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1 Peter: Expositions

by Alexander Maclaren

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Christian Asceticism

'Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin 2. That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. 3. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: 4. Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you: 5. Who shall give account to Him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead. 6. For, for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit. 7. But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer. 8. And, above all things, have fervent charity among yourselves; for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.' — 1 Peter 4:1-8.

CHRISTIAN morality brought two new things into the world — a new type of life in sharp contrast with the sensuality rife on every side, and a new set of motives powerfully aiding in its realisation. Both these novelties are presented in this passage, which insists on a life in which the spirit dominates the flesh, and is dominated by the will of God, and which puts forward purely Christian ideas as containing the motives for such a life. The facts of Christ's life and the prospect of Christ's return to judge the world are here

urged as the reason for living a life of austere repression of 'the flesh' that we may do God's will.

I. We have, first, in verses 1 and 2, a general precept, based upon the broad view of Christ's earthly history.

'Christ hath suffered in the flesh.' That is the great fact which should shape the course of all His followers. But what does suffering in the flesh mean here? It does not refer only to the death of Jesus, but to His whole life. The phrase 'in the flesh' is reiterated in the context, and evidently is equivalent to 'during the earthly life.' Our Lord's life was, in one aspect, one continuous suffering, because He lived the higher life of the spirit. That higher life had to Him, and has to us, rich compensations; but it sets those who are true to it at necessary variance with the lower types of life common among men, and it brings many pains, all of which Jesus knew. The last draught from the cup was the bitterest, but the bitterness was diffused through all the life of the Man of Sorrows.

That life is here contemplated as the pattern for all Christ's servants. Peter says much in this letter of our Lord's sufferings as the atonement for sin, but here he looks at them rather as the realised ideal of all worthy life. We are to be 'partakers of Christ's sufferings' (v. 13), and we shall become so in proportion as His own Spirit becomes the spirit which lives in us. If Jesus were only our pattern, Christianity would be a poor affair, and a gospel of despair; for how should we reach to the pure heights where He stood? But, since He can breathe into us a spirit which will hallow and energize our spirits, we can rise to walk beside Him on the high places of heroic endurance and of holy living. Very beautifully does Peter hint at our sore conflict, our personal defenselessness, and our all-sufficient armour, in the picturesque metaphor 'arm yourselves.' The 'mind of Christ' is given to us if we will. We can gird it on, and if we do, it will be as an impenetrable coat-of-mail, which will turn the sharpest arrows and resist the fiercest sword-cuts.

The last clause of verse 1 is a parenthesis, and, if it is for the moment omitted, the sentence runs smoothly on, especially if the Revised Version's reading is adopted. The purpose of arming us with the same mind is that, whilst we live on earth, we should live according to the will of God, and should renounce 'the lusts of men,' which are in us as in all men, and which men who are not clad in the armour which Christ gives to us yield to.

But what of the parenthetical statement? Clearly, the words which follow it forbid its being taken to mean that dead men do not sin. Rather the Apostle's thought seems to be that such suffering in daily life after Christ's pattern, and by His help, is at once a sign that the sufferer has shaken off the dominion of sin, and is a means of further emancipating him from it.

But the two great thoughts in this paragraph are, that the Christian life is one in which God's will, and not man's desires, is the regulating force, and that the pattern of that life and the power to copy the pattern are found in Christ, the sufferer for righteousness' sake.

II. More specific injunctions, entering into the details of the higher life, follow, interwoven, as in the preceding verses, with a statement of the motives which make obedience to them possible to our weakness.

The sins in view are those most closely connected with 'the flesh' in its literal meaning, amongst which are included 'abominable idolatries,' because gross acts of sensual immorality were inseparably intertwined with much of heathen worship. These sins of flesh were especially rampant among the luxurious Asiatic lands, to which this letter was addressed, but they flooded the whole Roman empire, as the works of poets like Martial and of moralists like Epictetus equally show. But New York or London could match the worst scenes in Rome or Ephesus, and perhaps would not be far behind the foul animalism of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lust and drunkenness are eating out the manhood of our race on both sides of the Atlantic, and, if we have 'the same mind' as the suffering Christ, we shall put on the armour for war to the knife with these in society, and for the rigid self-control of our own animal nature.

Observe the strong motives which Peter just touches without expanding. A sad irony lies in his saying that the time past may suffice. The flesh had had enough of time given to it, — had not God a right to the rest? The flesh should have had none; it had had all too much. Surely the readers had had enough of the lower life, more than enough. Were they not sick of it, 'satisfied' even to disgust? Let us look back on our wasted years, and give no more precious moments to serve the corruptible flesh. Further, the life of submission to the animal nature is characteristic of 'the Gentiles,' and in sharp contrast, therefore, to that proper to Christ's followers. That is as true to-day, in America and England, as ever it was. Indeed, as wealth has increased, and so-called 'civilisation' has diffused material comforts, senseless luxury, gluttony, drunkenness, and still baser fleshy sins, have become more flagrantly common in 'society which is not distinctively and earnestly Christian; and there was never more need than there is today for Christians to carry aloft the flag of self-control and temperance in all things belonging to 'the flesh.'

If we have the mind of Christ, we shall get the same treatment from the world which Peter says that the primitive Christians did from the idolaters round them. We shall be wondered at, just as a heathen stared with astonishment at this strange, new sect, which would have nothing to do with feasts and garlands and wine-cups and lust disguised as worship. The spectacle, when repeated to-day, of Christians steadfastly refusing to share in that lower life which is the only life of so many, is, perhaps, less wondered at now, because it is, thank God! more familiar; but it is not less disliked and 'blasphemed.' A total abstainer from intoxicants will not get the good word of the distiller or brewer or consumer of liquor. He will be called faddist, narrow, sour-visaged, and so on and so on. 'You

may know a genius because all the dunces make common cause against him,' said Swift. You may know a Christian after Christ's pattern because all the children of the flesh are in league to laugh at him and pelt him with nicknames.

Further, the thought of Christ as the judge should both silence the blasphemers and strengthen the blasphemed to endure. That judgment will vindicate the wisdom of those who sowed to the spirit and the folly of those who sowed to the flesh. The one will reap corruption; the other, life everlasting.

The difficult verse 6 cannot be adequately dealt with here, but we may note that introductory 'for' shows that it, too, contains a motive urging to life, 'to the will of God,' and that no such motive appears in it if it is taken to mean, as by some, that the gospel is preached after death to the dead. Surely to say that 'the gospel was preached also (or, even) to them that are dead' is not to say that it was preached to them when dead.

Peter's letter is of late enough date to explain his looking back to a generation now passed away, who had heard it in their lifetime. Nor does one see how the meaning of 'in the flesh,' which belongs to the phrase in the frequent instances of its occurrence in this context, can be preserved in the clause 'that they might be judged according to men in the flesh,' unless that means a judgment which takes place during the earthly life.

We note, too, that the antithesis between being judged 'according to men in the flesh,' and living 'according to God in the spirit' recalls that in verse 2 between living in the flesh to the lusts of men and to the will of God. It would appear, therefore, that the Apostle's meaning is that the very aim of the preaching of the gospel to those who are gone to meet the Judge was that they might by it be judged while here in the flesh, in regard to the lower life 'according to men' (or, as verse 2 has it, 'to the lusts of men'), and, being so judged, and sin condemned in their flesh, might live according to God in their spirits. That is but to say in other words that the gospel is meant to search hearts, and bring to light and condemn the lusts of the flesh, and to impart the new life which is moulded after the will of God.

III. The reference to Christ as the judge suggests a final motive for a life of suppression of the lower nature, — the near approach of the end of all things.

The distinct statement by our Lord in Acts 1:7 excludes the knowledge of the time of the end from the revelation granted to the Apostles, so that there need be no hesitation in upholding their authority, and yet admitting their liability to mistake on that point. But the force of the motive is independent of the proximity of the judgment. Its certainty and the indefiniteness of the time when we each shall have to pass into the other state of being are sufficient to preserve for each of us the whole pressure of the solemn thought that for us the end is at hand, and to enforce thereby Peter's exhortation, 'Be ye therefore of sound mind.'

The prospect of that end will sweep away many illusions as to the worth of the enjoyments of sense, and be a bridle on many vagrant desires. Self-control in all regions of our nature is implied in the word. Our various faculties are meant to be governed by a sovereign will, which is itself governed by the Divine will; and, if we see plain before us the dawning of 'the day of the Lord,' the vision will help to tame the subordinate parts of ourselves, and to establish the supremacy of the spirit over the flesh. One special form of that general self-control is that already enjoined, — the suppression of the animal appetites, especially the abstinence from intoxicants. That form of self-control is especially meant by the second of these exhortations, 'Be sober.' How could a man lift the wine cup to his lips, and drown his higher nature in a flood of drunken riot, if the end, with its solemnities of judgment, blazed before his inner eye? But this self-command is inculcated that we may be fit to pray. These lower appetites will take all desire for prayer and all earnestness in it out of us, and only when we keep the wings of appetites close clipped will the pinions grow by which we can mount up with wings as eagles. A praying drunkard is an impossible monster.

But exhortations to self-control are not all. We have to think of others, as well as of our own growth in purity and spirituality. Therefore Peter casts one swift glance to the wider circle of the brethren, which encompasses each of us, and gives the all-embracing direction, which carries in itself everything. 'Fervent love' to our fellow-Christians is the counterpoise to earnest government of ourselves. There is a selfishness possible even in cultivating our religion, as many a monk and recluse has shown. Such love as Peter here enjoins will save us from the possible evils of self-regard, and it will 'cover the multitude of sins,' — by which is not meant that, having it, we shall be excused if we in other respects sin, but that, having it, we shall be more desirous of veiling than of exposing our brother's faults, and shall be ready to forgive even when our brother offends against us often. Perhaps Peter was remembering the lesson which he had once had when he was told that 'seventy times seven' was not too great a multitude of sins against brotherly love to be

The Slave's Girdle

'... Be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.'

— 1 Peter 5:5.

THE Apostle uses here an expression of a remarkable kind, and which never occurs again in Scripture. The word rendered in the Authorised Version 'be clothed,' or better in the Revised Version, 'gird yourselves with,' really implies a little more than either of those renderings suggests. It describes a kind of garment as well as the act of putting it on, and the sort of garment which it describes was a remarkable one. It was a part of a slave's uniform. Some scholars think that it was a kind of white apron, or overall, or something of that sort; others think that it was simply a scarf or girdle; but, at all events, it was a distinguishing mark of a slave, and he put it on when he meant work. And, says Peter, 'Do you strap round you the slave's apron, and do it for the same reason that He did it, to serve.'

So, then, there are three points in my text, and the first is what we have to wear; second, what we have to wear it for; and, third, why we should wear it.

I. What we have to wear.

'Gird yourselves with the slave's apron of humility.' Humility does not consist in being, or pretending to be, blind to one's strong points. There is no humility in a man denying that he can do certain things if he can do them, or even refusing to believe he can do them well, if God has given him special faculties in any given direction. That is not humility at all. But to know whence all my strength comes, and to know what a little thing it is, after all; not to estimate myself highly, and, still further, not to be always insisting upon other people estimating me highly, and to think a great deal more about their claims on me than fretfully to insist upon my due modicum of respect and attention from others, that is the sort of temper that Peter means here.

Now, that temper which may recognise fully any gift that God has given me, its sweep and degree, but that nevertheless takes a true, because a lowly, measure of myself, and does not always demand from other people their regard and assistance, that temper is a thing that we can cultivate. We can increase it, and we are all bound to try specifically and directly to do so. Now, I believe that .a great part of the feeble and unprogressive character of so many Christian people amongst us is due to this, that they do not definitely steady their thoughts and focus them on the purpose, of finding out the weak points to which special attention and discipline should be directed. It is a very easy thing to say, 'Oh, I am a poor, weak, sinful creature!' It would do you a great deal more good to say, 'I am a very passionate one, and my business is to control that quick temper of mine,' or, 'I am a great deal too much disposed to run after worldly advantage, and my business is to subdue that,' or, 'I am afraid I am rather too close-fisted, and I ought to crucify myself into liberality.' It would be a great deal better, I say, to apply the general confession to specific cases, and to set ourselves to cultivate individual types of goodness, as well as to seek to be filled with the all-comprehensive root of it all, which lies in union with Jesus Christ. We have often to preach, dear brethren, that the way of self-improvement is not by hammering at ourselves, but by letting God mould us, and to keep the balance right. We have also to insist upon the other side of the truth, and to press the complementary thought that specific efforts after the cultivation of specific virtues — and all the more if they are virtues that are not natural to us, for the gospel is given to us to mend our natural tempers — is the duty of all Christian people that would seek to live as Christ would have them.

And how is this to be done? How am I to gird upon myself and to keep-if I may transpose the metaphor into the key of modern English — tightly buckled around me this belt which may hold in place a number of fine articles of clothing?

Well, there are three things, I think, that we may profitably do. Go down deep enough into yourself if you want to cure a lofty estimate of yourself. The top storeys may be beautifully furnished, but there are some ugly things and rubbish down in the cellar. There is not one of us but, if we honestly let the dredge down into the depths, as far down as the Challenger's went, miles and miles down, will bring up a pretty collection of wriggling monstrosities that never have been in the daylight before, and are ugly enough to be always shrouded in their native darkness. Down in us all, if we will go deep enough, and take with us a light bright 'enough, we shall discover enough to make anything but humility ridiculous, if it were not wicked. And the only right place and attitude for a man who knows himself down to the roots of his being is the publican's when 'he stood afar off, and would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven, and said, God be merciful to me a sinner.' Ah, dear friends, it will put an end to any undue exaltation of ourselves if we know ourselves as we are.

Further, let us try to cultivate this temper, by looking at God, and having communion with Him. Think of Him as the Giver of anything in us that is good, and that annihilates our pride. Think of Jesus as our pattern; how that kills our satisfaction in little excellences! If you get high enough up the mountainside, the undulating country which when you were down amongst the knolls showed all variations of level, and where he who lived on the top of one little mound thought himself in a fine, airy situation as compared with his neighbour down in the close valley, is smoothed down, and brought to one uniform level; and from the hilltop the rolling land is a plateau.

I have heard of a child who, when she was told that the sun was ninety-five millions of miles of, asked if that was from the top or the bottom storey of the house! There is about as much difference between the great men and the little, between heroes and the unknown men, as measured against the distance to God, as there is difference in the distance to the sun from the slates and from

the cellar. Let us live near God, and so aspiration will come in the place of satisfaction, and the unattained will gleam before us, and beckon us not in vain, and the man that sees what an infinite stretch there is before him will be delivered from the temptations of self-conceit, and will say, 'Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfected, but I follow after.'

But there is another advice to be given—cultivate the habit of thinking about other people, their excellences, their claims on you. To be always trying to get a footing in a social grade above our own is a poor effort, but there is a sense in which it is good advice — live with your betters. We can all do that. A man writes a bit of a book, preaches a sermon, makes a speech — all the newspapers pat him on the back, and say what a clever fellow he is. But let him steep his mind and his heart in the great works of the great men, and he finds out what a poor little dwarf he is by the side of them. And so all round the circle. Live with bigger men, not with little ones. And learn to discount — and you may take a very liberal discount off — either the praises or the censures of the people round you. Let us rather say, 'With me it is a very small matter to be judged of man's judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord.'

There are plenty of hands, foremost among them a black one that is not so much a hand as a claw, ready to snatch the girdle of humility off you! Buckle it tight about you, brother; and in an immovable temper of lowly estimate of yourself live and work.

II. The second thought here is, What we are to wear the apron or girdle for?

The Revised Version makes a little alteration in the reading as well as in the translation of our text, the previous words to which, in the Authorised Version stand, 'Yea, all of you be subject one to another.' There is another reading which strikes out that clause, and adds a portion of it to the first part of my text, which then runs thus: 'Yea, all of you gird yourselves with humility to serve one another.' That is what Christian humility is for. The slave put on his garment, whatever it was, when he had work to do.

But perhaps there is a deeper thought here. I wonder if it is fanciful to see in the text one of the very numerous allusions in this epistle to the events in our Lord's Passion. You remember that Jesus laid aside His garments, and took a towel, and girded Himself, and washed the disciples' feet, and then said, 'The servant is not above His master. I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.' Probably, I think, there floated before the memory of the man who had said, 'Lord, Thou shalt never wash my feet,' and then, with the swift recoil to the opposite pole which makes us love Him so much, hurried to say, 'Lord, not my feet only, but also—my hands and my head' — some reminiscence of that upper chamber, and of how the Master had girded Himself with the slave's apron, or towel, in order that He might serve the disciples; and then had told them that that was the pattern for all Christian men, and for all Christian living till the very end.

Service coming from humility, and humility manifested in service, are the requirements laid down in the text. Humility is the preparation for service; and service is the test of humility. If a man does not feel himself to be needy and low, he will never be able, and he will never be willing, to help those that are. You must go down if you would lift up. Laces and velvets and the fine feathers that the peacocks of self-conceit in this world strut about in are terribly in the way of Christian work. Rough work needs rough dress; and the only garb in which we shall be able to do the deeds of self-sacrifice that are needed in order to help our brethren is humility, the preparation for all service.

But, further, service is the test of humility. Plenty of people will say, 'I know that I have nothing to boast of,' and so forth; but they never do any work. And there is a still more spurious kind of humility, that of a great many professing Christians (I wonder of how many of us) who, when we ask them for any kind of Christian service, say, 'I do not feel myself at all competent. I am sure I could not take a class in the Sunday School. I do not feel sufficiently master of the subject. I cannot talk. I have no facilities for influencing other people,' and so on. Too many of us are very humble when there is anything to be done, and never at any other time as far as anybody can see; and that sort of humility the Apostle does not commend. It is unfortunately very frequent amongst professing Christians. Christian humility is not particular about the sort of work it does for Jesus. Never mind whether you are on the quarter-deck, with gold lace on your coat and epaulettes on your shoulders as an officer, or whether you are a cabin-boy doing the humblest duties, or a stoker working away down fifty feet below daylight As long as the work is done for the great Admiral, that is enough; and whoever does any work for Him will never want for a reward. There are some of us who like to be officers, but do not like carrying a musket in the ranks. Humility is the preparation for service, and service is the test of humility.

III. Lastly, why we should wear this girdle.

There is one reason given in my text, which Peter quotes from the Old Testament 'God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble.' That is often true even in regard to outward life. Providence and man often seem to be in league together to lift up the lowly ones and thwart the proud. If a man walks with his head very high, in this low-roofed world, he is pretty sure to get it knocked against the rafters before he has done. But it is the spiritual region that the Apostle is thinking about, in which the one condition of receiving God's grace is a lowly sense of my own character and nature, which is conscious of sin and weakness, and waits before Him. And the one condition of not receiving any of that grace is to keep a stiff upper lip and a high head. If I think that I am rich, 'and increased with goods, and have need of nothing,' that 'nothing' is exactly what I shall get from God, and if I have need of everything, and know that I have, that 'everything' is what I shall get from Him. 'He resisteth the proud, and He giveth grace to the

humble.' On the high barren mountain-tops the dew and the rain slide off and find their way down to the lowly valleys, where they run as fertilising rivers. And the man that is humble and of a contrite heart, 'with that man will I dwell, saith the Lord.' If we gird ourselves with the slave's dress of humility, then we shall one day have to say, 'My soul shall rejoice in the Lord, for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation; and He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness; as a bridegroom decketh himself with his ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels.'

Sylvanus

By Sylvanus, our faithful brother, as I account him, I have written unto you briefly.'

— 1 Peter 5:12. (R.V.).

I ADOPT the Revised Version because, in one or two small points, it brings out more clearly the Apostle's meaning. This Sylvanus is, beyond all reasonable doubt, the same man who is known to us in the Acts of the Apostles by the name of Silas. A double name was very common amongst Jews, whose avocations brought them into close connection with Gentiles. You will find other instances of it amongst the Apostles: in Paul himself, whose Hebrew name was Saul; Simon and Peter; and probably in Bartholomew and Nathanael. And there is no reasonable doubt that a careful examination of the various places in which Silas and Sylvanus are mentioned shows that they were borne by one person.

Now let me put together the little that we know about this man, because it will help us to some lessons. He was one of the chief men in the church at Jerusalem when the dispute arose about the necessity for circumcision for the Gentile Christians. He was despatched to Antioch with the message of peace and good feeling which the church at Jerusalem wisely sent forth to heal the strife. He remained in Antioch, although his co-deputy went back to Jerusalem; and the attraction of Paul — the great mass of that star — draw this lesser light into becoming a satellite, moving round the greater orb. So, when the unfortunate quarrel broke out between Paul and Barnabas, and the latter went sulkily away by himself with his dear John Mark, without his brethren's blessing. Paul chose Silas and set out upon his first missionary tour. He was Paul's companion in the prison and stripes at Philippi, and in the troubles at Thessalonica; and, though they were parted for a little while, he rejoined the Apostle in the city of Corinth. From thence Paul wrote the two letters to the Thessalonians, both of which are sent in the name of himself and Silas or Sylvanus. There is one more reference to Sylvanus in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, which mentions him as having been associated with Paul in the evangelisation of the church there.

Then he drops out of the book altogether, and we never hear anything more about him, except this one passing reference, which shows us to him in an altogether new relation. He is no longer attached to Paul, but to Peter. Paul was probably either in prison, or, possibly, martyred. At all events, Sylvanus now stood to Peter in a relationship similar to that in which he formerly stood to Paul. He was evidently acquainted with and known to the churches to whom this letter was addressed, and, therefore, is chosen to carry Peter's message to them.

Now I would suggest, in passing, how Sylvanus' relations to the two Apostles throws light upon the perfectly cordial alliance between them, and how it shatters into fragments the theory which was thought to be such a wonderful discovery some years ago, as to the 'great schism' in the early church between one section, led by Peter, and the more liberal party, headed by Paul. Instead of that, we find the two men working together, and the only division between them was not as to the sort of gospel they preached, but as to the people to whom they preached. This little incident helps us to realise how natural it was for a man steeped in Paul's teaching to attach himself, if circumstances suggested it, to the person who has been said to have been antagonistic in the whole drift of his conceptions of Christianity to that Apostle.

But I do not wish to speak about that now. I take this figure of a man who so contentedly and continually took such a subordinate place-played second fiddle quite willingly all his days, and who toiled on without any notice or record, and ask whether it does not teach one or two things.

I. First, then, I think we may see here a hint as to the worth and importance of subordinate work.

Not a syllable that Silas ever said is recorded in Scripture. He had been a chief man among the brethren when he was in Jerusalem, but, like some other chief men in little spheres, he came to be anything but a chief man when he got alongside of Paul, and found his proper work. He did not say: 'I have always pulled the stroke oar, and I am not going to be second. I do not intend to be absorbed in this man's brilliant lustre. I would rather have a smaller sphere where my light may not suffer by comparison than be overshadowed by him.' By no means! He could not do Paul's work, but he could endure stripes along with him in the prison at Philippi, and he took them. He could not write as Peter could; it was not his work to do that. But he could carry one of Peter's letters. And so, 'by Sylvanus, a faithful brother, I have written to you.' Perhaps Sylvanus was amanuensis as well as letter-carrier, for I daresay Peter was no great hand with a pen; he was better accustomed to haul nets. At all events, subordinate work was what God had set him to do, and so he found joy in it.

Well, then, is not that a pattern for us? People in the world or in the Church who can do prominent work are counted by units; and

those who can do valuable subordinate work are counted by thousands — by millions. 'Those members which seem to be more feeble are the more necessary,' says Paul. It is a great truth, which it would do us all good to lay more to heart.

It is hard to tell what is superior and what is subordinate work. I suppose that in a steam engine the smallest rivet is quite as essential as the huge piston, and that if the rivet drops out the piston-rod is very likely to stop rising and falling. So it is a very vulgar way of talking to speak about A.'s work being large and B.'s work being small, or to assume that we have eyes to settle which work is principal and which subordinate.

The Athenians, who deemed themselves wisest in the world, thought there were few people of less importance than the fanatical Jew who was preaching a strange story about what they knew so little of that they took Jesus and Resurrection to be the names of a pair of gods, one male and one female. But in the eyes that see truly — the eyes of God — the relative importance of Apostle and Stoic was otherwise appraised.

We cannot tell, as the book of Ecclesiastes has it, 'which shall prosper-this or that.' And if we begin to settle which is important work, we shall be

sure to make mistakes, both in our judgment about other people, and in our sense of the obligations laid upon ourselves. Let us remember that when a thing is to be done by the cooperation of a great many parts, each part is as important as the other, and each is indispensable. Although more glory may come to the soldiers who go to the front and do the fighting, the troops miles in the rear, that are quietly in camp looking after the stores and keeping open the lines of communication, are quite as essential to the success of the campaign. Their names will not get into the gazette; there will probably not be any honours at the conclusion of the war showered upon them; but, if they had not been doing their subordinate work, the men at the front would never have been able to do theirs. Therefore, the old wise law in Israel was: 'As his part is that goeth down into the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff; they shall part alike.'

And so it is good for people that have only one talent, and cannot do much, and must be contented to help somebody else that can do more, to remember this pretty little picture of Sylvanus, 'the faithful brother,' contented all his life to be a satellite of somebody; first of all helping Paul, and then helping Paul's brother Peter. Let us not be too lazy, or too proud with the pride that apes humility, to do the little that we can do because it is little.

II. Another lesson which is own sister to that first one, but which may be taken for a moment separately, is, the importance and obligation of persistently doing our task, though nobody notices it.

As I remarked, there is not one word of anything that Sylvanus said, or of anything that he did apart from Paul or Peter, recorded. And for all the long stretch of years — we do not know how many, but a very large number — that lie between this text of mine, where we find him in conjunction with Peter, and that day at Corinth, where we left him with Paul, the Acts of the Apostles does not think it worth while to mention his name. Was he sitting with his hands in his pockets all the while, do you think, doing no Christian work? Did he say, as some good people are apt to say now, 'Well, I went to teach in Sunday School for a while, and I took an interest in this, that, or the other thing for a bit, but nobody took any notice of me; and I supposed I was not wanted, and so I came away!'

Not he. That is what a great many of us do. Though we sometimes are not honest enough to say it to ourselves, yet we do let the absence of 'recognition' (save the mark) influence us in the earnestness of our Christian work to far too great an extent. And I dare say there are good friends among us who, if they would be quite honest with themselves, would take the hint, and, if I may use such a word, the rebuke, to themselves.

Dear brethren, all the work that any of us do has to become unnoticed after a little while. It will not last. Nobody will know about you or me thirty years after we are dead. What does it matter whether they know anything about us, or say anything about us, or pat us on the back for anything that we do, or recognise our service whilst we live? Surely, if we are Christian men and women, we have a better reason for working than that. 'I will never forget any of their works.' That ought to be enough for us, ought it not? Whoever forgets, He remembers; and if He remembers, He will not remain in our debt for anything that we have done.

So let us keep on, noticed or unnoticed; it matters very little which it is. There is a fillip, no doubt-and we should not be men and women if we did not feel it — in the recognition of what we have tried to do. And rochetimes it comes to us; but the absence of it is no reason for slackening our work. And this man, so patiently and persistently 'pegging away' at his obscure task during all these years which have been swallowed up in oblivion, may preach a sermon to us all.

Only let us remember that he also shows us that unnoticed work is noticed, and that unrecorded services are recorded. Here are you and I, nineteen centuries after he is dead, talking about him, and his name will live and last as long as the world, because, though written in no other history, it has been recorded here. Jesus Christ's record, the Book of Life, contains the names of 'fellow-labourers' whose names have dropped out of every other record; and that should be enough for us, Sylvanus did no work that

Christ did not see, and no work that Christ did not remember, and no work of which he did not, eighteen hundred years since, enter into the enjoyment of the fruit, and which he enjoys up there, whilst we are thinking about him down here.

III. The last thing that I would suggest is — here is an example to us of a character which we can all earn, and which will be the best that any man can get.

A great genius, a wise philosopher, an eloquent preacher, a statesman, a warrior, poet, painter? No! 'A faithful brother.' He may have been a commonplace one. We do not know anything about his intellectual capacity. He may have had very narrow limitations and very few powers, or he may have been a man of large faculty and acquirements. But these things drop out of sight; and this remains — that he was faithful. I suppose the eulogium is meant in both senses of the word. The one of these is the root of the other; for a man that is full of faith is a man who may be trusted, is reliable, and will be sure to fulfil all the obligations of his position, and to do all the duties that are laid upon him.

You and I, whether we are wise or not, whether we are learned or not, whether we have large faculties or not, whether we have great opportunities or very small ones, can all equally earn that name if we like. If the perfect judgment, the clear eye, of Jesus Christ beholds in us qualities which will permit Him to call us by that name, what can we want better? 'A faithful brother.' Trust in Christ; let that be the animating principle of all that we do, the controlling power that restrains and limits and stimulates and impels. And then men will know where to have us, and will be sure, and rightly sure, that we shall not shirk our obligations, nor scamp our work, nor neglect our duties. And being thus full of faith, and counted faithful by Him, we need care little what men's judgments of us may be, and need desire no better epitaph than this —

An Apostolic Testimony and Exhortation

'... I have written briefly, exhorting, and testifying that this is the true grace of God wherein ye stand.' — 1 Peter 5:12.

'I HAVE written briefly,' says Peter. But his letter, in comparison with the other epistles of the New Testament, is not remarkably short; in fact, is longer than many of them. He regards it as short when measured by the greatness of its theme. For all words which are devoted to witnessing to the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ, must be narrow and insufficient as compared with that, and after every utterance the speaker must feel how inadequate his utterance has been. So in that word 'briefly' we get a glimpse of the Apostle's conception of the transcendent greatness of the Gospel which he had to proclaim. This verse seems to be a summary of the contents of the Epistle. And if we observe the altered translation of the latter portion of my text which is given in the Revised Version, we shall see that the verse is itself an example of both 'testifying' and exhorting. For the last clause is not, as our Authorised Version renders it, 'Wherein ye stand' — a statement of a fact, however true that may be — but a commandment, 'In which stand fast.' And so we have here the Apostle's all-sufficient teaching, and this all-comprehensive exhortation. He 'witnesses' that this is the true grace of God, and because it is, he exhorts, 'stand fast therein.' Let us look at these two points.

I. Peter's testimony.

Now there is a very beautiful, though not, to superficial readers, obvious, significance in this testimony.

'This is the true grace of God.' What is meant by 'this'? Not merely the teaching which he has been giving in the preceding part of the letter, but that which somebody else had been giving. Now these churches in Asia Minor, to whom this letter was sent, were in all probability founded by the Apostle Paul, or by men working under his direction: and the type of doctrine preached in them was what people nowadays call Pauline. And here Peter puts his seal on the teaching that had come from his brother Apostle, and says: 'The thing that you have learned, and that I have had no part in communicating to you, this is the true grace of God.' If such be the primary application of the words (and I think there can be little doubt that it is), then we have an interesting evidence, all the stronger because unobtrusive, of the cordial understanding between the two great leaders of the Church in apostolic times; and the figments that have been set forth, with great learning and little common sense, about the differences that divided these great teachers of Christianity, melt away into thin air. Their division was only a division of the field of labour. 'They would that I should go unto the Gentiles, and they unto the circumcision.' All the evidence confirms what Paul says, 'Whether it were they or I, so we preach, and so' all the converts 'believed.' Thus it is not without significance and beauty that we here see dimly through the ages Peter stretching out his hands to Paul's convert, and saying, 'This — which my beloved brother Paul taught you — this is the true grace of God.'

But, apart altogether from that thought, note two things; the one, the substance of this witness-bearing; and the other, Peter's right to bear it. As to the substance of the testimony; 'grace,' which has become a threadbare word in the minds of many people, used with very little conception of its true depth and beauty of meaning, is properly love in exercise towards inferior and sinful creatures who deserve something else. Condescending, pardoning, and active love, is its proper meaning. And, says Peter, the inmost significance of the gospel is that it is the revelation of such a love as being in God's heart.

Another meaning springs out of this. That same message is not only a revelation of love, but it is a communication of the gifts of love. And the 'true grace of God' is shorthand for all the rich abundance and variety mad exuberant manifoldness and all-sufficiency of the sevenfold perfect gifts for spirit and heart which come from faith in Jesus Christ. The truths that lie here in the Gospel, the truths which glow and throb in this letter of Peter's, are the revelation and the communication to men of the rich gifts of the Divine heart, which will all flow into that soul which opens itself for the entrance of God's word. And what are these truths? The main theme of this letter is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, that was slain. 'Ye were as sheep going astray, but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.' He dwells upon Christ's innocence, upon Christ's meekness; but most of all upon the Christ that died, 'whom, having not seen, we love, and in whom, though unseen, we, believing, receive the end of our faith' — and the end of the gospel — 'even the salvation of our souls.'

Thus, dear brethren, this gospel, the gospel of the Divine Christ that died for our sins, and lives to give His Spirit to all waiting hearts; this is the true grace of God. It is very needful for us to keep in view always that lofty conception of what this gospel is, that we may not bring it down to the level of a mere theory of religion; nor think of it as a mere publication of dry doctrines; that we may not lose sight of what is the heart of it all, but may recognise this fact, that a gospel out of which are struck, or in which are diminished, the truths of the sacrifice of Christ and His ever-living intercession for us, is not the true grace of God, and is neither a revelation of His love to inferior and sinful men, nor a communication of His gifts to our weakness. Let us remember Peter's witness. This — the full gospel of incarnation, sacrifice, resurrection, ascension, and reign in glory, and return as Judge — this, and nothing else, 'is the true grace of God.' And this gospel is not exalted to its highest place unless it is regarded as such by our waiting and recipient hearts.

Further, what right had this man to take this position and say, 'I testify that this is the true grace of God'? He was no great genius; he did not know anything about comparative religion, which is nowadays supposed to be absolutely essential to understanding any one religion. He was not a scholar or a philosopher. What business had he to bring in his personality thus, as if he were an authority, and say, 'I testify that this is the true grace of God'?

Well there are two or three answers: one peculiar to him and others common to all Christian people. The one peculiar to him is, as I believe, that he was conscious, and rightly conscious, that Jesus Christ had bestowed upon him the power to witness, and the authority to impose his testimony upon men as a word from God. In the most inartificial and matter-of-course way Peter here lets us see the apostolic conception of apostolic authority. He had a right — not because of what he was himself, but because of the authority which Christ had conferred on him — to say to men, 'I do not ask you to give heed to me, Peter. I myself also am a man (as he said to Cornelius), but I call on you to accept Christ's word, spoken through me, His commissioned messenger, when I testify, and through me Christ testifies, that this is the true grace of God.'

Now no one but an apostle has the right to say that; but we Christian people have a right to say something like it, and if we have not apostolic authority, we may have what is very nearly as good, and sometimes as

powerful in its effect upon other people, and that is authority based on personal experience. If we have plunged deep into the secrets of God, and lived closely and faithfully in communion with Him, and for ourselves have found the grace of God, His love and the gifts of His love, coming into our lives, and ennobling, calming, elevating each of us; then we, too, have a right to go to men and say, 'Never mind about me; never mind about whether I am wise or foolish, I do not argue, but I tell you I have tasted the manna, and it is sweet. I have drunk of the water, and it comes cool and fresh from the rock. One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see. I believed, and therefore have I spoken, and on the strength of my own tasting of it, I testify that this, which has done so much for me, is the true grace of God.' If we testify thus, and back up our witness with lives corresponding, some who are wholly untouched by a preacher's eloquence and controversialists' arguments, will probably be led by our attestation to make the experiment for themselves. 'Ye are My witnesses,' says God. He did not say, 'Ye are my advocates.' He did not bid us argue for Him, but He bid us witness for Him.

II. Further, notice Peter's exhortation.

According to the right rendering the last clause is, as I have already said, 'in which stand fast' The translation in the Authorised Version, 'in which ye stand,' gives a true thought, though not the Apostle's intention here. For, as a matter of fact, men cannot stand upright and firm unless their feet are planted on the rock of that true grace of God. If our heels are well fixed on it, then our goings will be established. It is no use talking to men about steadfastness of purpose, stability of life, erect independence, resistance to antagonistic forces, and all the rest, unless you give them something to stand upon. If you talk so to a man who has his foot upon shifting sands or slippery clay; the more he tries the deeper will he sink into the one, or slide the further upon the other. The best way to help men to stand fast is to give them something to stand upon. And the only standing ground that will never yield, nor collapse, nor, like the quicksand with the tide round it, melt away, we do not know how, from beneath our feet, is 'the grace of God.' Or, as Dr. Watts says, in one of his now old-fashioned hymns: —

'Lo! on the solid Rock I stands

And all beside is shifting sand.'

However, that is not what the Apostle Peter meant. He says, 'See that you keep firmly your position in reference to this true grace of God.' Now I am not going to talk to you about intellectual difficulties in the way of hearty and whole-souled acceptance of the gospel re-velation-difficulties which are very real and very widespread in these days, but which possibly very slightly affect us; at least I hope so.

But whilst these slay their thousands, the difficulties that affect us all in the way of keeping a firm hold on, or firm standing in (for the two metaphors coalesce) the gospel, which is the true grace of God, are those that arise from two causes working in combination. One is our own poor weak hearts, wavering wills, strong passions, unbridled desires, forgetful minds; and the other is all that army and babel of seductions and inducements, in occupations legitimate and necessary, in enjoyments which are in themselves pure and innocent, in family delights, in home engagements, in pursuits of commerce or of daily business — all that crowd of things that tempt us to forget the true grace and to wander away in a foolish and vain search after vain and foolish substitutes.

Dear brethren, it is not so much because there are many adversaries in the intellectual world as because we are such weak creatures ourselves, and the world around us is so strong against us, that we need to say to one another and to ourselves, over and over again, 'Stand ye fast therein.' You cannot keep hold of a rope even, without the act of grasping tending to relax, and there must be a conscious and repeated tightening up of the muscles, or the very cord on which we hang for safety will slip through our relaxed palms. And however we may be convinced that there are no hope and no true blessedness for us except in keeping hold of God, we need that grasp to be tightened up by daily renewed efforts, or else it will certainly become slack, and we shall lose the thing that we should hold fast. So my text exhorts us against ourselves, and against the temptations of the world, which are always present with us, and are far more operative in bringing down the temperature of the Christian Church, and of its individual members, than any chilling that arises from intellectual doubts.

And how are we to obey the exhortation? Well, plainly, if 'this' is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, 'the true grace of God' which alone will give stability to our feet, then we 'shall not stand fast' in it unless we make conscious efforts to apprehend, and comprehend, and keep hold of it in our minds as well as in our hearts. May I say one very plain word? I am very much afraid that people do not read their Bibles very much now (or if they do read them, they do not study them), and that anything like an intelligent familiarity with the whole sweep of the great system (for it is a system) of Divine truth, evolved 'at sundry times and in divers manners' in this Word, is a very rare thing amongst even good people. They listen to sermons, with more or less attention; they read newspapers, no doubt; they read good little books, and magazines, and the like; and volumes that profess to be drawn from Scripture. These are all right and good in their place. But sure I am that a robust and firm grasp of the gospel, 'which is the grace of God,' is not possible with a starvation diet of Scripture. And so I would say, try to get hold of the depth and width of meaning in the Word.

Again, try to keep heart and mind in contact with it amidst distractions and daily duties. Try to bring the principles of the New Testament consciously to bear on the small details of everyday life. Do you look at your day's work through these spectacles? Does it ever occur to you, as you are going about your business, or your profession, or your domestic work, to ask yourselves what bearing the gospel and its truths have upon these? If my ordinary, so-called secular, avocations are evacuated of reference to, and government by, the Word of God, I want to know what of my life is left as the sphere in which it is to work. There is no need that religion and daily life should be kept apart as they are. There is no reason why the experience of to-day, in shop, and counting-house, and kitchen, and study, should not cast light upon, and make more real to me, 'the true grace of God.' Be sure that you desire, and ask for, and put yourself in the attitude of receiving, the gifts of that love, which are the graces of the Christian life. And when you have got them, apply them, 'that you may be able to withstand in the evil day; and, having done all, to stand'

The Church in Babylon

The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you... ' —1 Peter 5:13.

WE have drawn lessons in previous addresses from the former parts of the closing salutations of this letter. And now I turn to this one to see what it may yield us. The Revised Version omits 'the church,' and substitutes 'she'; explaining in a marginal note that there is a difference of opinion as to whether the sender of the letter is a community or an individual. All the old MSS., with one weighty exception, follow the reading 'she that is in Babylon.' But it seems so extremely unlikely that a single individual, with no special function, should be bracketed along with the communities to whom the letter was addressed, as 'elected together with' them, that the conclusion that the sender of the letter is a church, symbolically designated as a 'lady,' seems the natural one.

Then there is another 'question — where was Babylon?

An equal diversity of opinion has arisen about that. I do not venture to trouble you with the arguments pro and con, but only express

my own opinion that 'Babylon' means Rome. (Ed comment: I respectfully disagree and think Babylon means Babylon next to the Euphrates)

We have here the same symbolical name as in the Book of Revelation, where, whatever further meanings are attached to the designation, it is intended primarily as an appellation for the imperial city, which has taken the place filled in the Old Testament by Babylon, as the concentration of antagonism to the Kingdom of God.

If these views of the significance of the expression are adopted we have here the Church in Rome, the proud stronghold of worldly power and hostility, sending its greetings to the scattered Christian communities in the provinces of what is now called Asia Minor. The fact of such cordial communications between communities separated by so many contrarities as well as by race and distance, familiar though it is, may suggest several profitable considerations, to which I ask your attention.

I. We have here an object lesson as to the uniting power of the gospel.

Just think of the relations which, in the civil world, subsisted between Rome and its subject provinces; the latter, with bitter hatred in their hearts to everything belonging to the oppressing city, having had their freedom crushed down and their aspirations ruthlessly trampled upon; the former, with the contempt natural to metropolitans in dealing with far-off provincials. The same kind of relationship subsisted between Rome and the outlying provinces of its unwieldy empire as between England, for instance, and its Indian possessions. And the same uniting bond came in which binds the Christian converts of these Eastern lands of ours to England by a far firmer bond than any other. There was springing up amidst all the alienation and hatred and smothered rebellion a still incipient, but increasing, and even then strong bond that held together Roman Christians and Cappadocian believers. They were both 'one in Christ Jesus.' The separating walls were high, but, according to the old saying, you cannot build walls high enough to keep out the birds; and spirits, winged by the common faith, soared above all earthly-made distinctions and met in the higher regions of Christian communion. When the tide rises it fills and unifies the scattered pools on the beach. So the uniting power of Christian faith was manifest in these early days, when it bound such discordant elements together, and made 'the church that was in Babylon' forget that they were to a large extent Romans by birth, and stretch out their hands, with their hearts in them, to the churches to whom this letter was sent.

Now, brethren, our temptation is not so much to let barriers of race and language and distance weaken our sense of Christian community, as it is to let even smaller things than these do the same tragical office for us. And we, as Christian people, are bound to try and look over the fences of our 'denominations' and churches, and recognise the wider fellowship and larger company in which all these are merged. God be thanked! there are manifest tokens all round us today that the age of separation and division is about coming to an end. Yearnings for unity, which must not be forced into acts too soon, but which will fulfil themselves in ways not yet clear to any of us, are beginning to rise in Christian hearts. Let us see to it, dear friends, that we do our parts to cherish and to increase these, and to yield ourselves to the uniting power of the common faith.

II. We note, further, the clear recognition here of what is the strong bond uniting all Christians.

Peter would probably have been very much astonished if he had been told of the theological controversies that were to be waged round that word 'elects' The emphasis here lies, not on 'elect,' but on 'together.' It is not the thing so much as the common possession of the thing which bulks largely before the Apostle. In effect he says, 'The reason why these Roman Christians that have never looked you Bithynians in the face do yet feel their hearts going out to you, and send you their loving messages, is because they, in common with you, have been recipients of precisely the same Divine act of grace.' We do not now need to discuss the respective parts of man and God in it, nor any of the interminable controversies that have sprung up around the word. God had, as the fact of their possession of salvation showed, chosen Romans and Asiatics together to be heirs of eternal life. By the side Of these transcendent blessings which they possessed in common, how pitifully small and insignificant all the causes which kept them apart looked and were!

And so here we have a partial parallel to the present state of Christendom, in Which are seen at work, on one hand, superficial separation; on the other, underlying unity. The splintered peaks may stand, or seem to stand, apart from their sister summits, or may frown at each other across impassable gorges, but they all belong to one geological formation, and in their depths their bases blend indistinguishably into a continuous whole. Their tops are miles apart, but beneath the surface they are one. And so the things that bind Christian men together are the great things and the deepest things; and the things that part them are the small and superficial ones. Therefore it is our wisdom — not only for the sake of the fact of our unity and for the sake of our consciousness of unity, but because the truths which unite are the most important ones — that they shall bulk largest. in our hearts and minds. And if they do, we shall know our brother in every man that is like-minded with us towards them, whatever shibboleth may separate us. I spoke a moment ago about the separate pools on the beach, and the tide rising. When the tide goes down, and the spiritual life ebbs, the pools are parted again. And so ages of feeble spiritual vitality have been ages of theological controversy about secondary matters; and ages of profound realisation by the Church of the great fundamentals of gospel truth have been those when its members were drawn together, they knew not how. Hence they can say of and to each other, 'Elect together with you.'

Brethren, for the sake of the strength of our own religious life, do not let us fix our attention on the peculiarities of our sects, but upon the catholic truths believed everywhere, always, by all. Then we shall 'walk in a large place,' and feel how many there are that are possessors of 'like precious faith' with ourselves.

III. Then, lastly, we may find here a hint as to the pressing need for such a realisation of unity.

'The church that is in Babylon' was in a very uncongenial place. Thank God, no Babylon is so Babylonish but that a Church of God may be found planted in it. No circumstances are so unfavourable to the creation and development of the religious life but that the religious life may grow there. An orchid will find footing upon a bit of stick, because it draws nourishment from the atmosphere; and they who are fed by influx of the Divine Spirit may be planted anywhere, and yet flourish in the courts of our God. So 'the church that is in Babylon' gives encouragement as to the possibility of Christian faith being triumphant over adverse conditions.

But it also gives a hint as to the obligation springing from the circumstances in which Christian people are set, to cultivate the sense of belonging to a great brotherhood.' Howsoever solitary and surrounded by uncongenial associations any Christian man may be, he may feel that he is not alone, not only because his Master is with him, but because there are many others whose hearts throb with the same love, whose lives are surrounded by the same difficulties. It is by no means a mere piece of selfish consolation which this same Apostle gives in another part of his letter, when he bids the troubled so be of good cheer, as remembering that the 'same afflictions were accomplished in the brotherhood which is in the world.' He did not mean to say, 'Take comfort, for other people are as badly off as you are,' but he meant to call to the remembrance of the solitary sufferer the thousands of his brethren who were 'dreeing the same weird' in the same uncongenial world.

If thus you and I, Christian men, are pressed upon on all sides by such worldly associations, the more need that we should let our hearts go out to the innumerable multitude of our fellows, companions in the tribulation, and patience, and kingdom of Jesus Christ. Precisely because the Roman believers were in Babylon, they were glad to think of their brethren in Asia. Isolated amidst Rome's splendours and sins, it was like a breath of cool air stealing into some banqueting house heavy with the fumes of wine, or some slaughter-house reeking with the smell of blood, to remember these far-off partakers of a purer life.

But if I might for a moment diverge, I would venture to say that in the conditions of thought, and the tendencies of things in our own and other lands, it is more the-ever needful that Christian people should close their ranks, and stand shoulder to shoulder. For men who believe in a supernatural revelation, in the Divine Christ, in an atoning Sacrifice, in an indwelling Spirit, are guilty of suicidal folly if they let the comparative trivialities that part them, separate God's army into isolated groups, in the face of the ordered battalions that are assaulting these great truths.

Because persecution was beginning to threaten and rumble on the horizon, like a rising thundercloud, it was the more needful, in Peter's time, that Christians parted by seas, by race, language, and customs, should draw together. And for us, fidelity to our testimony and loyalty to our Master, to say nothing of common sense and the instinct of self-preservation, command Christian men in this day to think more, and to speak more, and to make more, of the great verities which they all possess in common.

Thus, brethren, living in Babylon, we should open our windows to Jerusalem; and though we dwell here as aliens, we may say, 'We are come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; to an innumerable company of angels; to the spirits of just men made perfect; and to the Church of the first-born whose names are written in Heaven.'

Marcus, My Son

'... So doth Marcus, my son.' — 1 Peter 5:13

THE outlines of Mark's life, so far as recorded in Scripture, are familiar. He was the son of Mary, a woman of some wealth and position, as is implied by the fact that her house was large enough to accommodate the 'many' who were gathered together to pray for Peter's release. He was a relative, probably a cousin (Colossians 4:10, Revised Version), of Barnabas, and possibly, like him, a native of Cyprus. The designation of him by Peter as 'my son' naturally implies that the Apostle had been the instrument of his conversion. An old tradition tells us that he was the 'young man' mentioned in his Gospel who saw Christ arrested, and fled, leaving his only covering in the captor's hands. However that may be, he and his relatives were early and prominent disciples, and closely connected with Peter, as is evident from the fact that it was to Mary's house that he went after his deliverance. Mark's relationship to Barnabas made it natural that he should be chosen to accompany him and Paul on their first missionary journey, and his connection with Cyprus helps to account for his willingness to go thither, and his unwillingness to go further into less known ground. We know how he left the Apostles, when they crossed from Cyprus to the mainland, and retreated to his mother's house at Jerusalem. We have no details of the inglorious inactivity in which he spent the time until the proposal of a second journey by Paul and Barnabas. In the preparations for it, the foolish indulgence of his cousin, far less kind than Paul's wholesome severity, led to a rupture

between the Apostles, and to Barnabas setting off on an evangelistic tour on his own account, which received no sympathy from the church at Antioch, and has been deemed unworthy of record in the Acts.

Then followed some twelve years or more, during which Mark seems to have remained quiescent; or, at all events, he does not appear to have had any work in connection with the great Apostle. Then we find him reappearing amongst Paul's company when he was in prison for the first time in Rome; and in the letters to Colossae he is mentioned as being a comfort to the Apostle then. He sends salutations to the Colossians, and is named also in the nearly contemporaneous letter to Philemon. According to the reference in Colossians, he was contemplating a journey amongst the Asiatic churches, for that in Colossae is bidden to welcome him. Then comes this mention of him in the text. The fact that Mark was beside Peter when he wrote seems to confirm the view that Babylon here is a mystical name for Rome; and that this letter falls somewhere about the same date as the letters to Colossae and Philemon. Here again he is sending salutations to Asiatic churches. We know nothing more about him, except that some considerable time after, in Paul's last letter, he asks Timothy, who was then at Ephesus, the headquarters of the Asiatic churches, to 'take Mark,' who, therefore, was apparently also in Asia, 'and bring him' with him to Rome; 'for,' says the Apostle, beautifully referring to the man's former failure, 'he is profitable to me for' — the very office that he had formerly flung up 'the ministry.'

So, possibly, he was with Paul in his last days. And then, after that, tradition tells us that he attached himself more closely to the Apostle Peter; and, finally, at his direction and dictation, became the evangelist who wrote the 'Gospel according to Mark.'

Now that is his story; and from the figure of this 'Marcus, my son,' and from his appearance here in this letter, I wish to gather two or three very plain and familiar lessons.

I. The first of them is the working of Christian sympathy.

Mark was a full-blooded Jew when he began his career. 'John, whose surname was Mark,' like a great many other Jews at that time, bore a double name — one Jewish, 'John,' and one Gentile, 'Marcus.' But as time goes on we do not hear anything more about 'John,' nor even about 'John Mark,' which are the two forms of his name when he is first introduced to us in the Acts of the Apostles, but he finally appears to have cast aside his Hebrew and to have been only known by his Roman name. And that change of appellation coincides with the fact that so many of the allusions which we have to him represent him as sending messages of Christian greeting across the sea to his Gentile brethren. And it further coincides with the fact that his gospel is obviously intended for the use of Gentile Christians, and, according to an old and reliable tradition, was written in Rome for Roman Christians. All of which facts just indicate two things, that the more a man has real operative love to Jesus Christ in his heart, the more he will rise above all limitations of his interests, his sympathy, and his efforts, and the more surely will he let himself out, as far as he can, in affection towards and toils for all men.

This change of name, though it is a mere trifle, and may have been adopted as a matter of convenience, may also be taken as reminding us of a very important truth, and that is, that if we wish to help people, the first condition is that we go down and stand on their level, and make ourselves one with them, as far as we can. And so Mark may have said, 'I have put away the name that parts me from these Gentiles, for whom I desire to work, and whom I love; and I take the name that binds me to them.' Why, it is the very same principle, in a small instance — just as a raindrop that hangs on the thorn of a rose-bush is moulded by the same laws that shape the great sphere of the central sun — it is a small instance of the great principle which brought Jesus Christ down into the world to die for us. You must become like the people that you want to help. 'Forasmuch as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same, that He might deliver them.' And so, not only the duty of widening our sympathies, but one of the supreme conditions of being of use to anybody, are set forth in the comparatively trifling incident, which we pass by without noticing it, that this man, a Jew to his finger-tips, finally found himself-or, rather, finally was carried, for it was no case of unconscious drifting — into the position of a messenger of the Cross to the Gentiles; and for the sake of efficiency in his work, and of getting close by the side of people whom he wanted to influence, flung away deliberately that which parted him from them. It is a small matter, but a little window may show a very wide prospect.

II. The history of Mark suggests the possibility of overcoming early faults.

We do not know why he refused to bear the burden of the work that he had so cheerily begun. Probably the reason that I have suggested may have had something to do with it. When he started he did not bargain for going into unknown lands, in which there were many toils to be encountered. He was willing to go where he knew the ground, and where there were people that would make things easy for him; but when Paul went further afield, Mark's courage ebbed out at his finger ends, and he slunk back to the comfort of his mother's house in Jerusalem. At all events, whatever his reason, his return was a fault; or Paul would not have been so hard upon him as he was. The writer of the Acts puts Paul's view of the case strongly by the arrangement of clauses in the sentence in which he tells us that the Apostle 'thought not good to take him with them who withdrew from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work.' If he thus threw down his tools whenever he came to a little difficulty, and said, 'As long as it is easy work, and close to the base of operations, I am your man, but if there is any sacrifice wanted you must look out for somebody

else,' he was not precisely a worker after Paul's own heart. And the best way to treat him was as the Apostle did; and to say to Barnabas' indulgent proposal, 'No! he would not do the work before, and now he shall not do it.' That is often God's way with us. It brings us to our senses, as it brought Mark to his.

We do not know how long it took to cure Mark of his early fault, but he was thoroughly cured. The man that was afraid of dangers and difficulties and hypothetical risks in Asia Minor became brave enough to stand by the Apostle when he was a prisoner, and was not ashamed of his chain. And afterwards, so much had he won his way into the Apostle's confidence, and made himself needful for him by his services and his sweetness, that the lonely prisoner, with the gibbet or headsman's sword in prospect, feels that he would like to have Mark with him once more, and bids Timothy bring him with himself, for 'he is profitable to me for the ministry.' 'He can do a thousand things that a man like me cannot do for himself, and he does them all for love and nothing for reward.' So he wants Mark once more. And thus not only Paul's generosity, but Mark's own patient effort had pasted a clean sheet over the one that was inscribed with the black story of his desertion, and he became 'profitable for' the task that he had once in so petulant and cowardly a way, flung up.

Well, translate that from the particular into the general and it comes to this. Let no man set limits to the possibilities of his own restoration, and of his curing faults which are most deeply rooted within himself. Hope and effort should be boundless. There is nothing that a Christian man may not reach, in the way of victory over his worse self, and ejection of his most deeply-rooted faults, if only he will be true to Jesus, and use the gifts that are given to him. There are many of us whose daily life is pitched in a minor key; whose whole landscape is grey and monotonous and sunless; who feel as if yesterday must set the tune for to-day, and as if, because we have been beaten and baffled so often, it is useless to try again. But remember that the field on which the Stone of Help was erected, to commemorate the great and decisive victory that Israel won, was the very field on which the same foes had before contended, and then Israel had been defeated.

So, brethren, we may win victories on the very soil where formerly we were shamefully put to the rout; and our Christ with us will make anything possible for us, in the way of restoration, of cure of old faults, of ceasing to repeat former sins. I suppose that when a spar is snapped on board a vessel, and lashed together with spun yarn and lanyards, as a sailor knows how to do, it is stronger at the point of fracture than it was before. I suppose that it is possible for a man to be most impregnable at the point where he is naturally weakest, if he chooses to use the defences that Jesus Christ has given.

III. Take another lesson — the greatness of little service.

We do not hear that this John Mark ever tried to do any work in the way of preaching the gospel. His business was a very much humbler one. He had to attend to Paul's comfort. He had to be his factotum, man of all work; looking after material things, the commissariat, the thousand and one trifles that some one had to see to if the Apostle's great work was to get done. And he did it all his life long. It was enough for him to do thoroughly the entirely 'secular' work, as some people would think it, which it was in his power to do. That needed some self-suppression. It would have been so natural for Mark to have said, 'Paul sends Timothy to be bishop in Crete; and Titus to look after other churches; Epaphroditus is an official here; and Apollos is a great preacher there. And here am I, grinding away at the secularities yet. I think I'll "strike," and try and get more conspicuous work.' Or he might, perhaps deceive himself, and say, 'more directly religious work,' like a great many of us that often mask a very carnal desire for prominence under a very saintly guise of desire to do spiritual service. Let us take care of that. This 'minister,' who was not a minister at all, in our sense of the word, but only in, the sense of being a servant, a private attendant and valet of the Apostle, was glad to do that work all his days.

That was self-suppression. But it was something more. It was a plain recognition of what we all ought to have very clearly before us, and that is, that all sorts of work which contribute to one end are one sort of work; and that at bottom the man who carried Paul's books and parchments, and saw that he was not left without clothes, though he was so negligent of cloaks and other necessaries, was just as much helping on the cause of Christ as the Apostle when he preached.

I wonder if any of you remember the old story about an organist and his blower. The blower was asked who it was that played that great sonata of Beethoven's, or somebody's. And he answered, 'I do not know who played, but I blew it.' There is a great truth there. If it had not been for the unknown man at the bellows, the artist at the keys would not have done much. So Mark helped Paul. And as Jesus Christ said, 'He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet, shall receive a prophet's reward.'

IV. Take as the last lesson the enlarged sphere that follows faithfulness in small matters.

What a singular change! The man who began with being a servant of Paul and of Barnabas ends by being the evangelist, and it is to him, under Peter's direction, that we owe what is possibly the oldest, and, at all events, in some aspects, an entirely unique, narrative of our Lord's life. Do you think that Peter would ever have said to him: 'Mark! come here and sit down and write what I tell you,' if there had not been beforehand these long years of faithful service? So is it always, dear friends. 'He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.' That is not only a declaration that faithfulness is one in kind, whatever be the diameter of the

circle in which it is exercised, but it may also be taken as a promise, though that was not the original intention of the saying.

For quite certainly, in God's providence, the tools do come to the hand that can wield them, and the best reward that we can get for doing well our little work is to have larger work to do. The little tapers are tempted, if I may use so incongruous a figure, to wish themselves set up on loftier stands. Shine your brightest in your corner, and you will be 'exalted' in due time. It is so, as a rule, in this world; sometimes too much so, for, they say is the case at the English bar, so it is sometimes in God's Church, 'There is no medium between having nothing to do and being killed with work.' Still the reward for work is more work. And the law will be exemplified most blessedly when Christ shall say, 'Well done! good and faithful servant. Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things.'

So this far-away figure of the minister-evangelist salutes us too, and bids us be of good cheer, notwithstanding all faults and failures, because it is possible for us, as he has proved, to recover ourselves after them all. God will not be less generous in forgiveness than Paul was; and even you and I may hear from Christ's lips, 'Thou art profitable to Me for the ministry.'