faithful in his adherence to Jesus Christ, a gleam of sunshine at eventime, which foretells Heaven's welcome and 'Well done!', before it is uttered. He was no self-righteous braggart, but a very rigid judge of himself, who, close by the headsman's block that ended his life, said: 'I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith.' 'Put on the whole armour of God,' and when the time comes to put it off, you will have a peaceful assurance as far removed from despair as it is from boasting. Distrust yourselves; do not underestimate your enemies; understand that life is warfare; trust utterly to Jesus Christ, and He will see to it that you are not conquered, will give you the calm confidence of which we have been speaking here, and a share hereafter in the throne which He promises to him that overcometh. If you will trust yourselves to Him, and take service in His army, you cannot be too certain of victory. If you fling yourself into the battle in your own strength, with however high a hope, and fight without the Captain for your ally, you cannot escape defeat.

1 Kings 21:1-16 Royal Murderers

There are three types of character in this story, all bad, but in different ways. Ahab is wicked and weak; Jezebel, wicked and strong; the elders of Jezreel, wicked and subservient. Amongst them they commit a great crime, which was the last drop in the full cup of the king's sins, and brought down God's judgment on him and his house.

I. We have to look at the weakly wicked Ahab.

His wish for Naboth's vineyard was a mere selfish whim. He was willing to give more for it than it was worth. It suited his convenience for a kitchen-garden. In the true spirit of an Eastern despot, he expected everything to yield to his caprice, and did not think that a subject had any rights. What business has a poor man with sentiment? Naboth is to go, and a handful of silver will set all right. Samuel's warning of what a king would be and do was fulfilled. This highhanded interference with private rights was what Israel's revolt had led to. The sturdy Naboth was influenced not only by love for the bit of land which his fathers had cultivated for more years than Ahab had reigned days, but by obedience to the law of God; and he was not afraid to show himself a Jehovah worshipper, by his solemn appeal to 'the Lord,' as well as by the fact of his refusal. The brusque, flat refusal shows that some independence was left in the nation.

The weak rage and childish sulking of Ahab are very characteristic of a feeble and selfish nature, accustomed to be humoured and not thwarted. These fits of temper seem to have been common with him; for he was in one at the end of the preceding chapter, as he is now. The 'bed' on which he flung himself is probably the couch for reclining on at table, and, if so, the picture of his passion is still more vivid. Instead of partaking of the meal, he turns his face to the wall, and refuses food. 'No meat will down with him for want of a salad, because wanting Naboth's vineyard for a garden of herbs.' As he lies there, like a spoiled child, all because he could not get his own way, he may serve for an example of the misery of unbridled selfishness and unregulated desires. An acre or two of land was a small matter to get into such a state about, and there are few things that are worth a wise or a strong man's being so troubled. Hezekiah might 'turn his face to the wall' in the extremity of sickness and earnestness of prayer; but Ahab in doing it is only a poor, feeble creature who has weakly set his heart on what is not his, and weakly whimpers because he cannot have it.

To be thus at the mercy of our own ravenous desires, and so utterly miserable when they are thwarted, is unworthy of manhood, and is sure to bring many a bitter moment; for there are more disappointments than gratifications in store for such a one. We may learn from Ahab, too, the certainty that weakness will darken into wickedness. Such a mood as his always brings some Jezebel or other to suggest evil ways of succeeding. In this wicked world there are more temptations to sin than helps to virtue, and the weak man will soon fall into some of the abundant traps laid for him. Unless we have learned to say 'No' with much emphasis, because we are 'strong in the Lord,' we shall fall. 'This did not I because of the fear of the Lord.' To be weak is to be miserable, and any sin may come from it.

II. Jezebel is a type of a different sort of wickedness.

She is wicked and strong. Notice how she takes the upper hand at once, in her abrupt question, not without a spice of scorn; and note how Ahab answers, bemoaning himself, putting in the forefront his fair proposal, and making Naboth's refusal ruder than it really had been, by suppressing its reason. Then out flashes the imperious will of this masterful princess, who had come from a land where royalty was all-powerful, and who had no restraints of conscience. She darts a half-contemptuous question at Ahab, to stir him to action; for nothing moves a weak man so much as the fear of being thought weak. 'Dost thou govern?' implies, 'If thou dost, thou mayest trample on a subject.' It should mean, 'If thou dost, thou must jealously guard the subject's rights.' What a proud consciousness of her power speaks in that 'I will give thee the vineyard'! It is like Lady Macbeth's 'Give me the dagger!' No more is said. She can keep her own counsel, and Ahab suspects that some violence is to be used, which he had better not know. So, again, his weakness leads him astray. He does not wish to hear what he is willing should be done, if only he has not to do it. So feeble men hoodwink conscience by conniving at evils which they dare not perpetrate, and then enjoying their fruits, and saying, 'Thou canst not say I did it.'

Jezebel had Ahab's signet, the badge of authority, which she probably got from him for her unspoken purpose. Her letter to the elders of Jezreel speaks out, with cynical disregard of decency, the whole ugly conspiracy. It is direct, horribly plain, and imperative. There is a perfect nest of sins hissing and coiled together in it. Hypocrisy calling religion in to attest a lie, subornation of evidence, contempt for the poor tools who are to perjure themselves, consciousness that such work will only be done by worthless men, cool lying, ferocity, and murder,—these are a pretty company to crowd into half a dozen lines. Most detestable of all is the plain speaking which shows her hardened audacity and conscious defiance of all right. To name sin by its true name, and then to do it without a quiver, is a depth of evil reached by few men, and perhaps fewer women.

The plot gives a colour of legality, which is probably often unobserved by readers. Naboth was to be accused of treason: 'renouncing God and the king'; and that was, according to the law of Moses, a charge which, if proved, merited capital punishment. But it is Satan accusing sin for Jezebel, the Baal worshipper, who had done her best to root out the name of Jehovah, to accuse Naboth of departing from God. Much highhanded oppression must have gone before such outspoken contempt of justice; and, if Ahab represents the fatal connection of weakness and wickedness, Jezebel is an instance of the fatal audacity with which a strong character may come, by long indulgence in self-willed gratification of its own desires, to trample down all obstacles and go crashing through all laws, human and divine. The climax of sin is to see a deed to be sinful, and to do it all the same. Such a pre-eminence in evil is not reached at a bound, but it can be reached; and every indulgence in passion, and every gratifying of desire against which conscience protests, is a step toward it. Therefore, if we shrink from such a goal, let us turn away from the paths that lead to it. 'No mortal man is supremely foul all at once.' Therefore resist the beginnings of evil. Elijah was strong by natural temperament, and so was Jezebel. But the strength of the prophet was hallowed by obedience, and, like some great river, poured blessings where it flowed. Jezebel's strength was lawless, and foamed itself away in fury, like some devastating torrent that spreads ruin whithersoever it bursts out. 'Be strong' is good advice, but it needs the supplement, 'Let all your deeds be done in charity,' and the foundation,' Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.'

III. The last set of actors in this pitiful tragedy are the subserviently wicked elders.

The narrative sets their slavish compliance in a strong light. It puts emphasis on the tie between them and Naboth, in that they 'dwelt in his city,' and so should have had neighbourly feeling. It lays stress on their cowardly motive and their complete execution of orders, both by reiterating that they acted 'as Jezebel had sent' and 'as it was written,' and by taking the letter clause by clause, in the narrative of the shameful parody of justice which they acted. It suggests both their eagerness to do her pleasure, and her impatient waiting, in her palace, by the message sent in hot haste as soon as the brave peasant proprietor was dead. 'It is ill sitting at Rome and striving with the Pope,' as the proverb has it. No doubt these cowards were afraid for their own necks, and were too near the royal tigress to venture disobedience. But their swift, unremonstrating, and complete obedience indicates the depth of degradation and corruption to which they and the nation had sunk, and the terror exercised by their upstart king and his Sidonian wife.

Cowardice is always contemptible, and wickedness is always odious; but when the two come together, and a man has no other reason for his sin than 'I was afraid,' each makes the other blacker. Israel had cast off the fear of the Lord, which would have preserved it from the ignoble terror of men, and the consequence was that it trembled before an angry, unscrupulous woman. It had revolted from Rehoboam and his foolish bluster about whips and scorpions, and the consequence was a worse slavery. If we fear God, we need have no other fear. The sun puts out a fire. If we rebel against Him, we do not become free, but fall under a heavy yoke. It is never prudent to do wrong. The worst consequences of resistance to powerful evil are easier to bear than those of compliance, though it may seem the safer. Better be lying dead beneath a heap of stones, like the sturdy Naboth, who could say 'No' to a king, than be one of his stoners, who killed their innocent neighbour to pleasure Jezebel!

Her indecent triumph at the success of the plot, and her utter callousness, are expressed in her words to Ahab, in which the main point is the taking possession of the vineyard. The death of its owner is told with exultation, as being nothing but the sweeping aside of an obstacle. Ahab asks no questions as to how this opportune clearing away of hindrance came about. He knew, no doubt, well enough that there had been foul play; but that does not matter to him, and such a trifle as murder does not slacken his glad haste to get his new toy. There was other red on the vines than their clustering grapes, as he soon found out, when Elijah's grim figure, like an embodied conscience, met him there. Whoever reaches out to grasp a fancied good by breaking God's law, may get his good, but he will get more than he expected along with it,—even an accusing voice that prophesies evil. Elijah strides among the leafy vines in the field bought by crime. Ahab meant to make it a garden of pot-herbs. 'Surely the bitter wormwood of divine revenge grew abundantly therein.'

1 Kings 21:20 Ahab and Elijah

The keynote of Elijah's character is force-the force of righteousness. The New Testament, you remember, speaks of the 'power of Elias.' The outward appearance of the man corresponds to his function and his character. Gaunt and sinewy, dwelling in the desert, feeding on locusts and wild honey, with a girdle of camel's skin about his loins, he bursts into the history, amongst all that corrupt

state of society, with the force of a hammer that God's hand wields. The whole of his career is marked by this one thing,—the strength of a righteous man. And then, on the other hand, this Ahab;—the keynote of his character is the weakness of wickedness, and the wickedness of weakness. Think of him. Weakly longing—as idle and weak minds in lofty places always do—after something that belongs to somebody else; with all his gardens, coveting the one little herb-plot of the poor Naboth; weak and worse than womanly, turning his face to the wall and weeping when he cannot get it; weakly desiring to have it, and yet not knowing how to set about accomplishing his wish; and then—as is always the case, for there are always tempters everywhere for weak people—that beautiful fiend by his side, like the other queen in our great drama, ready to screw the feeble man that she is wedded to, to the sticking-place, and to dare anything to grasp that on which the heart was set. And so the deed is done: Naboth safe stoned out of the way; and Ahab goes down to take possession! The lesson of that is, my friend,—Weak dallying with forbidden desires is sure to end in wicked clutching at them. Young men, take care! You stand upon the beetling edge of a great precipice, when you look over, from your fancied security, at a wrong thing; and to strain too far, and to look too fixedly, leads to a perilous danger of toppling over and being lost! If you know that a thing cannot be won without transgression, do not tamper with hankerings for it. Keep away from the edge, and ' shut your eyes from beholding vanity.'

But my business now is rather with the consequences of this apparently successful sin, than with what went before it. The king gets the crime done, shuffles it off himself on to the shoulders of his ready tools in the little village, goes down to get his toy, and gets it—but he gets Elijah along with it, which was more than he reckoned on. When, all full of impatience and hot haste to solace himself with his new possession, he rushes down to seize the vineyard, he finds there, standing at the gate, waiting for him—black-browed, motionless, grim, an incarnate conscience—the prophet whom he had not seen for years, the prophet that he had last seen on Carmel, bearding alone the servants of Baal, and executing on them the solemn judgment of death; and there leaps at once to his lip, 'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?'

I. I find here, in the first place, this broad principle: Pleasure won by sin is peace lost.

It does not need that there should be a rebuking prophet standing by to work out that law. God commits the execution of it to the natural operations of our own consciences and our own spirits. Here is the fact in men's natures on which it partly depends: when sin is yet tempting us, it is loved; when sin in done, it is loathed. Action and reaction, as the mechanicians tell us, are equal and contrary. The more violent the blow with which we strike upon the forbidden pleasure, the further back the rebound after the stroke. When sin tempts—when there hangs glittering before a man the golden fruit which he knows that he ought not to touch—then, amidst the noise of passion or the sophistry of desire, conscience is silenced for a little while. No man sins without knowing that it is wrong, without knowing that in the long run it is a mistake; but at the instant, in the delirium of yielding, as in moments of high physical excitement, he is blind and deaf, deaf to the voice of reason, blind to the sight of consequences. Conscience and consequence are alike lost sight of. Like a mad bull, the man that is tempted lowers his head and shuts his eyes, and rushes right on. The moment that the sin is done, that moment the passion or desire which tempted to it is satiated, and ceases to exist for the time. It is gone as a motive. Like some savage beast, being fed full, it lies down to sleep. There is a vacuum left in the heart, the noise is stilled, and then— and then—conscience begins to speak. Or, to take another image, the passion, the desires, the impulses that lead us to do wrong things— they are like a crew that mutiny, and take for a moment the wheel from the steersman and the command from the captain, but then, having driven the ship on the rocks, the mutineers get intoxicated, and lie down and sleep. Passion fulfils itself, and expires. The desire is satisfied, and it turns into a loathing. The tempter draws us to him, and then unveils the horrid face that lies beneath the mask. When the deed is done and cannot be undone, then comes satiety; then comes the reaction of the fierce excitement, the hot blood begins to flow more slowly; then rises up in the heart conscience; then rises up in majesty in the soul reason; then flashes and flares before the eye the vivid picture of the consequences. His 'enemy' has found the sinner. He has got the vineyard—ay, but Elijah is there, and his dark and stern presence sucks all the brightness and the sunniness out of the landscape; and Naboth's blood stains the leaves of Naboth's garden! There is no sin which is not the purchase of pleasure at the price of peace.

Now, you will say that all that is true in regard to the grosser forms of transgression, but that it is not true in regard to the less vulgar and sensual kinds of crime. Of course it is most markedly observable with regard to the coarsest kind of sins; but it is as true, though perhaps not in the same degree—not in the same prominent, manifest way at any rate—in regard to every sin that a man does. There is never an evil thing which—knowing it to be evil—we commit, which does not rise up to testify against us. As surely as (in the words of our great philosopher poet) 'lust dwells hard by hate,' and as surely as to-night's debauch is followed by to-morrow's headache, so surely—each after its kind, and each in its own region—every sin lodges in the human heart the seed of a quick-springing punishment, yea, is its own punishment. When we come to grasp the sweet thing that we have been tempted to seize, there is a serpent that starts up amongst all the flowers. When the evil act is done—opposite of the prophet's roll—it is sweet in the lips, but oh! it is bitter afterwards. 'At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder!'

Then, you may say again, 'All that is very much exaggerated. That is not the sort of feeling which men that go on persistently doing wrong things, cherish. They live quietly and contentedly enough. "There are no bands in their death, and their strength is firm."' All

that would be true if men's consciences kept sensitive in the midst of men's sins, but they do not; and so it cannot be that every transgression has thus its quick result in loss of peace. I grant you at once that it is quite possible for men to sin away the delicacy and susceptibility of their consciences. I dare say there are people here now who, after they have done a wrong thing, go on very quietly, with no knowledge of those agonies that I have been speaking about, with scarcely ever a prick of conscience for their sin. But what then? I did not say that all sin purchased pleasure by inflictions of agony; but I do say, that all sin purchases pleasure by loss of peace. The silence of a seared conscience is not peace. For peace you want something more than that a conscience shall be dumb. For peace you want something more than that you shall be able to live without the daily sense and sting of sin. You want not only the negative absence of pain, but the positive presence of a tranquillising guest in your heart—that conscience of yours testifying with you, blessing you in its witness, and shedding abroad rest and comfort. It is easy to kill a conscience—after a fashion at least. It is easy to stifle it. It is easy to come to that depth of wrongdoing that one gets used to it, and does it without caring. But oh! that cold vacuum, that dead absence in such a spirit of all healthy self-communing, that painful suspicion, 'If I look into myself, and be quiet for a little while, and take stock of my own character, and see what I am, the balance will be on the wrong side,'—that is not peace. As the old historian says about the Roman armies that marched through a country, burning and destroying every living thing, 'They make a solitude, and they call it peace.' And so men do with their consciences. They stifle them, sear them, forcibly silence them, somehow or other; and then, when there is a dead stillness in the heart, broken by no voice of either approbation or blame, but doleful like the unnatural quiet of a deserted city, then they call that peace, and the man's uncontrolled passions and unbridled desires dwell solitary in the fortress of his own spirit! You may almost attain to that. Do you think it is a goal to be set before you as an ideal of human nature? The loss of peace is certain—the presence of agony is most likely—from every act of sin.

And so, it is not only a crime that men commit when they do wrong, but it is a blunder . Sin is not only guilt, but it is a mistake. 'The game is not worth the candle,' according to the French proverb. The thing that you buy is not worth the price you pay for it. Sin is like a great forest-tree that we may sometimes see standing up green in its leafy beauty, and spreading a broad shadow over half a field; but when we get round on the other side, there is a great dark hollow in the very heart of it, and corruption is at work there. It is like the poison-tree in travellers' stories, tempting weary men to rest beneath its thick foliage, and insinuating death into the limbs that relax in the fatal coolness of its shade. It is like the apples of Sodom, fair to look upon, but turning to acrid ashes on the unwary lips. It is like the magician's rod that we read about in old books. There it lies; and if, tempted by its glitter, or fascinated by the power that it proffers you, you take it in your hand, the thing starts into a serpent with erected crest and sparkling eye, and plunges its quick barb into the hand that holds it, and sends poison through all the veins. Do not touch it, my brother! Every sin buys pleasure at the price of peace. Elijah is always waiting at the gate of the ill-gotten possession.

II. In the second place, Sin is blind to its true friends and its real foes.

'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? ' Elijah was the best friend that Ahab had in his kingdom. And that Jezebel there, the wife of his bosom, whom he loved and thanked for this new toy, she was the worst foe that hell could have sent him. Ay, and so it is always. The faithful rebuker, the merciful inflicter of pain, is the truest friend of the wrongdoer. The worst enemy of the sinful heart is the voice that either tempts it into sin, or lulls it into self-complacency. And this is one of the most certain workings of evil desires in our spirits, that they pervert for us all the relations of things, that they make us blind to all the moral truths of God's universe. Sin is blind as to itself, blind as to its own consequences, blind as to who are its friends and who are its foes, blind as to earth, blind as to another world, blind as to God. The man who walks in the 'vain show' of transgression, whose heart is set upon evil,—he fancies that ashes are bread, and stones gold (as in the old fairy story); and, on the other hand, he thinks that the true sweet is the bitter, and turns away from God's angels and God's prophets, with, 'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?' That is the reason, my friend, of not a little of the infidelity that haunts this world—that sin, perverted and blinded, stumbles about in its darkness, and mistakes the face of the friend for the face of the foe. God sends you in mercy a conscience to prick and sting you that you may be kept right; and you think that it is your enemy. God sends in His mercy the discipline of life, pains and sorrows, to draw us away from the wrong, to make us believe that the right in this world and the next is life, and that holiness is happiness for evermore. And then, when, having done wrong, God's merciful messenger of a sharp sorrow finds us out, we say, 'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?' and begin to wonder about the mysteries of Providence, and how it comes that there is evil in the creation of a good God. Why, physical evil is the best friend of the man that is subject to moral evil. Sorrow is the truest blessing to a sinner. The best thing that can befall any of us is that God shall not let us alone in any wrong course, without making us feel His rod, without hedging up our way with thorns, and sending us by His grace into a better one. There is no mystery in sorrow. There is a mystery in sin; but sorrow following on the back of sin is the true friend, and not the enemy, of the wrong-doing spirit.

And then, again, God sends us a gospel full of dark words about evil. It deals with that fact of sin, as no other system ever did. There is no book like the Bible for these two things,—for the lofty notion that it has about what man may be and ought to be; and for the low notion that it has of what man is. It does not degrade human nature, because it tells us the truth about human nature as it is. Its darkest and bitterest sayings about transgression, they are veiled promises, my brother. It does not make the consequences of sin which it writes down. You and I make them for ourselves, and it tells us of them. Did the lighthouse make the rock that it stands on? Is it to be blamed for the shipwreck? If a man will go full tilt against the thing that he knows will ruin him, what is the right name for

him who hedges it up with a prickly fence of thorns, and puts a great light above it, and writes below, 'If thou comest here thou diest'? Is that the work of an enemy? And yet that is why people talk about the gloomy views of the gospel, about the narrow spirit of Christianity, about the harsh things that are here! The Bible did not make hell. The Bible did not make sin the parent of sorrow. The Bible did not make it certain that 'every transgression and disobedience' should reap its 'just recompense of reward.' We are the causes of their coming upon ourselves; and the Bible but proclaims the end to which the paths of sin must lead, and beseechingly calls to us all, 'Turn ye, turn ye! why will ye die?' And yet when it comes to you, how many of you turn away from it, and say, 'It is mine enemy'! How many shrink from its merciful knife, that cuts into all the wounds of the festering spirit! How many of you feel as if 'the truth that is in Jesus' was a hard and bitter truth; when all the while its very heart's blood is love, and the very secret of its message is the tenderest compassion, the most yearning sympathy, for every soul amongst us!

Ay, and more than that:—sin makes us fancy that God Himself is our enemy; and sin makes that thought of God that ought to be most blessed and most sweet to us, the terror of our souls. You have the power, my friend, by your own wrongdoing, of perverting the whole universe, and, worst of all, of distorting the image of the merciful Father, of the loving God. God loves. God is the Father. God watches over us. God will not let us alone when we transgress, God in His love has appointed that sin shall breed sorrow. But we —we do wrong; and then, for God's Providence, and God's Gospel, and God's Son, and God Himself, there rises up in our hearts a hostile feeling, and we think that He is turned to be our enemy, and fights against us! But oh! He only fights against us that we may submit to, and love, Him. Will you, then, have it that God's highest mercy should be your greatest sorrow, that your truest friend should be your worst foe? You can make the choice. To you God and His truth are like that ark of His covenant which to Dagon and the Philistines was a curse, but to the house of Obededom was a blessing. He and His gospel are to you like that pillar that was darkness and trouble to the hosts of the Egyptians, but light by night to His children. To you, my brother, the gospel may be either 'the savour of life unto life, or the savour of death unto death!' If He comes to you with rebuke, and meets you when you are at the very door of your sin, and busy with your transgression,—usher Him in, and thank Him, and bless Him for words of threatening, for merciful severity, for conviction of sin;—because conviction of sin is the work of the Comforter; and all the threatenings and all the pains that follow and track, like swift hounds, the committer of evil, are sent by Him who loves too wisely not to punish transgression, and loves too well to punish without warning, and desires only when He punishes that we should turn from our evil way, and escape the condemnation. An enemy, or a friend,—which is God in His truth to you?

III. Lastly, the sin which mistakes the friendly appeal for an enemy, lays up for itself a terrible retribution.

Elijah comes to Jezreel and prophesies the fall of Ahab. The next peal, the next flash, fulfil the prediction. There, where he did the wrong, he suffered. In Jezreel, Ahab died. In Jezreel, Jezebel died. That plain was the battlefield for the subsequent discomfiture of Israel. Over and over again there encamped upon it the hosts of the spoilers. Over and over again its soil ran red with the blood of the children of Israel; and at last, in the destruction of the kingdom, Naboth was avenged and God's word fulfilled. The threatened evil was foretold that it might lead the king to repentance, and that thus it might never need to be more than a threat. But, though Ahab was partially penitent, and partially listened to the prophet's voice, yet for all that, he went on in his evil way. Therefore the merciful threatening becomes a stern prophecy, and is fulfilled to the very letter.

So, when God's message comes to us, friends, if we listen not to it, and turn not to its gentle rebuke, Oh! then we gather up for ourselves an awful futurity of judgment, when threatening will darken into punishment, and the voice that rebuked will swell into the voice of final condemnation. When a man fancies that God's prophet is his enemy, and dreams that his finding him out is a calamity and a loss, that man may be certain that something worse will find him out some day. His sins will find him out, and that is worse than the prophet's coming. My friend, picture to yourself this—a human spirit shut up, with the companionship of its forgotten and dead transgressions. There is a resurrection of acts as well as of bodies. Think what it will be for a man to sit surrounded by that ghastly company, the ghosts of his own sins!—and as each forgotten fault and buried badness comes, silent and sheeted, into that awful society, and sits itself down there, think of him greeting each with the question, 'Thou too? What! are ye all here? Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?' and from each bloodless spectral lip there tolls out the answer, the knell of his life, 'I have found thee, because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord.' Ah, my friend! if that were all we had to say, it might well stiffen us into stony despair. Thank God—thank God! such an issue is not inevitable. Christ speaks to you. Christ is your Friend . He loves you, and He speaks to you now—speaks to you of your danger, but in order that you may never rush into it and be engulfed by it; speaks to you of your sin, but in order that you may say to Him, 'Take Thou it away, O merciful Lord'; speaks to you of justice, but in order that you may never sink beneath the weight of His stroke; speaks to you of love, in order that you may know, and fully know, the depth of His graciousness. When He says to you, 'I love thee; love thou Me: I have died for thee; trust Me, live by Me, and live for Me, 'will you not say to Him, 'My Friend, my Brother, my Lord, and my God'?

1 Kings 22:3 Unpossessed Possessions

This city of Ramoth in Gilead was an important fortified place on the eastern side of the Jordan, and had, many years before the date of our text, been captured by its northern neighbours in the kingdom of Syria. A treaty had subsequently been concluded and

broken a war followed thereafter, in which Ben-hadad, King of Syria, had bound himself to restore all his conquests. He had not observed that article of peace, and the people of Israel had not been strong enough to enforce it until the date of our text; but then, backed up by a powerful alliance with Jehoshaphat of Judah, they determined to make a dash to get back what was theirs, but whilst theirs was also not theirs.

Now, I have nothing more to do with Ahab and Jehoshaphat, but I wish to turn the words of my test, and the thoughts that may come from them, into a direction profitable to ourselves. 'Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours?' and yet it had to be got out of the hands of the King of Syria.

I. What is ours and not ours.

Every Christian man has large tracts of unannexed territory, unattained possibilities, unenjoyed blessings, things that are his and yet not his. How much more of God you and I have a right to than we have the possession of! The ocean is ours, but only the little pailful that we carry away home to our own houses is of use to us. The whole of God is mine if I am Christ's, and a dribble of God is all that comes into the lives of most of us.

How much inward peace is ours? It is meant that there should never pass across a Christian's soul more than a ripple of agitation, which may indeed ruffle and curl the surface; but deep down there should be the tranquillity of the fathomless ocean, unbroken by any tempests, and yet not stagnant, because there is a vital current running through it, and every drop is being drawn upward to the surface and the sunlight. There may be a peace in our hearts deep as life; a tranquillity which may be superficially disturbed, but is never thoroughly, and down in its depths, broken. And yet, let some little petty annoyance come into our daily life, and what a pucker we are in! Then we forget all about the still depths in which we ought to be living; and fears and hopes and loves and ambitions disturb our souls, just as they do the spirits of the men that do not profess to have any holdfast in God. The peace of God is ours; but, ah! in how sad a sense it is true that the peace of God is not ours!

What 'heights'—for Ramoth means 'high places'—what heights of consecration there are which are ours according to the divine purpose and according to the fulness of God's gift! It is meant, and it is possible, and well within the reach of every Christian soul, that he or she should live, day by day, in the continual and utter surrender of himself or herself to the will of God, and should say, 'I do the little I can do, and leave the rest with Thee'; and should say again, 'All is right that seems most wrong, If it be His sweet will.' But instead of this absolute submission and completeness and joyfulness of surrender of ourselves to Him, what do we find? Reluctance to obey, regret at providences, Self dominant or struggling hard against the partial domination of the will of God in our hearts. The mind which was in Jesus Christ, who was able to say, 'It is written of Me, lo! I come to do Thy will, O Lord!' is ours by virtue of our being Christians; but, alas! in practical realisation how sadly it is not ours!

What noble possibilities of service, what power in the world, are bestowed on Christ's people!' All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth,' says He. 'And He breathed on them, and said, As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.' The divine gift to the Christian community, and to the individuals that compose it—for there are no gifts given to the community, but to the individuals that make it up— is of fulness of power for all their work. And yet look how, all through the ages, the Church has been beaten by the corruption of the world; and how to-day many of us are standing, either utterly careless and callous about the diseases that we have the medicine to cure, or in desperation looking about for other healing for the social and moral condition of the community than that which is granted to us in Jesus Christ. 'Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours, and we be still, and take it not out of the hands of the King of Syria?'

There is ever so much in the world which belongs to our Master, and therefore belongs to us, and which the Church is bound to lay its hand upon and claim for its own and for its Lord's. For remember, brethren, that all the gifts at which I have been glancing—and I might have largely increased the catalogue—all these spiritual endowments of peace, and safety, and purity, and joy, of religious elevation, and consecration, and power for service, and the like—are ours by a threefold title and charter. God's purpose, which is nothing less for every one of us than that we should be 'filled with all the fulness of God,' and that He should 'supply all our need, according to His riches in glory,'—that is the first of the parchments on which our title depends. And the second title-deed is Christ's purchase; for the efficacy of His death and the power of His triumphant life have secured for all who trust Him the whole fulness of this divine gift. And the third of our claims and titles is the influence of that Holy Spirit whom Jesus Christ gives to every one of His children to dwell in him. There is in you, working in you, if you have any faith in that Lord, a power that is capable of making you perfectly pure, perfectly blessed, strong with an immortal strength, and glad with a 'joy that is unspeakable and full of glory.'

Oh! then, let us think of the awful contrast between what is ours and what we have. It is ours by the divine intention, by the divine gift in its fulness and all-sufficiency, and yet think of the poor, partial realisation of it that has passed into our experience. Be sure that you have what you have, and that you make your own what God has made yours.

II. Then, let me suggest, again, how our text hints for us, not only the difference between possession and realisation, but also our strange contentment in imperfect possession.

Ahab's remonstrances with his servants, which make the starting-point of my remarks, seem to suggest that there were two reasons for their acquiescence in the domination of a foreign power on a bit of their soil. They had not realised that Ramoth was theirs, and they were too lazy and cowardly to go and take it. Ignorance of the fulness of the gift, and slothful timidity in daring everything in the effort to make it ours, explain a great deal of the present condition of Christian people.

Is not that condition of passive acquiescence in their small present attainments, and of careless indifference to the great stretch of the unattained, the characteristic of the mass of professing Christians? They have got a foothold on a new continent, and their possession of it is like the world's drawing of the map of Africa when we were children, which had a settlement dotted here and there along the coast, and all the broad regions of the interior were blank. The settlers huddle together upon the fringe of barren sand by the salt water, and never dream of pressing forward into the heart of the land. And so, too, many of us are content with what we have got, a little bit of God, when we might have Him all; a settlement on the fringe and edge of the land, when we might traverse the whole length of it; and behold! it is all ours.

That unfamiliarity with the thought of unattained possibilities in the Christian life is a damning curse of thousands of people who call themselves Christians. They do not think, they never realise—and some of us are guilty in this respect—they never realise that it is possible for them to be all unlike what they are now, and that, instead of the miserable partial hallowing of their nature, and the poor, weak —I was going to say strength, but it is not worth calling strength, that they possess, they might be as the angels of God: 'the weakest as David,' and David as a very angel of heaven itself. Why is it, why is it, that there is this unfamiliarity?

And then, another reason for the woeful disproportion between what we have and what we utilise is the love of ease, such as kept these Israelites from going up to Ramoth-Gilead. It was a long way off; there was a river to be forded; there were heights to be climbed; there were weary marches to be taken; there were hard knocks going in front of the walls of Ramoth before they got inside it; and on the whole it was more comfortable to sit at home, or look after their farms and their merchandise, than to embark on the quixotic attempt to win back a city that had not been theirs for ever so long, and that they had got on very well without.

And so it is with hosts of Christian people; we do not realise how much we have that we never get any good out of. And, in the second place, we had rather just stay where we are, and make the best of the world as it is, and the desires of our hearts go in another direction than for our increase in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour. Ah, brethren! if we had a claim to some great property, or any other wealth that we really cared about, should we be so very indifferent as to asserting our rights? Should we not fight to the death, some of us, for the last inch of soil, for the last ounce of treasure, that belonged to us? When you really value a thing, you secure the greatest possible amount of it; and there is very little margin between what you own and what you use.

And if there is such a tremendous difference between the breadth of the one and the narrowness of the other in our Christian life, there can be no reason for it except this, that we do not care enough about spiritual blessings and forces to make the effort that is needed to win and keep, and get the good of, all that is ours.

And is not that something like despising the birthright? Is it not a criminal thing for Christian people thus to neglect, and to put aside, and never to seek to obtain, all these great gifts of God? There they lie at our doors, and they are ours for the taking. Suppose a carrier brought you a whole waggon full of precious goods, and put them down at your door, and you were not at the trouble to open your doors, or to carry the goods into your cellars. That would not look as if you cared much either for the goods or for the giver. And I wonder how many of us are chargeable with that criminal despising of God's gifts, which is clearly the explanation of our letting them lie rotting, as it were, at our gates? We are starving paupers in the midst of plenty.

'My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory, by Christ Jesus,' says Paul. You have the right to them all. Draw cheques against the capital that is lodged in your name in that great bank.

III. And so, lastly, my text suggests the effort that is needed to make our own ours.

'We be still, and take it not out of the hands of the King of Syria.' Then these things that are ours, by God's gift, by Christ's purchase, by the Spirit's influence, will need our effort to secure them. And that is no contradiction, nor any paradox. God does exactly in the same way with regard to a great many of His natural gifts as He does with regard to His spiritual ones. He gives them to us, but we hold them on this tenure, that we put forth our best efforts to get and to keep them. His giving them does not set aside our taking. However much we tried we could not take them out of His hand if it were clenched. Open as His hand is, and stretched out to us as it is, the gifts that sparkle in it are not transferred to our hands unless we ourselves put forth an effort.

So let me say that one large part of the discipline by which men make their own their own is by familiarising themselves with the thought of the larger possibilities of unattained possessions which God has given them. That is true in everything. To recognise our present imperfection, and to see stretching before us glorious and immense possibilities, opening out into a vista where our eyesight fails us to travel to its end, is the very salt of life in every region. Artist, student, all of us 'are saved by hope,' in a very much wider sense than the Apostle meant by that great saying. And whosoever has once lost, or felt becoming dim, the vision before him of a

possible better than his present best, in any region, is in that region condemned to grow no more. If we desire to have any kind of advancement, it is only possible for us, when there gleams ever before us the untravelled road, and we see at the end of it unattained brightnesses and blessings.

And we Christian people have an endless prospect of that sort stretching before us. Oh, if we looked at it oftener, 'having respect unto the recompense of the reward,' we should find it easier to dash at any Ramoth-Gilead, and get it out of the hands of the strongest of the enemies that may bar our way to it. Let us familiarise ourselves with the thought of our present imperfection, and of our future completeness, and of the possibilities which may become actualities, even here and now; and let us not fitfully use what power we have, but make the best of what graces are ours, and enjoy and expatiate in the spiritual blessings of peace and rest which Christ has already given to us. 'To him that hath shall be given,' and the surest way to lose what we have is to neglect to increase it.

And, above all, let us keep nearer to our Master, and live more in fellowship with our Lord, and that will help us to deny ourselves to ungodliness and worldly lusts. It is the prevalence of these, and the absence of self-denial, that ruins most of the Christian lives that are ruined in this world. If a man wants to be what he is not, he must cease to be what he is.

Self-sacrifice, and the emptying of our hearts of trash and trifles, is the only way to get our hearts filled with God and with His blessing. Let us keep near Jesus Christ. If we have Him for ours we have peace, we have power, we have purity. 'He of God is made unto us' all in all, and every gift that may adorn humanity, and make our lives joyous and ourselves noble, is given to us in Jesus Christ. Let us put away from ourselves, then, this slothful indifference to our unattained possessions. 'Know ye that Ramoth is ours?' 'Let us be still' no longer. 'All things are yours, whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come: all are yours if ye are Christ's.'

1 Kings 22:7,8 Ahab and Micaiah

An ill-omened alliance had been struck up between Ahab of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah. The latter, who would have been much better in Jerusalem, had come down to Samaria to join in an assault on the kingdom of Damascus; but, like a great many other people, Jehoshaphat first made up his mind without asking God, and then thought that it might be well to get some kind of varnish of a religious sanction for his decision. So he proposes to Ahab to inquire of the Lord about this matter. One would have thought that that should have been done before, and not after, the determination was made. Ahab does not at all see the necessity for such a thing, but, to please his scrupulous ally, he sends for his priests. They came, four hundred of them, and of course they all played the tune that Ahab called for. It is not difficult to get prophets to pat a king on the back, and tell him, 'Do what you like.'

But Jehoshaphat was not satisfied yet. Perhaps he thought that Ahab's clergy were not exactly God's prophets, but at all events he wanted an independent opinion; and so he asks if there is not in all Samaria a man that can be trusted to speak out. He gets for answer the name of this 'Micaiah the son of Imlah.' Ahab had had experience of him, and knew his man; and the very name leads him to an explosion of passion, which, like other explosions, lays bare some very ugly depths. 'I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.'

That is a curious mood, is it not? that a man should know another to be a messenger of God, and therefore know that his words are true, and that if he asked his counsel he would be forbidden to do the thing that he is dead set on doing, and would be warned that to do it was destruction; and that still he should not ask the counsel, nor ever dream of dropping the purpose, but should burst out in a passion of puerile rage against the counsellor, and will have none of his reproofs. Very curious! But there are a great many of us that have something of the same mood in us, though we do not speak it out as plainly as Ahab did. It lurks more or less in us all, and it largely determines the attitude that some of us take to Christianity and to Christ. So I wish to say a word or two about it.

I. My text suggests the inevitable opposition between a message from God, and man's evil.

No doubt, God is love; and just because He is, it is absolutely necessary that what comes from Him, and is the reflex and cast, so to speak, of His character, should be in stern and continual antagonism to that evil which is the worst foe of men, and is sure to lead to their death. It is because God is love, that 'to the froward He shows Himself froward.' and opposes that which, unopposed and yielded to, will ruin the man that does it. So this is one of the characteristic marks of all true messages from God, that men who will not part with their evil call them 'stern,' 'rigid,' 'gloomy,' 'narrow' Yes, of course; because God must look upon godless lives with disapprobation, and must desire by all means to draw men away from that which is drawing them away from Him and to their death.

Now, I suppose I need not spend time in enumerating or describing the points in the attitude of Christianity towards the solemn fact of human sin, which correspond to Ahab's complaint that the prophet spake always 'not good concerning him, but evil.' The 'gospel' of Jesus Christ proves its name to be true, and that it is 'good news,' not only by its graciousness, its promises, its offers, and the rich blessings of eternal life with which its hands are full, but by its severity, as men call it. One characteristic of the gospel is the altogether unique place which the fact of sin fills in it. There is no other religion on the face of the earth that has so grasped and

made prominent this thought: 'All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' There is none that has painted human nature as it is in such dark colours, because there is none that knows itself to be able to change human nature into such radiance of glory and purity. The gospel has, if I might so say, on its palette a far greater range of pigments than any other system. Its blacks are blacker; its whites are whiter; its golds are more lustrous than those of other painters of human nature as it is and as it may become. It is a mark of its divine origin that it unfalteringly looks facts in the face, and will not say smooth things about men as they are.

Side by side with that characteristic of the dark picture which it draws of us, as we are in ourselves, is its unhesitating restraint or condemnation of deep-seated desires and tendencies. It does not come to men with the smooth words on its lips, 'Do as thou wilt.' It does not seek for favour by relaxing bonds, but it rigidly builds up a wall on either side of a narrow path, and says, 'Walk within these limits and thou art safe. Go beyond them a hair's-breadth, and thou perishest.' It may suit Ahab's prophets to fling the reins on the neck of human nature; God's prophet says, 'Thou shalt not,' That is another of the tests of divine origin, that there shall be no base compliance with inclinations, but rigid condemnation of many of our deep desires.

Side by side with these two, there is a third characteristic that the Word, which is the outcome and expression of the divine love, is distinguished by its plain and stern declarations of the bitter consequences of evil-doing. I need not dwell upon these, brethren. They seem to me to be far too solemn to be spoken of by a man to men in other words than Scripture's. But I beseech you to remember that this, too, is the characteristic of Christ's message. So a man should feel, when he thinks of the dark and solemn things that the Old Testament partially, and the New Testament more clearly, utter as to the death which is the outcome of sin, that these are indeed the very voice of infinite love pleading with us all. Brother I do not so misapprehend facts as to think that the restraints and threatenings and dark pictures which Christ and His servants have drawn are anything but the utterance of the purest affection.

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to look for a moment at the strange dislike which this attitude of Christianity kindles.

I have said that Ahab's mental condition was a very odd one. Strange as it is, it is, as I have already remarked, in some degree a very frequent one. There are in us all, as we see in many regions of life, the beginnings of the same kind of feeling. Here, for example, is a course that I am quite sure, if I pursue it, will land me in evil. Does the drunkard take a glass the less, because he knows that if he goes on he will have a drunkard's liver and die a miserable death? Does the gambler ever take away his hand from the pack of cards or the dice-box, because he knows that play means, in the long run, poverty and disgrace? When a man sets his will upon a certain course, he is like a bull that has started in its rage. Down goes the head, and, with eyes shut, he will charge a stone wall or an iron door, though he knows it will smash his skull. Men are very foolish animals; and there is no greater mark of their folly than the conspicuous and oft-repeated fact that the clearest vision of the consequences of a course of conduct is powerless to turn a man from it, when once his passions, or his will, or, worse still, his weakness, or, worst of all, his habits, have bound him to it.

Take another illustration. Do we not all know that honest friends have sometimes fallen out of favour, perhaps with ourselves, because they have persistently kept telling us what our consciences and common-sense knew to be true, that if we go on by that road we shall be suffocated in a bog? A man makes up his mind to a course of conduct. He has a shrewd suspicion that an honest friend will condemn him, and that the condemnation will be right. What does he do, therefore? He never consults his friend, but if by chance that friend should say what was expected of him, he gets angry with his adviser and doggedly goes his own road. I suppose we all know what it is to treat our consciences in the style in which Ahab treated Micaiah. We do not listen to them because we know what they will say before they have said it; and we call ourselves sensible people! Martin Luther once said, 'It is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience.' But Ahab put Micaiah in prison; and we shut up our consciences in a dungeon, and put a gag in their mouths, and a muffler over the gag, that we may hear them say no word, because we know that what we are doing, and we are doggedly determined to do, is wrong.

But the saddest illustration of this infatuation is to be found in the attitude that many men take in regard to Christianity. There is a great craving to-day, more perhaps than there has been in some other periods of the world's history, for a religion which shall adorn, but shall not restrain; for a religion which shall be toothless, and have no bite in it; for a religion that shall sanction anything that it pleases our sovereign mightiness to want to do. We should all like to have God's sanction for our actions. But there are a great many of us who will not take the only way to secure that—viz. to do the actions which He commands, and to abstain from those which He forbids. Popular Christianity is a very easy-fitting garment; it is like an old shoe that you can slip off and on without any difficulty. But a religion which does not put up a strong barrier between you and many of your inclinations in not worth anything. The mark of a message from God is that it restrains and coerces and forbids and commands. And some of you do not like it because it does.

There is a great tendency in this day to cut out of the Old and New Testaments all the pages that say things like this, 'The soul that sinneth it shall die'; or things like this, 'This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light'; or things like this, 'Then shall the wicked go away into outer darkness.' Brethren, men being what they are, and God being what He is, there can be no divine message without a side of what the world calls threatening, or what Ahab called' prophesying evil.' I beseech you, do not be carried away by the modern talk about Christianity being gloomy and dark, or fancy that we put a blot

and an excrescence upon the pure religion of the Man of Nazareth, when we speak of the death that follows sin, and of the darkness into which unbelief carries a man.

III. Once more, let me say a word about the intense folly of such an attitude.

Ahab hated Micaiah. Why? Because Micaiah told him what would come to him as the fruit of his own actions. That was foolish. It is no less foolish for people to take up a position of dislike, and to turn away from the gospel of Jesus Christ because it speaks in like manner. I said that men are very foolish animals; there is surely nothing in all the annals of human stupidity more stupid than to be angry with the word that tells you the truth about what you are bringing down upon your heads. It is absurd, because Micaiah did not make the evil, but Ahab made it; and Micaiah's business was only to tell him what he was doing. It is absurd, because the only question to be asked is. Are the warnings true? are the threatenings representations of what really will come? are the prohibitions reasonable? And it is absurd, because, if these things are so—if it is true that the soul that sinneth dies, and will die; if it is true that you, who have heard of the name and the salvation of Jesus Christ over and over again, and have turned away from it, will, if you continue in that negligence and unbelief, reap bitter fruits here and hereafter therefrom—if these things are true, surely the man that tells you so, and the gospel that tells you so, deserve better treatment than Ahab's petulant hatred or your stolid indifference and neglect.

Would you think it wise for a sea-captain to try to take the clapper out of the bell that floats and tolls above a shoal on which his ship will be wrecked if it strikes? Would it be wise to put out the lighthouse lamps, and then think that you had abolished the reef? Does the signalman with his red flag make the danger of which he warns, and is it not like a baby to hate and to neglect the message that comes to you and says, 'Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die'?

IV. So, lastly, I notice the end of this foolish attitude.

Ahab was told in plain words by Micaiah, before the interview closed, that he would never come back again in peace. He ordered the bold prophet into prison, and rode away gaily, no doubt, to his campaign. Weak men are very often obstinate, because they are not strong enough to rise to the height of changing a purpose when reason condemns it. This weak man was always obstinate in the wrong place, as so many of us are. So away he went, down from Samaria, across the plain, down to the fords of the Jordan. But when he had crossed to the other side, and was coming near his objective point, the memories of Micaiah in prison at Samaria began to sit heavy on his soul.

So he tried to deceive divine judgment, and got up an ingenious scheme by which his ally was to go into the field in royal pomp, and he to slip into it disguised. A great many of us try to hoodwink God, and it does not answer. The man who 'drew the bow at a venture' had his hand guided by a higher Hand. Ahab was plated all over with iron and brass, but there is always a crevice through which God's arrow can find its way; and, where God's arrow finds its way, it kills. When the night fell, he was lying dead on his chariot floor, and the host was scattered, and Micaiah, the prisoner, was avenged; and his word had taken hold on the despiser of it.

So it always will be. So it will be with us, dear brethren, if we do not give heed to our ways and listen to the word which may be bitter in the mouth, but, eaten, turns sweet as honey. Nailing the index of the barometer to 'set fair' will not keep off the thunderstorm, and no negligence or dislike of divine threatenings will arrest the slow, solemn march, inevitable as destiny, of the consequences of our doings. Things will be as they will be. Believed or unbelieved, the avalanche will come.

Dear brethren, there is one way to get Micaiah on your side. Listen to him, and then he will speak good to you, and not what you foolishly call evil. Let God's word convince you of sin. Let it bring you to the Cross for pardon. Jesus Christ addresses each of us in the Apostle's words: 'Am I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?' The sternest threatenings in the Bible come from the lips of that infinite Love. If you will listen to Him, if you will yield yourselves to Him, if you will take Him for your Saviour and your Lord, if you will cast your confidence and anchor your love upon Him, if you will let Him restrain you, if you will consult Him about what He would have you do, if you will accept His prohibitions as well as His permissions, then His word and His act to you, here and hereafter, will be only good and not evil, all the days of your life.

Remember Ahab lying dead on the floor of his chariot in a pool of his own blood, and bethink yourselves of what despising the threatenings, and turning away from the rebukes and prohibitions of the divine word, come to. These threatenings are spoken that they may never need to be put in effect. If you give heed to them they will never be put in effect in regard to you, if you neglect them and 'will none of' God's 'reproof,' they will come down on you like a mighty rock loosed from the mountain, and will grind you to powder.