

Maclaren on 2 Kings

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2 Kings

Sermons

by Alexander Maclaren

The Chariots of Fire

2 Kings 2:1-11

Elijah's end is in keeping with his career. From his first abrupt appearance it had been fitly symbolised by the stormy wind and flaming fire which he heard and saw at Horeb, and now these were to be the vehicles which should sweep him into the heavens. He came like a whirlwind, he burned like a fire, and in fire and whirlwind he disappeared. The story is wonderful in pathos and simplicity. Surely never was such a miracle told so quietly. The actual ascension is narrated in a sentence. Its preliminaries take up the rest of this narrative.

I. This journey from Gilgal to the eastern side of Jordan is minutely described in its stages.

Apparently this Gilgal is not the well-known place so called, which was down in the Jordan valley close to Jericho, else the road from it to Bethel could not have been called a going down (v. 2). It probably lay to the north of Bethel, which would then be between it and Jericho, where the Jordan was to be passed. Elijah was not sent on an aimless round of farewell visits, but by the direct road to his destination. Note that he and Elisha and the "sons of the prophets" all know that he is near his end. How this came about we are not told, and need not speculate; but though all knew, none seems to have known that the others knew. Elijah does not explain to Elisha why he wished him to stay behind, nor Elisha to Elijah why he was so resolved to keep by him. The knowledge and the silence would give peculiar solemnity and sweet bitterness to these last hours. How often a similar combination weighs on the hearts of a household, who all know that a dear one is soon to be taken away, and yet can only be silent about what is uppermost in their thoughts!

Why did Elijah wish Elisha to stay behind? Apparently to spare him the pain of seeing his master depart. With loving concealment, he tried to make Elisha suppose that his errand to Bethel and then to Jericho was but a common one, to be soon despatched. It was a little touch of tenderness in the strong, rough man. Note, too, the gradual disclosure to Elijah of the places to which he was to go. He is only bid to go to Bethel, and not till he gets there is he further sent on to Jericho, and, presumably, only when there is directed to cross Jordan. God does not show all the road at once, even if it lead to glory, but step by step, and a second stage only when we have obediently traversed the first. We get light as we go. Elisha's clinging to his master till the very last is but too intelligible to many of us who have gone through the same sorrow, and counted each moment of companionship with some dear one about to leave earth as priceless gain, to be treasured in the sacred recesses of memory for evermore.

It has been thought that the object of the visits to Bethel and Jericho was to give parting directions to the schools of the prophets at each place; but that is read into the narrative, which gives no hint that Elijah had any communication with these. Rather the contrary is implied, both in the fact that the "sons of the prophets" came to the travellers, not the travellers to them, and in their addressing Elisha, as if some awe of the master kept them from speaking to him. An Elijah marching to his chariot of fire was not a man for raw youths to approach lightly. Their question is met by Elisha with curtness and scant courtesy, which indicates that it was asked in no sympathetic spirit, but from mere love of telling bad news, and of vulgar excitement. Even the gentle Elisha is stirred to rebuke the gossiping chattering, who intrude their curiosity into that sacred hour. There are abundance of such busy-bodies always ready to buzz about any bleeding heart, and sorrow has often to be stern in order to be unmolested.

II. The second stage is the passage of Jordan.

The verbal repetition of the same dialogue at Jericho as at Bethel increases the impression of prolonged loving struggle between the two prophets. At last, they stand on the western bank of Jordan, at their feet the spot where the hurrying river had been stayed by the ark till the tribes had passed over, before them the mountains bordering Elijah's homeland of Gilead on the left, and away on the right the lone peak where Moses had died "by the mouth of the Lord." The soil was redolent of the miracles of the Mosaic age, and the dividing of the waters by Elijah is meant to bring the present into vital connection with that past, and to designate him as parallel with the former leader. Note the vigour with which he twists his characteristic mantle into a kind of rod, and strikes the waters strongly. The repetition of the former miracle is a sign that the unexhausted Power which wrought it is with Elijah. The God of yesterday is the God of to-day, and nothing that was done in the past but will be repeated in essence, though not in form, in the present. "As we have heard so have we seen." The former miracle had been done for a nation; this is performed for two men. It teaches the preciousness of His individual servants in God's eyes. The former had been done through the ark; this, by the prophet's mantle. Power is lodged in the faithful messenger. God's strength dwells in those who love Him. The former miracle had been the close of the desert wanderings and the gateway to Canaan. Though Elijah's face is turned in the opposite direction, does not its repetition suggest that for him, too, the impending translation was to be the end of wilderness weariness and toil, and the entrance on rest?

III. Elisha's request is the next stage in the story.

How far they two "went on" is not told. The Bible does not foster the craving to know the exact situation where sacred things happened, the gratification of which might feed superstition, but could not increase reverence. Possibly they had drawn near the eastern hills, and were out of sight of the fifty curious gazers on the other bank. Elijah at last spoke the truth which both knew. How true to nature is that reticence kept up till the last moment, and then broken so tenderly! "Ask what I shall do for thee, before." Probably he did not mean any supernatural gift, but simply some parting token of love; for he is startled at the response of Elisha. A true disciple can desire nothing more than a portion of his master's spirit. "It is enough for the disciple that he be as his Master." They covet wisely and with a noble covetousness who most desire spiritual gifts to fit them for their vocation. It was an unworldly soul which asked but for such a legacy.

The "double portion" does not mean twice as much as Elijah's portion had been, but twice as much as other "sons of the prophets" would receive. Elisha reckoned himself Elijah's first-born spiritual son, and asked for the elder brother's share, because he had been designated as successor, and would require more than others for his work. The new sense of responsibility is coming on him, and teaching him his need. Well for us if higher positions make us lowlier, in the consciousness of our own unfitness without divine help! Elijah knows that his spirit was not his to give, and can only refer his successor to the Fountain from which he had drawn; for the sign which he gives is obviously not within his power to determine. If the Lord shows the ascending master to him who is left, He will give the servant his desire.

A portion of their "spirit" is the very thing which teachers and prophets cannot give. They may give their systems or their methods, their favourite ideas or cut-and-dry maxims and principles, and so leave a race of pygmies who give themselves airs as being their disciples, but their spirit they cannot impart. Contrast with this limitation of power confessed by Elijah, His consciousness who breathed on eleven poor men, and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." No man could say that without absurdity or blasphemy. The gift impossible to man is the very characteristic gift of Jesus, who "has power over the Spirit of holiness." Must He not thereby be "declared to be the Son of God"?

IV. The climax of this lesson is that stupendous scene of the translation. Note how the "Behold" suggests the suddenness of the appearance of the fiery chariot, which came flaming between the two men eagerly talking, and drove them apart. The description of the departure, in its brevity and incompleteness, sounds like the report of the only eye-witness, who had the fiery chariot between him and Elijah, and was too bewildered to see precisely what happened. All he knew was the sudden appearance of the fiery equipage, and then that, suddenly, and apparently swiftly, a rushing mighty wind swept away chariot and prophet into the heavens. He saw it, as the next verse after this passage tells us, only long enough to break into one rapturous and yet lamenting cry, and then all vanished, and he stood alone with an apparently empty heaven above him, the whirlwind sunk to calm, and Elijah's mantle at his feet.

The teaching of the event is plain. As for the pre-Mosaic ages the translation of Enoch, and for the earlier Mosaic epoch the mysterious death of Moses, so for the prophetic period the carrying to heaven of Elijah, witnessed of a life beyond death, and of death as the wages of sin, which God could remit, if He willed, in the case of faithful service. Enoch and Elijah were led round the head of the valley on the heights, and reached the other side without having to go down into the cold waters flowing in the bottom; and though we cannot tread their path, the joy of their experience has not ceased to be a joy to us, if we walk with God. Death is still the coming of the chariot and horses of fire to bear the believer home. The same exclamation which fell from Elisha's lips, as he saw the chariot sweep up the sky, was spoken over him as he lay sick "of the sickness whereof he should die."

But the most instructive view of Elijah's translation is its parallel and contrast with Christ's Ascension. The one was by outward means; the other by inward energy. Storm and fire bore Elijah up into a region strange to him. Christ ascended up where He was before, returning by the propriety of His nature to His eternal dwelling-place. The one is accomplished with significant disturbance, of whirlwind and flame; the other is gentle, like the life which it closed, and the last sight of Him was with extended hands of blessing. Each life closed in a manner corresponding to its character. The one was swift and sudden. The other was a slow, solemn motion, vividly described as being borne upwards and as going into heaven. The one bore a mortal into heaven. In the other, the Son of God, our great High Priest, hath passed through the heavens and now, far above them all, He is Head over all things.

The Translation of Elijah and the Ascension of Christ

2 Kings 2:11

And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. 2 KINGS 2:11

And it came to pass, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. LUKE 24:51 .

These two events, the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of our Lord, have sometimes been put side by side in order to show that the latter narrative is nothing but a variant of the former. See, it is said, the source of your New Testament story is only the old legend shaped anew by the wistful regrets of the early disciples. But to me it seems that the simple comparison of the two narratives is sufficient to bring out such fundamental difference in the ideas which they respectively embody as amount to opposition, and make any such theory of the origin of the latter absurdly improbable, I could wish no better foil for the history of the Ascension than the history of Elijah's rapture. The comparison brings out contrasts at every step, and there is no readier way of throwing into strong relief the meaning and purpose of the former, than holding up beside it the story of the latter. The real parallel makes the divergences the more remarkable, for likeness sharpens our perception of unlikeness, and no contrast is so forcible as the contrast of things that correspond. I am much mistaken if we shall not find almost every truth of importance connected with our Lord's Ascension emphasised for us by the comparison to which we now proceed.

I. The first point which may be mentioned is the contrast between the manner of Elijah's translation, and that of our Lord's Ascension.

It is perhaps not without significance that the place of the one event was on the uplands or in some of the rocky gorges beyond Jordan, and that of the other, the slopes of Olivet above Bethany. The lonely prophet, who had burst like a meteor on Israel from the solitudes of Gilead, whose fervour had ever and again been rekindled by return to the wilderness, whose whole career had isolated him from men, found the fitting place for that last wonder amidst the stern silence where he had so often sought asylum and inspiration. He was close to the scenes of mighty events in the past. There, on that overhanging peak, the lawgiver whose work he was continuing, and with whom he was to be so strangely associated on the Mount of Transfiguration, had made himself ready for his lonely grave. Here at his feet, the river had parted for the victorious march of Israel. Away down on his horizon the sunshine gleamed on the waters of the Dead Sea; and thus, on his native soil, surrounded by memorials of the Law which he laboured to restore, and of the victories which he would fain have brought back, and of the judgments which he saw again impending over Israel, the stern, solitary ascetic, the prophet of righteousness, whose single arm stayed the downward course of a nation, passed from his toil and his warfare.

What a different set of associations cluster round the place of Christ's Ascension at Bethany, or, as it is more particularly specified in the Acts, Olivet! In the very heart of the land, close by and yet out of sight of the great city, in no wild solitude, but perhaps in some dimple of the hill, neither shunning nor courting spectators, with the quiet home where He had rested so often in the little village at their feet there, and Gethsemane a few furlongs off, in such scenes did the Christ whose delights were with the sons of men and His life lived in closest companionship with His brethren, choose the place whence He should ascend to their Father and His Father. Nor perhaps was it without a meaning that the Mount which received the last print of His ascending footstep was that which a mysterious prophecy designated as destined to receive the first print of the footstep of the Lord coming at a future day to end the long warfare with evil.

But more important than the localities is the contrasted manner of the two ascents. The prophet's end was like the man. It was fitting that he should be swept up the skies in tempest and fire. The impetuosity of his nature, and the stormy energy of his career, had already been symbolised in the mighty and strong wind which rent the rocks, and in the fire that followed the earthquake; and similarly nothing could be more appropriate than that sudden rapture in storm and whirlwind, escorted by the flaming chivalry of heaven.

Nor is it only as appropriate to the character of the prophet and his work that this tempestuous translation is noteworthy. It also suggests very plainly that Elijah was lifted to the skies by power acting on him from without. He did not ascend; he was carried up; the earthly frame and the human nature had no power to rise. "No man hath ascended into heaven." The two men of whom the Old Testament speaks were alike in this, that "God took them." The tempest and the fiery chariot tell us how great was the exercise of divine power which bore the gross mortality thither, and how unfamiliar was the sphere into which it passed.

How full of the very spirit of Christ's whole life is the contrasted manner of His Ascension! The silent gentleness, which did not strive nor cry nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets, marks Him even in that hour of lofty and transcendent triumph. There is no outward sign to accompany His slow upward movement through the quiet air. No blaze of fiery chariots, nor agitation of tempest is needed to bear Him heavenwards. The outstretched hands drop the dew of His benediction on the little company, and so He floats upward, His own will and indwelling power the royal chariot which bears Him, and calmly "leaves the world and goes unto the Father." The slow, continuous movement of ascent is emphatically made prominent in the brief narratives, both by the phrase in Luke, "He was carried up," which expresses continuous leisurely motion, and by the picture in the Acts, of the disciples gazing into heaven "as He went up," in which latter word is brought out, not only the slowness of the movement, but its origin in His own will and its execution by His own power.

Nor is this absence of any vehicle or external agency destroyed by the fact that "a cloud" received Him out of their sight, for its purpose was not to raise Him heavenward, but to hide Him from the gazers' eyes, that He might not seem to them to dwindle into distance, but that their last look and memory might be of His clearly discerned and loving face. Possibly, too, it may be intended to remind us of the cloud which guided Israel, the glory which dwelt between the cherubim, the cloud which overshadowed the Mount of Transfiguration, and to set forth a symbol of the Divine Presence welcoming to itself, His battle fought, the Son of His love.

Be that as it may, the manner of our Lord's Ascension by His own inherent power is brought into boldest relief when contrasted with Elijah's rapture, and is evidently the fitting expression, as it is the consequence, of His sole and singular divine nature. It accords with His own mode of reference to the Ascension, while He was on earth, which ever represents Him not as being taken, but as going: "I leave the world and go to the Father." "I ascend to My Father and your Father." The highest hope of the devoutest souls before Him had been, "Thou wilt afterwards take me to glory." The highest hope of devout souls since Him has been, "We shall be caught up to meet the Lord." But this Man ever speaks of Himself as able when He will, by His own power, to rise where no man hath ascended. His divine nature and pre-existence shine clearly forth, and as we stand gazing at Him blessing the world as He rises into the heavens, we know that we are looking on no mere mysterious elevation of a mortal to the skies, but are beholding the return of the Incarnate Lord, who willed to tarry among our earthly tabernacles for a time, to the glory where He was before, "His own calm home, His habitation from eternity."

II. Another striking point of contrast embraces the relation which these two events respectively bear to the life's work which had preceded them.

The falling mantle of Elijah has become a symbol known to all the world, for the transference of unfinished tasks and the appointment of successors to departed greatness. Elisha asked that he might have a double portion of his master's spirit, not meaning twice as much as his master had had, but the eldest son's share of the father's possessions, the double of the other children's portion. And, though his master had no power to bestow the gift, and had to reply as one who has nothing that he has not received, and cannot dispose of the grace that dwells in him, the prayer was answered, and the feebler nature of Elisha was fitted for the continuance of the work which Elijah left undone.

The mantle that passed from one to the other was the symbol of office and authority transferred; the functions were the same, whilst the holders had changed. The sons of the prophets bow before the new master; "the spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha."

So the world goes on. Man after man serves his generation by the will of God, and is gathered to his fathers; and a new arm grasps the mantle to smite Jordan, and a new voice speaks from his empty place, and men recognise the successor, and forget the predecessor.

We turn to Christ's Ascension, and there we meet with nothing analogous to this transference of office. No mantle falling from His shoulders lights on any of that group, none are hailed as His successors. What He has done bears and needs no repetition whilst time shall roll, whilst eternity shall last. His work is unique: "the help that is done on earth, He doeth it all Himself." His Ascension completed the witness of heaven, begun at His resurrection, that "He has offered one sacrifice for sins, for ever." He has left no unfinished work which another may perfect. He has done no work which another may do again for new generations. He has spoken all truth, and none may add to His words. He has fulfilled all righteousness, and none may better His pattern. He has borne all the world's sin, and no time can waste the power of that sacrifice, nor any man add to its absolute sufficiency. This King of men wears a crown to which there is no heir. This Priest has a priesthood which passes to no other. This

“Prophet” does “live for ever,” The world sees all other guides and helpers pass away, and every man’s work is caught up by other hands and carried on after he drops it, and the short memories and shorter gratitudes of men turn to the rising sun; but one Name remains undimmed by distance, and one work remains unapproached and unapproachable, and one Man remains whose office none other can hold, whose bow none but He can bend, whose mantle none can wear. Christ has ascended up on high and left a finished work for all men to trust, for no man to continue.

III. Whilst our Lord’s Ascension is thus marked as the seal of a work in which He has no successor, it is also emphatically set forth, by contrast with Elijah’s translation, as the transition to a continuous energy for and in the world.

Clearly the other narrative derives all its pathos from the thought that Elijah’s work is done. His task is over, and nothing more is to be hoped for from him. But that same absence from the history of Christ’s Ascension, of any hint of a successor, to which we have referred in the previous remarks, has an obvious bearing on His present relation to the world as well as on the completeness of His unique past work.

When Christ ascended up on high, He relinquished nothing of His activity for us, but only cast it into a new form, which in some sense is yet higher than that which it took on earth. His work for the world is in one aspect completed on the Cross, but in another it will never be completed until all the blessings which that Cross has lodged in the midst of humanity, have reached their widest possible diffusion and their highest possible development. Long ages ago He cried, “It is finished,” but we may be far yet from the time when He shall say, “It is done”; and for all the slow years between His own word gives us the law of His activity, “My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.”

Christ’s Ascension is no withdrawal of the Captain of our salvation from the field where we are left to fight, nor has He gone up to the mountain, leaving us alone to tug at the oar, and shiver in the cold night air. True, there may seem a strange contrast between the present condition of the Lord who “was received up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God,” and that of the servants wandering through the world on His business; but the contrast is harmonised by the next words, “the Lord also working with them.” Yes, He has gone up to sit at the right hand of God. That session at God’s right hand to which the Ascension is chiefly of importance as the transition, means the repose of a perfected redemption, the communion of the Son with the Father, the exercise of all the omnipotence of God, the administration of the world’s history. He has ascended that He might fill all things, that He might pour out His Spirit upon us, that the path to God may be trodden by our lame feet, that the whole resources of the divine nature may be wielded by the hands that were nailed to the Cross, that the mighty purpose of salvation may be fulfilled.

Elijah knew not whether his spirit could descend upon his follower. But Christ, though, as we have said, He left no legacy of falling mantle to any, left His Spirit to His people. What Elisha gained, Elijah lost. What Elisha desired, Elijah could not give nor guarantee. How firm and assured beside Elijah’s dubious “Thou hast asked a hard thing,” and his “If thou see me, it shall be so,” is Christ’s “It is expedient for you that I go away. For if I go not away the Comforter will not come, but if I depart, I will send Him unto you.”

Manifold are the forms of that new and continuous activity of Christ into which He passed when He left the earth: and as we contrast these with the utter helplessness any longer to counsel, rebuke or save, to which death reduces those who love us best, and to which even his glorious rapture into the heavens brought the strong prophet of fire, we can take up, with a new depth of meaning, the ancient words that tell of Christ’s exclusive prerogative of succouring and inspiring from within the veil: “Thou hast ascended on high; Thou hast led captivity captive; Thou hast received gifts for men.”

IV. The Ascension of Christ is still further set forth, in its very circumstances, by contrast with Elijah’s translation, as bearing on the hopes of humanity for the future.

The prophet is caught up to the glory and repose for himself alone, and the sole share which the gazing follower or the sons of the prophets straining their eyes there at Jericho, had in his triumph, was a deepened conviction of his prophetic mission, and perhaps some clearer faith in a future life. Their wonder and sorrow, Elisha’s immediate exercise of his new power, the prophets’ immediate transference of their allegiance to their new head, show that on both sides it was felt that they had no part in the event beyond that of awe-struck beholders. No light streamed from it on their own future. The path they had to tread was still the common road into the great darkness, as solitary and unknown as before. The chariot of fire parted their master from the common experience of humanity as from their fellowship, making him an exception to the sad rule of death, which frowned the grimmer and more inexorable by contrast with his radiant translation.

The very reverse is true of Christ’s Ascension. In Him our nature is taken up to the throne of God. His Resurrection assures us that “them which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him,” His passage to the heavens assures us that “they who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them,” and that all of both companies shall with Him live and reign, sharing His

dominion, and molded to His image.

If we would know of what our manhood is capable, if we would rise to the height of the hopes which God means that we should cherish, if we would gain a living grasp of the power that fulfils them, we have to stand there, gazing on the piled cloud that sails slowly upwards, the pure floor for our Brother's feet. As we watch it rising with a motion which is rest, we have the right to think, "Thither the Forerunner is for us entered." We see there what man is meant for, what men who love Him attain. True, the world is still full of death and sorrow, man's dominion seems a futile dream and a hope that mocks, but "we see Jesus," ascended up on high, and in Him we too are "made to sit together in heavenly places." The Breaker is gone up before them. Their King shall pass before them, and the Lord at the head of them.

There is yet another aspect in which our Lord's Ascension bears on our hopes for the future, namely, as connected with His coming again. In that respect, too, the contrast of Elijah's translation may serve to emphasise the truth. Prophecy, indeed, in its latest voice, spoke of sending Elijah the prophet before the coming of the day of the Lord, and Rabbinical legends delighted to tell how he had been carried to the Garden of Eden, whence he would come again, in Israel's sorest need. But the prophecy had no thought of a personal reappearance, and the dreams are only dreams such as we find in the legendary history of many nations. As Elisha recrossed the Jordan, he bore with him only a mantle and a memory, not a hope.

"Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven." How grand is the use in these mighty words of the name Jesus, the name that speaks of His true humanity, with all its weakness, limitations, and sorrow, with all its tenderness and brotherhood! The man who died and rose again, has gone up on high. He will so come as He has gone. "So" that is to say, personally, corporeally, visibly, on clouds, perhaps to that very spot, "and His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives." Thus Scripture teaches us ever to associate together the departure and the coming of the Lord, and always when we meditate on His Ascension to prepare a place for us, to think of His real presence with us through the ages, and of His coming again to receive us to Himself.

That parting on Olivet cannot be the end. Such a leave-taking is the prophecy of happy greetings and an inseparable reunion. The King has gone to receive a kingdom, and to return. Memory and hope coalesce, as we think of Him who is passed into the heavens, and the heart of the Church has to cherish at once the glad thought that its Head and helper has entered within the veil, and the still more joyous one, which lightens the days of separation and widowhood, that the Lord will come again.

So let us take our share in the "great joy" with which the disciples returned to Jerusalem, left like sheep in the midst of wolves as they were, and "let us set our affection on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God."

Elijah's Translation and Elisha's Deathbed

2 Kings 2:12, 13:14

"And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof." 2 KINGS 2:12

"... And Joash, the King of Israel, came down unto him, and wept over his face, and said. O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof." 2 KINGS 13:14

The scenes and the speakers are strangely different in these two incidents. The one scene is that mysterious translation on the further bank of the Jordan, when a mortal was swept up to heaven in a fiery whirlwind, and the other is an ordinary sick chamber, where an old man was lying, with the life slowly ebbing out of him. The one speaker is the successor of the great prophet, on whom his spirit in a large measure fell; the other, an idolatrous king, young, headstrong, who had despised the latter prophet's teaching while he lived, but was now for the moment awed into something like seriousness and reverence by his death.

Now the remarkable thing is that this unworthy monarch should have come to the dying prophet, and should have strengthened and cheered him by the quotation of his own words, spoken so long ago, as if he would say to him, "All that thou didst mean when thou didst stand there in rapturous adoration, watching the ascending Elijah, is as true about thee, lying dying here, of a common and lingering sickness. My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof." Seen or unseen, these were present. The reality was the same, though the appearances were so different.

I. We have in the first case the chariot and horsemen seen.

To feel the force of the exclamation on the lips of Joash, we must try to make clear to ourselves what its original meaning was. What did Elisha intend when he stood beyond Jordan, and in wonder and awe exclaimed, "The chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof"?

It does not seem to me that the interpretation of the words now in favour is at all satisfactory. It tells us that the expression is to be taken as in apposition with the exclamation "My father, my father"; and that both the one phrase and the other mean "Elijah! Yet what a preposterous and strange metaphor it would be to call a man a chariot and pair, or a chariot and cavalry! It seems to me that the very statement of this explanation, in plain English, condemns it as untenable. It is surely less probable that Elisha in that exclamation was describing Elijah than that he was speaking of that wondrous chariot of fire and horses of fire that had come between him and his master, and that his exclamation was one of surprised adoration as he gazed with wide-opened eyes on the burning angel-hosts, and saw his master mysteriously able to bear that fire, ringed round by these flaming squadrons, possibly standing unscathed on the floor of the chariot, and swept with it and all the celestial pomp, by the whirlwind, into heaven.

But why should he say "the chariot of Israel"? I think we take for granted too readily that "Israel" here means the nation. You will remember that that name was not originally that of the nation, but of its progenitor and founder, given to Jacob as the consequence and record of that mysterious wrestling by the brook. And I think we get a nobler signification for the words before us if, instead of applying the name to the nation, we apply it here to the individual. When Elijah and Elisha crossed Jordan they were not far from the spot where that name was given to Jacob, "the supplanter," whom discipline and communion with God had elevated into Israel. And they were near another of the sites consecrated by his history, the place where, just before the change of his name, the angels of God met him and "he called the name of the place Mahanaim." That means "the two camps," the one, Jacob's defenceless company of women and children, the other, their celestial guards.

It seems reasonable to suppose that, in all probability, a reminiscence of that old story of the manifestation of the armed angels of God as the defenders and servants of His children broke from Elisha's lips. As he looks upon that strange appearance of the chariot and horses of fire that parted him and his friend, he sees once more "the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof," the reappearance of the shining armies whose presence had of old declared that "the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them." And now the same hosts in their immortal youth, unweakened by the ages which have brought earthly warriors to dust and their swords to rust, are flaming and flashing there in the midday sun. What was their errand, and why did they appear? They came, as God's messengers, to bear His servant to His presence. They attested the commission and devotion of the prophet. Their agency was needful to lift a mortal to skies not native to him. Strange that a body of flesh should be able to endure that fiery splendour! Somewhere in the course of that upward movement must this man, who was caught up to meet the Lord in the air, have been "changed." His guards of honour were not only for tokens of his prophetic work, but for witnesses of the unseen world and in some sort pledges, suited to that stage of revelation, of life and immortality.

How striking is the contrast between the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of Christ! He who ascended up where He was before needed no whirlwind, nor chariot of fire, nor extraneous power to elevate Him to His home. Calmly, slowly, as borne upwards by indwelling affinity with heaven, He floated thither with outstretched hands of blessing. The servant angels did not need to surround Him, but, clad no longer in fiery armour, but "in white apparel," the emblem of purity and peace, they stood by the disciples and comforted them with hope. Elijah was carried to heaven. Christ went. The angels disappeared with the prophet and left Elisha to grieve alone. They lingered here after Christ had gone, and turned tears into rainbows flashing with the hues of hope.

II. We have in our second text the chariot and horsemen present though unseen.

We are now in a position to appreciate the meaning of Joash's repetition to Elisha of his own words, spoken under such different circumstances.

Elisha was by no means so great a prophet as Elijah. His work had not been so conspicuous, his character was not so strong, though perhaps more gentle. No such lofty and large influence had been granted to him as had been given to the fiery Tishbite to wield, nor did he leave his mark so deep upon the history of the times or upon the memory of succeeding generations. But such as it had been given him to be he had been. He was a continuer, not an originator. There had been a long period during which he appears to have lived in absolute retirement, exercising no prophetic functions. We never hear of him during the interval between the anointing of Jehu to the Israelitish monarchy and the time of his own death, and that period must have extended over nearly fifty years. After all these years of eclipse and seclusion he was lying dying somewhere in a corner, and the king, young but impressible, although, on the whole, not reliable nor good, came down to the prophet's home, and there, standing by the pallet of the dying man, repeated the words, so strangely reminiscent of a very different event—"My father, my father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!"

And what does that exclamation mean? Two things. One is this, that the angels of the Divine Presence are with us as truly, in life, when unseen as if seen. So far as we know, it was only to Elisha that the vision had been granted of that chariot of fire and horses of fire. We read that at Elijah's translation on the other side of Jordan, and consequently at no great distance off, there stood a company of the sons of the prophets from Jericho to see what would happen, but we do not read that they did see. On the contrary, they were inclined to believe that Elijah had been caught up and flung away somewhere on the mountains, and that it was worth

while to organise search-parties to go after him. It was only Elisha that saw, and Elijah did not know whether he would see or not, for he said to him, "If thou shalt see me when I am taken from thee, then thy desire shall be granted.

The angels of God are visible to the eyes that are fit to see them; and those eyes can always see them. It does not matter whether in a miracle or in a common event—it does not matter whether on the stones by the banks of Jordan or in a close sick chamber, they are visible for those who, by pure hearts and holy desires, have had their vision purged from the intrusive vulgarities and dazzling brightnesses of this poor, petty present, and can therefore see beneath all the apparent the real that blazes behind it.

The scenes at Jordan and in the death-chamber are not the only times in Elisha's life when we read of these chariots and horses of fire. There was another incident in his career in which the same phrase occurs. Once his servant was terrified at the sight of a host compassing the little city where Elisha and he were, with horses and chariots, and came to his master with alarm and despair, crying, "Alas! my master, how shall we do?" The prophet answered with superb calmness, "Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them ... Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. They had always been there, though no one saw them. They were there when no one but Elisha saw them. They were no more there when the young man saw them than they had been before. They did not cease to be there when the film came over his eyes again, and the common round took him back to the trivialities of daily life.

And so from the mouth of this not very devout king the prophet was reminded of his own ancient experiences, and invited to feel that, unseen or seen, the solemn forms stood "bright-harnessed, and strong, in order serviceable, ranged about him for his defence and blessing.

And are they not round about us? If a man can but look into the realities of things, will he see only the work of men and of the forces of nature? Will there not be far more visible as they are far more real than any of these—the forces of the Eternal Presence and ever operative Will of our Father in Heaven? We need not discuss the personality of angels. An angel is the embodiment of the will and energy of God, and we have that will and energy working for us, whether there are any angel persons about us or not. Scripture declares that there are, and that they serve us. We may be sure that if only we will honestly try to purge our eyes from the illusions and temptations of "things seen and temporal, the mountain or the sick chamber will be to us equally full of the angel forms of our defenders and companions.

Do we see them for ourselves; and, not less important, do we, like Elisha, lying there on his deathbed, help else blind men to see them, and make every one that comes beside us, even if he be as little impressible and as little devout as this king Joash was, recognise that in our chambers there sit, and round our lives there flutter and sing, sweet and strong angel wings and voices? Will anybody, looking at you, be constrained to feel that with and around you are the angels of God?

Still further, another cognate application of these great words is that one which is more directly suggested by their quotation by Joash. It does not matter in what way the end of life comes. The reality is the same to all devout men; though one be swept to heaven in a whirlwind, and another lady slowly away in old age, or "fall sick of the sickness wherewith he should die. Each is taken to God in a chariot of fire. The means are of little moment, the fact remains the same, however diverse may be the methods of its accomplishment. The road is the same, the companions the same, the impelling "I was going to say the locomotive"power, is the same, and the goal is the same.

Of Enoch we read, "He was not, for God took him." Of Elijah we read, "He went up in a whirlwind to heaven." Of Elisha we read, "He died and they buried him." And of all three—the two who were translated that they should not see death, and the one who died like the rest of us—it is equally true that "God took" them, and that they were taken to Him. So for ourselves and for our dear ones we may look forward or backward, to deathbeds of weariness, of lingering sickness, of long pain and suffering, or of swift dissolution, and piercing beneath the surface may see the blessed central reality and thankfully feel that Death, too, is God's angel, who does His commandments, hearkening to the voice of God's word when in his dark hearse he carries us hence.

Gentleness Succeeding Strength

2 Kings 2:13-22

The independent activity of Elisha begins with verse 13. How short the gap between the two prophets, and how easily filled it is! Not the greatest are indispensable. God lays aside one tool, but only to take up another. He has inexhaustible stores. The work goes on, though the workers change, and there is little time for mere mourning, and none for idle sorrow. Elisha's first miracle is almost an experiment. The mantle which lay at his feet had been thrown over him by Elijah when he was called to his service, and it was now a token that office and power had devolved on him. His first steps tread closely in Elijah's track; as those of

wise and humble men, called to higher work, will mostly do. The repetition of the miracle by the same means, and the invocation of the Lord as the "God of Elijah," a new name, to be set by the side of "the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob" express the humility which seeks to shelter itself behind the example of its mighty predecessor. The form of the invocation as a question indicates that Elisha had not yet attained certainty as to his power, as not yet having proved it. "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" is not the question of unbelief, but neither is it the voice of full confidence, which asks no such question, because it knows Him to be with it. It is the cry, "Oh that Thou mayest be here, even with unworthy me! and art Thou not here?" The faith was real, though young, and clouded with some film of doubt. But, being real, it was answered; and it was because of Elisha's trust, not Elijah's mantle, that the waters parted. God will listen to a man pleading that ancient deeds may be repeated to-day, and, by answering the cry addressed to Him as the God of saints and martyrs of old, will embolden us to cry to Him as our very own God. We may learn from that first half-tentative miracle the spirit in which men should take up the work of those that are gone, the lowliness fitting for beginners, the wisdom of seeking to graft new work on the old stock, the encouragement from remembering the divine wonders through His servants in the past, and the true way to assure ourselves of our God-given power; namely, by attempting great things for Him, in dependence on His promise.

The miracle was wrought partly for Elisha, and partly for others who were to acknowledge his authority. These sons of the prophets, who stood on the eastern bank of Jordan, had probably not been witnesses of the translation, even if their position commanded a view of the spot. Purer eyes and more kindred spirits than theirs were needed for that.

But they saw Elisha returning alone, and the waters parting before him, and, no doubt, as he came nearer, would recognise what he bore in his hand—Elijah's well-known mantle. They hasten to recognise him as the head of the prophets, and their acknowledgment accurately expresses his place and work. Elijah's spirit rests on him, even though the two men and their careers are very different, and in some respects opposite. Elisha is distinctly secondary to Elijah. He is in no sense an originator, either of fresh revelations or of new impulses to obedience. He but carries on what Elijah had begun, inherits a work, and is Elijah's "Timothy" and "son in the faith." The same Spirit was on him, though the form of his character and gifts was in strong contrast to the stormier genius of his mightier predecessor. Elisha had no such work as Elijah's—no foot-to-foot and hand-to-hand duels with murderous kings or queens; no single-handed efforts to stop a nation from rushing down a steep place into the sea; no fiery energy; no bursts of despair. He moved among kings and courts as an honoured guest and trusted counsellor. He did not dwell apart, like Elijah, the strong son of the desert; but, born in the fertile valley of the Jordan, he lived a life "kindly with his kind," and his delights were with the sons of men. His miracles are mostly works of mercy and gentleness, relieving wants and sicknesses, drying tears and giving back dear ones to mourners. He is as complete a contrast to his stern, solitary, forceful predecessor, as the "still small voice" was to the roar of the wind or the crackling hiss of the flames.

But, nevertheless, "there are diversities of operations, but the same God." It is well to remember that one type of excellence does not exhaust the possibilities of goodness, nor the resources of the inspiring Spirit. The comparative merits of strength and gentleness will always be variously estimated; but God's work needs them both, and both may join hands as serving the same Lord in diverse ways, which are all needed. We should seek to widen our discernment to the extent of the rich variety of forms of good and of service which God gives. Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Timothy, Luther and Melancthon, are all His servants. Well is it when the strong can recognise the power of the gentle, and the gentle can discern the tenderness of the strong, and when each is forward to say of the other, "He worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do."

The search after Elijah, insisted on by the sons of the prophets, is of importance only as showing their low thoughts and Elisha's gentle spirit. He is their head, but he holds the reins loosely. Fancy anybody "urging" Elijah "till he was ashamed"! The shame would very soon have mantled the cheek of the urger. But though, no doubt, Elisha would tell what had happened, these "prophets" only think that Elijah has been miraculously borne somewhither, as he had been before, and seem to have no notion of what has really happened. How hard it is to heave heavy men up to any height of spiritual vision! How vulgar minds always take refuge in the most commonplace explanations that they can find of high truths! "Gone up to heaven! Not he! He is lying, living or dead, in some gorge or on some hillside. Let us go and look for him!" There is nothing on which some people pride themselves more than upon being practical—which generally means prosaic, and often means blind to God's greatest deeds. To go scouring wady and mountain for a man who had been taken up into heaven was practical common sense indeed! But Elisha's gentleness is to be noted. He let them have their own way. Often that is the only plan for convincing people of their errors. And, when the fifty scouts come back empty-handed, all he says is a quiet "Did I no say unto you, Go not?" "The servant of the Lord must not strive," but "in meekness" instruct "those that oppose themselves"; and the effectual instruction is often to let them take their own course.

The miracle of healing the waters is of the beneficent kind usual with Elisha, inaugurates his course with blessing, and typifies the healing power which God through him would exert on men. Jericho had been recently rebuilt in spite of the curse against its builders. The bitterness of the spring seems to have been part of the malediction; for men would not be so foolish as to rebuild a city which had only impure water to depend on. However that may be, the main lesson of the miracle, beyond its revelation of the spirit of gentle compassion in Elisha, is the symbolical one. The new cruse and the salt are emblems of the divine gift which

cleanses the human heart. Salt is an emblem of purification, and its emblematic meaning prevails here over its natural properties; for the last thing to cure a brackish spring was to put salt into it. The very inadequacy, as well as inappropriateness, of the remedy, points the miraculous and symbolical character of the whole. A jar full of salt could do little to a gushing fountain. But it figured the cleansing power which God will bring to bear on us, if we will; and it taught the great truth that sin must be cleansed at the fountain-head in the heart, not half a mile down the stream, in the deeds. Put the salt in the spring, and the outflow will be sweet.

When the Oil Flows

2 Kings 4:6

“And it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said unto her son, Bring me yet a vessel. And he said unto her, There is not a vessel more. And the oil stayed.” 2 KINGS 4:6 .

The series of miracles ascribed to Elisha are very unlike most of the wonderful works of even the Old Testament, and still more unlike those of the New. For about a great many of them there seems to have been no special purpose, either doctrinal or otherwise, but simply the relief of trivial and transient distresses. This story, from which my text is taken, is one of that sort. One of the sons of the prophets had died in Shunem. He left a widow and two little children. The creditor, according to the Mosaic law, had the right, which he was about to put in practice, of taking the children to be bondmen. And so the penniless, helpless woman comes to Elisha, as a kind of deliverer-general from all sorts of distresses, and tells him her pitiful tale. He asks her what she wants him to do, and she has no counsel to give. Then the thing to do strikes him. He asks what she has in the house. It was a poor, bare hovel of a place. There was not anything in it save a pot of oil, which was all her property. He sends her to borrow vessels, of all sorts and sizes. He takes the pot of oil, and shuts the door. Then she sets the two boys fetching and carrying; and herself taking up the one possession that she has, in faith she pours; and dish after dish is filled, and still she pours; and they were all filled, and she kept on pouring. Then she said, “Bring some more”; and the boys answered, “There are not any more,” so then the oil stopped.

There was no very special reason for all this. It is not at all like most Biblical miracles. I do not suppose it had any symbolical intention; but I venture to do a little gentle violence to the incident, and to see in the staying of the oil when no more vessels were brought to be filled, a lesson addressed to us all, and it is this: God keeps giving Himself as long as we bring that into which He can pour Himself. And when we stop bringing, He stops giving.

Now, if I may venture to be fanciful for once, let me tell you of three vessels that we have to bring if we would have the oil of the Divine Spirit poured into us.

I. The vessel of desire.

God can give us a great many things that we do not wish, but He cannot give us His best gift, and that is Himself, unless we desire it. He never forces His company on any man, and if we do not wish for Him He cannot give us Himself, His Spirit, or the gifts of His Spirit. For instance, He cannot make a man wise if he does not wish to be instructed. He cannot make a man holy if he has no aspiration after holiness. He cannot save a man from his sins if the man holds on to his sin with both hands, like some shellfish with its claws when you try to drag it out of its cleft in the rock. He cannot give the oil unless we bring the vessels of our hearts opened by our desires.

If God could He would. “Ye have not because ye ask not.” But we are never to forget that God is not led to begin His giving because we petition Him, but that the infinitude of His stores, and the endless, changeless, unmotivated, perfect love of His heart, make self-communication “I was going to use a very strong word, and I do not know that it is too strong” necessary to the blessedness of the blessed God, and, long before we ever thought of Him, or sought anything from Him, there was pouring out from Him all the fulness of His love: just as we may conceive of the sunshine raying out before the orbs that were to circle round it had been completely shaped, but were still diffused and nebulous.

But, while God is always giving, our capacity to receive determines the degree of our individual possession of Him. Or, to put it in the plainest words “we have as much of God as we can take in; and the principal factor in settling how much we can take is “how much we wish. Measure the reality and intensity of desire, and you measure capacity. As the atmosphere rushes into every vacuum, or as the sea runs up into and fills every sinuosity of the shore, so wherever a heart opens, and the unbroken coastline is indented, as it were, by desire, in rushes the tide of the divine gifts. You have God in the measure in which you desire Him.

Only remember that that desire which brings God must be more than a feeble, fleeting wish. Wishing is one thing; willing is quite another. Lazily wishing and strenuously desiring are two entirely different postures of mind; the former gets nothing and the latter gets everything, gets God, and with God all that God can bring.

But the wish must not only rise to intensity and earnestness, but it must be steadfast. Suppose these two little boys of the widow

had held their vessels below the spout of the oil-pot with tremulous hands, while they looked away at something else, sometimes keeping the vessels right under, and sometimes shifting them on one side, it would have been slow work filling the unsteadily held vessels. So it is in regard to receiving God's best gift. Our desires must be unwavering. A cup held by a shaking hand will spill its contents, or will never receive them. "Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord." The steadfast wish is the wish that is answered.

Is it not a strange indifference to our true good that we who have learned, as most of us have learned only too well, that in this world to wish is not to have, should turn away from the possibility that lies before us each, of passing from this disappointing world of vain longings into a region where we cannot wish anything that we do not get? There is only one thing about which it is true that, if you want, and as much as you want, you will have; and that thing is found when we turn away our wishes from the false, fleeting, and surface satisfactions of earth, and fasten them upon God, "Who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ... think." Wish for Him, and you have what you have wished. Wish for anything else, and you may have it or you may not, but depend upon it the fish is never half as big when it is out of the water as it felt to be when it was tugging at the hook.

II. Another vessel that we have to bring is the vessel of our expectancy.

Desire is one thing; confident anticipation that the desire will be fulfilled is quite another. And the two do not certainly go together anywhere except in this one region, and there they do go, linked arm in arm. For whatsoever, in the highest of all regions, we wish, we have the right without presumption to believe that we shall receive. Expectation, like desire, opens the heart.

There are some expectations, even in lower regions, that fulfil themselves. Doctors will tell you that a very large part of the curative power of their medicine depends upon the patient's anticipation of recovery. If a man expects to die when he takes to his bed, the chances are that he will die; and if a man expects to get better, Death will have a fight before it conquers him. There are hundreds of cases, in all departments of life, where he who sets himself to a task with assured persuasion that he is going to do such and such a thing will do it. "Screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail," said the heroine in the tragedy; and there is a great truth in her fierce encouragement.

All these illustrations fall far beneath the Christian aspect of the thought that what we expect from God we receive. That is only another way of putting "According to thy faith be it unto thee." It is exactly what Jesus Christ said when He promised, "Whatsoever things ye ask when ye stand praying believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them."

I am afraid that a great many of us often have expectations fainter than desires; and that we should be very much surprised if the thing that we ask for, in the prayers that we so often repeat by rote, were granted to us. You will hear men praying for holiness, for clean hearts, for progress in the Christian life, for a hundred other such blessings. They do not expect that anything is going to come in consequence, and they would be mightily at a loss what to do with the gift if it did come. The absence of expectancy in our public petitions is to me one of the saddest features in the Christian life of this day. If you expect little, you will get little; and we do expect far less than we ought. We cannot raise our confident expectations too high; for "He is able to do for us exceeding abundantly above all that we ask" as well as "think." The Apostle has set the limit of our expectations, in the same context, and here it is: "That we may be filled with all the fulness of God." There are two limits: one is the boundless illimitableness of God's perfection, and the possibilities of our possession of Him are not exhausted until we have reached that infinite completeness. But then, there is a practical, working limit for each of us; and that is "what do you desire? and what do you expect? God can give more than we can ask or think, but He cannot at the moment give more than we expect or desire.

True, the vessels that we bring to be filled with the oil are not like the vessels that the fatherless boys brought. These were of a definite capacity; and the little cup when it was filled was filled, and there was an end of it. But the vessels that we bring are elastic, and widen out. The more that is put into them the more they can hold, so that there is no bound to the capacity of a heart for the reception and inrush of God; and there will not be a bound through all the ages of a growing possession of Him in eternity. But for to-day, desire and expectancy determine the measure of the gift.

III. Lastly, one more vessel that we have to bring is obedience.

"If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine." There is one case of the general principle that wishes and anticipations are all right and well, but unless they are backed up and verified by conduct, even wishes and anticipations will not bring God's gift. For it is possible for a man who, in his better moments of devotion, has some desires after a loftier range of goodness and a completer conformity to God than he ordinarily has, to rise from his knees and rush into the world, and there live in some lust, or uncleanness, or vice, or indulgence, or absorption in the cares of this life, in such a way as that desires and anticipations shall vanish. If we fill our vessels full, before we take them to the source of supply, with all manner of baser liquids, there will be no room for the oil. We may contradict and stifle our desires by our conduct, and by it make our expectations perfectly impossible to be fulfilled. Are our daily doings of such a nature as that the Spirit of God, which is symbolised by the oil, can come into our hearts; or are we quenching and grieving Him so that He

Can but listen at the gate

And hear the household jar within?

Desire, Expectancy, and Obedience—these three must never be separated if we are to receive the gift of Himself, which God delights and waits to give. All spiritual possessions and powers grow by use, even as exercised muscles are strengthened, and unused ones tend to be atrophied. It is possible, by neglect of God and of the gift given to us, to incur the stern sentence passed on the slothful servant—“Take it from him.” By disobedience and negligence we choke the channel through which God’s gifts can flow to us. So, brethren, bring these three vessels, and you will not go away with them empty. Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.

A Miracle Needing Effort

2 Kings 4:25-37

The story of Elisha is almost entirely a record of his miracles, and the story of his miracles is almost entirely a record of deeds of beneficence. Exception has been taken to it on the ground of the strange accumulation of supernatural works, which have been said to make it like some mediaeval saint’s legend. But why should it not be true that, after Elijah had proclaimed the truth, his successor’s function was to enforce it chiefly by his acts, and to seek to draw Israel back to God by “the cords of love” and the gentle compulsion of mercies? The careful consideration of the work of the two prophets makes the peculiarities of Elisha’s perfectly intelligible. This story of the great lady at Shunem, her joy over her only child and his piteous death—on her knees—is one of the tenderest and sweetest pages in the history. Late won and early lost, the poor boy lies pale and dead on Elisha’s bed at Shunem, while the mother hurries across the plain of Jezreel to Carmel, “a distance of some fifteen or sixteen miles,” where Elisha was then living, probably near the place of Elijah’s sacrifice. This passage begins with her approach.

I. Note first the meeting (2 Ki 4:25-28)

Somewhere on the slopes of Carmel, commanding a view of the plain stretching away in the blue distance eastward, sat the prophet. His eye was keen, though probably he was now old, and he recognised the lady at a distance, as she rode swiftly towards the mountain. He appears to have suspected that this unusual visit meant some calamity, and his gentle heart went out towards his hostess and friend. Gehazi could not get back sooner than she could come, but sympathy could not sit passive and watch her approach. So the instinctively despatched message beautifully witnesses the prophet’s keen affection, and, as it were, the eager leap of his sympathy. So swift and ready to flash into act is the fellow-feeling of the Highest with the sorrows of us all; so should be the compassion of each with another. The higher in gifts or office in the kingdom a man is, the more is he bound to carry his sympathy in an outstretched hand. It is worth very little when it comes slowly. It is priceless when it runs to meet the mourner before she speaks.

The detailed question put into Gehazi’s mouth describes the circle within which this woman’s heart moved, “her husband, her child, herself. If these were well, nothing could be very ill; if ill, nothing could be well. But the message, which came so warm from Elisha’s lips, had been cooled on the road, and sounded formal from Gehazi. It is hard for selfish indifference to carry tender words without freezing them. The bearer of sympathy must be sympathetic. As Gehazi spoiled Elisha’s message, so we Christians too often do our Master’s, and cool it down to our own temperature. The fact that Gehazi had done so is suggested by the curt answer, “Peace!” It is often quoted as the language of resignation, but it seems much rather to be evasion of the question, and that because her sorrow shrank from unveiling itself to the questioner. Nothing makes grief dumb so surely as prying and yet indifferent intrusion. A tenderer hand than Gehazi’s is needed to unlock the sad secret of that burdened breast.

It was perhaps partly pique at her silencing him, and partly mere unfeeling attention to “propriety,” which made the servant wish to check the convulsive grasp of the feet, which the master allowed. Underlings are more careful of what they suppose to be their superior’s dignity than he is. Much is permitted to love and sorrow, by a prophet, which would be repressed by smaller men. “Her soul is bitter within her” pardons much, and only unfeeling critics will be punctilious in dealing with even the extravagances of grief. But Elisha had another reason than pity. He wished to know her pain, and therefore he let her cling to his feet; for only there would she find her tongue. Does there not shine through the figure of the gentle prophet the image of the gentler Christ, who will not have the poorest and foulest spurned from His feet, though it be “a woman who was a sinner,” and lets us come as close to Him as we will, even to hide our faces on His breast, that we may pour out all our sorrows and sins to Him?

The limitations of the prophet’s knowledge he frankly owns. How much better would it have been for the Church if its teachers had been more willing to copy his modesty, and said about a great many things, “The Lord hath hid it from me!”

The mother's answer is indeed the cry of a bitter heart. Its abrupt questions and its reticence as to the child's death are pathetically true to nature, and sound yet across all these centuries as if the bitter cry were for a grief of to-day. "Did I desire a son?" She upbraids Elisha and Elisha's God for having forced on her an unasked blessing. "Did I not say, Do not deceive me?" She did (verse 16); and she upbraids Elisha again for a worse deceit than she had meant then, by mocking her with a gift which was wrenched from her hands so suddenly and soon. How many a sad heart is to-day tempted to raise this cry of anguish! And how patient is Elisha with wild words, and how he discerns, beneath the apparent rough reproach, the misery which it implies and the petition which it veils! Elisha's Lord is no less tender in His judgment of our hasty, whirlwind words, when our hearts are sore; and if only we speak them to Him and cling to His feet, He translates them into the petitions which they mean, and is swift to answer the meaning and pass by the sound of our bitter cry.

II. We note the ineffectual experiment of the staff (2 Ki 4:29-31)

The supposition that Gehazi was sent in such haste with the hope that the touch of the staff might bring back life, is dismissed as "impossible" by most commentators, who have therefore some difficulty in saying what he was sent for. Some of the Rabbis answered, "To prevent putrefaction," which would set in soon on that harvest day. Others say that the intention was to prevent more life escaping from him. But "dead" is not usually supposed to be an adjective admitting of comparison. Others find the reason in the wish to deliver Israel from the superstitious veneration of such things as the staff, by showing that it was powerless. But verse 31 plainly implies that the result of Gehazi's attempt was not what had been expected. Why need there be any hesitation in taking the natural meaning, and supposing that Elisha sent his servant quickly, "if peradventure" the touch of his staff might suffice, and followed in person, because he did not know whether it would. There is nothing unworthy of a prophet who had just confessed his ignorance in the supposition. His unobtrusive spirit delighted to hide its power behind material vehicles, as is seen in most of his miracles; and, if he remembered how he himself, in his early days, had parted the waters with his master's cloak, he might think it possible that his servant should work a miracle with his staff.

The Shunemite quotes his own words on that far-off day; and perhaps she was reminded of them by perceiving the analogy of the two incidents. But her clinging to Elisha shows her doubt of the success of the attempt; and she was right. Why did the staff fail? Perhaps because of its bearer. Gehazi always appears unfavourably, and Elisha's staff loses its power in such hands. The mightiest instruments are weak when selfishness and coldness wield them. An unworthy minister can make the Gospel itself impotent. It is an awful thing to carry "the rod of Thy strength" and to hinder its exerting its energy. But possibly the non-success of the attempt was meant to teach Elisha and us that miracles of life-giving are not to be wrought so easily, but need the effort of the prophet himself. We cannot delegate the work of God, and no sending of others will do instead of going ourselves. Such things are not achieved without much personal toil, pains, and self-sacrifice.

III. So we come to the last step, the communication of life (2 Ki 4:32-37)

It was noon when the child died. The mother's journey would take three or four hours, and the return at least as much. It would then be dark when the two reached her desolate home. She had laid the boy on Elisha's bed, as if even that brought her some comfort. It is difficult to say whether "them twain" (verse 33) means him and the mother, or him and the child; but the expression of the next verse, "went up," suggests that the prayer with shut door was in the lower part of the house, and that the mother's cry was joined to the prophet's petitions. Such prayer is the true preparation for such a miracle. Beautiful consideration, born of sympathy, led him to shut out curious onlookers, and then to go up alone to the little chamber where that pale, tiny corpse lay. No eye but a mother's could have seen what followed without profanation; and a mother's heart would have been torn by hopes and fears if she had seen.

The actual miracle is remarkable for two peculiarities—the effort required and the slowness of the process. Of course, there is a profound and beautiful use to be made of the prophet's action in laying himself upon the dead child, mouth to mouth, and hand to hand, if we regard it as symbolic of that closeness of approach to our nature, dead in sins, which the Lord of life makes in His incarnation and in His continual drawing near. It is His own life which Jesus imparts, and it is imparted because He comes near and touches us. It is the warmth of His own heart which passes into those who live by derivation of life from Him. And Elisha may well stand as symbol of Jesus in this miracle. But besides that use of the narrative, which is no mere fanciful playing with it, we should also note the difference between the prophet and Christ in their miracles. Jesus raises the dead by His bare word. His expressed will is all-sufficient. Elisha prays, and then puts forth somewhat prolonged efforts, from which at first there is no effect, and which drain him of force, so that he is obliged to pause and leave the chamber, and gather himself together for a renewal of them. The ease of the one sets the difficulty of the other in a strong light. And the life which came back with a rush, in full stream, at Christ's bidding, comes only by degrees at Elisha's prayer and work. The one worker is the Lord of life, who speaks and it is done; the other is but the channel of power, and the appearance of effort and gradualness in result is owing to the narrowness of the channel, not to the inadequacy of the power.

In all Elisha's gentleness and lowliness there is yet a certain dignity as God's prophet; and it was not fitting that he should

come from the scene of such a miracle with the glow of it upon him, to seek for the mother. So he summons her by Gehazi, and then, with beautiful delicacy, leaves her to go alone into the chamber. None are to see the transports of her joy, not even the author of it. How beautiful, too, are the quiet words, "Take up thy son!" She has no words; but, for all answer, comes close to him (there is no "in" in verse 37), and once again, but with what different feelings, clasps his feet. Not even Gehazi, or any other stickler for propriety, has the heart to thrust her back this time. The story draws a curtain over that meeting in the prophet's chamber. Sad hearts who have vainly longed for such a moment, can fancy the rapture. But the day will come, not here, but in the upper chamber, when parted ones shall clasp each other again; and many a mourner shall hear Jesus say from the throne what He once said from the Cross, "Woman, behold thy son; son, behold thy mother."

Naaman's Wrath

2 Kings 5:10,11

And Elisha sent a messenger unto Naaman, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. 11. But Naaman was wroth, and went away. 2 KINGS 5:10, 11 .

These two figures are significant of much beyond themselves. Elisha the prophet is the bearer of a divine cure. Naaman, the great Syrian noble, is stricken with the disease that throughout the Old Testament is treated as a parable of sin and death. He was the commander-in-chief of the army of Damascus, high in favour at Ben-hadad's court; his reputation and renown were on every tongue, but he was a leper. There is a "but" in every fortune, as there is a "but" in every character.

So he comes to the prophet's humble home in Samaria, and we find him waiting, a suppliant at the gate, with his cavalcade of attendants, and a present worth many thousands of pounds in our English money.

How does the prophet receive his distinguished visitor? In all the rest of his actions we find Elisha gentle, accessible, forgetful of his dignity. Here his conduct would be discourteous if there were not a reason for it. He is reserved, unsympathetic, keeps the great man at the staff-end, will not even come out to receive him as common courtesy might have suggested; sends him a curt message of direction, with not a word more than was necessary.

And then, naturally enough, the hot soldier begins to explode. His pride is touched; he has not been received with due deference. If the prophet would have come out and chanted incantations over him, and made mystical motions of his hands above the shining patches of his leprous skin, he could have believed in the cure. But there was nothing in the injunction given for his superstition to lay hold of. His patriotic susceptibilities are roused. If he is to be cleansed by bathing, are not the crystal streams of his own city, the glory of Damascus, better than the turbid and muddy Jordan that belongs to Israel? So he flounced away, and would have sacrificed his hope of cure to his passion if his servants had not brought him to common-sense by their cool remonstrance. He would have done any great thing which he had been set to do; he had already done a great thing in taking the long journey, and being ready to expend all that vast amount of treasure, and so surely there need be no difficulty in his complying, were it only as an experiment, with the very simple and easy terms which the prophet had enjoined.

Now, all these points may be so put as to suggest for us characteristics of that gospel which is God's cure for our leprosy. And the whole story shows us as in a glass what human nature would like the gospel to be, and how we sick men quarrel with our physic, and stumble at those very characteristics of the gospel which are its main glory and the secret of its power. My only purpose in this sermon is to bring out two or three of these as lying on the surface of the story before us.

I. First, then, God's cure puts us all on one level.

Naaman wished to be treated like a great man that happened to be a leper; Elisha treated him like a leper that happened to be a great man. "I thought, he will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God." The whole question about his treatment turns on this, Whether is the important thing his disease or his dignity? He thought it was his dignity, the prophet thought it was his disease. And so he served him as he would have served any one else that in similar circumstances, and for a like necessity, had come to him.

And now, if you will generalise that, it just comes to this—that Christianity brushes aside all the surface differences of men, and goes in its treatment of them straight to the central likenesses, the things which, in all mankind, are identical. There are the same wants, the same sorrows, the same necessity for the same cleansing beneath the queen's robes and the peer's ermine, the workman's jacket and the beggar's rags.

Whatever differences of culture, of station, of idiosyncrasy there may be, these are but surface and accidental. We are all alike in this, that we "have sinned, and come short of the glory of God"; and our Great Physician, in His great remedy, insists upon treating us all as patients, and not as this, that, or the other, kind of patients. The cholera, when it lays hold of ladies and

gentlemen, deals with them in precisely the same fashion that it does when it lays hold of waifs on the dunghill; and a wise doctor will treat the Prince of Wales just as he will treat the Prince of Wales's stable-boy. Christianity has nothing to say, in the first place, to the accidents that separate us one from the other, but insists on looking at us all as standing on the one level and partaking of the one characteristic. We may be wise or foolish, we may be learned or ignorant, we may be rich or poor, we may be high or low, we may be barbarian or civilised, but we are all sinners. The leprosy runs through us all, according to the diagnosis of Christianity, and our Elisha deals with Naaman as he deals with the poorest footboy in Naaman's cavalcade who is afflicted with the same disease.

Now that rubs against our self-importance; a great many of us would be quite willing to go to heaven, but we do not like to go in a common caravan. We want to have a compartment to ourselves, and to travel in a manner becoming our position. We are quite willing to be healed, but we would like to be healed with due deference. You are an educated man, a student; you do not like to take the same place as the most unlettered, and to feel that the common fact of sin puts you, in a very solemn respect, upon the level of these narrow foreheads and unlettered people. And so some of you turn away because Christianity, with such impartiality and persistency, insists upon the identity of the fact of sin in us all, and passes by the little diversities on which we plume ourselves, and which part us the one from the other. Dear brethren, I am sure that some of my audience have been kept away from the gospel by this humbling characteristic of it, that at the very beginning it insists on bringing us all into the one category; and I venture to ask you to ponder with yourselves this question, Is it not wise, is it not necessary that the physician should look only at the disease and think nothing of all the other facts of the patient's character or life? Surely, surely, it is a fact that we are transgressors, and surely it is a fact that if we be transgressors that is the most important thing about us—far more important than all these diversities of which I have been speaking. They are skin-deep, this is the central truth, that we have souls which ought to stand in a living relation of glad obedience to our Father in heaven; and which, alas! do stand in an attitude often of sulky alienation, often of indifference, and not seldom of rebellion. If so, then it is both wise and kind to deal with that solemn fact first. In wisdom and in mercy Christianity deals with all men as sinners, needing chiefly to be healed of that disease. "The Scripture hath concluded all under sin" "shut up the whole race as in a great chamber, that so cleansing and forgiveness might reach them all. They are gathered together as patients in a hospital are gathered, that their sickness may be medicined and their wounds dressed.

For this impartiality of the gospel, putting us all on one level, and its determination to deal with us all as sinners, is but the other side of, and the preparation for, that blessed universality of a sacrifice for all, and a gospel for the whole world. Do not quarrel with your physic because the Physician insists upon dealing with you as sick men.

II. Then take another of the thoughts that come out of the incident before us. God's cure puts the messengers of the cure well away in the background.

Naaman, heathen-like, wanted something sensuous for his confidence in the prophet's cure to lay hold upon. If the prophet would only have come out, and done like the sorcerers and magic-workers of whom he had had experience; if he would have come weaving mystical incantations, and calling upon the God whom he worshipped, but whom Naaman did not, and making passes with his hands over the leprous places—then there would have been something for his sense to build upon, and he would have been ready to believe in the prophet's power to cure. But that was the very thing which the prophet did not want him to believe in. Elisha desired to conceal himself, and to make God's power prominent. He wished to cure Naaman's soul of the leprosy of idolatry as well as to cure his body; and we see, in the sequel of the story, that the very simplicity of the means enjoined and the absence of any human agency, which at first staggered the sensuous nature and offended the pride of Naaman, at last led him to see and confess that there was no God in all the earth but in Israel. Therefore the prophet keeps in the background. His part is not to cure, but to bring God's cure. He is only a voice. He brings the sick man and God's prescription face to face, and there leaves him. Naaman would have liked to force him into the place of a magician, in whom miracle-working power resided. Elisha will only take the place of a herald who proclaims how God's power may be brought to heal. So men have always sought to turn the messengers of God's cure into miracle-workers. Making the ministers of God's word into priests who by external acts convey grace and forgiveness, is a superstition that has its roots deep in human nature. It is not that the priests have made themselves so much as that the people have made the priests. Here is an instance in a rude form of the tendency which has been at work in all generations, and has been the corruption of Christianity from the beginning, and is doing mischief every day—the tendency to place one's confidence in a man who is supposed to be, in some mysterious manner, the bearer of a grace that will cure and cleanse. And the prophet's position in our story brings out very clearly the position which all Christian ministers hold. They are nothing but heralds, their personality disappears, they are merely a voice. All that they have to do is to bring men into contact with God's own word of command and promise, and then to vanish.

Christianity has no "priests," Christianity has no "sacraments." Christianity has no external rites which bring grace or help except in so far as by their aid the soul is brought into contact with the truth, and by meditation and faith is thus made capable of receiving more of Christ's Spirit. Our only commission is to bring to you God's message of how you may be healed. When we have said, "Wash, and be clean," as plainly, earnestly, and lovingly as we can, we have done all our appointed office. We are heralds, and nothing more. Our business is to preach, not to do rites, or minister sacraments. Our business is to

preach, not to argue. We are neither priests nor professors, but preachers. We have to deliver the message given to us faithfully. We have to ring out the proclamation loudly. The virtue of a town crier is that he make people hear and understand. The virtue of a messenger is that he repeats precisely what he was told. And a Christian minister has to lift up his voice and not be afraid, to see to it that his speech be plain, and that it do not overlay the message with fripperies of ornament, or affectations, or personalities, and to plead earnestly and lovingly with men to come to the divine Healer. John Baptist's description of himself is true of them. With rare self-abnegation, he would only reply to the question, "Who art thou?" with "I am a voice." His personality was nothing. His message was all. A musical string cannot be seen as it vibrates. So the man should be lost in his proclamation. We are heralds and nothing more, and the more we keep in the background and the less our hearers depend on us, the better. If you want priests who will "call on the name of their God, and wave their hands over the place," and convey grace and healing to you by anything that they do for or to you, you will have to go beyond the limits of New Testament Christianity to find them. So men quarrel with their medicine because their cure is purely a spiritual process, depending on spiritual forces, and sense cries out for sacred rites and persons to be the channels of God's healing.

III. And now, lastly, God's cure wants nothing from you but to take it.

Naaman's servants were quite right: "My father! If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it?" Yes! Of course he would, and the greater the better. Men will stand, as Indian fakirs do, with their arms above their heads until they stiffen there. They will perch themselves upon pillars, like Simeon Stylites, for years, till the birds build their nests in their hair: they will measure all the distance from Cape Comorin to Juggernaut's temple with their bodies along the dusty road. They will give the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul. They will wear hair shirts and scourge themselves. They will fast and deny themselves. They will build cathedrals and endow churches. They will do as many of you do, labour by fits and starts all through your lives at the endless task of making yourselves ready for heaven, and winning it by obedience and by righteousness. They will do all these things and do them gladly, rather than listen to the humbling message that says, "You do not need to do anything!" "wash!" Is it your washing, or the water, that will clean you? Wash and be clean! Ah, my brother! Naaman's cleansing was only a test of his obedience, and a token that it was God who cleansed him. There was no power in Jordan's waters to take away the taint of leprosy. Our cleansing is in that blood of Jesus Christ that has the power to take away all sin, and to make the foulest amongst us pure and clean.

But the two commandments—that of the symbol in my text, that of the reality in the Christian gospel—are alike in this respect, that both the one and the other are a confession that the man himself has no part in his own cleansing. And so Naamans, in all generations, who were eager to do some great thing, have stumbled, and turned away from that gospel which says, "It is finished!" "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us." Dear brother, you can do nothing. You do not need to do anything. It is a hard pill for my pride to swallow, to be indebted to absolute mercy, which I have done nothing to bring, for all my hope, but it is a position that we have to take. Hard to take for all of us, very hard for you who have never looked in the face the solemn fact of your own sinfulness, and pondered upon the consequences of that; but most blessed if only you will open your eyes to see that the stern refusal to accept anything from us as working out our salvation is but the other side of the great truth that Christ's death is all-sufficient, and that in Him the foulest may be clean.

"Nothing in my hand I bring."

If you bring anything you cannot grasp the Cross. Do not try to eke out Christ's work with yours; do not build upon penitence, or feelings, or faith, or anything, but build only upon this: "When I had nothing to pay He frankly forgave me all." And build upon this: "Christ alone has died for me"; and Christ alone is all-sufficient. "Wash and be clean"; accept and possess; believe and live!

Naaman's Imperfect Faith

2 Kings 5:15-27

Like the Samaritan leper healed by Jesus, Naaman came back to give glory to God. Samaria was quite out of his road to Damascus, but benefit melted his heart, and the pride, which had been indignant that the prophet did not come out to him, faded before thankfulness, which impelled him to go to the prophet. God's gifts should humble, and gratitude is not afraid to stoop. Elisha would not see Naaman before, for he needed to be taught; but he gladly welcomes him into his presence now, for he has learned his lesson. Sometimes the best way to attract is to repel, and the true servant of God consults not his own dignity, but others' good, whichever he does.

I. The first point is the offer and refusal of the gift.

The benefited is liberal and the benefactor disinterested. Naaman was a convert to pure monotheism. His avowal is clear and full.

But what a miserable conclusion he draws with that "therefore"! He should have said, "Therefore I come to trust under the shadow of His wings." But he is not ready to give himself, and, like some of the rest of us, thinks to compound by giving money. When the outward giving of goods is token of inward surrender of self, it is accepted. When it is a substitute for that, it is rejected. No doubt, too, Naaman thought that Elisha was, like the sorcerers of heathenism, very accessible to gifts; and if he had come to believe in Elisha's God, he had yet to learn the loving-kindness of the God in whom he had come to believe. He had to learn next that "the gift of God" was not "purchased with money" and the prophet's acceptance of his present would have dimmed Elisha's own character, and that of his God, in the newly opened eyes of Naaman.

Elisha's answer begins with the solemn adjuration which we first hear from Elijah. In its use here, it not only declares the unalterable determination of Elisha, but reveals its grounds. To a man who feels ever the burning consciousness that he is in the presence of God, all earthly good dwindles into nothing. How should talents of silver and gold, and changes of raiment, have worth in eyes before which that awful, blessed vision flames? A candle shows black against the sun. If we walk all the day in the light of God's countenance, we shall not see much brightness to dazzle us in the pale and borrowed lights of earth. The vivid realisation of God in our daily lives is the true shield against the enticements of the world. Further, the consciousness of being God's servant, which is implied in the expression "before whom I stand," makes a man shrink from receiving wages from men. "To his own Master he standeth or falleth," and will be scrupulously careful that no taint of apparent self-seeking shall spoil his service, in the eyes of men or in the judgment of the "great Taskmaster." Elisha felt that the honour of his order, and, in some sense, of his God, in the eyes of this half-convert, depended on his own perfect and transparent disinterestedness. Therefore, although he made no scruple of taking the Shunemite's gifts, and probably lived on similar offerings, he steadfastly refused the enormous sum proffered by Naaman. "The labourer is worthy of his hire," but if accepting it is likely to make people think that he did his work for the sake of it, he must refuse it. A hireling is not a man who is paid for his work, but one who works for the sake of the pay. If once a professed servant of God falls under reasonable suspicion of doing that, his power for good is ended, as it should be.

II. The next point to notice is the alloy in the gold, or the imperfection of Naaman's new convictions.

He had been cured of his leprosy at once, but the cure of his soul had to be more gradual. It is unreasonable to expect clear sight, with the power of rightly estimating magnitudes, from a man seeing for the first time. But though Naaman's shortcomings are very natural and excusable, they are plainly shortcomings. Note the two forms which they take, "superstition and selfish compromise. What good would a couple of loads of soil be, and could he not have taken that from the roadside without leave? The connection between the two halves of verse 17 makes his object plain. He wished the earth "for" he would not sacrifice but to Jehovah. That is, he meant to use it as the foundation of an altar, as if only some of the very ground on which Jehovah had manifested Himself was sacred enough for such a purpose. He did not, indeed, think of "the Lord" as a local deity of Israel, as his ample confession of faith in verse 15 proves; but neither had he reached the point of feeling that the Being worshipped makes the altar sacred. No wonder that he did not unlearn in an hour his whole way of thinking of religion! The reliance on externals is too natural to us all, even with all our training in a better faith, to allow of our wondering at or severely blaming him. A sackful of earth from Palestine has been supposed to make a whole graveyard a "Campo Santo"; and, no doubt, there are many good people in England who have carried home bottles of Jordan water for christenings. Does not the very name of "the Holy Land" witness to the survival of Naaman's sentimental error?

The other tarnish on the clear mirror was of a graver kind. Notice that he does not ask Elisha's sanction to his intended compromise, but simply announces his intention, and hopes for forgiveness. It looks ill when a man, in the first fervour of adopting a new faith, is casting about for ways to reconcile it with the public profession of his old abandoned one. We should have thought better of Naaman's monotheism, if he had not coupled his avowal of it, where it was safe to be honest, with the announcement that he did not intend to stand by his avowal when it was risky. It would have required huge courage to have gone back to Damascus and denied Rimmon; and our censure must be lenient, but decided.

Naaman was the first preacher of a doctrine of compromise, which has found eminent defenders and practisers, in our own and other times. To separate the official from the man, and to allow the one to profess in public a creed which the other disavows in private, is rank immorality, whoever does or advocates it. The motive in this case was, perhaps, not so much cowardice as selfish unwillingness to forfeit position and favour at court. He wants to keep all the good things he has got; and he tries to blind his conscience by representing the small compliance of bowing as almost forced on him by the grasp of the bowing king, who leaned on his hand. But was it necessary that he should be the king's favourite? A deeper faith would have said, "Perish court favour and everything that hinders me from making known whose I am." But Naaman is an early example of the family of "Facing-both-ways," and of trying to "make the best of both worlds." But his sophistication of conscience will not do, and his own dissatisfaction with his excuse peeps out plainly in his petition that he may be forgiven. If his act needed forgiveness, it should not have been done, nor thus calmly announced. It is vain to ask forgiveness beforehand for known sin about to be committed.

Elisha is not asked for his sanction, and he neither gives nor refuses it. He dismissed Naaman with cold dignity, in the ordinary conventional form of leave-taking. His silence indicated at least the absence of hearty approval, and probably he was silent to Naaman because, as he said about the Shunemite's trouble, the Lord had been silent to him, and he had no authoritative decision to give. Let us hope that Naaman's faith grew and stiffened before the time of trial came, and that he did not lie to God in the house of Rimmon. Let us take the warning that we are to publish on the housetops what we hear in the ear, and that, if in anything we should be punctiliously sincere, it is in the profession of our faith.

III. The last point is Gehazi's avarice, and what he got by it.

How differently the same sight affected the man who lived near God and the one who lived by sense! Elisha had no desires stirred by the wealth in Naaman's train. Gehazi's mouth watered after it. Regulate desires and you rule conduct. The true regulation of desires is found in communion with God. Gehazi had a sordid soul, like Judas; and, like the traitor Apostle, he was untouched by contact with goodness and unworldliness. Perhaps the parallel might be carried farther, and both were moved with coarse contempt for their master's silly indifference to earthly good. That feeling speaks in Gehazi's soliloquy. He evidently thought the prophet a fool for having let this Syrian off so easily. He was fair game, and he had brought the wealth on purpose to leave it. Profanity speaks in uttering a solemn oath on such an occasion. The putting side by side of the Lord liveth and I will run after him would be ludicrous if it were not horrible. How much profanity may live close beside a prophet, and learn nothing from him but a holy name to sully in an oath!

The after part of the story suggests that Naaman was out of sight of the city before he saw Gehazi coming after him. The cunning liar timed his arrival well. The courtesy of Naaman in lighting down from his chariot to receive the prophet's servant shows how real a change had been wrought upon him, even though there were imperfections in him. Gehazi's story is well hung together, and has plenty of local colour to make it probable. Such glib ingenuity in lying augurs long practice in the art. If he had been content with a small fee, he needed only to have told the truth; but his story was required to put a fair face on the amount of his request. And in what an amiable light it sets Elisha! He would not take for himself, but he has nothing to give to the two imaginary scholars, who have come from some of the schools of the prophets in the hill-country of Ephraim, thirsting for instruction. How sweet the picture, and what a hard heart that could refuse the request! Truly said Paul, "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." Any sin may come from it, and be done to gratify it. "Honestly if you can, but get it," was Gehazi's principle, as it is that of many a man in the Christian Churches of this day. Greed of gain is a sin that seldom keeps house alone. Naaman no doubt was glad to give, both because he was grateful, and because, like most people in high positions, he was galled by the sense of obligation to a man beneath him in rank. So back went Gehazi, with the two Syrian slaves carrying his baggage for him, and he chuckling at his lucky stroke, and pleasantly imagining how to spend his wealth.

"The tower" in verse 24 is more correctly "the hill," and it was probably there where the little group would come in sight of Elisha's house. So Gehazi gets rid of the porters before they could be seen or speak to any one, and manages his load for a little way himself, carefully hides it in the house, and, seeing the men safely off, appears obsequious and innocent before Elisha. The prophet's gift of supernatural knowledge was intermittent, as witness his ignorance of the Shunemite's sorrow; but Gehazi must have known its occasional action, and we can fancy that his heart sank at the ominous question, so curt in the original, and conveying so clearly the prophet's knowledge that he had been away from the house: "Whence, Gehazi?" One lie needs another to cover it, and every sin is likely to beget a successor. So, with some tremor, but without hesitation, he tries to hide his tracks. Did not Elisha's eye pierce the wretched hypocrite as with a dart? and did not his voice ring like a judgment trumpet, as he confounded the silent sinner with the conviction that the prophet himself had been at the spot, though his body had remained in the house? So, at last, will men be reduced to stony dumbness, when they discover that an Eye which can see deeper than Elisha's has been gazing on all their secret sins. The question, "Is this a time to receive?" etc., suggests the special reasons, in Naaman's new faith, for conspicuous disregard of wealth, in order that he might thereby learn the free love of Elisha's God and of Jehovah's servant, both of which had been tarnished by Gehazi's ill-omened greed. The long enumeration following on "garments" includes, no doubt, the things that Gehazi had solaced his return with the thought of buying, and so adds another proof that his heart was turned inside out before the prophet.

His punishment is severe; but his sin was great. The leprosy was a fitting punishment, both because it had been Naaman's, from which obedient reliance on God had set him free, and because of its symbolical meaning, as the type of sin. Gehazi got his coveted money, but he got something else along with it, which he did not bargain for, and which took all the sweetness out of it. That is always the case. "Ill-gotten gear never prospers"; and, if a man has set his heart on worldly good, he may succeed in amassing a fortune, but the leprosy will cleave to him, and his soul will be all crusted and foul with that living death. How many successful men, perhaps high in reputation in the Church as in the world, would stand "lepers as white as snow," if we had God's eyes to see them with!

Sight and Blindness

2 Kings 6:8-18

The revelation of the angel guard around Elisha is the important part of this incident, but the preliminaries to it may yield some instruction. The first point to be noted is the friendly relations between the king and the prophet. The king was probably Joram, who had given up Baal worship, though still retaining the calves at Bethel and Dan (2 Kings iii 2). The whole tone of things is changed from the stormy days of Elijah. The prophet is frequently an inhabitant of the capital, and a trusted counsellor. No doubt much of this improvement was owing to Elijah's undaunted denunciation, but much, too, was due to Elisha's gentle persuasion. We are often tempted to do injustice to the sterner predecessors when we see how the gentler ways of their followers seem to accomplish more than theirs did. Unless winter storms had come first, spring sunshine would draw forth few flowers. All honour to the heroes who begin the fight, and do not see the victory.

The Syrian king's way of warfare was not by a regular continued invasion, but by dashes across the border on undefended places; and time after time he found himself out in his calculations, and troops enough to beat him off massed where he meant to strike. No wonder that he suspected treachery. The prompt answer of his servants implies that Elisha's intervention was well known by them, and measures the reputation in which he stood. Let no one suppose that thwarting Syria was an unworthy use of a supernatural gift. The preservation of Israel and the revelation of God were worthy ends, and all that is accessory to a worthy end is worthy. It is foolish to call anything a trifle which serves a great purpose.

Joram had learned to obey the prophet, and his people and their enemies had learned that Elisha was a prophet. That was much. He had no great revelations of the deep things of God to give to his generation or to posterity, but he gave directions as to practical life which bore on the wellbeing of the state; and that office was not less divinely conferred. It is a good thing when God's servants are not afraid to make their voices heard in politics, and a safeguard for a nation when their counsels are taken. The quiet prophet was more to Israel than an army.

The "great host" sent to capture Elisha shows the terror which he had inspired, and the importance attached to getting possession of him. It is, too, an odd instance of the inconsistency of godless men, in that it never occurs to the Syrian king that Elisha, who knew all his schemes, might know this one too, or that horses and chariots were of little use against a man who had Heaven to back him. Dothan lay on an isolated hill in a wide plain, and could easily be surrounded. A night-march offered the chance of a surprise, which seems to have been prevented by the unusually early rising of Elisha's servant, the young successor of Gehazi. Apparently he had gone out of the little city before he discovered the besiegers, and then rushed back in terror. Note the strongly contrasted pictures of the lad and his master, "the one representing the despair of sense, the other the confidence of faith. The lad's passionate exclamation was most natural, and fear darkening to bewildered helplessness is reasonable to men who only see the material and visible dangers and enemies that beset every life. The wonder is, not that we should sometimes be afraid, but that we should ever be free from fear, if we look only at visible facts. Worse foes ring us round than those whose armour glittered in the morning sunshine at Dothan, and we are as helpless to cope with them as that frightened youth was. Any man who calmly reflects on the possibilities and certainties of his life will find abundant reason for a sinking heart. So much that is dreadful and sad may come, and so much must come, that the boldest may well shrink, and the most resourceful cry "Alas! how shall we do?" It is not courage, but blindness, which enables godless men to front life so unconcernedly.

How nobly the calmness of Elisha shows beside the lad's alarm! Probably both were now outside the city, as the immediately following verse speaks of the mountain as the scene. If so, Elisha had gone forth to meet the enemy, and that must have brought fresh terror to his servant. The quiet "Fear not!" was of little use without the assurance of the next clause; for there is no more idle expenditure of breath than in telling a man not to be afraid, and doing nothing to remove the grounds of his fear. That is all that the world can do to comfort or hearten. "Fear not?" the youth might well have said. "It is all very easy to say that; but look there! How can I help being afraid?" There is only one way to help it, and that is to believe that "they that be with us are more than they that be with them." The true and only conqueror of reasonable fear is still more reasonable trust. The two parts played by the servant and the prophet are united in the man who cleaves to Jesus Christ as his defence. He would not cling so close to Him but for the fear that tightens his grip. He would tremble far more but for that grip. He who says in his heart, "What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee," will presently get to saying, "I will trust, and not be afraid."

Note, further, the sight seen by opened eyes. Elisha did not pray that the heavenly guards might come; for they were there already. Nor does it appear that he saw them; for he did not need that heightened condition of spiritual perception which appears to be meant by the opening of the eyes. And what a sight the trembling young man saw! Where he had seen only barren rock or sparse vegetation, he saw that same fiery host that had attended Elijah in his translation, now enclosing the unarmed prophet and himself within a flaming ring. The manifestation, not the presence, of the angel guards was the miracle. It was a momentary unveiling of what always was, and would be after the curtain was drawn again. I suppose that no reverent reader of Scripture can doubt the existence of angelic beings, or their office to "minister to the heirs of salvation." To us, indeed, who know Him who is the "Head of all principalities and powers," the doctrine of angelic ministration is of less importance than that of Christ's

divine help; but the latter truth does not supersede the former, though its brightness throws the other, about which we know so much less, into comparative shadow. But we may still learn from this transient disclosure of "the things that are," the permanent truth of the ever-active presence of divinely sent helps and guards, with all who trust in Him.

This manifestation has several features of resemblance to that given to Jacob, in his most defenceless hour, when he saw beside his unprotected camp of women and children "God's host," and, in a rapture of thankful wonder, named the place "Mahanaim," "Two Camps." The sight teaches us that God's messengers are ever near, and then most near when needed most. It tells us, too, that they come in the form needed. They are warriors when we are ringed about by foes, counsellors when we are perplexed, comforters when we mourn. Their shapes are as varied as our needs, and ever correspond to "the present distress." They come in power sufficient to conquer. There was force enough circling the prophet to have annihilated all the Syrians. True, they did not draw their celestial swords, but they were there, and their presence was enough for the triumphant faith of the guarded men. What living thing could come through that wall of fire?

Our eyes are blinded and we need to have them cleared, if not in the same manner as this lad's, yet in an analogous way. We look so constantly at the things seen that we have no sight for the unseen. Worldliness, sin, unbelief, sense and its trifles, time and its transitoriness, blind the eyes of our mind; and we need those of sense to be closed, that these may open. The truest vision is the vision of faith. It is certain, direct, and conclusive. The world says, "Seeing is believing"; the gospel says, "Believing is seeing." If we would but live near to Jesus Christ, pray to Him to touch our blind eyeballs, and turn away from the dazzling unrealities which sense brings, we should find Him "the master-light of all our seeing," and be sure of the eternal, invisible things, with an assurance superior to that given by the keenest sight in the brightest sunshine. When we are blind to earth, we see earth glorified by angel presences, and fear and despair and helplessness and sorrow flee away from our tranquil hearts. If, on the other hand, we fix our gaze on earth and its trifles, there will generally be more to alarm than to encourage, and we shall do well to be afraid, if we do not see, as in such a case we shall certainly not see, the fiery wall around us, behind which God keeps His people safe.

Note, finally, the blindness. Elisha's dealing with the advancing host of Syria can only be rightly estimated by looking beyond the limits of the text. His object was to carry the whole army into Samaria, that they might there be won by giving them bread to eat and water to drink, and so heaping coals of fire on their head. The prophet, who was in so many points a foreshadowing of the gospel type of excellence, was the first to show the right way to conquer. Nineteen centuries of so-called Christianity have not brought "Christendom" to practise Elisha's recipe for finishing a war. It succeeded in his hands; for, after that feast and liberation of a captured army, "the bands of Syria came no more into the land of Israel." How could they, as long as the remembrance of that kindness lasted? Pity that the same sort of treatment were not tried to-day!

The blindness which fell on the Syrians does not seem to have been total loss of sight, "for, if so, they could not have followed Elisha to Samaria, nearly fifteen miles off," but rather an ocular affection which prevented them from recognising what they saw. It was a supernatural impediment in any case, however far it extended. God did "according to the word of Elisha," a wonderful inversion of the ordinary formula. But that was because Elisha was doing according to the word of the Lord. The prayers which are "according to His will" are the answered prayers.

They who see not the angels, see nothing clearly. There is a mist over every eye that beholds only the things of time, which prevents it from seeing these as they are, and from recognising a prophet when he is before them. If we would rightly estimate the objects of sense, we must discern, shining through them, the far loftier and greater things of eternity. That flaming background is needed to supply a scale by which to measure the others. The flat plain of Lombardy is most beautiful when its flatness is seen girdled by the giant Alps, where lies the purity of the snow which feeds the rivers that fertilise the levels below.

Impossible - Only I Saw It

2 Kings 7:1-16

The keynote of this incident lies in the promise in the first verse. The whole story illustrates man's too frequent rejection of God's promise, and God's wonderful way of fulfilling it.

I. We note first the promise which common-sense finds incredible.

It came from Elisha when all seemed desperate. The wonderfully vivid narrative in the previous chapter tells a pitiful tale of women boiling their children, of unclean food worth more than its weight in silver, of a king worked up to a pitch of frenzy and murderous designs, and renouncing his allegiance to Jehovah. Such faith as he had was strained to the breaking point, and his messenger was sent to tell the prophet that the king would not "wait for the Lord any longer." That was the moment chosen to speak the promise. It came, as God's helps, both of promise and act, so often come, at the very nick of time, when faith is ready to fail and human aid is vain. Before we had learned our hopeless state, they would come too soon for our good; after faith had wholly

parted from its moorings, they would come too late.

Note the precision and confidence of the promise. The hour of the fulfilment, and the price of flour and the cheaper barley are stated. Manâ€™s promises are vague; Godâ€™s are specific. Mark, too, the entire silence of the promise as to the mode of its fulfilment. Probably Elisha knew as little as any one, how it was going to be accomplished. The particularity and vagueness combined are remarkable. A hint as to how the thing was to be done would have made the belief in the fact so much easier. Yes, and just because it would have smoothed the road for worthless belief, it was not given, but the apparently impossible promise was left in nakedness, for any one who needed sense to animate his faith, to scoff at. Is not that emphatic assertion of the fact, and emphatic silence as to the â€˜how,â€™ a frequent characteristic of Godâ€™s promises? If ever we are kept in the dark as to the latter, it is for our good, and for the encouragement of our growth in utter dependence and perfect trust. It is not well for the trusting soul to ask too curiously about methods intervening between the promise in the present and its accomplishment in the future. It is better for peace and the simplicity of our trust, that we should be content to cling to the faithful word, and to â€˜believe... that it shall be even as it was toldâ€™ us, without troubling ourselves about His way of effecting His purposes. Passengers are not admitted to the engine-room, nor allowed on the bridge. Let them leave all the working of the ship to the captain.

II. The noble who blurted out his incredulity had a great deal to say for himself from the common-sense and worldly point of view.

But he need not have sneered, in the same breath, at old miracles and new. His sarcasm about â€˜windows in heavenâ€™ refers to the story of the flood; and perhaps there is a hint of allusion to the manna. He neither believed these ancient deeds, nor the promise for to-morrow. Why not? Simply because heâ€™wise as he thought himselfâ€™ could not see any way of bringing it about. There are many of us yet who have the same modest opinion of our own acuteness, and go on the supposition that what we do not see is invisible, and what we cannot do, or imagine done, is impossible. Why should not the Lord â€˜make windows in heavenâ€™ if He please? Or, how does the pert objector know that that is the only way of fulfilling the promise? He will be taught that he has not quite exhausted all the possibilities open to Omnipotence, and that something much simpler than windows in heaven can do what is wanted. Unbelief which rejects Godâ€™s plain promises because it does not see how they can be fulfilled is common enough still, and is as unreasonable as it is impertinent. Elisha was as ignorant as this nobleman was, of the means, but his faith fixed its eyes on the faithful word, and trusted, while sense, self-conceit, and worldliness, a mole pretending to have an eagleâ€™s eye, declared that to be impossible which it could not see the way to bring about, and thereby exposed only its own blind arrogance.

III. Elishaâ€™s answer (v. 2) sounds like Elijah.

The utmost gentleness is stirred to pronounce condemnation on self-confident unbelief, and a gentler gentleness than Elishaâ€™s, even Christâ€™s, shrinks not from executing the sentence. Is not the sentence on this scoffing lord the very sentence pronounced ever on unbelief? In his case, it was fulfilled by the crowd that pressed, in their ravenous hunger, through the gate, and trod him down; but in ordinary cases, in our days, the natural operation of unbelief is to shut men out from the fruition, of which faith is the necessary and only condition. It is no avenging and arbitrarily imposed exclusion, but the necessary result of self-made disqualification, which brings on the unbeliever the doom, â€˜Thou shalt not eat thereof.â€™ The blessings of the religious life on earth, and the glories of its perfection in heaven, are only enjoyable through faith. These are not so plainly visible to the unbelieving heart as the scene at the gate was to the nobleman; but, in some measure, even those who do not possess them do, in some lucid moments, see their worth. It is one sad part of the sad lives of godless men that they have their seasons of calm weather, when, in the clearer atmosphere, they catch glimpses of their true good, but that they yet do not behold it long and close enough to be smitten with the desire to possess it; and so the sight remains inoperative, or adds to their condemnation. Not to taste is the sadder fate, because there has been sight. To have eyes opened at last to our own folly, and to see the rich provision of Godâ€™s table, when it is too late, will be a chief pang of future retribution,â€™as it sometimes is of present godlessness.

IV. Passing over for the present the account of the discovery by the four lepers, we may next note Godâ€™s way of fulfilling His promise.

A panic would spread fast in an undisciplined army, and history supplies examples of the swift change into a mob under the influence of groundless terror. There is nothing wonderful in the helter-skelter rush for the Jordan, or in the road being littered with abandoned baggage. The divine intervention produced the impression which naturally brought the flight about, and the coincidence of the prophecy and the panic which fulfilled it stamp both as divinely originated. But if we looked on events as devoutly, and saw into their true character as deeply as the author of the Books of Kings does, we should see that many a similar coincidence, which we trace no farther than to men or circumstances, was due to the same divine cause which made the Syrians to hear â€˜the noise of a great host.â€™ Track the river of life to its source, and you come to God.

â€˜The wicked fleeth when no man pursueth.â€™ Imaginary terrors are apt to beset those who have no trust in God. If we fear Him, we need have no other fear; but if we have not Him for our anchorage, we shall be driven by gusts of passion and terror. The unseen possibilities of attack and defeat may well terrify a man who has not the unseen God to keep him calm.

Windows in heaven, then, were not needed, and the arrogance which said "Impossible!" had not measured all the resources of God. A very wise scientist here in England proved that the Atlantic could not be crossed by a steamer, and the first steamer that did cross took out copies of his book. How foolish men's demonstrations of impossibility look beside God's deliverances! We have not gone through all the chambers of His storehouse, and "His ways are far above, out of our sight." Let us hold fast by the faith that His arm is strong to do whatever His lips are gracious to engage, nor let our inability to see where the river gets through the mountains ever make us doubt that it will reach the sunlit ocean.

V. We may throw together the remaining parts of the incident, as showing how the fulfilled promise was received. These four lepers had heard nothing of it, when despair made them venturesome. How reckless they were, and how they harp on the one gloomy word "die!" The thought was familiar to them, and yet, lepers though they were, life was sweet, and a chance of prolonging it, even as slaves, was worth trying. They chose twilight, that they might be unobserved. We can see them creeping cautiously, with beating hearts, towards the camp, expecting every moment to be challenged, and possibly slain. How their caution would diminish and their wonder grow, as they passed from end to end, and found no one! There stood the horses and asses, left behind lest their footfalls should betray the flight, and every tent empty of men and full of spoil. The lepers seem to have gone right through the camp before they ventured to begin plundering; for the "uttermost part" in verse 5 and that in verse 8 are naturally understood of its opposite extremities. Then, secure against surprise, they eat and drink as ravenously as men who had been starving so long would do. Twilight had deepened into darkness before hunger and greed were satisfied. Not till then did they awake to their duty; and even when they bethink themselves, it is fear of punishment, not care for a city full of hungry men, that moves them. But their tardy awaking to duty is couched in words which carry a great truth, especially to all who have tasted the Bread of Life. It is "not well" to "hold our peace" in "a day of good tidings." If we have good news, especially the good news, its possession obliges us to impart it. If we have tasted the graciousness of the Lord, we are bound to tell of the stores we have found. "He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him." "Of how much sorer punishment... shall he be thought worthy, who keeps to himself the food of the world?"

Lepers were strange messengers of good, but the message graces the bringer, and they who tell good tidings are sure of a welcome. God does not choose great men for the heralds of His mercy, but the qualification is personal experience. These four could only say, "We have seen and tasted," but that was enough. The king's caution was very natural, and would have been quite blameless, if God's promise had not been spoken the day before. But that made the slowness to believe a sin. Feeling one's way over untried ice is prudent; but if we have previously been told that it will bear, it proves our distrust of him who told us. The despatch of the chariots to make a reconnaissance was needless trouble. But men are always apt to think that faith is but a shaky ground of certitude unless it be backed up by sense. When God gives us His word to trust to, we are wisest if we trust to it alone, and we may save ourselves the trouble of sending out scouts to see if it is really beginning to be fulfilled. Elisha had no need to wait the report of the charioteers before he believed in the fulfilment of the promise, which others had found incredible when spoken, and too good to be true even when fulfilled. Let us trust God, whether sense can attest the incipient accomplishment of His words or no.

Silent Christians 2 Kings 7:9

"Then they said one to another, We do not well; this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; if we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will come upon us; now therefore come, that we may go and tell the king's household." 2 KINGS 7:9 .

The city of Samaria was closely besieged, and suffering all the horrors of famine. Women were boiling and eating their children, and the most revolting garbage was worth its weight in silver. Four starving lepers, sitting by the gate, plucked up courage from the extremity of their distress, and looking in each other's bloodshot eyes, whispered one to another, with their hoarse voices: "If we say we will enter into the city, then the famine is in the city, and we shall die there; and if we sit still here we die also. Now therefore come, and let us fall unto the host of the Syrians; if they save us alive we shall live; and if they kill us we shall but die." So in the twilight they stole away. As they come near the camp there is a strange silence; no guards, no stir. They creep to the first tent and find it empty; and then another, and another, and another, till at last it admits of no doubt that certainly the enemy has gone, leaving all his baggage behind him, So for awhile they feast and plunder—"small blame to them! And then conscience wakes, and the same thought occurs to each of them: "This is not patriotic; this is scarcely human; it is a shame for us to be sitting here gorging ourselves whilst a city is starving within a stone's-throw." So they say one to another in the words of my text.

Now these men's consciousness of the obligation imposed upon them by the knowledge of glad news, their self-reproach for their silence, their conviction that retribution would fall on them if it continued, and their resolve therefore to clear themselves, may

all be transferred to higher regions, and may fairly illustrate Christian responsibilities and duties.

I wish to say one or two very homely, plain things about Christian men's obligation to speech, and the sin of their silence. My remarks will have no special reference to any particular forms of Christian activity, but if I succeed in impressing on any a deeper sense of duty in reference to declaring the Gospel than they possess, then all forms of it will be prosecuted with greater vigour and consecration.

I. I wish first to dwell for a moment on that "I was going to use a plain word and say" hideous ; I will substitute a milder term, and say "remarkable , fact of Christian silence.

I take this congregation as a fair average representative of the ordinary habitudes of professing Christians of this generation. How many men and women there are sitting in these pews, who, if I asked them the question, would say that they were Christians? and what proportion of these, if I asked them the further question, "Did you ever tell anybody anything about Jesus Christ?" would say, "No, never!" I know this, that in regard to all the recognised and associated forms of Christian work which cluster round a Christian congregation, it is the same handful of people that do them all. It is just like the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope, there are not many of them though you can shake them up into a great number of patterns, but they are always the very same bits. So I could go through pew after pew, if it would not be very personal, and find men and women, one after another "rows of them" that, so far as any of the united work of a church goes, are absolutely idle. They are worthy kind of people, too, with some real religion in them; but yet, partly from shyness, partly from indolence, partly because (as they think) they have so much else to do, and for a number of other reasons that I do not need to dwell upon, they fall into the great army of idlers, and are just so much dead weight and surplusage, as far as the work of the Church is concerned.

Now I do not mean to say that, because professing Christian people do not work in any recognised forms of Christian service which are attached to a congregation, therefore they are not doing anything. God forbid! There are many of you, for instance, mothers of families, whose best service is to speak about Jesus Christ to your children, and to live according as you speak, and that is work enough for you. There are many more of us, who, for various legitimate reasons, are precluded from taking part in organised forms of Christian service. Do not so fatally misunderstand me as to suppose that I am merely beating a drum to get recruits for societies. What I want to impress upon every Christian person listening to me now is simply this, the anomaly of the fact, if it be a fact, that you are a dumb Christian. You can all speak, if you will; you all have people with whom your speech is weighty and powerful. There are doors open before each of you. Ask yourselves, have you gone in at the open doors? or is it true about you that you have never felt the obligation to make your Master known to others, or, at all events, have never felt it so strongly that it compelled you to obey? The strange fact of Christian silence is one that I emphasise to begin with.

II. Let me say a word next about the sin of this silence.

These four poor lepers had not had much kindness dealt out to them in their lives, and they might have been pardoned if in their moment of joy they had remained in the isolation to which they had been condemned by reason of their disease. But they think to themselves of the hollow eyes in Samaria there, and the hideous meals, that might stay hunger but brought no nourishment, and of the king with sackcloth beneath his royal robes, and, forgetting everything but their abundance and these people's empty stomachs, they say, "Not thus must we do," as the Hebrew might be translated, "this is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; and that is a sin. And if we continue dumb, then before morning some kind of punishment will come down upon us."

Now, let me put what I have to say on this matter into two sentences.

First of all, I say that such silence is inhuman. You would all recognise that in the case of an actual, literal, instead of a metaphorical, famine. What would you say about a man who contented himself with sitting in his own back room, where nobody could see his abundance, and feasting to the full, whilst his fellow-citizens were dying of starvation? Why! you would say he was a brute. And if Christian people believed as thoroughly that men and women without "the Bread of God which comes down from Heaven" were starving and dying of hunger, as they believe that men without literal bread must die, there would not be so many dumb ones amongst them; and they would feel more distinctly than any of us feel now, the responsibility that is laid upon them, and the inhumanity of the sin.

Dear brethren! God has made this strange brotherhood of humanity in which we live, all intertwined and intertangled together, mainly in order that there may be scope for brotherly impartation to the needy, of the gifts that each possesses. And He has given to each of us something or other which, by the very terms of the gift and the purpose of the bestowment, we are bound to impart to others. The meaning of our being born into the brotherhood of humanity is that God's grace, in some shape or other, may fructify through us to all; and I say that the man who possesses any kind of gift, and, especially, God's highest gifts of wisdom and of knowledge, and most of all, the highest gift of spiritual knowledge and moral and religious truth, and keeps them to himself, in his idleness is sinfully active, and in his selfishness is inhuman and cruel. The very constitution of humanity says to us that "we do not well," if in the "day of good tidings" of any sort "we hold our peace." The possession of mere physical or

abstract truth does not turn its possessors into its apostles, but the possession of moral and spiritual truth does. We are, every one of us, responsible for all the eyes which we could have opened and which are still dark, and for every soul that gropes in ignorance, if we possess something that would enlighten its darkness.

But then, further, let me say that this sin of silence is in sheer contradiction of every principle of Christianity. Why has God given you His grace, do you suppose? For what purpose comes it that you are Christians? Were you converted that you might go by yourselves into a solitary heaven, do you think? Are you important enough to be an ultimate end of God's mercy? Or are you indeed an end, but only that in your turn you might be a means of transmitting? Does the electric influence terminate when it reaches you, or is it turned on to you that from you it may be passed to others? The very purpose of the existence of a Christian Church is counterworked and thwarted by dumb Christians. We Nonconformists can talk abundantly when ecclesiastical assumptions have to be fought against, about the priesthood of all believers. Very well, if that principle is a true one—and it is a true one—it has other applications than simply controversial, and is meant for other uses than simply that you should brandish it in the face of sacerdotal claims and priest-ridden churches. "Ye are all priests," that is to say, the meaning of the existence of a Christian Church is to raise up a cloud of witnesses, and make every lip vocal with the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. And you, dear brethren, you, the idlers of a church and congregation, are doing all that you can to thwart the divine purpose, and to destroy the very meaning of the existence of the church to which you belong.

And let me remind you, too, that such silence is clearly contrary to all Christian principle, inasmuch as one main purpose of the Gospel being given us is to shift our centre from ourselves, first to Christ, and then, if I may so say, to others. The very thing from which Christianity is meant to deliver us is the very thing that these idle, silent believers are indulging in, namely, the possession of God's gifts for their own profit and enjoyment. What is the use of your saying that you are Christian people if, in your very religion, you are practising the very vice that Jesus Christ has come to destroy? Selfishness is the opposite, the formal contradiction, of Christianity, and in the measure in which your religion is self-regarding, it is no religion at all. You are doing your best to counterwork the very main purpose of the Gospel upon yourselves, when in silence you possess, or fancy that you possess, the gift of His love.

And then, still further, let me remind you that this absolutely un-Christian character of silence is manifested, if you consider that the end of the Gospel for each of us is to bring us into full and happy sympathy with Christ, and likeness to Him. And how is that purpose being effected in His professed "followers," if they know nothing of the experience of looking on the world with Christ's eyes, or of the thrill of pity caught from Him, and have no sympathy with, in the sense of any reflected experience of, the sense of obligation to help the helpless which nailed Him to the Cross? We say that we are followers of One who "so loved the world" that He died for it; we say that we long to be transformed into His likeness, and yet we put away from ourselves the spirit that regards our brethren as He regarded us all; and never dream of copying, howsoever feebly in our lives and efforts, the pattern that was set before us in His death.

O dear brethren! "if a man see his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion against him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" And if a Christian looks upon a world without Christ, and has only a tepid sympathy and a faint realisation of the misery, and never does anything to lighten it by a grain, how can he pretend that he takes Jesus Christ for his Pattern and Example? Silence is manifestly a sin by reason of its inhumanity, and its contrariety to every principle of the Gospel.

III. Now, still further, let me point you to the retribution on silence.

These four men, no doubt, had some superstitious idea that mischief might come to them in the darkness. But they expressed a truth when they said, "If we be silent, some evil" or, as the word might be translated, "some punishment will find us." I desire to lay this on your hearts, dear brethren, that like all other selfish things, the silence of the Christian does him harm instead of good.

For instance, if you want to learn anything, set yourself to teach it. In trying to spread the name of Jesus Christ by your own personal effort, you will get a firmer hold of the truths that you attempt to impress upon others. I do not know any better cure for a great deal of unwholesome and superfluous speculation than to go into the slums and see what it is that tells there. That is a test of what is central and what is surface, in Christianity. I do not know any better discipline for a man whose religion is suffering from too much leisure and curiosity than to take a course of evangelistic work. He will find out then where the power is, and a great many cobwebs will be blown away. Be sure of this, that convictions unspoken, like plants grown in a cellar, will get very white in the stems, and will bear no fruit. Be sure of this, that a religion which is dumb will very soon tend to lose its possession of the truth, and that if you carry that great gift hid away in your heart it will be like locking up some singing-bird in a box. When you come to open it, the bird will be dead. There are, I have no doubt, many whom I am now addressing whose religion has all but, if not entirely, ebbed away from them, mainly because they have all their days been dumb Christians. That is one part of the punishment.

And another part is that silence is avenged by the dying out of the sympathies which inspire speech. It is the punishment of the selfish man that he becomes more selfish. It is the punishment of the heart, which never expands in sympathy, that its walls shrivel

and contract, until there is scarcely blood enough between them to be impelled through the veins. Feelings which it is joy and nobleness to possess are nurtured and strengthened by expression; and the silent Christian is punished by becoming at last utterly indifferent to the woes of the world and to the spread of the Gospel. I think I could lay my finger, if I dared, on some of my audience who have got perilously near to that point.

And then again let me remind you that there is another form of the punishment, and that is the loss of all the blessed experience of the reaper's joy; and let me point you in a sentence to the final time of retribution. There shall stand in that last day, as Scripture teaches us, humble workers before the Throne who will say, "Behold! I, and the children whom Thou hast given me." And there will stand some before the Throne, solitary; and I wonder if they will not feel lonely when they go into heaven, and find not a soul there to look them in the eyes and say, "Thou didst lead me to the Christ, and I am here to welcome thee." "He that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together." Do you not think that then there will steal a shadow of shame across the spirit of the servant who stood idle in the market-place all the day with the wretched excuse, "No man hath hired me," when the Master had hired him beforehand, and given him such wages in advance?

O dear brethren! the cure for silence is to keep near that Master, and to drink in His Spirit; and then, as I beseech you to do, think, think, think of your obligations in the light of the Cross until you can say, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints is this grace given, not this burden imposed, that I, even I, should preach the Name that is above every name." "Open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall shew forth Thy praise."