

Maclaren on 2 Chronicles

2 Chronicles

Sermons

Alexander Maclaren

Who is Alexander Maclaren (1826-1910)?

2 Chronicles 7:12,13 The Duty of Every Day

‘Then Solomon offered burnt offerings unto the Lord ... Even after a certain rate every day.’—(A.V.) ‘Then Solomon offered burnt offerings unto the Lord, even as the duty of every day required it.’— 2 CHRON. viii. 12-13 (R. V.)

This is a description of the elaborate provision, in accordance with the commandment of Moses, which Solomon made for the worship in his new Temple. The writer is enlarging on the precise accordance of the ritual with the regulations laid down in the law. He expresses, by the phrase which we have taken as our text, not only the accordance of the worship with the commandment, but its unbroken continuity, and also the variety in it, according to the regulations for different days. For the verse runs on, ‘on the Sabbaths, and on the new moons, and on the solemn feasts, three times in the year, even in the Feast of unleavened bread, and in the Feast of weeks, and in the Feast of Tabernacles.’ There were, then, these characteristics in the ritual of Solomon’s Temple, precise compliance with the Divine commandment, unbroken continuity, and beautiful flexibility and variety of method.

But passing altogether from the original application of the words, I venture to do now what I very seldom do, and that is, to take this verse as a kind of motto. ‘Even according as the duty of every day required’; the phrase may suggest three thoughts: that each day has its own work, its own worship, and its own supplies, ‘even as the duty of every day required.’

Each day has its own work.

Of course there is a great uniformity in our lives, and many of us who are set down to one continuous occupation can tell twelve months before what, in all probability, we shall be doing at each hour of each day in the week. But for all that, there is a certain individual physiognomy about each new day as it comes to us; and the oldest, most habitual, and therefore in some degree easiest and least stimulating, work has its own special characteristics as it comes again to us day by day for the hundredth time.

So there are three pieces of practical wisdom that I would suggest, and one is—be content to take your work in little bits as it comes. There is a great deal of practical wisdom in taking short views of things, for although we have often to look ahead, yet it is better on the whole that a man should, as far as he can, confine his anticipations to the day that is passing, and leave the day that is coming to look after itself. Take short views and be content to let each day prescribe its tasks, and you have gone a long way to make all your days quiet and peaceful. For it is far more the anticipation of difficulties than the realisation of them that wears and wearies us. If a man says to himself, ‘This sorrow that I am carrying, or this work that I have to do, is going to last for many days to come,’ his heart will fail. If he said to himself, ‘It will be no worse to-morrow than it is at this moment, and I can live through it, for am I not living through it at this moment, and getting power to endure or do at this moment? and to-morrow will probably be like today,’ things would not be so difficult.

You remember the homely old parable of the clock on the stair that gave up ticking altogether because it began to calculate how many thousands of seconds there are in the year, and that twice that number of times it would have to wag backwards and forwards. The lesson that it learned was—tick one tick and never mind the next. You will be able to do it when the time to do it comes. Let us act ‘as the duty of every day requireth.’ ‘Sufficient for the day is the work thereof.’

Then there is another piece of advice from this thought of each day having its own work, and that is—keep your ears open, and your eyes too, to learn the lesson of what the day’s work is. There is generally abundance of direction for us if only we are content with the one-step-at-a-time direction, which we get, and if another condition is fulfilled, if we try to suppress our own wishes and the noisy babble of our own yelping inclinations, and take the whip to them until they cease their barking, that we may hear what God says. It is not because He does not speak, but because we are too anxious to have our own way to listen quietly to His voice, that we make most of our blunders as to what the duty of every day requires. If we will be still and listen, and stand in the attitude of the boy-prophet before the glimmering lamp in the sacred place, saying, ‘Speak, Lord! for Thy servant heareth,’ we shall get sufficient instruction for our next step.

Another piece of practical wisdom that I would suggest is that if every day has its own work, we should buckle ourselves to do the day's work before night falls and not leave any over for to-morrow, which will be quite full enough. 'Do the duty that lies nearest thee,' was the preaching of one of our sages, and it is wholesome advice. For when we do that duty, the doing of it has a wonderful power of opening up further steps, and showing us more clearly what is the next duty. Only let us be sure of this, that no moment comes from God which has not in it boundless possibilities; and that no moment comes from God which has not in it stringent obligations. We neither avail ourselves of the one, nor discharge the other, unless we come, morning by morning, to the new day that is dawning upon us, with some fresh consciousness of the large issues that may be wrapped in its unseen hours, and the great things for Him that we may do ere its evening falls.

Each day has its tasks, and if we do not do the tasks of each day in its day, we shall fling away life. If a man had L. 100,000 for a fortune, and turned it all into halfpence, and tossed them out of the window, he could soon get rid of his whole fortune. And if you fling away your moments or live without the consciousness of their solemn possibilities and mystic awfulness, you will find at the last that you have made 'ducks and drakes' of your years, and have flung them away in moments without knowing what you were doing, and without possibility of recovery. 'Take care of the pence, the pounds will take care of themselves.' Take care of the days, and the years will show a fair record.

Secondly, we have here the suggestion that every day has its own worship.

As I remarked at the beginning of my observations, the chronicler dwells, with a certain kind of satisfaction, in accordance with the tone of his whole writings, upon the external ritual of the Temple; and points out its entire conformity with the divine precept, and the unbroken continuity of worship day after day, year in year out, and the variation of the characteristics of that worship according as the day was more or less ritually important. From his words we may deduce a very needful though obvious and commonplace lesson. What we want is every-day religion, and that every-day religion is the only thing that will enable us to do what the duty of every day requires. But that every-day religion which will be our best ally, and power for the discharge of the obligations that each moment brings with it, must have its points of support, as it were, in special moments and methods of worship.

So, then, take that first thought: What we want is a religion that will go all through our lives. A great many of you keep your religion where you keep your best clothes: putting it on on Sunday and locking it away on the Sunday night in a wardrobe because it is not the dress that you go to work in. And some of you keep your religion in your pew, and lock it up in the little box where you put your hymn-books and your Bibles, which you read only once a week, devoting yourselves to ledgers or novels and newspapers for the rest of your time. We want a religion that will go all through our life; and if there is anything in our life that will not stand its presence, the sooner we get rid of that element the better. A mountain road has generally a living brooklet leaping and flashing by the side of it. So our lives will be dusty and dead and cold and poor and prosaic unless that river runs along by the roadside and makes music for us as it flows. Take your religion wherever you go. If you cannot take it in to any scenes or company, stop you outside.

There is nothing that will help a man to do his day's work so much as the realisation of Christ's Presence. And that realisation, along with its certain results, devotion of heart to Him and submission of will to His commandment, and desire to shape our lives to be like His, will make us masters of all circumstances and strong enough for the hardest work that God can lay upon us.

There is nothing so sure to make life beautiful, and noble, and pure, and peaceful, and strong as this—the application to its monotonous trifles of religious principles. If you do not do little things as Christian men and women, and under the influence of Christian principle, pray what are you going to do under the influence of Christian principle? If you are keeping your religion to influence the crises of your lives, and are content to let the trifles be ruled by the devil or the world and yourselves, you will find out, when you come to the end, that there were perhaps three or four crises in your experience, and that all the rest of life was made of trifles, and that when the crises came you could not lay your hand on the religious principle that would have enabled you to deal with them. The sword had got so rusty in its scabbard because it had never been drawn for long years, that it could not be readily drawn in the moment of sudden peril; and if you could have drawn it, you would have found its edge blunted. Use your religion on the trifles, or you will not be able to make much of it in the crises. 'He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.' The worship of every day is the preparation for the work of that day.

Further, that worship, that religion, wearing its common, modest suit of workaday clothes, must also, if there is to be any power in it, have a certain variety in its methods. 'Solomon offered burnt offerings ... on the Sabbaths, on the new moons,' which had a little more ceremonial than the Sabbaths, 'and on the solemn feasts three times in a year,' which had still more ceremonial than the new moons, 'even in the Feast of unleavened bread, and in the Feast of weeks, and in the Feast of tabernacles.' These were spring-tides when the sea of worship rose beyond its usual level, and they kept it from stagnating. We, too, if we wish to have this every-day religion running with any strength of scour and current through our lives, will need to have moments when it touches high-water mark, else it will not flush the foulness out of our hearts and our lives.

Lastly, take the other suggestion, that every day has its own supplies.

That does not lie in the text properly, but for the sake of completeness I add it. Every day has its own supplies. The manna fell every day, and was gathered and consumed on the day on which it fell. God gives us strength measured accurately by the needs of the day. You will get as much as you require, and if ever you do not get as much as you require, which is very often the case with Christian people, that is not because God did not send enough manna, but because their omer was not ready to catch it as it fell. The day's supply is measured by the day's need. Suppose an Israelite had sat in his tent and said, 'I am not going out to gather,' would he have had any in his empty vessel? Certainly not. The manna lay all around the tent, but each man had to go out and gather it. God makes no mistakes in His weights and measures. He gives us each sufficient strength to do His will and to walk in His ways; and if we do not do His will or walk in His ways, or if we find our burden too heavy, our sorrows too sharp, our loneliness too dreary, our difficulties too great, it is not because 'the Lord's hand is shortened that it cannot' supply, but because our hands are so slack that they will not take the sufficiency which He gives. In the midst of abundance we are starving. We let the water run idly through the open sluice instead of driving the wheels of life.

My friend! God's measure of supply is correct. If we were more faithful and humble, and if we understood better and felt more how deep is our need and how little is our strength, we should more continually be able to rejoice that He has given, and we have received, 'even as the duty of every day required.'

2 Chronicles 12:8 Contrasted Services

'They shall be his servants: that they may know My service, and the service of the kingdoms of the countries.'— 2 Chronicles 12:8

Rehoboam was a self-willed, godless king who, like some other kings, learned nothing by experience. His kingdom was nearly wrecked at the very beginning of his reign, and was saved much more by the folly of his rival than by his own wisdom. Jeroboam's religious revolution drove all the worshippers of God among the northern kingdom into flight. They might have endured the separate monarchy, but they could not endure the separate Temple. So all priests and Levites in Israel, and all the adherents of the ancestral worship in the Temple at Jerusalem, withdrew to the southern kingdom and added much to its strength.

Rehoboam's narrow escape taught him neither moderation nor devotion, his new strength turned his head. He forsook the law of the Lord. The dreary series, so often illustrated in the history of Israel, came into operation. Prosperity produced irreligion; irreligion brought chastisement; chastisement brought repentance; repentance brought the removal of the invader—and then, like a spring released, back went king and nation to their old sin.

So here—Rehoboam's sins take visible form in Sheshak's army. He has sown the dragon's teeth and they spring up armed men. Shemaiah the prophet, the first of the long series of noble men who curbed the violence of Jewish monarchs, points the lesson of invasion in plain, blunt words: 'Ye have forsaken Me.' Then follow penitence and confession—and the promise that Jerusalem shall not be destroyed, but at the same time they are to be left as vassals and tributaries of Egypt—an anomalous position for them—and the reason is given in these words of our text.

I. The contrasted Masters.

Judah was too small to be independent of the powerful warlike states to its north and south, unless miraculously guarded and preserved. So it must either keep near God, and therefore free and safe from invasion, or else, departing from God and following its own ways, fall under alien dominion. Its experience was a type of that of universal humanity. Man is not independent. His mass is not enough for him to do without a central orb round which he may revolve. He has a choice of the form of service and the master that he will choose, but one or other must dominate his life and sway his motions. 'Ye cannot serve God and Mammon'; ye must serve God or Mammon. The solemn choice is presented to every man, but the misery of many lives is that they drift along, making their election unawares, and infallibly choosing the worse by the very act of lazily or weakly allowing accident to determine their lives. Not consciously and strongly to will the right, not resolutely and with coercion of the vagrant self to will to take God for our aim, is to choose the low, the wrong. Perhaps none, or very few of us, would deliberately say 'I choose Mammon, having carefully compared the claims of the opposite systems of life that solicit me, and with open-eyed scrutiny measured their courses, their goods and their ends.' But how many of us there are who have in effect made that choice, and never have given one moment's clear, patient examination of the grounds of our choice! The policy of drift is unworthy of a man and is sure to end in ruin.

It is not for me to attempt here to draw out the contrast between man's chief end and all other rival claimants of our lives. Each man must do that for himself, and I venture to assert that the more thoroughly the process of comparison is carried out, and the more complete the analysis not only of the rival claims and gifts, but of our capacities and needs, the more sun-clear will be the truth of the old, well-worn answer: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever.' The old woman by her solitary fireside who has

learned that and practises it, has chosen the better part which will last when many shining careers have sunk into darkness, and many will-o'-the-wisps, which have been pursued with immense acclamations, have danced away into the bog, and many a man who has been envied and admired has had to sum up his successful career in the sad words, 'I have played the fool and erred exceedingly.' I cannot pretend to conduct the investigation for you, but I can press on every one who does not wish to let accidents mould him, at least to recognise that there is a choice to be made, and to make it deliberately and with eyes open to the facts of the case. It is a shabby way of ruining yourself to do it for want of thought. The rabble of competitors of God catch more souls by accident than of set purpose. Most men are godless because they have never fairly faced the question: what does my soul require in order to reach its highest blessedness and its noblest energy?

II. The contrasted experience of the servants.

Judah learned that the yoke of obedience to God's law was a world lighter than the grinding oppression of the Egyptian invader.

God's service is freedom; the world's is slavery.

Liberty is unrestrained power to do what we ought. Man must be subject to law. The solemn imperative of duty is omnipresent and sovereign. To do as we like is not freedom, but bondage to self, and that usually our worst self, which means crushing or coercing the better self. The choice is to chain the beast in us or to clip the wings of the angel in us, and he is a fool who conceits himself free because he lets his inferior self have its full swing, and hustles his better self into bondage to clear the course for the other. There is but one deliverance from the sway of self, and it is realised in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. To make self our master inevitably leads to setting beggars on horseback and princes walking. Passion, the 'flesh' is terribly apt to usurp the throne within when once God is dethroned. Then indulgence feeds passion, and deeper draughts become necessary in order to produce the same effects, and cravings, once allowed free play, grow in ravenousness, while their pabulum steadily loses its power to satisfy. The experience of the undevout sensualist is but too faithful a type of that of all undevout livers, in the failure of delights to delight and of acquisitions to enrich, and in the bondage, often to nothing more worthy to be obeyed than mere habit, and in the hopeless incapacity to shake off the adamantine chains which they have themselves rivetted on their limbs. There are endless varieties in the forms which the service of self assumes, ranging from gross animalism, naked and unashamed, up to refined and cultured godlessness, but they are one in their inmost character, one in their disabling the spirit from a free choice of its course, one in the limitations which they impose on its aspirations and possibilities, one in the heavy yoke which they lay on their vassals. The true liberty is realised only when for love's dear sake we joyously serve God, and from the highest motive enrol ourselves in the household of the highest Person, and by the act become 'no more servants but sons.' Well may we all pray—

**'Lord! bind me up, and let me lie
A prisoner to my liberty,
If such a state at all can be
As an imprisonment, serving Thee.'**

God's service brings solid good, the world's is vain and empty.

God's service brings an approving conscience, a calm heart, strength and gladness. It is in full accord with our best selves. Tranquil joys attend on it. 'In keeping Thy commandments there is great reward,' and that not merely bestowed after keeping, but realised and inherent in the very act. On the other side, think of the stings of conscience, the illusions on which those feed who will not eat of the heavenly food, the husks of the swine-trough, the ashes for bread, that self and the world, in all their forms set before men. A pathetic character in modern fiction says, 'If you make believe very much it is nice.' It takes a tremendous amount of make-believe to keep up an appetite for the world's dainties or to find its meats palatable, after a little while. No sin ever yields the fruit it was expected to produce, or if it does it brings something which was not expected, and the bitter tang of the addition spoils the whole. It may be wisely adapted to secure a given end, but that end is only a means to secure the real end, our substantial blessedness, and that is never attained but by one course of life, the life of service of God. We may indeed win a goodly garment, but the plague is in the stuff and, worn, it will burn into the bones like fire. I read somewhere lately of thieves who had stolen a cask of wine, and had their debauch, but they sickened and died. The cask was examined and a huge snake was found dead in it. Its poison had passed into the wine and killed the drinkers. That is how the world serves those who swill its cup. 'What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed?' The threatening pronounced against Israel's disobedience enshrines an eternal truth: 'Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things; therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies ... in hunger and in thirst, and in nakedness and in want of all things.'

God's service has final issues and the world's service has final issues.

Only fools try to blink the fact that all our doings have consequences. And it augurs no less levity and insensibility to blink the other fact that these consequences show no indications of being broken short off at the end of our earthly life. Men die into another life, as they have ever, dimly and with many foolish accompaniments, believed; and dead, they are the men that they have made

themselves while living. Character is eternal, memory is eternal, death puts the stamp of perpetuity on what life has evolved. Nothing human ever dies. The thought is too solemn to be vulgarised by pulpit rhetoric. Enough to say here that these two tremendous alternatives, Life and Death, express some little part of the eternal issues of our fleeting days. Looking fixedly into these two great symbols of the ultimate issues of these contrasted services, we can dimly see, as in the one, a wonder of resplendent glories moving in a sphere 'as calm as it is bright,' so, in the other, whirling clouds and jets of vapour as in the crater of a volcano. One shuddering glance over the rim of it should suffice to warn from lingering near, lest the unsteady soil should crumble beneath our feet.

But the true Lord of our lives loves us too well to let us experience all the bitter issues of our foolish rebellion against His authority, and yet He loves us too well not to let us taste something of them that we may 'know and see that it is an evil thing and a bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God.' The experiences of the consequences of godless living are in some measure allowed to fall on us by God's love, lest we should persist in the evil and so bring down on ourselves still more fatal issues. It is mercy that here chastises the evildoer with whips, in hope of not having to chastise him with scorpions. God desires to teach us, by the pains and heartaches of an undevout life, by disappointments, foiled plans, wrecked hopes, inner poverty, the difference between His service and that of 'the kingdoms of the countries,' if haply He may not be forced to let the full flood of fatal results overwhelm us. It is best to be drawn to serve Him by the cords of love, but it is possible to have the beginnings of the desire so to serve roused by the far lower motives of weariness and disgust at the world's wages, and by dread of what these may prove when they are paid in full. Self-interest may sicken a man of serving Mammon, and may be transformed into the self-surrender which makes God's service possible and blessed. The flight into the city of refuge may be quickened by the fear of the pursuer, whose horse's hoofs are heard thundering on the road behind the fugitive, and whose spear is all but felt a yard from his back, but once within the shelter of the city wall, gratitude for deliverance will fill his heart and 'perfect love will cast out fear.'

The king concerning whom our text was spoken had to suffer humiliation by the Egyptian invasion. His sufferings were meant to be educational, and when they in some measure effected their purpose, God curbed the invader and granted some measure of deliverance. So is it with us, if, moved by whatever impulse, we betake ourselves to Jesus to save us from the bitter fruits of our evil lives. The extreme severity of the results of our sins does not fall on penitent, believing spirits, but some do fall. As the Psalmist says: 'Thou wast a God that forgavest them though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.' A profligate course of life may be forgiven, but health or fortune is ruined all the same. In brief, the so-called 'natural' consequences are not removed, though the sin which caused them is pardoned. Polluted memories, indulged habits, defiled imaginations, are not got rid of, though the sins that inflicted them are forgiven.

Is it not, then, the part of wise men to lay to heart the lessons of experience, and to let what we have learned of the bitter fruit of godless living turn us away from such service, and draw us by merciful chastisement to yield ourselves to God, whom to serve accords with our deepest needs and brings first fruits and pre-libations of blessedness and peace here, and fullness of joy with pleasures for evermore hereafter?

2 Chronicles 13:18 The Secret of Victory

'The children of Judah prevailed, because they relied upon the Lord God of their fathers.'— 2 Chronicles 13:18

These words are the summing-up of the story of a strange old-world battle between Jeroboam, the adventurer who rent the kingdom, and Abijah, the son of the foolish Rehoboam, whose unseasonable blustering had played into the usurper's hands. The son was a wiser and better man than his father. It is characteristic of the ancient world, that before battle was joined Abijah made a long speech to the enemy, recounting the ritual deficiencies of the Northern kingdom, and proudly contrasting the punctilious correctness of the Temple service with the irregular cult set up by Jeroboam. He confidently pointed to the priests 'with their trumpets' in his army as the visible sign that 'God is with us at our head,' and while charging Israel with having 'forsaken the Lord our God,' to whom he and his people had kept true, besought them not to carry their rebellion to the extreme of fighting against their fathers' God, and assured them that no success could attend their weapons in such a strife. The passionate appeal had no effect, but while Abijah was orating, Jeroboam was carrying out a ruse, and planting part of his troops behind Judah, so as to put them between two fires and draw a net round the outnumbered and outmaneuvered enemy.

Abijah and his men suddenly detected their desperate position, and did the only wise thing. When, with a shock of surprise, they saw that 'behold! the battle was before and behind them,' they 'cried unto the Lord, and the priests sounded with the trumpets.' The sharp, short cry from thousands of agitated men ringed round by foes, and the blare of the trumpets were both prayers, and heartened the suppliants for their whirlwind charge, before which the men of Israel, double in number as they were, broke and fled. The defeat was thorough, and, for a while, Rehoboam and his kingdom were 'brought under,' and a comparatively long peace followed. Our text gathers up the lesson taught, not to Judah or Israel alone, by victory and defeat, when it declares that to rely upon the Lord is to prevail. It opens for us the secret of victory, in that old far-off struggle and in to-day's conflicts.

I. We note the faith of the fighters.

'They relied,' says the chronicler, 'upon the Lord.' Now the word rendered 'relied' is one of several picturesque words by which the Old Testament, which we are sometimes told, with a great flourish of learning, has no mention of 'faith,' expresses 'trust,' by metaphors drawn from bodily actions which symbolise the spiritual act. The word here literally signifies to lean on, as a feeble hand might on a staff, or a tremulous arm on a strong one. And does not that picture carry with it much insight into what the essence of Old Testament 'trust' or New Testament 'faith' is? If we think of faith as leaning, we shall not fall into that starved misconception of it which takes it to be nothing more than intellectual assent. We shall see there is a far fuller pulse of feeling than that beating in it. A man who leans on some support, does so because he knows that his own strength is insufficient for his need. The consciousness of weakness is the beginning of faith. He who has never despaired of himself has scarcely trusted in God. Abijah's enemies were two to one of his own men. No wonder that they cried unto the Lord, and felt a stound of despair shake their courage. And who of us can face life with its heavy duties, its thick-clustering dangers and temptations, its certain struggles, its possible failures, and not feel the cold touch of dread gripping our hearts, though strong and brave? Surely he has had little experience, or has learned little wisdom from the experience he has had, who has yet to discover his own weakness. But the consciousness of weakness is by itself debilitating, and but increases the weakness of which it is painfully aware. There is no surer way to sap what strength we have than to tell ourselves what poor creatures we are. The purpose and end of self-contemplation which becomes aware of our own feebleness is to lead us to the contemplation of God, our immortal strength. Abijah's assurance that 'God is with us at our head' rang out triumphantly. Faith has an upper and an under side: the under side is self-distrust; the upper, trust in God. He will never lean all his weight on a prop, who fancies that he can stand alone, or has other stays to hold him up.

But Abijah's example teaches us another lesson—that for a vigorous faith, there must be obedience to all God's known will. True, thank God! faith often springs in its power in a soul that is conscious but of sin, but a continuance in disobedience will inevitably kill faith. It was because Abijah and his people had kept 'the charge of the Lord our God,' that they were sure that God was with them. We can only be sure of God to lean on when we are doing His will, and we shall do His will only as we are sure that we lean on Him. Our trust in Him will be strong and operative in the measure in which our lives are conformed to His commandments. Much elaborate dissertation has been devoted to expounding what faith is, and the strong, vivid Scriptural conception of it has been woefully darkened and overlaid with cobwebs of theology, but surely this eloquent metaphor of our text tells us more than do many learned volumes. It bids us lean on God, rest the whole weight of our needs, our weaknesses, and our sins on Him. Like any human friend or helper, He is better pleased when we lean hard on Him than when we gingerly put a finger on His arm, and lay no pressure on it, as we do when in ceremonial fashion we seem to accept another's support, and hold ourselves back from putting a weight on the offered arm. We cannot rely too utterly on Him. We honour Him most when we repose our whole selves on His strong arm.

II. The increase of faith by sudden fear.

'When Judah looked back, behold, the battle was before and behind them.' The shock of seeing the flashing spears in the rear would make the bravest hold their breath for one overwhelming moment, but the next moment their faith in God surged back with tenfold force, increased by the sudden new peril. The sharp collision of flint and steel struck out a spark of faith. 'What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee,' said an expert in the genesis and growth of trust. Peril kills a feeble trust, but vivifies it, if strong. The recognition of danger is meant to drive us to God. If each fresh difficulty or danger makes us tighten our clasp of Him, and lean the harder on Him, it has done its highest service to us, and we have conquered it, and are the stronger because of it. The storm that makes the traveller, fighting with the wind and the rain in his face, clasp his cloak tighter round him, does him no harm. The purpose of our trials is to drive us to God, and a fair-weather faith which had all but fallen asleep is often roused to energy that works wonders, by the sudden dash of danger flung into and disturbing a life. It is wise seamanship to make a run to get snugly behind the breakwater when a sudden gale springs up.

III. The expression of faith in appeal to God.

When the ambush was unmasked, the surrounded men of Judah 'cried unto the Lord, and the priests sounded with the trumpets,' before they flung themselves on the enemy. We may be sure that their cry was short and sharp, and poignant with appeal to God. There would be no waste words, nor perfunctory petitions without wings of desire, in that cry. Should we not look for the essential elements of prayer rather to such cries, pressed from burdened hearts by a keen sense of absolute helplessness, and very careless of proprieties so long as they were shrill enough to pierce God's ear and touch His heart, than to the formal petitions of well-ordered worship? A single ejaculation flung heavenward in a moment of despair or agony is more precious in God's sight than a whole litany of half-hearted devotions.

The text puts in a striking form another lesson well worth learning, that, in the greatest crises, no time is better spent than time used for prayer. A rush on the enemy would not have served Abijah's purpose nearly so well as that moment's pause for crying to the Lord, before his charge. Hands lifted to heaven are nerved to clutch the sword and strike manfully. It is not only that Christ's soldiers are to fight and pray, but that they fight by praying. That is true in the small conflicts and antagonisms of the lives of each of us, and

it is true in regard to the age long battle against ignorance and sin. Christian's sword was named 'All-prayer.'

The priests, too, blew a prayer through their trumpets, for the ordinance had appointed that 'when ye go to war ... then shall ye sound an alarm with the trumpets; and ye shall be remembered before the Lord your God, and ye shall be saved from your enemies.' The clear, strident blare was not intended to hearten warriors, or to sing defiance, but to remind God of His promises, and to bring Him on to the battlefield, as He had said that He would be. The truest prayer is that which but picks up the arrows of promise shot from heaven to earth, and casts them back from earth to heaven. He prays best who fills his mouth with God's words, turning every 'I will' of His into 'Do Thou!'

IV. The strength that comes through faith.

'As the men of Judah shouted, it came to pass that God smote Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah.' There is no such quickener of all a man's natural force as even the lowest forms of faith. He who throws himself into any enterprise sure of success will often succeed just because he was sure he would. The world's history is full of instances where men, with every odds against them, have plucked the flower safety out of the nettle danger, just because they trusted in their star, or their luck, or their destiny. We all know how a very crude faith turned a horde of wild Arabs into a conquering army, that in a century dominated the world from Damascus to Seville. The truth that is in 'Christian Science' is that many forms of disease yield to the patient's firm persuasion of recovery. And from these and many other facts the natural power of faith is beginning to dawn on the most matter-of-fact and unspiritual people. They are beginning to think that perhaps Christ was right after all in saying 'All things are possible to him that believeth,' and that it is not such a blunder after all to make faith the first step to all holiness and purity, and the secret of victory in life's tussle. Leaving out of view for the moment the supernatural effects of faith, which Christianity alleges are its constant consequences, it is clear that its natural effects are all in the direction of increasing the force of the trusting man. It calms, it heartens for all work, effort, and struggle. It imparts patience, it brightens hope, it forbids discouragement, it rebukes and cures despondency. And besides all this, there is the supernatural communication of a strength not our own, which is the constant result of Christian faith. Christian faith knits the soul and the Saviour in so close a union, that all that is Christ's becomes the Christian's, and every believer may hear His Lover's voice whispering to him what one of His servants once heard in an hour of despondency, 'My grace is sufficient for thee, for My power is made perfect in weakness.' Faith joins us to the Lord, and 'he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit'; and that Lord has said to all His disciples, 'I give thee Myself, and in Myself all that is Mine.' We do not go to warfare at our own charges, but there will pass into and abide in our hearts the warlike might of the true King and Captain of the Lord's host, and we shall hear the ring of His encouraging voice saying, 'Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world.'

2 Chronicles 14:2-8 Asa's Reformation and Consequent Peace and Victory

And Asa did that which was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God; 3. For he took away the altars of the strange gods, and the high places, and brake down the images, and cut down the groves: 4. And commanded Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers, and to do the law and the commandment. 5. Also he took away out of all the cities of Judah the high places and the images: and the kingdom was quiet before him. 6. And he built fenced cities in Judah: for the land had rest, and he had no war in those years; because the Lord had given him rest. 7. Therefore he said unto Judah, Let us build these cities, and make about them walls, and towers, gates, and bars, while the land is yet before us; because we have sought the Lord our God, we have sought Him, and He hath given us rest on every side. So they built and prospered. 8. And Asa had an army of men that bare targets and spears, out of Judah three hundred thousand; and out of Benjamin, that bare shields and drew bows, two hundred and fourscore thousand: all these were mighty men of valor.— 2 Chronicles 14:2-8

Asa was Rehoboam's grandson, and came to the throne when a young man. The two preceding reigns had favoured idolatry, but the young king had a will of his own, and inaugurated a religious revolution, with which and its happy results this passage deals.

I. It first recounts the thorough clearance of idolatrous emblems and images which Asa made.

'Strange altars,'—that is, those dedicated to other gods; 'high places,'—that is, where illegal sacrifice to Jehovah was offered; 'pillars,'—that is, stone columns; and 'Asherim,'—that is, trees or wooden poles, survivals of ancient stone- or tree-worship; 'sun-images,'—that is, probably, pillars consecrated to Baal as sun-god, were all swept away. The enumeration vividly suggests the incongruous rabble of gods which had taken the place of the one Lord. How vainly we try to make up for His absence from our hearts by a multitude of finite delights and helpers! Their multiplicity proves the insufficiency of each and of all.

1 Kings 15:13 adds a detail which brings out still more clearly Asa's reforming zeal; for it tells us that he had to fight against the influence of his mother, who had been prominent in supporting disgusting and immoral forms of worship, and who retained some authority, of which her son was strong enough to take the extreme step of depriving her. Remembering the Eastern reverence for a

mother, we can estimate the effort which that required, and the resolution which it implied. But 1 Kings differs from our narrative in stating that the 'high places' were not taken away—the explanation of the variation probably being that the one account tells what Asa attempted and commanded, and the other records the imperfect way in which his orders were carried out. They would be obeyed in Jerusalem and its neighbourhood, but in many a secluded corner the old rites would be observed.

It is vain to force religious revolutions. Laws which are not supported by the national conscience will only be obeyed where disobedience will involve penalties. If men's hearts cleave to Baal, they will not be turned into Jehovah-worshippers by a king's commands. Asa could command Judah to 'seek the Lord God of their fathers, and to do the law,' but he could not make them do it.

II. The chronicler brings out strongly the truth which runs through his whole book,—namely, the connection between honoring Jehovah and national prosperity.

He did not import that thought into his narrative, but he insisted on it as molding the history of Judah. Modern critics charge him with writing with a bias, but he learned the 'bias' from God's own declarations, and had it confirmed by observation, reflection, and experience. The whole history of Israel and Judah was one long illustration of the truth which he is constantly repeating. No doubt, the divine dealings with Israel brought obedience and well-being into closer connection than exists now; but in deepest truth the sure defence of our national prosperity is the same as theirs, and it is still the case that 'righteousness exalteth a nation.' 'The kingdom was quiet,' says the chronicler, 'and he had no war in those years; because the Lord had given him rest.'

1 Kings makes more of the standing enmity with the northern kingdom, and records scarcely anything of Asa's reign except the war which, as it says, was between him and Baasha of Israel 'all their days.' But, according to 2 Chronicles 16:1, Baasha did not proceed to war till Asa's thirty-sixth year, and the halcyon time of peace evidently followed immediately on the religious reformation at its very beginning.

Asa's experience embodies a truth which is substantially fulfilled in nations and in individuals; for obedience brings rest, often outward tranquility, always inward calm. Note the heightened earnestness expressed in the repetition of the expression 'We have sought the Lord' in verse 7, and the grand assurance of His favour as the source of well-being in the clause which follows, 'and He hath given us rest on every side.' That is always so, and will be so with us. If we seek Him with our whole hearts, keeping Him ever before us amid the distractions of life, taking Him as our aim and desire, and ever stretching out the tendrils of our hearts to feel after Him and clasp Him, all around and within will be tranquil, and even in warfare we shall preserve unbroken peace.

Asa teaches us, too, the right use of tranquility. He clearly and gratefully recognised God's hand in it, and traced it not to his own warlike skill or his people's prowess, but to Him. And he used the time of repose to strengthen his defenses, and exercise his soldiers against possible assaults. We do not yet dwell in the land of peace, where it is safe to be without bolts and bars, but have ever to be on the watch for sudden attacks. Rest from war should give leisure for building not only fortresses, but temples, as was the case with Solomon. The time comes when, as in many an ancient fortified city of Europe, the ramparts may be levelled, and flowers bloom where sentries walked; but to-day we have to be on perpetual guard, and look to our fortifications, if we would not be overcome.

2 Chronicles 14:11 Asa's Prayer

And Asa cried unto the Lord his God, and said, Lord, it is nothing with Thee to help, whether with many, or with them that have no power: help us, O Lord our God; for we rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go against this multitude. O Lord, Thou art our God; let not man prevail against Thee.— 2 Chronicles 14:11

This King Asa, Rehoboam's grandson, had had a long reign of peace, which the writer of the Book of Chronicles traces to the fact that he had rooted out idolatry from Judah, 'The land had rest, and he no war ... because the Lord had given him rest.'

But there came a time when the war-cloud began to roll threateningly over the land, and a great army—the numbers of which, from their immense magnitude, seem to be erroneously given—came up against him. Like a wise man he made his military dispositions first, and prayed next. He set his troops in order, and then he fell down on his knees, and spoke to God.

Now, it seems to me that this prayer contains the very essence of what ought to be the Christian attitude in reference to all the conditions and threatening dangers and conflicts of life; and so I wish to run over it, and bring out the salient points of it, as typical of what ought to be our disposition.

I. The wholesome consciousness of our own impotence.

It did not take much to convince Asa that he had 'no power.' His army, according to the numbers given of the two hosts, was

outnumbered two to one; and so it did not require much reflection to say, 'We have no might.' But although perhaps not so sufficiently obvious to us, as truly as in the case in our text, if we look fairly in the face our duties, our tasks, our dangers, the possibilities of life and its certainties, the more humbly we think of our own capacity, the more wisely we shall think about God, and the more truly we shall estimate ourselves. The world says, 'Self-reliance is the conquering virtue'; Jesus says to us, 'Self-distrust is the condition of all victory.' And that does not mean any mere shuffling off of responsibility from our own shoulders, but it means looking the facts of our lives, and of our own characters, in the face. And if we will do that, however apparently easy may be our course, and however richly endowed in mind, body, or estate we may be, if we all do that honestly, we shall find that we each are like 'the man with ten thousand' that has to meet 'the King that comes against him with twenty thousand'; and we shall not 'desire conditions of peace' with our enemy, for that is not what in this case we have to do, but we shall look about us, and not keep our eyes on the horizon, and on the levels of earth, but look up to see if there is not there an Ally that we can bring into the field to redress the balance, and to make our ten as strong as the opposing twenty. Zerah the Ethiopian, who was coming down on Asa, is said to have had a million fighting-men at his back, but that is probably an erroneous figure, because Old Testament numbers are necessarily often unreliable. Asa had only half the number; so he said, 'What can I do?' And what could he do? He did the only thing possible, he 'grasped at God's skirts, and prayed,' and that made all the difference.

Now all that is true about the disproportion between the foes we have to face and fight and our own strength. It is eminently true about us Christian people, if we are doing any work for our Master. You hear people say, 'Look at the small number of professing Christians in this country, as compared with the numbers on the other side. What is the use of their trying to convert the world?' Well, think of the assembled Christian people, for instance, of Manchester, on the most charitable supposition, and the shallowest interpretation of that word 'Christian.' What are they among so many? A mere handful. If the Christian Church had to undertake the task of Christianising the world by its own strength, we might well despair of success and stop altogether. 'We have no might.' The disproportion both numerically and in all things that the world estimates as strength (which are many of them good things), is so great that we are in a worse case than Asa was. It is not two to one; it is twenty to one, or an even greater disproportion. But we are not only numerically weak. A multitude of non-effectives, mere camp followers, loosely attached, nominal Christians, have to be deducted from the muster-roll, and the few who are left are so feeble as well as few that they have more than enough to do in holding their own, to say nothing of dreaming of charging the wide-stretching lines of the enemy. So a profound self-distrust is our wisdom. But that should not paralyze us, but lead to something better, as it led Asa.

II. Summoning God into the field should follow wholesome self-distrust.

Asa uses a remarkable expression, which is, perhaps, scarcely reproduced adequately in our Authorised Version: 'It is nothing with Thee to help, whether with many or with them that have no power.' It is a strange phrase, but it seems most probable that the suggested rendering in the Revised Version is nearer the writer's meaning, which says, 'Lord! there is none beside Thee to help between the mighty and them that have no power,' which to our ears is a somewhat cumbrous way of saying that God, and God only, can adjust the difference between the mighty and the weak; can redress the balance, and by the laying of His hand upon the feeble hand can make it strong as the mailed fist to which it is opposed. If we know ourselves to be hopelessly outnumbered, and send to God for reinforcements, He will clash His sword into the scale, and make it go down. Asa turns to God and says, 'Thou only canst trim the scales and make the lighter of the two the heavier one by casting Thy might into it. So help us, O Lord our God!'

One man with God at his back is always in the majority; and, however many there may be on the other side, 'there are more that be with us than they that be with them.' There is encouragement for people who have to fight unpopular causes in the world, who have been accustomed to be in minorities all their days, in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation. Never mind about the numbers; bring God into the field, and the little band, which is compared in another place in these historical Books to 'two flocks of kids' fronting the enemy, that had flowed all over the land, is in the majority. 'God with us'; then we are strong.

The consciousness of weakness may unnerve a man; and that is why people in the world are always patting each other on the back and saying 'Be of good cheer, and rely upon yourself.' But the self-distrust that turns to God becomes the parent of a far more reliable self-reliance than that which trusts to men. My consciousness of need is my opening the door for God to come in. Just as you always find the lakes in the hollows, so you will always find the grace of God coming into men's hearts to strengthen them and make them victorious, when there has been the preparation of the lowered estimate of one's self. Hollow out your heart by self-distrust, and God will fill it with the flashing waters of His strength bestowed. The more I feel myself weak, the more I am meant not to fold my hands and say, 'I never can do that thing; it is of no use my trying to attempt it, I may as well give it up'; but to say, 'Lord I there is none beside Thee that can set the balance right between the mighty and him that hath no strength.' 'Help me, O Lord my God!' Just as those little hermit-crabs that you see upon the seashore, with soft bodies unprotected, make for the first empty shell they can find, and house in that and make it their fortress, our exposed natures, our unarmoured characters, our sense of weakness, ought to drive us to Him. As the unarmed population of a land invaded by the enemy pack their goods and hurry to the nearest fortified place, so when I say to myself I have no strength, let me say, 'Thou art my Rock, my Strength, my Fortress, and my Deliverer. My God, in whom I trust, my Buckler, and the Horn of my Salvation, and my high Tower.'

Now, there is one more word about this matter, and that is, the way by which we summon God into the field. Asa prays, 'Help us, O Lord our God! for we rest on Thee'; and the word that he employs for 'rest' is not a very frequent one. It carries with it a very striking picture. Let me illustrate it by a reference to another case where it is employed. It is used in that tragical story of the death of Saul, when the man that saw the last of him came to David and drew in a sentence the pathetic picture of the wearied, wounded, broken-hearted, discrowned, desperate monarch, leaning on his spear. You can understand how hard he leaned, with what a grip he held it, and how heavily his whole languid, powerless weight pressed upon it. And that is the word that is used here. 'We lean on Thee' as the wounded Saul leaned upon his spear. Is that a picture of your faith, my friend? Do you lean upon God like that, laying your hand upon Him till every vein on your hand stands out with the force and tension of the grasp? Or do you lean lightly, as a man that does not feel much the need of a support? Lean hard if you wish God to come quickly. 'We rest on Thee; help us, O Lord!'

III. Courageous advance should follow self-distrust and summoning God by faith.

It is well when self-distrust leads to confidence, when, as Charles Wesley has it in his great hymn:

**'... I am weak,
But confident in self-despair.'**

But that is not enough. It is better when self-distrust and confidence in God lead to courage, and as Asa goes on, 'Help us, for we rely on Thee, and in Thy name we go against this multitude.' Never mind though it is two to one. What does that matter? Prudence and calculation are well enough, but there is a great deal of very rank cowardice and want of faith in Christian people, both in regard to their own lives and in regard to Christian work in the world, which goes masquerading under much too respectable a name, and calls itself 'judicious caution' and 'prudence.' There is little ever done by that, especially in the Christian course; and the old motto of one of the French republicans holds good; 'Dare! dare! always dare!' You have more on your side than you have against you, and creeping prudence of calculation is not the temper in which the battle is won. 'Dash' is not always precipitate and presumptuous. If we have God with us, let us be bold in fronting the dangers and difficulties that beset us, and be sure that He will help us.

IV. And now the last point that I would notice is this—the all-powerful plea which God will answer.

'Thou art my God, let not man prevail against Thee.' That prayer covers two things. You may be quite sure that if God is your God you will not be beaten; and you may be quite sure that if you have made God's cause yours He will make your cause His, and again you will not be beaten.

'Thou art our God.' 'It takes two to make a bargain,' and God and we have both to act before He is truly ours. He gives Himself to us, but there is an act of ours required too, and you must take the God that is given to you, and make Him yours because you make yourselves His. And when I have taken Him for mine, and not unless I have, He is mine, to all intents of strength-giving and blessedness. When I can say, 'Thou art my God, and it is impossible that Thou wilt deny Thyself,' then nothing can snap that bond; and 'neither life nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature' can do it. But there is a creature that can, and that is I. For I can separate myself from the love and the guardianship of God, and He can say to a man, 'I am thy God,' and the man not answer, 'Thou art my God.'

And then there is another plea here. 'Let not man prevail against Thee.' What business had Asa to identify his little kingdom and his victory with God's cause and God's conquest? Only this, that he had flung himself into God's arms, and because he had, and was trying to do what God would have him do, he was quite sure that it was not Asa but Jehovah that the million of Ethiopians were fighting against. People warn us against the fanaticism of taking for granted that our cause is God's cause. Well, we need the warning sometimes, but we may be quite sure of this, that if we have made God's cause ours, He will make our cause His, down to the minutest point in our daily lives.

And then, if thus we say in the depths of our hearts, and live accordingly, 'There is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God!' it will be with us as it was with Asa in the story before us, 'the enemy fled, and could not recover themselves, for they were destroyed before the Lord and before His hosts.'

2 Chronicles 15:15 The Search That Always Finds

They ... sought Him with their whole desire; and He was found of them: and the Lord gave them rest round about.— 2 Chronicles 15:15

These words occur in one of the least familiar passages of the Old Testament. They describe an incident in the reign of Asa, who was the grandson of Solomon's foolish son Rehoboam, and was consequently the third king of Judah after the secession of the

North. He had just won a great victory, and was returning with his triumphant army to Jerusalem, when there met him a prophet, unknown otherwise, who poured out fiery words, exhorting Asa and his people to cleave to God and to cast away their idols. Asa, encouraged by the prophetic words of this bold speaker for God, screwed himself up, and was able to induce also his people, to effect a great religious reformation. He made a clean sweep of the idols, and gathered the sadly-dwindled nation together in Jerusalem, where they renewed the covenant with the Lord God of their fathers. The text sums up their work and its result. 'They sought Him with their whole heart, and He was found of them; and the Lord gave them rest round about.' The words express in simplest form what should be the chief desire of our hearts and occupation of our lives, and what will then be our peaceful experience. We shall best bring out these points if we take the words just as they lie, and consider the seeking, the finding which certainly crowns that seeking, and the rest which ensues on finding God.

I. The seeking.

Now, of course, there is no doubt that what the chronicler meant to describe by the phrase, 'seeking the Lord,' was largely the mere external acts of ritual worship, the superficial turning from idols to a purely external recognition of God as the God of Israel. But while there may have been nothing deeper than a change in the nominal object of nominal worship, so far as many were concerned, no doubt a very real turning of heart to God underlay the external change in many other cases, of which the destruction of idols and the renewed observance of the form of Jehovah's worship were the consequence and sign. That turning of mind, will, and affection towards God must be ours if we are to be among those wise and happy seekers who are sure to find that which—or rather Him whom—they seek and to rest in Him whom they find. That search is not after a lost treasure, nor does it imply ignorance of where its object is to be found. We seek that which we know, and which we may be assured of finding. Therefore there need be no tremors of uncertainty in our quest, and the blessedness of the search is as real as, though different from, the blessedness of the possession which ends it. The famous saying which prefers the search after, to the possession of truth, is more proud than wise; but the comparison which it institutes is so far true that there is a joy in the aspiration after and the efforts towards truth only less joyous than that which attends its attainment. But truth divorced from God is finite and may pall, become familiar and lose its radiance, like a gathered flower; and hence the preference for the search is intelligible though one-sided. But God does not pall, and the more we find Him the more we delight in Him; the highest bliss is to find Him, the next highest is to seek Him; and, since seeking and finding Him are never wholly separate, these kindred joys blend their lights in the experience of all His children.

But our text lays emphasis on the whole-heartedness of the people's seeking of God. The search must be earnest and engaged in with the whole energy of our whole being, if any blessing is to come from it. Why! one reason why the great mass of professing Christians make so little of their religion is because they are only half-hearted in it. If you divide a river into two streams the force of each is less than half the power of the original current; and the chances are that you will make a stagnant marsh where there used to be a flowing stream. 'All in all, or not at all,' is the rule for life, in all departments. It is the rule in daily business. A man that puts only half himself in his profession or trade, while the other half of his wits is gone woolgathering and dreaming, is predestined from all eternity to fail. The same is true about our religion. If you and I attend to it as a kind of by-occupation; if we give the balance of our time and the superfluity of our energy, after we have done a hard day's work—say, an hour upon a Sunday—to seeking God, and devote all the rest of the week to seeking worldly prosperity, it is no wonder if our religion languishes, and is mainly a matter of forms, as it is with such hosts of people that call themselves Christians.

Oh! dear brethren, I do believe there is more unconscious unreality in the average Christian man's endeavour to be a better Christian than there is in almost anything else in the world:—

**'One foot on sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.'**

That is why so many of us know nothing of a progressive strengthening of our faith, and an increasing conquest of ourselves, and a firmer grasp of God, and a fuller realisation of the blessedness of walking in His ways.

'They sought Him with all their heart.' That does not mean, remember, that there are to be no other desires, for it is a great mistake to pit religion against other things which are meant to be its instruments and its helps. We are not required to seek nothing else in order to seek God wholly. He demands no impossible and fantastic detachment of ourselves from the ordinary and legitimate occupations, affections, and duties of human life, but He does ask that the dominant desire after Him should be powerful enough to express itself through all our actions, and that we should seek for God in them, and for them in God.

Whilst thus we are to give the right interpretation to that whole-heartedness in our seeking God, on which the text lays stress, do not let us forget that the one token of it which the text specifies is, casting out our idols. There must be detachment if there is to be attachment. If some climbing plant, for instance, has twisted itself round the unprofitable thorns in the hedge, the gardener, before he can get it to go up the support that it is meant to encircle, has carefully to detach it from the stays to which it has wantonly clung, taking care that in the process he does not break its tendrils and destroy its power of growth. So, to train our souls to cleave to God, and to grow up round the great Stay that is provided for us, there is needed, as an essential part of the process, the voluntary,

conscious, conscientious, and constant guarding of ourselves from the vagrancies of our desires, which send out their shoots away from Him; and when the objects of these become idols, then there is nothing for it but that, like Asa and his people, we should hew them to pieces and make a bonfire of them; and then renew our covenant before God. I desire to press that upon you and upon myself. The heart must be emptied of baser liquors, if the new wine of the Kingdom is to be poured into it.

True it is, of course—and thank God for it!—that the most powerful agent in effecting that detachment of ourselves from lower things is our fruition of higher. It is when God comes into the temple that Dagon falls on the threshold. It is when a new affection begins to spring in the heart that old loves are thrust out of it. But whilst that is true, it is also true that the two processes run on simultaneously; and that whilst, on the one hand, if we are ever to overcome our love of the world it must be through the love of God, on the other hand, if we are ever to be confirmed in a whole-hearted love of God, it must be through our conquest of our love of the world. ‘Unite my heart to fear Thy name’ was the profound prayer of the old Psalmist; and the ‘heart,’ according to Old Testament usage, is the central fountain from which flow all the streams of conscious life. To seek Him with the whole heart is to engage the whole self in the quest, and that is the only kind of seeking which has the certainty of success.

II. The finding which crowns such seeking.

‘He was found of them.’ Yes; anything is possible rather than that a whole-hearted search after God should be a vain search. For there are, in that case, two seekers—God is seeking for us more truly than we are seeking for Him. And if the mother is seeking her child, and the child its mother, it will be a very wide desert where they will not meet. ‘The Father seeketh such to worship Him,’ that is—the divine activity is going about the world, searching for the heart that turns to Him, and it cannot but be that they that seek Him shall find Him, or ‘shall be found of Him.’ Open the windows, and you cannot keep out the sunshine; open your lungs and you cannot keep out the air. ‘In Him we live and move and have our being,’ and if our desires turn, however blindly, to Him, and are accompanied with the appropriate action, heaven and earth are more likely to rush to ruin than such a searching to be frustrated of its aim.

Brethren! is there anything else in the world of which you can say, ‘Seek, and ye shall find’? You, with white hairs on your heads, have you found anything else in which the chase was sure to result in the capture; in which capture was sure to yield all that the hunter had wished? There is only one direction for a man’s desires and aims, in which disappointment is an impossibility. In all other regions the most that can be promised is ‘Seek, and perhaps you will find’; and, when you have found, perhaps you will feel that the prize was not worth the finding. Or it is, ‘Seek, and possibly you will find; and after you have found and kept for a little while, you will lose.’ Though it may be

**‘Better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all,’**

a treasure that slips out of our fingers is not the best treasure that we can search for. But here the assurance is, ‘Seek, and ye shall find; and shall never lose. Find, and you shall always possess.’

What would you think of a company of gold-seekers, hunting about in some exhausted claim, for hypothetical grains, ragged, starving—and all the while in the next gully were lying lumps of gold for the picking up? And that figure fairly represents what people do and suffer who seek for good and do not seek for God.

III. The rest which ensues on finding God.

‘The Lord gave them rest round about.’ We believe that the Jewish nation was under special supernatural guidance, so that national adherence to the Law was always followed by external prosperity. That is not, of course, the case with us. But which is the better thing, ‘rest round about’ or rest within? We have no immunity from toil or conflict. Seeking God does not cover our heads from the storm of external calamities, nor arm our hearts against the darts and daggers of many a pain, anxiety, and care, but disturbance around is a very small matter if there be a better thing, rest within.

Do you remember who it was that said, ‘In the world ye shall have tribulation ... but in Me ye shall have peace’? Then we have, as it were, two abodes—one, as far as regards the life of sense, in the world of sense—another, as far as regards the inmost self, which may, if we will, be in Christ. A vessel with an outer casing and a layer of air between it and the inner will keep its contents hot. So we may have round us the very opposite of repose, and, if God so wills, let us not kick against His will; we may have conflict and stir and strife, and yet a better rest than that of my text may be ours. ‘Rest round about’ is sometimes good and sometimes bad. It is often bad, for it is the people that ‘have no changes’ who most usually ‘do not fear God.’ But rest within, that is sure to come when a man has sought with all his desire for God, whom he has found in all His fullness, is only good and best of all.

We all know, thank God! in worldly matters and in inferior degree, how blessed and restful it is when some strong affection is gratified, some cherished desire fulfilled. Though these satisfactions are not perpetual, nor perfect, they may teach us what a depth of blessed and calm repose, incapable of being broken by any storms or by any tasks, will come to and abide with the man whose

deepest love is satisfied in God, and whose most ardent desires have found more than they sought for in Him. Be sure of this, dear friends! that if we do thus seek, and thus find, it is not in the power of anything 'that is at enmity with joy' utterly to 'abolish or destroy' the quietness of our hearts. 'Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.' They who thus repose will have peace in their hearts, even whilst tasks and temptations, changes and sorrows, disturb their outward lives. 'In the world ye shall have tribulation.' Be it so; it may be borne with submission and thankfulness if in Christ we have peace.

Thus we may have the peace of God, rest in and from Him, entering into us, and in due time, by His gracious guidance and help, we shall enter into eternal rest. Whilst to seek is to find Him, in a very deep and blessed sense, even in this life; in another aspect all our earthly life may be regarded as seeking after Him, and the future as the true finding of Him. That future will bring to those whose hearts have turned from the shows and vanities of time to God a possession of Him so much fuller than was experienced here that the lesser discoveries and enjoyments of Him which are experienced here, scarcely deserve in comparison to be called by the same name. So my text may be taken, as in its first part, a description of the blessed life here—'They sought Him with all their heart'—and in its second, as a shadowy vision of the yet more blessed life hereafter, 'He was found of them, and the Lord gave them rest round about,' as well as within, in the land of peace, where sorrow and sighing, and toil and care, shall pass from memory; and they that warred against us shall be far away.

2 Chronicles 17:1-10 Jehoshaphat's Reform

And Jehoshaphat his son reigned in his stead, and strengthened himself against Israel. 2. And he placed forces in all the fenced cities of Judah, and set garrisons in the land of Judah, and in the cities of Ephraim, which Asa his father had taken. 3. And the Lord was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the first ways of his father David, and sought not unto Baalim; 4. But sought to the Lord God of his father, and walked in His commandments, and not after the doings of Israel. 5. Therefore the Lord established the kingdom in his hand; and all Judah brought to Jehoshaphat presents; and he had riches and honour in abundance. 6. And his heart was lifted up in the ways of the Lord: moreover he took away the high places and groves out of Judah. 7. Also in the third year of his reign he sent to his princes, even to Ben-hail, and to Obadiah, and to Zechariah, and to Nethaneel, and to Michaiiah, to teach in the cities of Judah. 8. And with them he sent Levites, even Shemaiah, and Nethaniah, and Zebadiah, and Asabel, and Shemiramoth, and Jehonathan, and Adonijah, and Tobijah, and Tobadonijah, Levites: and with them Elishama and Jehoram, priests. 9. And they taught in Judah, and had the book of the law of the Lord with them, and went about throughout all the cities of Judah, and taught the people. 10. And the fear of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were round about Judah, so that they made no war against Jehoshaphat.'— 2 Chronicles 17:1-10

The first point to be noted in this passage is that Jehoshaphat followed in the steps of Asa his father. Stress is laid on his adherence to the ancestral faith, 'the first ways of his father David,'—before his great fall,—and the paternal example, 'he sought to the God of his father.' Such carrying on of a predecessor's work is rare in the line of kings of Judah, where father and son were seldom of the same mind in religion. The principle of hereditary monarchy secures peaceful succession, but not continuity of policy. Many a king of Judah had to say in his heart what Ecclesiastes puts into Solomon's mouth, 'I hated all my labour, ... seeing that I must leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?' But it is not only in kings' houses that that experience is realised. Many a home is saddened to-day because the children do not seek the God of their fathers. 'Instead of the fathers' should 'come up thy children'; but, alas! grandmother Lois and mother Eunice do not always see the boy who has known the Scriptures from a child grow up into a Timothy, in whom their unfeigned faith lives again. The neglect of religious instruction in professedly Christian families, the inconsistent lives of parents or their too rigid restraints, or, sometimes, their too lax discipline, are to be blamed for many such cases. But there are many instances in which not the parents, but the children, are to be blamed. An earnest Sunday-school teacher may do much to lead the children of godly parents to their father's God. Blessed is the home where the golden chain of common faith binds hearts together, and family love is elevated and hallowed by common love of God!

Jehoshaphat's religion was, further, resolutely held in the face of prevailing opposition. 'The Baalim' were popular; it was fashionable to worship them. They were numerous, and all varieties of taste could find a Baal to please them. But this young king turned from the tempting ways that opened flower-strewn before him, and chose the narrow road that led upwards. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God,' might have been his motto. A similar determined setting of our faces God-ward, in spite of the crowd of tempting false deities around us, must mark us, if we are to have any religion worth calling by the name. This king recoiled from the example of the neighbouring monarchy, and walked 'not after the doings of Israel.' His seeking to God was very practical, for it was not shown simply by professed beliefs or by sentiment, but by ordering his life in obedience to God's will. The test of real religion is, after all, a life unlike the lives of the men who do not share our faith, and molded in accordance with God's known will. It is vain to allege that we are seeking the Lord unless we are walking in His commandments.

Prosperity followed godliness, in accordance with the divinely appointed connection between them which characterized the Old

Dispensation. 'Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New,' says Bacon. But the epigram is too neat to be entirely true, for the Book of Job and many a psalm show that the eternal problem of suffering innocence was raised by facts even in the old days, and in our days there are forms of well-being which are the natural fruits of well-doing. Still, the connection was closer in Judah than with us, and, in the case before us, the establishment of Jehoshaphat in the kingdom, his subject's love, which showed itself in voluntary gifts over and above the taxes imposed, and his wealth and honour, were the direct results of his true religion.

A really devout man must be a propagandist. True faith cannot be hid nor be dumb. As certainly as light must radiate must faith strive to communicate itself. So the account of Jehoshaphat's efforts to spread the worship of Jehovah follows the account of his personal godliness. 'His heart was lifted up in the ways of the Lord.' There are two kinds of lifted-up hearts; one when pride, self-sufficiency, and forgetfulness of God, raise a man to a giddy height, from which God's judgments are sure to cast him down and break him in the fall; one when a lowly heart is raised to high courage and devotion, and 'set on high,' because it fears God's name. Such elevation is consistent with humility. It fears no fall; it is an elevation above earthly desires and terrors, neither of which can reach it, so as to hinder the man from walking in 'the ways of the Lord.' This king was lifted to it by his happy experience of the blessed effects of obedience. These encouraged him to vigorous efforts to spread the religion which had thus gladdened and brightened his own life. Is that the use we make of the ease which God gives us?

Jehoshaphat had to destroy first, in order to build up. The 'high places and Asherim' had to be taken out of Judah before the true worship could be established there. So it is still. The Christian has to carry a sword in the one hand, and a trowel in the other. Many a rotten old building, the stones of which have been cemented in blood, has to be swept away before the fair temple can be reared. The Devil is in possession of much of the world, and the lawful owner has to dispossess the 'squatter.' No one can suppose that society is organised on Christian principles even in so-called 'Christian countries'; and there is much overturning work to be done before He whose right it is to reign is really king over the whole earth. We, too, have our 'high places and Asherim' to root out.

But that destructive work is not to be done by force. Institutions can only be swept away when public opinion has grown to see their evils. Forcible reformations of manners, and, still more, of religion, never last, but are sure to be followed by violent rebounds to the old order. So, side by side with the removal of idolatry, this king took care to diffuse the knowledge of the true worship, by sending out a body of influential commissioners to teach in Judah. That was a new departure of great importance. It presents several interesting features. The composition of the staff of instructors is remarkable. The principal men in it are five court officers, next to whom, and subordinate, as is shown not only by the order of enumeration, but by the phrase 'with them,' were nine Levites, and, last and lowest of all, two priests. We might have expected that priests should be the most numerous and important members of such a body, and we are led to suspect that the priesthood was so corrupted as to be careless about religious reformation. A clerical order is not always the most ardent in religious revival. The commissioners were probably chosen, without regard to their being priests, Levites, or 'laymen,' because of their zeal in the worship of Jehovah; and the five 'princes' head the list in order to show the royal authority of the commission.

Another point is the emphasis with which their function of teaching is thrice mentioned in three verses. Apparently the bulk of the nation knew little or nothing of 'the law of the Lord,' either on its spiritual and moral or its ceremonial side; and Jehoshaphat's object was to effect an enlightened, not a forcible and superficial, change. God's way of influencing actions is to reveal Himself to the understanding and the heart, that these may move the will, and that may shape the deeds. Wise men will imitate God's way. Jehoshaphat did not issue royal commands, but sent out teachers. In chapter xix. we find him despatching 'judges' in similar fashion throughout Judah. They had the power to punish, but these teachers had only authority to explain and to exhort.

The present writer accepts the chronicler's statement that the teachers had 'the Book of the Law' with them, though he recognises it as possible that that 'Book' was not identical with the complete collection of documents which now bears the name. But, be that as it may, the incident of our text is remarkable as being the only recorded systematic and complete attempt to diffuse the remedy against idolatry throughout the kingdom, as putting religious reformation on its only sure ground, and as hinting at deep and widespread ignorance among the masses.

'When a man's ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.' So Judah found. 'A terror of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms' around. No doubt, the news filtered to them of how Jehovah was exerting His might on the nation, and a certain indefinable awe of this so potent god, who was defeating the Baalim, made them think that peace was the best policy. Each nation was supposed to have its own god, and the national god was supposed to fight for his worshippers; so that war was a struggle of deities as well as of men, and the stronger god won. Here was a god who had reconquered his territory, and had cast out usurpers. Prudence dictated keeping on good terms with him. But it never occurred to any of these peoples that their own gods were any less real than Judah's, or that Judah's God could ever become theirs.

1 Chronicles 17:16 Amasiah

'Amasiah, the son of Zichri, who willingly offered himself unto the Lord.'— 1 Chronicles 17:16

This is a scrap from the catalogue of Jehoshaphat's 'mighty men of valour'; and is Amasiah's sole record. We see him for a moment and hear his eulogium and then oblivion swallows him up. We do not know what it was that he did to earn it. But what a fate, to live to all generations by that one sentence!

I. Cheerful self-surrender the secret of all religion.

The words of our text contain a metaphor naturally drawn from the sacrificial system. It comes so easily to us that we scarcely recognise the metaphorical element, but the clear recognition of it gives great additional energy to the words. Amasiah was both sacrificer and sacrifice. His offering was self-immolation. As in all love, so in that noblest kind of it which clasps God, its perfect expression is, 'I give Thee my living, loving self.' Nor is it only sacrifice and sacrificer that are seen in deepest truth in the experience of the Christian life, but the reality of the Temple is also there, for 'Ye also ... are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices.' Only when God dwells in us, shall we have the nerve and the firmness of hand to take the knife and 'slay before the Lord,' the awful Guest in the sanctuary within, the most precious of the children of our spirits.

The essence of the sacrifice of self is the sacrifice of will. In the Christian experience 'willingly offered' is almost tautology, for unwilling offerings are a contradiction and in fact there are no such things. The quality of unwillingness destroys the character of the offering and robs it of all sacredness. Reluctant Christianity is not Christianity. That noun and that adjective can never be buckled together.

The submission of will and the consequent surrender of myself and my powers, opportunities, and possessions, so that I do all, enjoy all, use all, and when need is, endure all with glad thankful reference to God is only possible to me in the measure in which my will is made flexible by love, and such will-subduing love comes only when we 'know and believe the love that God hath to us.' There is the point at which not a few moral and religious teachers go wrong and bewilder themselves and their disciples. There, too, is the point at which Christ and the Gospel of salvation through faith in Him stand forth as emancipating humanity from the dreary round of efforts and vain attempts to work up the condition needful for achieving the height of self-surrender, which is seen to be indispensable to all true nobleness of living, but is felt to be beyond the reach of the ordinary man. There, too, is the point at which many good people mar their lives as Christians. They waste their strength in trying to bring the jibbing horse up to the leap. They try to blow up a fire of devotion and to make themselves priests to offer themselves, but all the while the mutinous self recoils from the leap, and the fire burns smokily, and their sacrifice is laid on the altar with little joy, because they have not been careful and wise enough to begin at the beginning and to follow God's way of melting their wills, by love, the reflection of the Infinite love of God to them. God's priests offer themselves because they offer their wills; they offer their wills because they love God; they love God because they know that God loves them. That is the divine order. It is vain to try to accomplish the end by any other.

II. This willing offering hallows all life.

No syllable is left to tell us what Amasiah did to win this praise. Probably the words enshrine some now forgotten memory of his cheerful courage, some heroic feat on an unrecorded battlefield. Particulars are not given nor needed. Specific actions are unimportant; the spirit of a life can be told with very incomplete details, and it, not the details, is the important thing. Sometimes, as in many modern biographies, one 'cannot see the wood for the trees,' and misses the main drift and aim of a life in the chaos of a bewildering mass of nothings. How much more happy the lot of this man of whom we have only the generalised expression of the text, unweighted and undisturbed by petty incidents! It takes tons of rose leaves to make a tiny phial of otto of roses, but the fragrance is far more pungent in a drop of the distillation than in armfuls of leaves. Every life shrinks into very small compass, and the centuries do not tolerate long biographies. Shall we not seek to order our life so that Amasiah's epitaph may serve for us? It will be blessed if this—and nothing else—is known about us, that we 'willingly offered ourselves to the Lord.' My friend: will that be a true epitome of your life?

III. This willing offering is accepted by God.

We may hear a mightier voice behind the chronicler's, and the judgment of the Judge of all pronounced by His lips. It matters little what men say of one another, but it matters everything what God says of us. We are but too apt to forget that He is now saying something as to each of us, and that we have not to wait for death to put a final period to our activities, before our lives become fit subjects for God's judgment. Moment by moment we are writing our own sentences. But while it is good for us to remember the continuous judgment of God on each deed, it is not good to let dark thoughts of the principles of that judgment paralyse our activity or chill our confidence in His forgiving and accepting mercy. There is often a dark suspicion, like that of the one-talented servant, which blackens God's fair fame as being 'an austere Man,' making demands rather than imparting power, and the effect of such an

ugly conception of Him is to cut the nerve of service and bury the talent, carefully folded up, it may be, but none the less earning nothing. 'If we call on Him as Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work,' let us be sure that it will be a Fatherly judgment that He will pass upon us and our offerings. There is a wonderful collection on His altar of what many people would think rubbish, just as many a mother has laid away among her treasures some worthless article which her child had once given her—a weed plucked by the roadside in a long past summer day, some trifle of rare preciousness in the child's eyes, and of none in any others than her own. She opens her drawer and brings out the poor little thing, and her eyes fill and her heart fills as she looks. And does not God keep His children's gifts as lovingly, and set them in places of honour in the day when He 'makes up His jewels'? There are cups of cold water and widows' mites and much else that a supercilious world would call 'trash' stored there. Thank God! He accepts imperfect service, faltering faith, partial consecration, a little love. Even our poor offering may be an 'odour of a sweet smell,' ministering fragrance that is a delight to Him, if it is offered with the much incense of the great Sacrifice and through the mediation of the great High Priest.

The world forgot Amasiah, or never knew him, an obscure soldier in an obscure kingdom, but God did not forget, and here is his epitaph, and this is his memorial to all generations. Men's chronicles have no room for all the names that their wearers are eager to have inscribed on their crumbling and crowded pages, 'but the Lamb's Book of Life' has ample space on its radiant pages for all who desire to set their names there, and if ours are there, we need not envy the proudest whose titles and deeds fill the most conspicuous pages in the world's records. 'Then shall every man have praise of Christ,' and he who wins that guerdon needs nothing more, and can have nothing more to swell his blessedness.

2 Chronicles 19:1-11 A Mirror For Magistrates

And Jehoshaphat the king of Judah returned to his house in peace to Jerusalem. 2. And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord. 3. Nevertheless there are good things found in thee, in that thou hast taken away the groves out of the land, and hast prepared thine heart to seek God. 4. And Jehoshaphat dwelt at Jerusalem: and he went out again through the people from Beer-sheba to mount Ephraim, and brought them back unto the Lord God of their fathers. 5. And he set judges in the land throughout all the fenced cities of Judah, city by city. 6. And said to the judges, Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment. 7. Wherefore now let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take heed and do it: for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, nor respect of persons, nor taking of gifts. 8. Moreover in Jerusalem did Jehoshaphat set of the Levites, and of the priests, and of the chief of the fathers of Israel, for the judgment of the Lord, and for controversies, when they returned to Jerusalem. 9. And he charged them, saying, Thus shall ye do in the fear of the Lord, faithfully, and with a perfect heart. 10. And what cause soever shall come to you of your brethren that dwell in their cities, between blood and blood, between law and commandment, statutes and judgments, ye shall even warn them that they trespass not against the Lord, and so wrath come upon you, and upon your brethren: this do, and ye shall not trespass. 11. And, behold, Amariah the chief priest is over you in all matters of the Lord; and Zebadiah the son of Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Judah, for all the king's matters: also the Levites shall be officers before you. Deal courageously, and the Lord shall be with the good.— 2 Chronicles 19:1-11

Jehoshaphat is distinguished by two measures for his people's good: one, his sending out travelling preachers through the land (2 Chron. xvii. 7-9); another, this provision of local judges and a central court in Jerusalem. The former was begun as early as the third year of his reign, but was probably interrupted, like other good things, by his ill-omened alliance with Ahab. The prophet Jehu's plain speaking seems to have brought the king back to his better self, and its fruit was his going 'among the people,' from south to north, as a missionary, 'to bring them back to Jehovah.' The religious reformation was accompanied by his setting judges throughout the land. Our modern way of distinguishing between religious and civil concerns is foreign to Eastern thought, and was especially out of the question in a theocracy. Jehovah was the King of Judah; therefore the things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's coalesced, and these two objects of Jehoshaphat's journeyings were pursued simultaneously. We have travelled far from his simple institutions, and our course has not been all progress. His supreme concern was to deal out even-handed justice between man and man; is not ours rather to give ample doses of law? To him the judicial function was a copy of God's, and its exercise a true act of worship, done in His fear, and modeled after His pattern. The first impression made in one of our courts is scarcely that judge and counsel are engaged in worship.

There had been local judges before Jehoshaphat—elders in the villages, the 'heads of the fathers' houses' in the tribes. We do not know whether the great secession had flung the simple old machinery somewhat out of gear, or whether Jehoshaphat's action was simply to systematize and make universal the existing arrangements. But what concerns us most is to note that all the charge which he gives to these peasant magistrates bears on the religious aspect of their duties. They are to think themselves as acting for Jehovah and with Jehovah. If they recognise the former, they may be confident of the latter. They are to 'let the fear of Jehovah be

upon you,' for that awe resting on a spirit will, like a burden or water-jar on a woman's shoulder, make the carriage upright and the steps firm. They are not only to act for and with Jehovah, but to do like Him, avoiding injustice, favoritism, and corruption, the plague-spots of Eastern law-courts. In such a state of society, the cases to be adjudicated were mostly such as mother-wit, honesty and the fear of God could solve; other times call for other qualifications. But still, let us learn from this charge that even in our necessarily complicated legal systems and political life, there is room and sore need for the application of the same principles. What a different world it would be if our judges and representatives carried some tincture of Jehoshaphat's simple and devout wisdom into their duties! Civic and political life ought to be as holy as that of cloister and cell. To judge righteously, to vote honestly, is as much worship as to pray. A politician may be 'a priest of the Most High God.'

And for us all the spirit of Jehoshaphat's charge is binding, and every trivial and secular task is to be discharged for God, with God, in the fear of God. 'On the bells of the horses shall be Holiness unto Jehovah.' If our religion does not drive the wheels of daily life, so much the worse for our life and our religion. But, above all, this charge reminds us that the secret of right living is to imitate God. These peasants were to find direction, as well as inspiration, in gazing on Jehovah's character, and trying to copy it. And we are to be 'imitators of God, as beloved children,' though our best efforts may only produce poor results. A masterpiece may be copied in some wretched little newspaper blotch, but the great artist will own it for a copy, and correct it into complete likeness.

The second step was to establish a 'supreme court' in Jerusalem, which had two divisions, ecclesiastical and civil, as we should say, the former presided over by the chief priest, and the latter by 'the ruler of the house of Judah.' Murder cases and the graver questions involving interpretation of the law were sent up thither, while the village judges had probably to decide only points that shrewdness and integrity could settle. But these superior judges, too, received charges as to moral, rather than intellectual or learned qualifications. Religiously, uprightly, 'with a perfect heart,' courageously, they were to act, 'and Jehovah be with the good!' That may be a prayer, like the old invocation with which heralds sent knights to tilt at each other, and with which, in some legal proceedings, the pleas are begun, 'God defend the right!' But more probably it is an assurance that God will guide the judges to favour the good cause, if they on their parts will bring the aforesaid qualities to their decisions. And are not these qualities just such as will, for the most part, give similar results to us, if in our various activities we exercise them? And may we not see a sequence worth our practically putting to the proof in these characteristics enjoined on Jehoshaphat's supreme court? Begin with 'the fear of the Lord'; that will help us to 'faithfulness and a perfect heart'; and these again by taking away occasions of ignoble fear, and knitting together the else tremulous and distracted nature, will make the fearful brave and the weak strong.

But another thought is suggested by Jehoshaphat's language. Note how this court does not seem to have inflicted punishments, but to have had only counsels and warnings to wield. It was a board of conciliation rather than a penal tribunal. Two things it had to do—to press upon the parties the weighty consideration that crimes against men were sins against God, and that the criminal drew down wrath on the community. This remarkable provision brings out strongly thoughts that modern society will be the better for incorporating. The best way to deal with men is to get at their hearts and consciences. The deeper aspect of civil crimes or wrongs to men should be pressed on the doer; namely, that they are sins against God. Again, all such acts are sins against the mystical sacred bond of brotherhood. Again, the solidarity of a nation makes it inevitable that 'one sinner destroyeth much good,' and pulls down with him, when God smites him, a multitude of innocents. So finely woven is the web of the national life that, if a thread run in any part of it, a great rent gapes. If one member sins, all the members suffer with it. And lastly, the cruellest thing that we can do is to be dumb when we see sin being committed. It is not public men, judges and the like, alone, who are called on thus to warn evil-doers, but all of us in our degree. If we do not, we are guilty along with a guilty nation; and it is only when, to the utmost of our power, we have warned our brethren as to national sins, that we can wash our hands in innocency, 'This do, and ye shall not be guilty.'

2 Chronicles 20:12 A Strange Battle

'We have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon Thee.'— 2 Chronicles 20:12

A formidable combination of neighbouring nations, of which Moab and Ammon, the ancestral enemies of Judah, were the chief, was threatening Judah. Jehoshaphat, the king, was panic-stricken when he heard of the heavy war-cloud that was rolling on, ready to burst in thunder on his little kingdom. His first act was to muster the nation, not as a military levy but as suppliants, 'to seek help of the Lord.' The enemy was camping down by the banks of the Dead Sea, almost within striking distance of Jerusalem. It seemed a time for fighting, not for praying, but even at that critical moment, the king and the men, whom it might have appeared that plain duty called to arms, were gathered in the Temple, and, hampered by their wives and children, were praying. Would they not have done better if they had been sturdily marching through the wilderness of Judah to front their foes? Our text is the close and the climax of Jehoshaphat's prayer, and, as the event proved, it was the most powerful weapon that could have been employed, for the rest of the

chapter tells the strangest story of a campaign that was ever written. No sword was drawn. The army was marshaled, but Levites with their instruments of music, not fighters with their spears, led the van, and as 'they began to sing and to praise,' sudden panic laid hold on the invading force, who turned their arms against each other. So when Judah came to some rising ground, on which stood a watch-tower commanding a view over the savage grimness of 'the wilderness,' it saw a field of corpses, stark and stiff and silent. Three days were spent in securing the booty, and on the fourth, Jehoshaphat and his men 'assembled themselves in the Valley of Blessing,' and thence returned a joyous multitude praising God for the victory which had been won for them without their having struck a blow. The whole story may yield large lessons, seasonable at all times. We deal with it, rather than with the fragment of the narrative which we have taken as our text.

I. We see here the confidence of despair.

Jehoshaphat's prayer had stayed itself on God's self-revelation in history, and on His gift of the land to their fathers. It had pleaded that the enemy's hostility was a poor 'reward' for Israel's ancient forbearance, and now, with a burst of agony, it casts down before God, as it were, Judah's desperate plight as outnumbered by the swarm of invaders and brought to their last shifts—'we have no might against this great company ... neither know we what to do.' But the very depth of despair sets them to climb to the height of trust. That is a mighty 'But,' which buckles into one sentence two such antitheses as confront us here. 'We know not what to do, but our eyes are upon Thee'—blessed is the desperation which catches at God's hand; firm is the trust which leaps from despair!

The helplessness is always a fact, though most of us manage to get along for the most part without discovering it. We are all outnumbered and overborne by the claims, duties, hindrances, sorrows, and entanglements of life. He is not the wisest of men who, facing all that life may bring and take away, all that it must bring and take away, knows no quiver of nameless fear, but jauntily professes himself ready for all that life can inflict. But there come moments in every life when the false security in which shallow souls wrap themselves ignobly is broken up, and then often a paroxysm of terror or misery grips a man, for which he has no anodyne, and his despair is as unreasonable as his security. The meaning of all circumstances that force our helplessness on us is to open to us Jehoshaphat's refuge in his—'our eyes are upon Thee.' We need to be driven by the crowds of foes and dangers around to look upwards. Our props are struck away that we may cling to God. The tree has its lateral branches hewed off that it may shoot up heavenward. When the valley is filled with mist and swathed in evening gloom, it is the time to lift our gaze to the peaks that glow in perpetual sunshine. Wise and happy shall we be if the sense of helplessness begets in us the energy of a desperate faith. For these two, distrust of self and glad confidence in God, are not opposites, as naked distrust and trust are, but are complementary. He does not turn his eyes to God who has not turned them on himself, and seen there nothing to which to cling, nothing on which to lean. Astronomers tell us that there are double stars revolving round one axis and forming a unity, of which the one is black and the other brilliant. Self-distrust and trust in God are thus knit together and are really one.

II. We see here the peaceful assurance of victory that attends on faith.

A flash of inspiration came to one of the Levitical singers who had, no doubt, been deeply moved and had unconsciously fitted himself for receiving it. Divinely breathed confidence illuminated his waiting spirit, and a great message of encouragement poured from his lips. His words heartened the host more than a hundred trumpets braying in their ears. How much one man who has drunk in God's assurance of victory can do to send a thrill of his own courage through more timorous hearts! Courage is no less contagious than panic. This Levite becomes the commander of the army, and Jehoshaphat and his captains 'bow their heads' and accept his plan for to-morrow, hearing in his ringing accents a message from Jehovah. The instructions given and at once accepted are as unlike those of ordinary warfare as is the whole incident; for there is to be no sword drawn nor blow struck, but they are to 'stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.' They are told where to find the enemy and are bid to go forth in order of battle against them, and they are assured 'that the battle is not theirs, but God's.' No wonder that the message was hailed as from heaven, and put new heart into the host, or that, when the messenger's voice ceased, his brother Levites broke into shrill praise as for a victory already won. With what calm, triumphant hearts the camp would sleep that night!

May we not take that inspired Levite's message as one to ourselves in the midst of our many conflicts both in the outward life and in the inward? If we have truly grasped God's hands, and are fighting for what is accordant with His will, we have a right to feel that 'the battle is not ours but God's,' and to be sure that therefore we shall conquer. Of course we are not to say to ourselves, 'God will fight for us, and we need not strike a blow,' Jehoshaphat's example does not fit our case in that respect, and we may thank God that it does not. We have a better lot than to 'stand still and see the salvation of God,' for we are honoured by being allowed to share the stress of conflict and the glow of battle as well as in the shout of victory. But even in the struggles of outward life, and much more in those of our spiritual nature, every man who watches his own career will many a time have to recognise God's hand, unaided by any act of his own, striking for him and giving him victory; and in the spiritual life every Christian man knows that his best moments have come from the initiation of the Spirit who 'bloweth where He listeth.' How often we have been surprised by God's help; how often we have been quickened by God's inbreathed Spirit, and have been taught that the passivity of faith draws to us greater blessings than the activity of effort! 'They also serve who only stand and wait,' and they also conquer who in quietness and confidence keep themselves still and let God work for them and in them. The first great blessing of trust in God is that we may be at peace on the eve

of battle, and the second is that in every battle it is, in truth, not we that fight, but God who fights for and in us.

III. We learn here the best preparation for the conflict.

When the morning dawned, the array was set in order and the march begun, and a strange array it was. In the van marched the Temple singers singing words that are music to us still: 'Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever,' and behind them came the ranks of Judah, no doubt swelling the volume of melody, that startled the wild creatures of the wilderness, and perhaps travelled through the still morning as far as the camp of the enemy. The singers had no armour nor weapons. They were clad in 'the beauty of holiness,' the priestly dress, and for sword and spear they carried harps and timbrels. Our best weapons are like their equipment.

We are most likely to conquer if we lift up the voice of thanks for victory in advance, and go into the battle expecting to triumph, because we trust in God. The world's expectation of success is too often a dream, a will-o'-the-wisp that tempts to bogs where the beguiled victim is choked, though even in the world it is often true; 'screw your courage to the sticking point, and we'll not fail.' But faith, that is the expectation of success based on God's help and inspiring to struggles for things dear to His heart, is wont to fulfil itself, and by bringing God into the fray, to secure the victory. A thankful heart not seldom brings into existence that for which it is thankful.

IV. We see here the victory and the praise for it.

The panic that laid hold on the enemy, and turned their swords against each other, was more natural in an undisciplined horde such as these irregular levies of ancient times, than it would be in a modern army. Once started, the infection would spread, so we need not wonder that by the time that Judah arrived on the field all was over. How often a like experience attends us! We quiver with apprehension of troubles that never attack us. We dread some impending battlefield, and when we reach it, Jehoshaphat's surprise is repeated, 'and, behold they were dead bodies, fallen to the earth.' Delivered from foes and fears, Judah's first impulse was to secure the booty, for they were keen after wealth, and their 'faith' was not very pure or elevating. But their last act was worthier, and fitly ended the strange campaign. They gathered in some wady among the grim cliffs of the wilderness of Judah, which broke the dreariness of that savage stretch of country with perhaps verdure and a brook, and there they 'blessed the Lord.' The chronicler gives a piece of popular etymology, in deriving the name, 'the valley of blessing,' from that morning's worship. Perhaps the name was older than that, and was given from a feeling of the contrast between the waste wilderness, which in its gaunt sterility seemed an accursed land, and the glen which with its trees and stream was indeed a 'valley of blessing.' If so, the name would be doubly appropriate after that day's experience. Be that as it may, here we have in vivid form the truth that all our struggles and fightings may end in a valley of blessing, which will ring with the praise of the God who fights for us. If we begin our warfare with an appeal to God, and with prayerful acknowledgment of our own impotence, we shall end it with thankful acknowledgment that we are 'more than conquerors through Him that loved us' and fought for us, and our choral song of praise will echo through the true Valley of Blessing, where no sound of enemies shall ever break the settled stillness, and the host of the redeemed, like that army of Judah, shall bear 'psalteries and harps and trumpets,' and shall need spear and sword no more at all for ever.

2 Chronicles 20:20 Holding Fast and Held Fast

As they went forth Jehoshaphat stood and said, Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established.²— 2 Chronicles 20:20

Certainly no stronger army ever went forth to victory than these Jews, who poured out of Jerusalem that morning with no weapon in all their ranks, and having for their van, not their picked men, but singers who 'praised the beauty of holiness,' and chanted the old hymn, 'Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever.' That was all that men had to do in the battle, for as the shrill song rose in the morning air 'the Lord set liers in wait for the foe,' and they turned their swords against one another, so that when Jehoshaphat and his troops came in sight of the enemy the battle was over and the field strewn with corpses—so great and swift is the power of devout recognition of God's goodness and trust in His enduring mercy, even in the hour of extremest peril.

The exhortation in our text which is Jehoshaphat's final word to his army, has, in the original, a beauty and emphasis that are incapable of being preserved in translation. There is a play of words which cannot be reproduced in another language, though the sentiment of it may be explained. The two expressions for 'believing' and 'being established' are two varying forms of the same root-word; and although we can only imitate the original clumsily in our language, we might translate in some such way as this: 'Hold fast by the Lord your God, and you will be held fast,' or 'stay yourselves on Him and you will be stable.' These attempts at reproducing the similarity of sound between the two verbs in the two clauses of our text, rude as they are, preserve what is lost, so far as regards form, in the English translation, though that is correct as to the meaning of the command and promise. If we note this

connection of the two clauses we just come to the general principle which lies here, that the true source of steadfastness in character and conduct, of victory over temptation, and of standing fast in slippery places, is simple reliance, or, to use the New Testament word, 'faith,' 'Believe and ye shall be established.' Put out your hand and clasp Him, and He puts out His hand and steadies you. But all the steadfastness and strength come from the mighty Hand that is outstretched, not from the tremulous one that grasps it.

So, then, keeping to the words of my text, let me suggest to you the large lessons that this saying teaches us, in regard to three things, which I may put as being the object, the nature, and the issues of faith; or, in other words, to whom we are to cling, how we are to cling, and what the consequence of the clinging is.

I. To whom we must cling.

'Stay yourselves on the Lord your God,' Well, then, faith is not believing a number of theological articles, nor is it even accepting the truth of the Gospel as it lies in Jesus Christ, but it is accepting the Christ whom the truth of the Gospel reveals to us. And, although we have to come to Him through the word that declares what He is, and what He has done for us, the act of believing on Him is something that lies beyond the mere understanding of, or giving credence to, the message that tells us who He is and what He has done. A man may have not the ghost of a doubt or hesitation about one tittle of revealed truth, and if you were to cross-question him, could answer satisfactorily all the questions of an orthodox inquisitor, and yet there may not be one faintest flicker of faith in that man's whole being, for all the correctness of his creed, and the comprehensiveness of it, too. Trust is more than assent. If it is a Person on whom our faith leans, then from that there follows clearly enough that the bond which binds us to Him must be something far warmer, far deeper, and far more under the control of our own will than the mere consent or assent of our brains to a set of revealed truths. 'The Lord your God,' and not even the Bible that tells you about Him; 'the Lord your God,' and not even the revealed truths that manifest Him, but Him as revealed by the truths—it is He that is the Object to which our faith clings.

Jehoshaphat, in the same breath in which he exhorted his people to 'believe in the Lord, that they might be established,' also said, 'Believe His prophets, so shall ye prosper.' The immediate reference, of course, was to the man who the day before had assured them of victory. But the wider truth suggested is, that the only way to get to God is through the word that speaks of Him, and which has come from the lips either of prophets or of the Son who has spoken more, and more sweetly and clearly, than all the prophets put together. If we are to believe God, we must believe the prophets that tell us of Him.

And then there is another suggestion that may be made. The Object of faith proposed to Judah is not only 'the Lord,' but 'the Lord your God.' I do not say that there can be no faith without the 'appropriating' action which takes the whole Godhead for mine, but I doubt very much whether there is any. And it seems to me that to a very large extent the difference between mere nominal, formal Christians and men who really are living by the power of faith in God as revealed in Jesus Christ, lies in that one little word, 'the Lord your God.' That a man shall put out a grasping hand, and say, 'I take for my own—for my very own—the universal blessing, I claim as my possession that God of the spirits of all flesh, I believe that He does stand in a real individualizing relation to me, and I to Him,' is surely of the very essence of faith. There is no presumption, but the truest wisdom and lowliness in enclosing, if I may so say, a part of this great common for ours, and putting a hedge about it, as it were, and saying, 'That is mine.' We shall not have understood the sweetness and the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ until we have pointed and condensed the general declaration, 'He so loved the world,' into the individualizing and appropriating one, 'He loved me, and gave Himself for me.' Oh! if we could only apply that process thoroughly to all the broad glorious words and promises of Scripture, and feel that the whole incidence of them was meant to fall upon us, one by one, and that just as the sun, up in the heavens there, sends all his beams into the tiniest daisy on the grass, as if there was nothing else in the whole world, but only its little petals to be smoothed out and opened, I think our Christianity would be more real, and we should have more blessings in our hands. God in Christ and I, the only two beings in the universe, and all His fullness mine, and all my weakness supported and supplemented by Him—that is the view that we should sometimes take. We should set ourselves apart from all mankind, and claim Him as our very own, and so be filled with the fullness of God.

This, then, is the Object of faith, a Person who is all mine and all yours too. The beam of light that falls on my eye falls on yours, and no man makes a sunbeam the smaller because he sees by it; and in like manner we may each possess the whole of God for our very own property.

II. How we cling.

The metaphor, I suppose, is more eloquent than all explanations of it. 'Believe in the Lord'; hold fast by Him with a tight grip, continually renewed when it tends to slacken, as it surely will, and then you will be established.

We might run out into any number of figurative illustrations. Look at that little child beginning to learn to walk, how it fastens its little dimpled hands into its mother's apron, and so the tiny tottering feet get a kind of steadfastness into them. Look at that man lying at the door of the Temple, who never had walked since his mother's womb, and had lain there for forty years, with his poor weak ankles all atrophied by reason of their disuse. 'He held Peter and John.' Would not his grasp be tight? Would he not clasp their hands as his

only stay? He had not become accustomed to the astounding miracle of walking, nor learned to balance himself and accomplish the still more astounding feat of standing steady. So he clutched at the two Apostles and was 'established.' Look at that man walking by a slippery path which he does not know, holding by the hand the guide who is able to direct and keep him up. See this other in some wild storm, with an arm round a steadfast tree-stem, to keep him from being blown over the precipice, how he clings like a limpet to a rock. And that is how we are to hold on to God, with what would be despair if it were not the perfection of confidence, with the clear sense that the only thing between us and ruin is the strong Hand that we clasp.

And what do we mean by clasping God? I mean making daily efforts to rivet our love on Him, and not to let the world, with all its delusive and cloying sweets, draw us away from Him. I mean continual and strenuous efforts to fix our thoughts upon Him, and not to allow the trivialities of life, or the claims of culture, or the necessities of our daily position so to absorb our minds as that thoughts of God are comparative strangers there, except, perhaps, sometimes on a Sunday, and now and then at the sleepy end, or the half-awake beginning, of a day. I mean continually repeated and strenuous efforts to cleave to Him by the submission of our will, letting Him 'do what seemeth Him good,' and not lifting ourselves up against Him, or perking our own inclinations, desires, and fancies in His face, as if we would induce Him to take them for His guides! And I mean that we should try to commit our way unto the Lord, 'to rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.' The submissive will which cleaves to God's commandments, the waiting heart that clings to His love, the regulated thoughts that embrace His truth, and the childlike confidence that commits its path to Him—these are the elements of that steadfast adherence to the Lord which shall not be in vain.

III. The blessed effects of this clinging to God.

'So shall ye be established.' That follows, as a matter of course. The only way to make light things stable is to fasten them to something that is stable. And the only way to put any kind of calmness and fixedness, and yet progress—stability in the midst of progress, and progress in the midst of stability—into our lives, is by keeping firm hold of God. If we grasp His hand, then a calm serenity will be ours. In the midst of changes, sorrows, losses, disappointments, we shall not be blown about here and there by furious winds of fortune, nor will the heavy currents of the river of life sweep us away. We shall have a holdfast and a mooring. And although, like some light-ship anchored in the Channel, we may heave up and down with the waves, we shall keep in the same place, and be steadfast in the midst of mobility, and wholesomely mobile although anchored in the one spot where there is safety. As the issue of faith, of this throwing the responsibility for ourselves upon God, there will be quietness of heart, and continuance and persistence in righteousness, and steadfastness of purpose and continuity of advancement in the divine life. 'The law of the Lord is in his heart,' says one of the Psalms, 'none of his steps shall slide.' The man who walks holding God's hand can put down a firm foot, even when he is walking in slippery places. There will be decision, and strength, and persistence of continuous advance, in a life that derives its impulse and its motive power from communion with God in Jesus Christ.

There will be victory, not indeed after the fashion of that in this story before us. In it, of course, men had to do nothing but 'stand still and see the salvation of God.' That is the law for us, in regard to the initial blessings of acceptance, and forgiveness, and the communication of the divine life from above. We have to be simple recipients, and we have no co-operating share in that part of the work of our own salvation. But for the rest we have to help God. 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you.' But none the less, 'This is the victory that over-cometh the world, even our faith,' and if we give heed to Jehoshaphat's commandment, and go out to battle as his people did, with the love and trust of God in our hearts, then we shall come back as they did, laden with spoil, and shall name the place which was the field of conflict 'the valley of blessing,' and return to Jerusalem 'with psalteries, and harps, and trumpets,' and 'God will give us rest from all our enemies round about us.'

2 Chronicles 24:2, 17 Joash

And Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest... 17. Now after the death of Jehoiada came the princes of Judah, and made obeisance to the king. Then the king hearkened unto them.— 2 Chronicles 24:2, 17.

Here we have the tragedy of a soul. Joash begins life well and for the greater part of it remains faithful to his conscience and to his duty, and then, when outward circumstances change, he casts all behind him, forgets the past and commits moral suicide. It is the sad old story, a bright commencement, an early promise all scattered to the winds. It is a strange story, too. This seven-year-old king had been saved when his father had been killed, and that true daughter of Jezebel, as well by nature as by blood, Athaliah, had murdered all his brothers and sisters, and made herself queen. He had been saved by the courage of a woman who might worthily stand by the side of Deborah and other Jewish heroines. By this woman, who was his aunt, he was hidden and brought up in the Temple until, whilst yet a mere boy, he came to the throne, the High Priest Jehoiada, the husband of his aunt, being his guardian during his nonage. He reigns well till the lad of seven becomes a mature man of thirty or thereabouts, and then Jehoiada dies, full of years and honours, and they fitly lay him among the kings of Judah, a worthy resting-place for one who had 'done good in Israel.'

And now the weakling on the throne is left alone without the strong arm to guide him and keep him right, and we read that 'the princes of Judah came and made obeisance to him.' They take him on his weak side, and I dare say Jehoiada had been too true and too noble to do that, and though we are not told what means they took to flatter and coax him, we see very plainly what they were conspiring to do, for we read that 'they left the house of the Lord their God, the God of their fathers, and served groves and idols,' the groves here mentioned being symbols of Ashtaroth the goddess of the Sidonians. And so all the past is wiped out and Joash takes his place amongst the apostates. The story has solemn lessons.

I. Note the change from loyal adherence to apostasy.

The strong man on whom Joash used to lean was away, and the poor, weak king went just where the wicked princes led him. It was probably out of sheer imbecility that he passed from the worship of God to the acknowledgment and service of idols.

The first point that I would insist upon is a well-worn and familiar one, as I am well aware, but I urge it upon you, and especially upon the younger portion of my audience. It is this, that there is no telling the amount of mischief that pure weakness of character may lead into. The worst men we come across in the Bible are not those who begin with a deliberate intention of doing evil. They are weak creatures, 'reeds shaken by the wind,' who have no power of resisting the force of circumstances. It is a truth which every one's experience confirms, that the mother of all possible badness is weakness, and that, not only as Milton's Satan puts it, 'To be weak is to be miserable,' but that weakness is wickedness sooner or later. The man who does not bar the doors and windows of his senses and his soul against temptation, is sure to make shipwreck of his life and in the end to become 'a fool.' There is so much wickedness lying round us in this world that any man who lets himself be shaped and coloured by that with which he comes in contact, is sure to go to the bad in the long run. Where a man lays himself open to the accidents of time and circumstances, the majority of these influences will be contrary to what is right and good. Therefore, he must gather himself together and learn to say 'No!' There is no foretelling the profound abysses into which a 'good, easy' nature, with plenty of high and pure impulses, perhaps, but which are written in water, may fall. 'Thou, therefore, young man! be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.' Learn to say No! or else you will be sure to say Yes! in the wrong place, and then down you will go, like this Joash whose goodness depended on Jehoiada, and when he died, all the virtue that had characterised this life hitherto was laid with him in the dust.

Let us learn from this story in the next place, how little power of continuance there is in a merely traditional religion. Many of you call yourselves Christian people mainly because other people do the same. It is customary to respect and regard Christianity. You have been brought up in the midst of it. Our country is always considered a Christian land, and so, naturally, you tacitly accept the truth of a religion which is so influential. The lowest phase of this attitude is that which seeks some advantage from a church connection, like the foolish man in the Old Testament who thought he would do well because he had a Levite for his priest. Religion is the most personal thing about a man. To become a Christian is the most personal act one can perform. It is a thing that a man has to do for himself, and however friends and guides may help us in other matters, in trials and perplexities and difficulties, by their sympathy and experience, they are useless here. A man has here to act as if there were no other beings in the universe but a solitary God and himself, and unless we have ourselves done that act in the depths of our own personality, we have not done it at all. If you young people are good, just because you have pious parents who make you go to church or chapel on a Sunday, and keep you out of mischief during the week, your goodness is a sham. One great result of personal Christianity is to make a minister, a teacher, a guide, superfluous, and when such an one becomes so, his work has been successful and not till then. Unless you put forth for yourself the hand of faith and for yourself yield up the devotion and love of your own heart, your religion is nought.

However much active effort about the outside of religion there may be, it is of itself useless. It is without bottom and without reality. Here we have Joash busy with the externals of worship and actually deceiving himself thereby. It was a great deal easier to make that chest for contributions to a Temple Repairing Fund, and to get it well filled, and to patch up the house of the Lord, than for him to get down on his knees and pray, and he may have thought that to be busy about the house of God was to be devout. So it may be with many Sunday-school teachers and Church workers. Their religion may be as merely superficial and as little personal as this man's was. It is not for me to say so about A, B, or C. It is for you to ask of yourselves if it is so as to you. But I do say that there is nothing that masks his own soul from a man more than setting him to do something for Christianity and God's Church, while in his inmost self he has not yet yielded himself to God.

I look around and I see the devil slaying his thousands by setting them to work in Christian associations and leaving them no time to think about their own Christianity. My brother! if the cap fits, go home and put it on.

We see in Joash's life for how long a time a man may go on in this self-delusion of external and barren service and never know it. Joash came to the throne at the age of seven. Up till that age he had lived in the Temple in concealment. Until he was one and thirty he went on in a steady, upright course, never knowing that there was anything hollow in his life. Apparently, Jehoiada's long life of one hundred and thirty years extended over the greater part of Joash's reign, during most of which he had Jehoiada to direct him and keep him right, and all this tragedy comes at the tag end of it.

So he went on apparently all right, like a tree that has become quite hollow, till during some storm it is blown down and falls with a

crash, and it is seen that for years it has been only the skin of a tree, bark outside, and inside—emptiness.

II. We come now to the second stage in the later life of Joash: His resistance to the divine pleading

'And they left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and served groves and idols, and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for their trespass, yet He sent prophets to them to bring them again unto the Lord.' He sent with endless pity, with long-suffering patience. He would not be put away, and as they increased the distance between Him and them, He increased His energies to bring them back. But they lifted themselves up, Joash and his princes, and with that strange, awful power of resisting the attraction of the divine pleading, and hardening their hearts against the divine patience—'they would not.' And then comes the affecting episode of the death of the high priest Zechariah, who had succeeded to his father's place and likewise to his heroism, and who, with the Spirit of God upon him, stands up and pointing out his wickedness, rebukes the fallen monarch for his apostasy. Joash, doubtless stung to the quick by Zechariah's just reproaches, allowed the truculent princes to slay him in the court of the Temple, even between the very shrine and the altar.

What a picture we have here of the divine love which follows every wanderer with its pleadings and beseechings! It came to this man through the lips of a prophet. It comes to us all in daily blessings, sometimes in messages, like these poor words of mine. God will not let us ruin ourselves without pleading with us and wooing us to love Him and cling to Him. 'He rises up early' and daily sends us His messages, sometimes rebukes and voices in our conscience, sometimes sunset glows and starry heavens lifting our thoughts above this low earth, sometimes sorrows that are meant to 'drive us to His breast,' and above all, the 'Gospel of our salvation' in Christ, ever, in such a land as ours, sounding in our ears.

Still further, we see in Joash what a strange, awful strength of obstinate resistance, a character weak as regards its resistance to man, can put forth against God. He never attempted to say 'No!' to the princes of Judah, but he could say it again and again to his Father in heaven. He could not but yield to the temptations which were level with his eyes, and this poor creature, easily swayed by human allurements and influences, could gather himself together, standing, as it were, on his little pin point, and say to God, 'Thou dost call and I refuse.' What a paradox, and yet repetitions of it are sitting in these pews, only half aware that it is about them that I am speaking!

The ever-deepening evil which began with forsaking the house of the Lord and serving Ashtaroath, ends with Joash steeping his hands in blood. The murder of Zechariah was beyond the common count of crimes, for it was a foul desecration of the Temple, an act of the blackest ingratitude to the man who had saved his infant life, and put him on the throne, an outrage on the claims of family connections, for Joash and Zechariah were probably blood relations. My brother! once get your foot upon that steep incline of evil, once forsake the path of what is good and right and true, and you are very much like a climber who misses his footing up among the mountain peaks, and down he slides till he reaches the edge of the precipice and then in an instant is dashed to pieces at the bottom. Once put your foot on that slippery slope and you know not where you may fall to.

III. Last comes the final scene: The retribution.

We have that picture of Zechariah, solemnly lifting up his eyes to heaven and committing his cause to God. 'The Lord look upon it and require it,' says the martyr priest in the spirit of the old Law. The dying appeal was soon answered in the invasion of the Syrian army, a comparatively small company, into whose hands the Lord delivered a very great host of the Israelites. The defeat was complete, and possibly Joash's 'great diseases,' of which the narrative speaks, refer to wounds received in the fight. The end soon comes, for two of his servants, neither of them Hebrews, one being the son of an Ammonitess and the other the son of a Moabitess, who were truer to his religion than he had been, and resolved to revenge Zechariah's death, entered the room, of the wounded king in the fortress whither he had retired to hide himself after the fight, and 'slew him on his bed.' Imagine the grim scene—the two men stealing in, the sick man there on the bed helpless, the short ghastly struggle and the swift end. What an end for a life with such a beginning!

Now I am not going to dwell on this retribution, inflicted on Joash, or on that which comes to us if we are like him, through a loud-voiced conscience, and a memory which, though it may be dulled and hushed to sleep at present, is sure to wake some day here or yonder. But I beseech you to ask yourselves what your outlook is. 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.' Is that all? Zechariah said, 'The Lord look upon it and require it.' The great doctrine of retribution is true for ever. Yes; but our Zechariah lifts up his eyes to heaven and he says, 'Father! forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And so, dear brother! you and I, trusting to that dear Lord, may have all our apostasy forgiven, and be brought near by the blood of Christ. Let us say with the Apostle Peter, 'Lord, to whom shall we go but to Thee? Thou hast the words of eternal life.'