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2 Samuel 14:14 God's Banished Ones

God doth devise means, that His banished be not expelled from Him:— 2 SAMUEL xiv. 14

David's good-for-nothing son Absalom had brought about the murder of one of his brothers, and had fled the country. His father weakly loved the brilliant blackguard, and would fain have had him back, but was restrained by a sense of kingly duty. Joab, the astute Commander-in-chief, a devoted friend of David, saw how the land lay, and formed a plan to give the king an excuse for doing what he wished to do. So he got hold of a person who is called 'a wise woman' from the country, dressed her as a mourner, and sent her with an ingeniously made-up story of how she was a widow with two sons, one of whom had killed the other, and of how the relatives insisted on their right of avenging blood, and demanded the surrender of the murderer; by which, as she pathetically said, 'the coal' that was left her would be 'quenched.' The king's sympathy was quickly roused—as was natural in so impulsive and poetic a nature—and he pledged his word, and finally his oath, that the offender should be safe.

So the woman has him in a trap, having induced him to waive justice and to absolve the guilty by an arbitrary act. Then she turns upon him with an application to his own case, and bids him free himself from the guilt of double measures and inconsistency by doing with his banished son the same thing—viz. abrogating law and bringing back the offender. In our text she urges still higher considerations—viz. those of God's way of treating criminals against His law, of whom she says that He spares their lives, and devises means-or, as the words might perhaps be rendered, 'plans plannings'—by which He may bring them back. She would imply that human power and sovereignty are then noblest and likest God's when they remit penalties and restore wanderers.

I do not further follow the story, which ends, as we all know, with Absalom's ill-omened return. But the wise woman's saying goes very deep, and, in its picturesque form, may help to bring out more vividly some truths—all-important ones—of which I wish to beg your very earnest consideration and acceptance.

I. Note, then, who are God's banished ones.

The woman's words are one of the few glimpses which we have of the condition of religious thought amongst the masses of Israel. Clearly she had laid to heart the teaching which declared the great, solemn, universal fact of sin and consequent separation from God. For the 'banished ones' of whom she speaks are no particular class of glaring criminals, but she includes within the designation the whole human race, or, at all events, the whole Israel to which she and David belonged. There may have been in her words—though that is very doubtful—a reference to the old story of Cain after the murder of his brother. For that narrative symbolises the consequences of all evil-doing and evil-loving, in that he was cast out from the presence of God, and went away into a 'land of wandering,' there to hide from the face of the Father. On the one hand, it was banishment; on the other hand, it was flight. So had Absalom's departure been, and so is ours.

Strip away the metaphor, dear brethren, and it just comes to this thought, which I seek to lay upon the hearts of all my hearers now—you cannot be blessedly and peacefully near God, unless you are far away from sin. If you take two polished plates of metal, and

lay them together, they will adhere. If you put half a dozen tiny grains of sand or dust between them, they will fall apart. So our sins have come between us and our God. They have not separated God from us, blessed be His name! for His love, and His care, and His desire to bless, His thought, and His knowledge, and His tenderness, all come to every soul of man. But they have rent us apart from Him, in so far as they make us unwilling to be near Him, incapable of receiving the truest nearness and blessedness of His presence, and sometimes desirous to hustle Him out of our thoughts, and, if we could, out of our world, rather than to expatiate in the calm sunlight of His presence.

That banishment is self-inflicted. God spurns away no man, but men spurn Him, and flee from Him. Many of us know what it is to pass whole days, and weeks, and years, as practical Atheists. God is not in all our thoughts.

And more than that, the miserable disgrace and solitude of a soul that is godless in the world is what many of us like. The Prodigal Son scraped all his goods together, and thought himself freed from a very unwelcome bondage, and a fine independent youth, when he went away into 'the far country.' It was not quite so pleasant when provisions and clothing fell short, and the swine's trough was the only table that was spread before him. But yet there are many of us, I fear, who are perfectly comfortable away from God, in so far as we can get away from Him, and who never are aware of the degradation that lies in a soul's having lowered itself to this, that it had rather not have God inconveniently near.

Away down in the luxurious islands of the Southern Sea you will find degraded Englishmen who have chosen rather to cast in their lot with savages than to have to strain and work and grow. These poor beach-combers of the Pacific, not happy in their degradation, but wallowing in it, are no exaggerated pictures of the condition, in reality, of thousands of us who dwell far from God, and far therefore from righteousness and peace.

II. Notice God's yearning over His banished ones.

The woman in our story hints at, or suggests, a parallel which, though inadequate, is deeply true. David was Absalom's father and Absalom's king; and the two relationships fought against each other in his heart. The king had to think of law and justice; the father cried out for his son. The young man's offence had neither altered his relationship nor affected the father's heart.

All that is true, far more deeply, blessedly true, in regard to our relation, the wandering exiles' relation, to God. For, whilst I believe that the highest form of sonship is only realised in the hearts of men who have been made partakers of a new life through Jesus Christ, I believe, just as firmly and earnestly, that every man and woman on the face of the earth, by virtue of physical life derived from God, by virtue of a spiritual being, which, in a very real and deep sense, still bears the image of God, and by reason of His continued love and care over them, is a child of His. The banished son is still a son, and is 'His banished one.' If there is love—wonderful as the thought is, and heart-melting as it ought to be—there must be loss when the child goes away. Human love would not have the same name as God's unless there were some analogy between the two. And though we walk in dark places, and had better acknowledge that the less we speak upon such profound subjects the less likely we are to err, yet it seems to me that the whole preciousness of the revelation of God in Scripture is imperiled unless we frankly recognise this—that His love is like ours, delights in being returned like ours, and is like ours in that it rejoices in presence and knows a sense of loss in absence. If you think that that is too bold a thing to say, remember who it was that taught us that the father fell on the neck of the returning prodigal, and kissed him; and that the rapture of his joy was the token and measure of the reality of his regret, and that it was the father to whom the prodigal son was 'lost.' Deep as is the mystery, let nothing, dear brethren, rob us of the plain fact that God's love moves all around the worst, the unworthiest, the most rebellious in the far-off land, and 'desires not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his iniquity and live.'

And it is you, you, whom He wants back; you whom He would fain rescue from your aversion to good and your carelessness of Him. It is you whom He seeks, according to the great saying of the Master, 'the Father seeketh' for worshippers in spirit and in truth.

III. Note the formidable obstacles to the restoration of the banished.

The words 'banished' and 'expelled' in our text are in the original the same; and the force of the whole would be better expressed if the same English word was employed as the equivalent of both. We should then see more clearly than the variation of rendering in our text enables us to see, that the being 'expelled' is no further stage which God devises means to prevent, but that what is meant is that He provides methods by which the banished should not be banished—that is, should be restored to Himself.

Now, note that the language of this 'wise woman,' unconsciously to herself, confesses that the parallel that she was trying to draw did not go on all fours; for what she was asking the king to do was simply, by an arbitrary act, to sweep aside law and to remit penalty. She instinctively feels that that is not what can be done by God, and so she says that He 'devises means' by which He can restore His banished.

That is to say, forgiveness and the obliteration of the consequences of a man's sin, and his restoration to the blessed nearness to God, which is life, are by no means such easy and simple matters as people sometimes suppose them to be. The whole drift of

popular thinking to-day goes in the direction of a very superficial and easy gospel, which merely says, 'Oh, of course, of course God forgives! Is not God Love? Is not God our Father? What more do you want than that?' Ah! you want a great deal more than that, my friends. Let me press upon you two or three plain considerations. There are formidable obstacles in the way of divine forgiveness.

If there are to be any pardon and restoration at all, they must be such as will leave untouched the sovereign majesty of God's law, and, untampered with, the eternal gulf between good and evil. That easygoing gospel which says, 'God will pardon, of course!' sounds very charitable and very catholic, but at bottom it is very cruel. For it shakes the very foundations on which the government of God must repose. God's law is the manifestation of God's character; and that is no flexible thing which can be bent about at the bidding of a weak good-nature. I believe that men are right in holding that certainly God must pardon, but I believe that they are fatally wrong in not recognising this—that the only kind of forgiveness which is possible for Him to bestow is one in which there shall be no tampering with the tremendous sanctions of His awful law; and no tendency to teach that it matters little whether a man is good or bad. The pardon, which many of us seem to think is quite sufficient, is a pardon that is nothing more noble than good-natured winking at transgression. And oh! if this be all that men have to lean on, they are leaning on a broken reed. The motto on the blue cover of the Edinburgh Review, for over a hundred years now, is true: 'The judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted.' David struck a fatal blow at the prestige of his own rule, when he weakly let his son off from penalty. And, if it were possible to imagine such a thing, God Himself would strike as fatal a blow at the justice and judgment which are the foundations of His throne, if His forgiveness was such as to be capable of being confounded with love which was too weakly indulgent to be righteous.

Further, if there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must be such as will turn away the heart of the pardoned man from his evil. The very story before us shows that it is not every kind of pardon which makes a man better. The scapegrace Absalom came back unsoftened, without one touch of gratitude to his father in his base heart, without the least gleam of a better nature dawning upon him, and went flaunting about the court until his viciousness culminated in his unnatural rebellion. That is to say, there is a forgiveness which nourishes the seeds of the crimes that it pardons. We have only to look into our own hearts, and we have only to look at the sort of people round us, to be very sure that, unless the forgiveness that is granted us from the heavens has in it an element which will avert our wills and desires from evil, the pardon will be very soon needed again, for the evil will very soon be done again.

If there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must come in such a fashion as that there shall be no doubt whatsoever of their reality and power. The vague kind of trust in a doubtful mercy, about which I have been speaking, may do all very well for people that have never probed the depths of their own hearts. Superficial notions of our sin, which so many of us have, are contented with superficial remedies for it. But let a man get a glimpse of his own real self, and I think that he will wish for something a great deal more solid to grip hold of, than nebulous talk of the kind that I have been describing. If once we feel ourselves to be struggling in the black flood of that awful river, we shall want a firmer hold upon the bank than is given to us by some rootless tree or other. We must clutch something that will stand a pull, if we are to be drawn from the muddy waters.

People say to us, 'Oh, God will forgive, of course!' Does this world look like a place where forgiveness is such an easy thing? Is there anything more certain than that consequences are inevitable when deeds have been done, and 'that whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap' and whatsoever he brews that shall he also drink? And is it into a grim, stern world of retribution like this that people will come, with their smiling, sunny gospel of a matter-of-course forgiveness, upon very easy terms of a slight penitence?

Brethren, God has to 'devise means,' which is a strong way of saying, in analogy to the limitations of humanity, that He cannot, by an arbitrary act of His will, pardon a sinful man. His eternal nature forbids it. His established law forbids it. The fabric of His universe forbids it. The good of men forbids it. The problem is insoluble by human thought. The love of God is like some great river that pours its waters down its channel, and is stayed by a black dam across its course, along which it feels for any cranny through which it may pour itself. We could never save ourselves, but

'He that might the vengeance best have took,

Found out the remedy.'

IV. And so the last word that I have to say is to note the triumphant, divine solution of these difficulties.

The work of Jesus Christ, and the work of Jesus Christ alone, meets all the requirements. It vindicates the majesty of law, it deepens the gulf between righteousness and sin. Where is there such a demonstration of the awful truth that 'the wages of sin is death' as on that Cross on which the Son of God died for us and for all 'His banished ones'? Where is there such a demonstration of the fixedness of the divine law as in that death to which the Son of God submitted Himself for us all? Where do we learn the hideousness of sin, the endless antagonism between God and it, and the fatal consequences of it, as we learn them in the sacrifice

of our Lord and Saviour? Where do we find the misery and desolation of banishment from God so tragically uttered as in that cry which rent the darkness of eclipse,' My God! My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?'

That work of Christ's is the only way by which it is made absolutely certain that sins forgiven shall be sins abhorred; and that a man once restored shall cleave to his Restorer as to his Life. That work is the only way by which a man can be absolutely certain that there is forgiveness, in spite of all the accusations of his own conscience; in spite of all the inexorable working out of penalties in the system of the world which seems to contradict the fond belief; in spite of all that a foreboding gaze tells, or ought to tell, of a judgment that is to follow.

Brethren, God has devised a means. None else could have done so. I beseech you, realise these facts that I have been trying to bring before you, and the considerations that I have based upon them, so far as they commend themselves to your hearts and consciences; and do not be content with acquiescing in them, but act upon them. We are all exiles from God, unless we have been 'brought nigh by the blood of Christ.' In Him, and in Him alone, can God restore His banished ones. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find a pardon which cleanses the heart, and ensures the removal of the sin which it forgives. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find, not a peradventure, not a subjective certainty, but an external fact which proclaims that verily there is forgiveness for us all. I pray you, dear friends, do not be content with that half-truth, which is ever the most dangerous lie, of divine pardon apart from Jesus Christ. Lay your sins upon His head, and your hand in the hand of the Elder Brother, who has come to the far-off land to seek us, and He will lead you back to the Father's house and the Father's heart, and you will be 'no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God.'

2 Samuel 15:1-12 Pardoned Sin Punished

And it came to pass after this, that Absalom prepared him chariots and horses, and fifty men to run before him. 2. And Absalom rose up early, and stood beside the way of the gate: and it was so, that when any man that had a controversy came to the king for judgment, then Absalom called unto him, and said, Of what city art thou? And he said, Thy servant is of one of the tribes of Israel. 3. And Absalom said unto him. See, thy matters are good and right; but there is no man deputed of the king to hear thee. 4. Absalom said moreover, Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man which hath any suit or cause might come unto me, and I would do him justice! 5. And it was so, that when any man came nigh to him to do him obeisance, he put forth his hand, and took him, and kissed him. 6. And on this manner did Absalom to all Israel that came to the king for judgment: so Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel. 7. And it came to pass after forty years, that Absalom said unto the king, I pray thee, let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed unto the Lord, in Hebron. 8. For thy servant vowed a vow while I abode at Geshur in Syria, saying, If the Lord shall bring me again indeed to Jerusalem, then I will serve the Lord. 9. And the king said unto him, Go in peace. So he arose, and went to Hebron. 10. But Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, As soon as ye hear the sound of the trumpet, then ye shall say, Absalom reigneth in Hebron. 11. And with Absalom went two hundred men out of Jerusalem, that were called; and they went in their simplicity, and they knew not any thing. 12. And Absalom sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counsellor, from his city, even from Giloh, while he offered sacrifices. And the conspiracy was strong; for the people increased continually with Absalom.'— 2 Samuel 15:1-12

There was little brightness in David's life after his great sin. Nathan had told him, even while announcing his forgiveness, that the sword should never depart from his house; and this revolt of Absalom's may be directly traced to his father's disgraceful crime. The solemn lesson that pardoned sin works out its consequences, so that 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,' is taught by it. The portion of the story with which we are concerned has two stages,—the slow hatching of the plot, and its final outburst.

I. 2 Samuel 15:1- 6 gives us the preparation of the mine.

It takes four years, during which Absalom plays all the tricks usual to aspirants for the most sweet voices of the multitude. He seems to have been but a poor creature; but it does not take much brain to do a great deal of mischief. He was vain, headstrong, with a dash of craft and a large amount of ambition. He had no love for his father, and no ballast of high principle, to say nothing of religion. He was a spoiled child grown to be a man, with a child's petulance and unreason, but a man's passions. He loved his unfortunate sister, but it was as much wounded honour as love which led him to the murder of his elder brother Amnon. That crime cleared his way to the throne; and David's half-and-half treatment of him after it, neither sternly punishing nor freely pardoning, set the son against the father, and left a sense of injury. So he became a rebel.

The story tells very vividly how he adopted the familiar tactics of pretenders. How old, and yet how modern, it reads! We who live in a country where everybody is an 'elector' of some sort, and candidates are plentiful, see the same things going on, in a little different dress, before our eyes. Absalom begins operations by dazzling people with ostentatious splendour. In better days Samuel had trudged on foot, driving a heifer before him, to anoint his father; and royalty had retained a noble simplicity in the hands of Saul and David. But 'plain living and high thinking' did not suit Absalom; and he had gauged the popular taste accurately enough in

setting up his chariot with its fifty runners. That was a show something like a king, and, no doubt, much more approved than David's simplicity. But it was an evil omen to any one who looked below the surface. When luxury grows, devotion languishes. The senseless ostentation which creeps into the families of good men, and is sustained by their weak compliance with their spoiled children's wishes, does a world of harm. We in Lancashire have a proverb, 'Clogs, carriage, clogs,' which puts into three words the history of three generations, and is verified over and over again.

How well Absalom has learned the arts of the office-seeker! Along with his handsome equipage he shows admirable devotion to the interests of his 'constituents.' He is early at the gate, so great is his appetite for work; he is accessible to everybody; he flatters each with the assurance that his case is clear; he gently drops hints of sad negligence in high quarters, which he could so soon set right, if only he were in power; and he will not have the respectful salutation of inferiors, but grasps every hard hand, and kisses each tanned cheek, with an affectation of equality very soothing to the dupes. 'Electioneering' is much the same all the world over; and Absalom has a good many imitators nearer home.

There was, no doubt, truth in the charge he made against David of negligence in his judicial and other duties. Ever since his great sin, the king seems to have been stunned into inaction. The heavy sense of demerit had taken the buoyancy out of him, and, though forgiven, he could never regain the elastic energy of purer days. The psalms which possibly belong to this period show a singular passivity. If we suppose that he was much in the seclusion of his palace, a heavily-burdened and spirit-broken man, we can understand how his condition tempted his heartless, dashing son to grasp at the reins which seemed to be dropping from his slack hands, and how his passivity gave opportunity for Absalom's carrying on his schemes undisturbed, and a colour of reasonableness to his charges. For four years this went on unchecked, and apparently unsuspected by the king, who must have been much withdrawn from public life not to have taken alarm. Nothing takes the spring out of a man like the humiliating sense of sin. The whole tone of David's conduct throughout the revolt is, 'I deserve it all. Let them smite, for God hath bidden them.' To this resourceless, unresisting submission to his enemies, sin had brought the daring soldier. It is not old age that has broken his courage and spirit, but the consciousness of his foul guilt, which weighs on him all the more heavily because he knows that it is pardoned.

II. The second part of our subject tells of the explosion of the long-prepared mine.

It was necessary to hoist the flag of revolt elsewhere than in Jerusalem, and some skill is shown in choosing Hebron, which had been the capital before the capture of the Jebusite city, and in which there would be natural jealousy of the new metropolis. The pretext of the sacrifice at Hebron, in pursuance of a vow made by Absalom in his exile, was meant to touch David's heart in two ways,—by appealing to his devotional feelings, and by presenting a pathetic picture of his suffering and devout son vowing in the land where his father's wrath had driven him. It is not the first time that religion has been made the stalking-horse for criminal ambition, nor is it the last. Politicians are but too apt to use it as a cloak for their personal ends. Absalom talking about his vow is a spectacle that might have made the most unsuspecting sure that there was something in the wind. Such a use of religious observances shows more than anything else could do, the utter irreligion of the man who can make it. A son rebelling against his father is an ugly sight, but rebellion disguised as religion adds to the ugliness. David suspects nothing; or, if he does, is too broken to resist, and, perhaps glad at any sign of grace in his son, or pleased to gratify any of his wishes, sends him away with a benediction. What a parting,—the last, though neither knew it!

The plot had spread widely in four years, and messengers had been sent through all Israel to summon its adherents to Hebron. If David had been as popular as in his early days, it would have been impossible for such a widely spread conspiracy to have come so near a head without some faithful soul having been found to tell him of it. But obviously there was much smoldering discontent, arising, no doubt, from such causes as the pressure of taxation, the gloom that hung over the king, the partial paralysis of justice, the transference of the capital, the weight of wars, and, at lowest, the craving for something new. Few reigns or lives set in unclouded brightness. The western horizon is often filled with a bank of blackness. Strangely enough, Absalom invited two hundred men to accompany him, who were ignorant of the plot. That looks as if its strength was outside Jerusalem, as was natural. These innocents were sufficiently associated with Absalom to be asked to accompany him, and, no doubt, he expected to secure their complicity when he got them away. Unsuspecting people are the best tools of knaves. It is better not to be on friendly terms with Absalom, if we would be true to David. The last piece of preparation recorded is the summoning of Abithophel to come and be the brain of the plot. He had been David's wisest counsellor, and is probably the 'familiar friend, in whom I trusted,' whose defection the Psalmist mourns so bitterly, and whose treachery was a marvellous foreshadowing of the traitor who dipped in the dish with David's Lord. Note that he had already withdrawn from Jerusalem to his own city, from which he came at once to Hebron. Absalom could flatter and play the well-worn tricks of a pretender, but a subtler, cooler head was wanted now, and the treacherous son was backed up by the traitor friend. 'And the conspiracy was strong; for the people increased continually with Absalom.' What a tragical issue to the joyous loyalty of early days! What a strange madness must have laid hold on the nation to have led them to prefer such a piece of petulance and vanity to their hero-poet-king! What did it mean?

The answer is not far to seek, and it is the great lesson of this story. David's sin was truly repented and freely forgiven, but not left

unpunished. God is too loving to shield men from the natural consequences, in the physical and social world, of their sins. The penitent drunkard's hand shakes, and his constitution is not renewed, though his spirit is. Only, punishment is changed into discipline, when the heart rests in the assurance of pardon, and is accepted as a token of a Father's love. In every way God made of the vice the whip to scourge the sinner, and David, like us all, had to drink as he had brewed, though he was forgiven the sin.

2 Samuel 15:15 A Loyal Vow

And the king's servants said unto the king, Behold, thy servants are ready to do whatsoever my lord the king shall appoint.— 2 Samuel 15:15

We stand here at the darkest hour of King David's life. Bowed down by the consciousness of his past sin, and recognising in the rebellion of his favourite son the divine chastisement, his early courage and buoyant daring seem to have ebbed from him wholly. He is forsaken by the mass of his subjects, he is preparing to abandon Jerusalem, and to flee as an exile, as he says himself so pathetically, 'whither I may.' And at that moment of deepest depression there comes one little gleam of consolation and one piece of chivalrous devotion which brightens the whole story. His special retainers, apparently a bodyguard mostly of foreigners, rally round him. Mostly foreigners, I say, for these hard words 'Cherethites and Pelethites' most probably mean inhabitants of the island of Crete, and Philistines. And as to six hundred of them, at all events, there can be no doubt, for they are expressly said to be 'men of Gath who followed after him.' At all events, there was a little nucleus of men, not his own subjects, who determined to share his fate, whatever it was. And the words of my text are their words, 'Behold, thy servants are ready to do whatsoever the king shall appoint.' Or, as the word stands in the original, in an abrupt, half-finished sentence, even more pathetic, 'According to all that my lord the king shall appoint, behold thy servants.' These men were foreigners, not bound to render obedience to the king, but giving it because their hearts were touched. They were loyal amongst rebels, so many Abdiels, 'among the faithless, faithful only' these, and they avowed their determination to cleave to the sovereign of their choice at a time when his back was at the wall, and their determination to follow him meant only peril and privation. They were filled with a passionate personal attachment to the king, and that personal attachment was ready to manifest itself as a willing sacrifice, as such love always is ready.

Now surely in all this there is a lesson for us. The heroism of men towards a man, the uncalculating devotion and magnificent self-sacrifice of which the poorest human soul is capable when touched to fine issues by some heart-love, are surely not all meant to be lavished on fellow-creatures, who, alas! generally receive the most of them. But these rude Philistines and Gittites, Goliath's fellow-townsmen, may preach to us Christians a lesson. Why should not we say as they said, 'According to all that my Lord the King shall appoint, behold Thy servants'?

I. So then, first, our King's will ought to be our will.

The obedience that is promised in these words is not the obedience of action only, but it is the bowing down of the heart. And for us Christian men there is neither peace nor nobleness in our lives, except in the measure in which the will of Jesus Christ and our wills are accurately conterminous and identical. Wheresoever the two coincide, there is strength for us; wheresoever they diverge, there are weakness and certain ruin. These two wills ought to be like two of Euclid's triangles, or other geometric figures, the one laid upon the other, and each line and curve and angle accurately corresponding and coinciding, so that the two cover precisely the same ground.

Christ's will my will; that is religion. And you and I are Christians just in the measure in which that coincidence of wills is true about us, and not one hair's-breadth further, for all our professions. Wheresoever my will diverges from Christ, in that particular I am not His man; and 'Christian' simply means 'Christ's man.' I belong to Him when I think as He does, love as He does, will as He does, accept His commandment as the law of my life, His pattern as my example, His providence as sufficient and as good. Where we thus yield ourselves to Him, there we are strong, and so far, and only so far, have we a right to say that we are the King's servants at all.

This absolute submission we do render to one another when our hearts are touched; and the fact that men can and do give it—husbands to wives, wives to husbands, children to parents, friends to one another—the fact that there is the capacity for that giving of one's self away, lodged deep in our nature, tells us what we are meant to do with it. 'Whose image and superscription hath it?' Was it meant that we should thus live in slavish submission even to the dearest loved ones? Surely not; for that is the destruction of individuality. No, but it was meant that we should lay our wills down at Christ's feet and say, 'Not my will, but Thine,' and Thine mine because I have made it mine by love. Then there is rest, and then we have solved the secret of the world, and are what our Lord would have us to be. Oh! do not our relations to our dear ones, with all that infinite power of self-sacrifice that our love brings with it, rebuke the partial extent of our surrender to our Master? and may we not be ashamed when we contrast the joy that we feel in giving up to those that we love, and the reluctance with which, too often, we obey the Master's commandments, and the long years of repining and murmuring before we 'submit,' as we call it, which too often means accept His providences as inevitable, though not as welcome? To be 'ready to do whatsoever my Lord the King shall choose,' believing that His choice is wisdom and kindness for

us, and His commandments a blessing and a gift, is the attitude and temper for us all. Is there any other attitude to Jesus Christ which corresponds to our relation to Him, to what He has done for us, to what we say that He is to us? He has the right to us, because He has given us Himself. He asks nothing from us but that of which He has already set us the example. 'He gave Himself for us, as the Apostle says with emphasis that is often unnoticed. 'He gave Himself for us' that He might 'purchase us for Himself.' He who would possess another must impart Himself, and love, that yields a whole man to the loved one, only springs when the loved one mutually yields her whole heart. The King does not command from above, but He comes down amongst us, and He says, 'I gave Myself for thee; what givest thou to Me?' O brethren, let us answer with that brave, chivalrous old Gittite:—'As the Lord liveth, and as my Lord the King liveth, surely in what place my Lord the King shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will Thy servant be.'

II. Then notice again, still sticking to our story, that this yielding up of will, if it is worth anything, will become the more intense and fervent when surrounded by rebels.

All Israel, with that poor feather-headed, vain Absalom, were on the one side, and David and these foreigners were on the other. Years of quiet uneventful life would never have brought out such magnificent heroism of devotion and self-surrender, as was crowded into that one moment of loyalty asserted in the face of triumphant rebels and traitors.

In like manner, the more Christ's reign is set at nought by the people about us, and the less they recognise the blessedness and the duty of submission to Him, the more strong and unmistakable should be the utterance of our loyalty. We should grasp His hand tighter by reason of the storms that may rage round about us. And if we dwell amongst those who, in any measure, deny or neglect His merciful dominion, let us see to it that we all the more hoist our colours at our doors, and stand by them when they are hoisted, that nobody may mistake under which King we serve.

You in your places of business, you young men in your warehouses, and all of us in our several spheres, have to come across many people who have no share in our loyalty and offer no allegiance to our King. That is the reason for intenser loyalty on our part. Never you mind what others say or do; do not take your orders from them. Better be with the handful that rally round David than with the crowds that run after Absalom! Better be amongst the few that are faithful than amongst the multitudes that depart! Dare to be singular, if it comes to that; and at all events remember that your relationship to your Master is a thing that concerns Him and you chiefly, and that you are not to take the pattern of your loyalty, nor the orders for your lives, from any lips but His own.

Hush all other voices that would command, and hush them that you may listen to Him. It is always difficult enough for Christian men to ascertain, in perplexed circumstances, the clear path of duty; but it is impossible if, along with His voice, we let the buzz of the crowd be audible in our ears. There is only one way by which we can hear what our 'Lord the King appoints,' and that is by making a great stillness in our souls, and neither letting our own yelping inclinations give tongue, nor the babble of men round us, and their notions of life and of what is right, have influence upon us, but waiting to hear what God the Lord, speaking in Christ the King, has to say to us. And, remember, the more rebels there are, the more need for us to be conspicuously loyal to our King.

III. Again, this complete yielding of ourselves in practical obedience and heart submission to command merits and providences is to be maintained, whatsoever it may lead to in the way of privation and difficulty.

It was no holiday vow, made upon some parade day, that these brave foreigners were bringing to their king now, but it meant 'we are ready to suffer, starve, fight, lose everything, die if need be, to be true to thee.' And the very thought of the impending danger elevated the men's consciousness, and made heroes out of very common people. And perhaps that is the best effect of our difficulties and sorrows, that they strike fire sometimes (if they are rightly accepted and used) out of what seems to be only dead, lumpish matter, and many a Christian shoots up into a stature of greatness and nobleness in his sorrow, who was but a very commonplace creature when all things went well with him. That is the kind of obedience that Christ delights to accept, obedience that is ready for anything, and does not wait to make sure that there is no danger of forfeiting a whole skin and a quiet life, before it vows itself to service. Are we only to be 'fair-weather Christians,' or are we to be prepared for all the trials and sufferings that may befall us? A Christianity that does not bring any worldly penalties along with it is not worth much. Christians of Christ's pattern have generally to give up something for their Christianity. They give up nothing that it is not gain to lose, nothing that they are not better without, but they have to surrender much in which other people find great enjoyment, and which their weaker selves would delight in too. Are you ready, my brother, for that? 'Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.' The old days of heroism and martyrdom are done with, as far as we are concerned, whatever may lie in the future. But do we make willingly and gladly the surrenders and the self-abnegations that are demanded by our loyalty to our Master? Have we ever learned to say about any line of action that our poor, lower nature grasps at, and our higher, enlightened by communion with Jesus Christ, forbids: 'So did not I because of the fear of the Lord'? We can talk about following Christ's footsteps; do you think that if we had stood where these rude soldiers stood, or had anything as dark in prospect, as the price of our faithfulness to our King, as they had as the price of faithfulness to theirs, there would have rung from our lips the utterly sincere vow that sprang joyously from theirs: 'Behold Thy servants, ready to do whatever our Lord the King shall appoint'?

IV. A final thought, which travels beyond my text, is that such thorough-going obedience, irrespective of consequences, is the secret of all blessedness.

'Great peace have they which love Thy law': the peace of conscience; the peace of ceasing from that which is our worst enemy, self-will; the peace of self-surrender; the peace of feeling 'Tis His to command; 'tis mine to obey'; the peace of casting the whole settling of the campaign on the King's shoulders, and of finding our duty restricted to tramping along with cheery heart on the path that He has appointed. That is worth having. Oh! if we could cease from self and lay our wills down before Him, then we should be quiet. The tranquil heart is the heart which has the law of Christ within it, and the true delight of life belongs to those who truly say, 'I delight to do Thy will.' So yielding, so obeying, so submitting, so surrendering one's self, life becomes quiet, and strong, and sweet. And, if I might so turn the story that we have been considering, the faithful soldiers who have been true to the King when His throne was contested, will march with laurelled heads in His triumphant train when He comes back after His final and complete victory, and reign with Him in the true City of Peace, where His will shall be perfectly done by loving hearts, and all His servants shall be kings.

2 Samuel 15:21 Ittai of Gath

And Ittai answered the king, and said, As the Lord liveth, and as my lord the king liveth, surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be.'— 2 Samuel 15:21

It was the darkest hour in David's life. No more pathetic page is found in the Old Testament than that which tells the story of his flight before Absalom. He is crushed by the consciousness that his punishment is deserved—the bitter fruit of the sin that filled all his later life with darkness. His courage and his buoyancy have left him. He has no spirit to make a stand or strike a blow. If Shimei runs along the hillside abreast of him, shrieking curses as he goes, all he says is: 'Let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him.'

So, heartbroken and spiritless, he leaves Jerusalem. And as soon as he has got clear of the city he calls a halt, in order that he may muster his followers and see on whom he may depend. Foremost among the little band come six hundred men from Gath—Philistines—from Goliath's city. These men, singularly enough, the king had chosen as his bodyguard; perhaps he was not altogether sure of the loyalty of his own subjects, and possibly felt safer with foreign mercenaries, who could have no secret leanings to the deposed house of Saul. Be that as it may, the narrative tells us that these men had 'come after him from Gath.' He had been there twice in the old days, in his flight from Saul, and the second visit had extended over something more than a year. Probably during that period his personal attraction, and his reputation as a brilliant leader, had led these rough soldiers to attach themselves to his service, and to be ready to forsake home and kindred in order to fight beside him.

At all events here they are, 'faithful among the faithless,' as foreign soldiers surrounding a king often are—notably, for instance, the Swiss guard in the French Revolution. Their strong arms might have been of great use to David, but his generosity cannot think of involving them in his fall, and so he says to them: 'I am not going to fight; I have no plan. I am going where I can. You go back and "worship the rising sun." Absalom will take you and be glad of your help. And as for me, I thank you for your past loyalty. Mercy and peace be with you!'

It is a beautiful nature that in the depth of sorrow shrinks from dragging other people down with itself. Generosity breeds generosity, and this Philistine captain breaks out into a burst of passionate devotion, garnished, in soldier fashion, with an unnecessary oath or two, but ringing very sincere and meaning a great deal. As for himself and his men, they have chosen their side. Whoever goes, they stay. Whatever befalls, they stick by David; and if the worst come to the worst they can all die together, and their corpses lie in firm ranks round about their dead king. David's heart is touched and warmed by their outspoken loyalty; he yields and accepts their service. Ittai and his noble six hundred tramp on, out of our sight, and all their households behind them. Now what is there in all that, to make a sermon out of?

I. First, look at the picture of that Philistine soldier, as teaching us what grand passionate self-sacrifice may be evolved out of the roughest natures.

Analyse his words, and do you not hear, ringing in them, three things, which are the seed of all nobility and splendour in human character? First, a passionate personal attachment; then, that love issuing, as such love always does, in willing sacrifice that reckes not for a moment of personal consequences; that is ready to accept anything for itself if it can serve the object of its devotion, and will count life well expended if it is flung away in such a service. And we see, lastly, in these words a supreme restful delight in the presence of him whom the heart loves. For Ittai and his men, the one thing needful was to be beside him in whose eye they had lived, from whose presence they had caught inspiration; their trusted leader, before whom their souls bowed down. So then this vehement speech is the pure language of love.

Now these three things,—a passionate personal attachment, issuing in spontaneous heroism of self-abandonment, and in supreme satisfaction in the beloved presence,—may spring up in the rudest, roughest nature. A Philistine soldier was not a very likely man in

whom to find refined and lofty emotion. He was hard by nature, hardened by his rough trade; and unconscious that he was doing anything at all heroic or great. Something had smitten this rock, and out of it there came the pure refreshing stream. And so I say to you, the weakest and the lowest, the roughest and the hardest, the most selfishly absorbed man and woman among us, has lying in him and her dormant capacities for flaming up into such a splendour of devotion and magnificence of heroic self-sacrifice as is represented in these words of my text. A mother will do it for her child, and never think that she has done anything extraordinary; husbands will do such things for wives; wives for husbands; friends and lovers for one another. All who know the sweetness and power of the bond of affection know that there is nothing more gladsome than to fling oneself away for the sake of those whom we love. And the capacity for such love and sacrifice lies in all of us. Prosaic, commonplace people as we are, with no great field on which to work out our heroisms; yet we have it in us to love and give ourselves away thus, if once the heart be stirred.

And lastly, this capacity which lies dormant in all of us, if once it is roused to action, will make a man blessed and dignified as nothing else will. The joy of unselfish love is the purest joy that man can taste; the joy of perfect self-sacrifice is the highest joy that humanity can possess, and they lie open for us all.

And wherever, in some humble measure, these emotions of which I have been speaking are realised, there you see weakness springing up into strength, and the ignoble into loftiness. Astronomers tell us that sometimes a star that has shone inconspicuous, and stood low down in their catalogues as of fifth or sixth magnitude, will all at once flame out, having kindled and caught fire somehow, and will blaze in the heavens, outshining Jupiter and Venus. And so some poor, vulgar, narrow nature, touched by this Promethean fire of pure love that leads to perfect sacrifice, will 'flame in the forehead of the morning sky' an undying splendour, and a light for evermore.

Brethren, my appeal to you is a very plain and simple one, founded on these facts:—You all have that capacity in you, and you all are responsible for the use of it. What have you done with it? Is there any person or thing in this world that has ever been able to lift you up out of your miserable selves? Is there any magnet that has proved strong enough to raise you from the low levels along which your life creeps? Have you ever known the thrill of resolving to become the bondservant and the slave of some great cause not your own? Or are you, as so many of you are, like spiders living in the midst of your web, mainly intent upon what you can catch by it? You have these capacities slumbering in you. Have you ever set a light to that inert mass of enthusiasm that lies within you? Have you ever woke up the sleeper? Look at this rough soldier of my text, and learn from him the lesson that there is nothing that so ennobles and dignifies a commonplace nature as enthusiasm for a great cause, or self-sacrificing love for a worthy heart.

II. The second remark which I make is this:—These possibilities of love and sacrifice point plainly to God in Christ as their true object.

'Whose image and superscription hath it?' said Christ, looking at the Roman denarius that they brought and laid on His palm. If the Emperor's head is on it, why, then, he has a right to it as tribute. And then He went on to say, 'Render, therefore, unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.' So there are things that have God's image and superscription stamped on them, and such are our hearts, our whole constitution and nature. As plainly as the penny had the head of Tiberius on it, and therefore proclaimed that he was Emperor where it was current, so plainly does every soul carry in the image of God the witness that He is its owner and that it should be rendered in tribute to Him.

And amongst all these marks of a divine possession and a divine destination printed upon human nature, it seems to me that none is plainer than this fact, that we can all of us thus give ourselves away in the abandonment of a profound and all-surrendering love. That capacity unmistakably proclaims that it is destined to be directed towards God and to find its rest in Him. As distinctly as some silver cup, with its owner's initials and arms engraved upon it, declares itself to be 'meet for the master's use,' so distinctly does your soul, by reason of this capacity, proclaim that it is meant to be turned to Him in whom alone all love can find its perfect satisfaction; for whom alone it is supremely blessed and great to lose life itself; and who only has authority over human spirits.

We are made with hearts that need to rest upon an absolute love; we are made with understandings that need to grasp a pure, a perfect, and, as I believe, paradoxical though it may sound, a personal Truth. We are made with wills that crave for an absolute authoritative command, and we are made with a moral nature that needs a perfect holiness. And we need all that love, truth, authority, purity, to be gathered into one, for our misery is that, when we set out to look for treasures, we have to go into many lands and to many merchants, to buy many goodly pearls. But we need One of great price, in which all our wealth may be invested. We need that One to be an undying and perpetual possession. There is One to whom our love can ever cleave, and fear none of the sorrows or imperfections that make earthward-turned love a rose with many a thorn, One for whom it is pure gain to lose ourselves, One who is plainly the only worthy recipient of the whole love and self-surrender of the heart.

That One is God, revealed and brought near to us in Jesus Christ. In that great Saviour we have a love at once divine and human, we have the great transcendent instance of love leading to sacrifice. On that love and sacrifice for us Christ builds His claim on us for our hearts, and our all. Life alone can communicate life; it is only light that can diffuse light. It is only love that can kindle love; it is only sacrifice that can inspire sacrifice. And so He comes to us, and asks that we should just love Him back again as He has

loved us. He first gives Himself utterly for and to us, and then asks us to give ourselves wholly to Him. He first yields up His own life, and then He says: 'He that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.' The object, the true object, for all this depth of love which lies slumbering in our hearts, is God in Christ, the Christ that died for us.

III. And now, lastly, observe that the terrible misdirection of these capacities is the sin and the misery of the world.

I will not say that such emotions, even when expended on creatures, are ever wasted. For however unworthy may be the objects on which they are lavished, the man himself is the better and the higher for having cherished them. The mother, when she forgets self in her child, though her love and self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice may, in some respects, be called but an animal instinct, is elevated and ennobled by the exercise of them. The patriot and the thinker, the philanthropist, ay! even—although I take him to be the lowest in the scale—the soldier who, in some cause which he thinks to be a good one, and not merely in the tigerish madness of the battlefield, throws away his life—are lifted in the scale of being by their self-abnegation.

And so I am not going to say that when men love each other passionately and deeply, and sacrifice themselves for one another, or for some cause or purpose affecting only temporal matters, the precious elixir of love is wasted. God forbid! But I do say that all these objects, sweet and gracious as some of them are, ennobling and elevating as some of them are, if they are taken apart from God, are insufficient to fill your hearts: and that if they are slipped in between you and God, as they often are, then they bring sin and sorrow.

There is nothing more tragic in this world than the misdirection of man's capacity for love and sacrifice. It is like the old story in the Book of Daniel, which tells how the heathen monarch made a great feast, and when the wine began to inflame the guests, sent for the sacred vessels taken from the Temple of Jerusalem, that had been used for Jehovah's worship; and (as the narrative says, with a kind of shudder at the profanation), 'They brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the House of God, which was at Jerusalem, and the king and his princes, his wives and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine and praised the gods.' So this heart of mine, which, as I said, has the Master's initials and His arms engraven upon it, in token that it is His cup, I too often fill with the poisonous and intoxicating draught of earthly pleasure and earthly affections; and as I drink it, the madness goes through my veins, and I praise gods of my own making instead of Him whom alone I ought to love.

Ah, brethren! we should be our own rebukers in this matter, and the heroism of the world should put to shame the cowardice and the selfishness of the Church. Contrast the depth of your affection for your household with the tepidity of your love for your Saviour. Contrast the willingness with which you sacrifice yourself for some dear one with the grudgingness with which you yield yourselves to Him. Contrast the rest and the sense of satisfaction in the presence of those whom you love, and your desolation when they are absent, with the indifference whether you have Christ beside you or not. And remember that the measure of your power of loving is the measure of your obligation to love your Lord; and that if you are all frost to Him and all fervour to them, then in a very solemn sense 'a man's foes shall be they of his own household.' 'He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.'

And so let me gather all that I have been saying into the one earnest beseeching of you that you would bring that power of uncalculating love and self-sacrificing affection which is in you, and would fasten it where it ought to fix—on Christ who died on the cross for you. Such a love will bring blessedness to you. Such a love will ennoble and dignify your whole nature, and make you a far greater and fairer man or woman than you ever otherwise could be. Like some little bit of black carbon put into an electric current, my poor nature will flame into beauty and radiance when that spark touches it. So love Him and be at peace; give yourselves to Him and He will give you back yourselves, ennobled and transfigured by the surrender. Lay yourselves on His altar, and that altar will sanctify both the giver and the gift. If you can take this rough Philistine soldier's words in their spirit, and in a higher sense say, 'Whether I live I live unto the Lord, or whether I die I die unto the Lord; living or dying, I am the Lord's,' He will let you enlist in His army; and give you for your marching orders this command and this hope, 'If any man serve Me let him follow Me; and where I am there shall also My servant be.'

2 Samuel 18:18-33 The Wail of a Broken Heart

Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and reared up for himself a pillar, which is in the king's dale; for he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance; and he called the pillar after his own name: and it is called unto this day, Absalom's Place. 19. Then said Ahimaaz the son of Zadok, Let me now run, and bear the king tidings, how that the Lord hath avenged him of his enemies. 20. And Joab said unto him. Thou shalt not bear tidings this day, but thou shalt bear tidings another day; but this day thou shalt bear no tidings, because the king's son is dead. 21. Then said Joab to Cush, Go tell the king what thou hast seen. And Cush bowed himself unto Joab, and ran. 22 Then said Ahimaaz the son of Zadok yet again to Joab, But howsoever, let me, I pray thee, also run after Cush. And Joab said, Wherefore wilt thou run, my son, seeing that thou hast no tidings ready? 23. But howsoever, said he, let me run. And he said unto him, Run. Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the plain, and overran Cush. 24. And David sat between the two gates: and the watchman went up to the roof over the gate unto the wall, and lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold a man running

alone. 25. And the watchman cried, and told the king. And the king said, If he be alone, there is tidings in his mouth. And he came apace, and drew near. 26. And the watchman saw another man running: and the watchman called unto the porter, and said, Behold another man running alone. And the king said, He also bringeth tidings. 27. And the watchman said, Me thinketh the running of the foremost is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok. And the king said, He is a good man, and cometh with good tidings. 28. And Ahimaaz called, and said unto the king, All is well. And he fell down to the earth upon his face before the king, and said, Blessed be the Lord thy God, which hath delivered up the men that lifted up their hand against my lord the king. 29. And the king said, Is the young man Absalom safe? And Ahimaaz answered, When Joab sent the king's servant, and me thy servant, I saw a great tumult, but I knew not what it was. 30. And the king said unto him, Turn aside, and stand here. And he turned aside, and stood still. 31. And, behold, Cushite came; and Cushite said, Tidings, my lord the king: for the Lord hath avenged thee this day of all them that rose up against thee. 32. And the king said unto Cushite, Is the young man Absalom safe? And Cushite answered, The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is. 33. And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!'— 2 Samuel 18:18-33

The first verse of this passage and the one preceding it give a striking contrast between the actual and the designed burial-place of Absalom. The great pit among the sombre trees, where his bloody corpse was hastily flung, with three darts through his heart, and the rude cairn piled over it, were a very different grave from the ostentatious tomb 'in the king's dale,' which he had built to keep his memory green. This was what all his restless intrigues and unbridled passions and dazzling hopes had come to. He wanted to be remembered, and he got his wish; but what a remembrance! That gloomy pit preaches anew the vanity of 'vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself,' and tells us once more that

**'Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.'**

I. The first picture here shows a glimpse of the battlefield, and brings before us three men, each in different ways exhibiting how small a thing Absalom's death was to all but the heartbroken father, and each going his own road, heedless of what lay below the heap of stones.

The world goes on all the same, though death is busy, and some heart-strings be cracked. The minute details which fill the most part of the story, lead up to, and throw into prominence, David's burst of agony at the close. The three men, Ahimaaz, Joab, and the Cushite (Ethiopian), are types of different kinds of self-engrossment, which is little touched by others' sorrows. The first, Ahimaaz, the young priest who had already done good service to David as a spy, is full of the joyous excitement of victory, and eager to run with what he thinks such good tidings. The word in verse 19, 'bear tidings,' always implies good news; and the youthful warrior-priest cannot conceive that the death of the head of the revolt can darken to the king the joy of victory. He is truly loyal, but, in his youthful impetuosity and excitement, cannot sympathise with the desolate father, who sits expectant at Mahanaim. Right feeling and real affection often fail in sympathy, for want of putting oneself in another's place; and, with the best intentions, wound where they mean to cheer. A little imagination; guided by affection, would have taught Ahimaaz that the messenger who told David of Absalom's death would thrust a sharper spear into his heart than Joab had driven into Absalom's.

Joab is a very different type of indifference. He is too much accustomed to battle to be much flushed with victory, and has killed too many men to care much about killing another. He is cool enough to measure the full effect of the news on David; and though he clearly discerns the sorrow, has not one grain of participation in it. He has some liking for Ahimaaz, and so does not wish him to run, but dissuades him on the ground (verse 22, Revised Version) that he will win no reward. That is the true spirit of the mercenary, who cannot conceive of a man taking trouble unless he gets paid for it somehow, and will fight and kill, all in the way of business, without the least spark of enthusiasm for a cause. Hard stolidity and brutal carelessness shielded him from any 'womanish' tenderness. Absalom was dead, and he had killed him. It was a good thing, for it had put out the fire of revolt. No doubt David would be sorry, but that mattered little. Only it was better for the message to go by some one whose fate was of no consequence. So he picks out 'the Cushite,' probably an Ethiopian slave; and if David in his anguish should harm him, nobody will be hurt but a friendless stranger.

The Cushite gets his orders; and he too is, in another fashion, careless of their contents and effect. Without a word, he bows himself to Joab, and runs, as unconcerned as the paper of a letter that may break a heart. Ahimaaz still pleads to go, and, gaining leave, takes the road across the Jordan valley, which was probably easier, though longer; while the other messenger went by the hills, which was a shorter and rougher road.

II. The scene shifts to Mahanaim, where David had found refuge.

He can scarcely have failed to take an omen from the name, which commemorated how another anxious heart had camped there, and been comforted, when it saw the vision of the encamping angels above its own feeble, undefended tents, and Jacob 'called the

name of that place Mahanaim' (that is, 'Two Camps'). How the change of scene in the narrative helps its vividness, and makes us share in the strain of expectancy and the tension of watching the approaching messengers! The king, restless for news, has come out to the space between the outer and inner gates, and planted a lookout on the gate-house roof. The sharp eyes see a solitary figure making for the city, across the plain. David recognizes that, since he is alone, he must be a messenger; and now the question is, What has he to tell? We see him coming nearer, and share the suspense. Then the second man appears; and clearly something more had happened, to require two. What was it? They run fast; but the moments are long till they arrive. The watchman recognizes Ahimaaz by his style of running; and David wistfully tries to forecast his tidings from his character. It is a pathetic effort, and reveals how anxiously his heart was beating.

As soon as Ahimaaz is within earshot, though panting with running, no doubt, he shouts, with what breath is left, the one word, 'Peace!' and then, at David's feet, tells the victory, 'Blessed be the Lord thy God'; the triumph was Jehovah's gift, and in it He had shown Himself David's God, and vindicated His servant's trust. But Ahimaaz is more devout and thankful than David. The king has neither praise and thankfulness to God nor to man. He has no pleasure in the victory; no interest in the details of the fight; no thankfulness for a restored kingdom; no word of eulogium for his soldiers; nothing but devouring anxiety for his unworthy son. How chilling to Ahimaaz, all flushed with eagerness, and proud of victory, and panting with running, and hungry for some word of praise, it must have been, to get for sole answer the question about Absalom! He shrinks from telling the whole truth, which, indeed, the Cushite was officially despatched to tell; but his enigmatic story of a great tumult as he left the field, of which he did not know the meaning, was meant to prepare for the bitter news. So he is bid to stand aside, and no words more vouchsafed to him. A cool reception, unworthy of David! As Ahimaaz stood there, neglected, he would think that the politic Joab was right after all.

The Cushite must have been close behind him, for he comes up as soon as the brief conversation is over. A deeper anxiety must have waited his tidings; for he must have something more to tell than victory. His first words add nothing to Ahimaaz's information. What, then, had he come for? David forebodes evil, and, with the monotony of a man absorbed in one anxiety, repeats verbatim his former question. Poor king! He more than half knew the answer, before it was given. The Cushite with some tenderness veils the fate of Absalom in the wish that all the king's enemies may be 'as that young man is.' But the veil was thin, and the attempt to console by reminding of the fact that the dead man was an enemy as well as a son, was swept away like a straw before the father's torrent of grief.

III. The sobs of a broken heart cannot be analysed; and this wail of almost inarticulate agony, with its infinitely pathetic reiteration, is too sacred for many words.

Grief, even if passionate, is not forbidden by religion; and David's sensitive poet-nature felt all emotions keenly. We are meant to weep; else wherefore is there calamity? But there were elements in David's mourning which were not good. It blinded him to blessings and to duties. His son was dead; but his rebellion was dead with him, and that should have been more present to his mind. His soldiers had fought well, and his first task should have been to honour and to thank them. He had no right to sink the king in the father, and Joab's unfeeling remonstrance, which followed, was wise and true in substance, though rough almost to brutality in tone. Sorrow which sees none of the blue because of one cloud, however heavy and thunderous, is sinful. Sorrow which sits with folded hands, like the sisters of Lazarus, and lets duties drift, that it may indulge in the luxury of unrestrained tears, is sinful. There is no tone of 'It is the Lord! let Him do what seemeth Him good,' in this passionate plaint; and so there is no soothing for the grief. The one consolation lies in submission. Submissive tears wash the heart clean; rebellious ones blister it.

David's grief was the bitter fruit of his own sin. He had weakly indulged Absalom, and had probably spared the rod, in the boy's youth, as he certainly spared the sword when Absalom had murdered his brother. His own immorality had loosened the bonds of family purity, and made him ashamed to punish his children. He had let Absalom flaunt and swagger and live in luxury, and put no curb on him; and here was the end of his foolish softness. How many fathers and mothers are the destroyers of their children today in the very same fashion! That grave in the wood might teach parents how their fatal fondness may end. Children, too, may learn from David's grief what an unworthy son can do to stuff his father's pillow with thorns, and to break his heart at last.

But there is another side to this grief. It witnesses to the depth and self-sacrificing energy of a father's love. The dead son's faults are all forgotten and obliterated by death's 'effacing fingers.' The headstrong, thankless rebel is, in David's mind, a child again, and the happy old days of his innocence and love are all that remain in memory. The prodigal is still a son. The father's love is immortal, and cannot be turned away by any faults. The father is willing to die for the disobedient child. Such purity and depth of affection lives in human hearts. So self-forgetting and incapable of being provoked is an earthly father's love. May we not see in this disclosure of David's paternal love, stripping it of its faults and excesses, some dim shadow of the greater love of God for His prodigals,—a love which cannot be dammed back or turned away by any sin, and which has found a way to fulfil David's impossible wish, in that it has given Jesus Christ to die for His rebellious children, and so made them sharers of His own kingdom?

2 Samuel 19:34-37 Barzillai

'And Barzillai said unto the king, How long have I to live, that I should go up with the king unto Jerusalem? 35. I am this day fourscore years old: and can I discern between good and evil! can thy servant taste what I eat or what I drink? can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women? wherefore then should thy servant be yet a burden unto my lord the king? 36. Thy servant will go a little way over Jordan with the king: and why should the king recompense it me with such a reward? 37. Let thy servant, I pray thee, turn back again, that I may die in mine own city, and be buried by the grave of my father and of my mother. But behold thy servant Chimham; let him go over with my lord the king; and do to him what shall seem good unto thee.'— 2 Samuel 19:34-37

To the Young .

People often fancy that religion is only good to die by, and many exhortations are addressed to the young, founded on the possibility that an early death may be their lot. That, no doubt, is a very solemn consideration, but it is by no means the sole ground on which such an appeal may or should be rested. To some of you an early death is destined. To the larger number of you will be granted a life protracted to middle age, and to some of you silver hair will come, and you may see your children's children. I wish to win you seriously to look forward to the life on earth that is before you, and to the end to which it is likely to come, if you be spared in the world long enough.

The little picture in these verses is a very beautiful one. David had been fleeing from his rebellious Absalom, and his adversity had winnowed his friends. He had crossed the Jordan to the hill-country beyond, and there, while he was lurking with his crown in peril, and a price on his head, and old friends dropping from him in their eagerness to worship the rising sun, this Barzillai with others brought him seasonable help (2 Sa 17:23), When David returned victorious, Barzillai met him again. David offered to take him to Jerusalem and to set him in honour there, The old man answered in the words of our text.

Now I take them for the sake of the picture of old age which they give us. Look at them: the intellectual powers are dimmed, all taste for the pleasures and delights of sense is gone, ambition is dead, capacity for change is departed. What is left? This old man lives in the past and in the future; the early child-love of the father and mother who, eighty years ago, rejoiced over his cradle, remains fresh; he cannot 'any more hear the voice of the singing men and women,' but he can hear the tones, clear over all these years, of the dear ones whom he first learned to love. The furthest past is fresh and vivid, and his heart and memory are true to it. Also he looks forward familiarly and calmly to the very near end, and lives with the thought of death. He keeps house with it now. It is nearer to him than the world of living men. In memory is half of his being, and in hope is the other half. All his hopes are now simplified and reduced to one, a hope to die and be united again with the dear ones whom he had so long remembered. And so he goes back to his city, and passes out of the record—an example of a green and good old age.

Now, young people, is not that picture one to touch your hearts? You think in your youthful flush of power and interest, that life will go on for ever as it has begun, and it is all but impossible to get you to look forward to what life must come to. I want you to learn from that picture of a calm, bright old age, a lesson or two of what life will certainly do to you, that I may found on these certainties the old, old appeal, 'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth'.

I. Life will gradually rob you of your interest in all earthly things.

Your time of life is full of ebullient feeling, and sees freshness, glory, and beauty everywhere. Even the least enthusiastic men are enthusiastic in their early days. You have physical strength, the keenness of unpalled senses, the delights of new powers, the blessedness of mere living. All this springs partly from physical causes, partly from the novelty of your position. Thank God! all young creatures are happy, and you among the rest.

Now, I do not ask you to restrain and mortify these things. But I do ask you to remember the end. It is as certain that joys will pall, it is as certain that subjects of interest will be exhausted, it is as certain that powers will decay, as that they now are what they are. All these grave, middle-aged, careful people round you were like you once. You, if you live, will be like them. The spring tints are natural, but they are transient; the blossoms are not always on the fruit-trees.

Think, then, of the End: to make you thankful; to stimulate you; but also to lead you to take for your object what will never pall. All created things go. Only the gospel provides you with a theme which never becomes stale, with objects which are inexhaustible.

Here is a lesson for—

- (a) Thinkers: 'Knowledge, it shall vanish away.'
- (b) Sensualists: 'Man delights me not, nor woman either.' How old was he who said that?
- (c) Ambitious, self-advancing men.

Is it worth your while to devote yourself to transient aims?

Is it congruous with your dignity as immortal souls?

Is it innocent or guilty?

Is the gospel not a thing to live by as well as to die by?

II. Life will certainly rob you of the power to change.

Barzillai knew that David's court was no place for him; he had been bred on the mountains of Gilead, and his habits suited only a simple country life. The court might be better, but he could not fit into it. But there was his boy Chimham; take him, he was young enough to bend and mould.

Now this is true in a far loftier way. I need not dwell on the universality of this law, how it applies to all manner of men, but I use it now in reference only to the gospel and your relation to it. You will never again be so likely to become a Christian, if you let these early days pass.

You say, 'I will have my fling, sow my wild oats, will wait a little longer, and then'—and then what? You will find that it is infinitely harder to close with Christ than it would have been before.

While you delay, you are stiffening into the habit of rejection. Custom is one of our mightiest friends or foes.

While you delay, you are doing violence to conscience, and so weakening that to which the gospel appeals.

While you delay, you are becoming more familiar with the unreceived message and so weakening the power of the gospel.

While you delay, you are adding to the long list of your sins.

While you delay, youth is slipping from you.

Make a mark with a straw on the clay and it abides; hammer on the brick with iron and it only breaks. Youth is a brief season. It is the season for forming habit, for receiving impression, for building up character. 'The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold, therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing.' Your present time is seed time. God forbid that I should say that it is impossible, but I do say that it is hard, for 'a man to be born again when he is old.'

If you do become Christ's servant later in life, your whole condition will be different from what it would have been if you had begun when young to trust and love Him. Think of the difficulty of rooting out habits and memories. Think of the horrid familiarity with evil. Think of the painful contrition for wasted years, which must be theirs who are hired at the eleventh hour, after standing all the day idle.

Contrast the experience of him who can say, 'I Thy servant fear God from my youth,' who has been led by God's mercy from childhood in the narrow way, who by early faith in Christ has been kept in the slippery ways of youth.

Of the one we can but say, 'Is not this a brand plucked from the burning?' The other is 'innocent of much transgression.'

I have small hope of changing middle-aged and old men. To you I turn, you young men and women, you children, and to each of you I say, 'Wilt thou not from this time say, My Father, Thou art the guide of my youth?'

III. Life will certainly deepen your early impressions.

The old Barzillai dying looks back to his early days.

So I point the lesson: 'Keep thy heart with all diligence,' and let your early thoughts be bright and pure ones.

Remember that you will never find any love like a father's and mother's. Don't do what will load your memories in after days with sharp reproaches.

IV. Life will bring you nearer and nearer to the grave.

Hope after hope dies out, and there is nothing left but the hope to die. How beautiful the facing of it so as to become calmly familiar with it, making it an object of hope, with bright visions of reunion!

How can such an old age so bright and beautiful be secured? Surely the one answer is,—by faith in Jesus Christ.

Think of an old Christian resting, full of years, full of memories, full of hopes, to whom the stir of the present is nothing, who has come so near the place where the river falls into the great sea that the sounds on the banks are unheard. It is calm above the

cataract, and though there be a shock when the stream plunges over the precipice, yet a rainbow spans the fall, and the river peacefully mingles with the shoreless, boundless ocean.

Dear young friends, 'what shall the end be'? It is for yourselves to settle. Oh, take Christ for your Lord! Then, though so far as regards the bodily life the 'youths shall faint and be weary,' as regards the true self the life may be one of growing maturity, and at last you may 'come to the grave as a shock of corn that is fully ripe.'

Trust, love, and serve Jesus, that thus calm, thus beautiful, may be your days here below, that if you die young you may die ripe enough for heaven, and that if God spares you to 'reverence and the silver hairs,' you may crown a holy life by a peaceful departure, and, sitting in the antechamber of death, may not grieve for the departure of youth and strength and buoyancy and activity, knowing that 'they also serve who only stand and wait,' and then may shake off the clog and hindrance of old age when you pass into the presence of God, and there, as being the latest-born of heaven, may more than renew your youth, and may enter on a life which weariness and decay never afflict, but with which immortal youth, with its prerogatives of endless hope, of keenest delight, of unwearying novelty, of boundless joy, abides for evermore.

2 Samuel 22:40-51 David's Hymn of Victory

'For Thou hast girded me with strength to battle: them that, rose up against me hast Thou subdued under me. 41. Thou hast also given me the necks of mine enemies, that I might destroy them that hate me. 42. They looked, but there was none to save; even unto the Lord, but He answered them not. 43. Then did I beat them as small as the dust of the earth, I did stamp them as the mire of the street, and did spread them abroad. 44. Thou also hast delivered me from the strivings of my people, Thou hast kept me to be head of the heathen: a people which I knew not shall serve me. 45. Strangers shall submit themselves unto me: as soon as they hear, they shall be obedient unto me. 46. Strangers shall fade away, and they shall be afraid out of their close places. 47. The Lord liveth; and blessed be my rock; and exalted be the God of the rock of my salvation. 48. It is God that avengeth me, and that bringeth down the people under me, 49. And that bringeth me forth from mine enemies: Thou also hast lifted me up on high above them that rose up against me: Thou hast delivered me from the violent man. 50. Therefore I will give thanks unto Thee, O Lord, among the heathen, and I will sing praises unto Thy name. 51. He is the tower of salvation for His king; and sheweth mercy to His anointed, unto David, and to his seed for evermore.'— 2 Samuel 22:40-51

The Davidic authorship of this great hymn has been admitted even by critics who are in general too slow to recognise it. One of these says that 'there is no Israelite king to whom the expressions in the psalm apply so closely as to David.' The favourite alternative theory that the speaker is the personified nation is hard to accept. The voice of individual trust and of personal experience sounds clear in the glowing words. Two editions of the hymn are preserved for us,—in Psalm 18 and 2 Samuel. Slight variations exist in the two copies, which may probably be merely accidental. Nothing important depends on them. The text begins with the closing words of a description of God's arming the singer for his victories, and goes on to paint the tumult of battle and the rout of the foe (2 Samuel 22:40-43); then follows triumphant expectation of future wider victories (2 Samuel 22:44-46); and that leads up to the closing burst of grateful praise (2 Samuel 22:47-51).

I. We are not to forget that what is described in 2 Samuel 22:40-43 is a literal fight, with real swords against very real enemies.

We may draw lessons of encouragement from it for our conflict with spiritual wickednesses, but we must not lose sight of the bloody combat with flesh and blood which the singer had waged. He felt that God had braced his armour on him, had given him the impenetrable 'shield' which he wore on his arm, and had strengthened his arms to bend the 'bow of steel.' We see him in swift pursuit, pressing hard on the flying foe, crushing them with his fierce charge, trampling them under foot. 'I did beat them small as the dust of the earth.' His blows fell like those of a great pestle, pulverizing some substance in a mortar. 'I did stamp them as the mire of the streets,'—a vivid picture of trampling down the prostrate wretches, for which Psalm xviii. gives the less picturesque variant, 'did cast them out.' In their despair the fugitives shriek aloud for God's help, and the Psalmist has a stern joy in knowing their cries to be unheard.

Now, such delight in an enemy's despair and destruction, such gratification at the vanity of his prayers, are far away from being Christian sentiments, and the gulf is not wholly bridged by the consideration that David felt himself to be God's Anointed, and enmity to him to be, consequently, treason against God. His feelings were most natural and entirely consistent with the stage of revelation in which he lived. They were capable of being purified into that triumph in the victory of good and the ruin of evil without which there is no vigorous sympathy with Christ's conflict. They kindle, by their splendid energy and condensed rapidity, an answering glow even in readers so far away from the scene as we are. But still they do belong to a lower level of feeling, and result from a less full revelation than belongs to Christianity. The light of battle which blazes in them is not the fire which Jesus longed to kindle on earth.

But we may well take a pattern from the stern soldier's recognition that all his victory was due to God alone. The strength that he put forth was God's gift. It was God who subdued the insurgents, not David. The panic which made the foe take to flight was infused into them by God. No name but Jehovah's was to be carved on the trophy reared on the battlefield. The human victor was but the instrument of the divine Conqueror. Such lowly reference of all our power and success to Him will save us from overweening self-adulation, and is the surest way to retain the power which He gives, and which is lost most surely when we take the credit of it to ourselves.

II. The enemies thus far have been from among his own subjects, but in 2 Samuel 22:44-46 a transition is made to victory over 'strangers'; that is, foreign nations.

The triumph over 'the strivings of my people' heartens the singer to expect that he will be 'head of the nations.' The other version of the hymn (Psalm xviii.) reads simply ' the people.'

The picture of hasty surrender 'as soon as they hear of me' is graphic. His very name conquers. 'The strangers shall submit themselves unto me' is literally 'shall lie,' or yield feigned obedience. They 'fade away' as if withered by the hot wind of the desert. 'They shall come limping' (as the word here used signifies), as if wounded in the fight, for which Psalm xviii. reads 'trembling.'

Now this vision of extended conquests, based as it is on past smaller victories, carries valuable lessons. David here lays hold of the great promises to his house of a wide dominion, and expects the beginnings of their fulfilment to himself. And he did extend his conquests beyond the territory of Israel. But we may take the hope as an instance in a particular direction of what should be the issue of all experience of God's mercies. 'To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.' Smaller victories will be followed by greater. Our reception of God's favouring help should widen our anticipations. Our gratitude to Him should be 'a lively sense of favours to come.' Progressive victory should be the experience of every believer.

We may see, too, dimly apparent through the large hope of the Psalmist-King, the prophecy of the worldwide victories of his Son, in whom the great promises of a dominion 'from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth,' are fulfilled.

III. 2 Samuel 22:46-51 make a noble close to a noble hymn, in which the singer's strong wing never flags, nor the rush of thought and feeling ever slackens.

In it, even more absolutely than in the rest of the psalm, his victory is all ascribed to Jehovah. He alone acts, David simply receives. To have learned by experience that 'He lives,' and is 'my Rock,' and to gather all the feelings excited by the retrospect of a long life into 'Blessed be my Rock,' is to have reaped and garnered the richest harvest which earth can yield. So at last sings the man whose early years had been full of struggles and privations. A morning of tempest has cleared into sunny evening calm, as it will with us all if the tempest blows us into our true shelter.

This psalm begins with a rapturous heaping together of the precious names of God, as the singer has had them revealed to him by experience. Foremost among these stands that one, 'my Rock,' which is caught up again in this closing burst of thanksgiving. That great Rock towers unchangeable above fleeting things. The river runs past its base, the woods nestling at its feet bud, and shed their pride of foliage, but it stands the same. David had many a time hid in 'the clefts of the rocks' in his years of wandering, and the figure is eloquent on his lips.

These closing strains gather together once more the main points of the previous verses, his deliverance from domestic foes, and his conquests over external enemies. These are wholly God's work. True thankfulness delights to repeat its acknowledgments. God does not weary of giving, we should not weary of praising the Giver and His gifts. We renew our enjoyment of our long-past mercies by reiterating our thankfulness for them. They do not die as long as gratitude keeps their remembrance green.

But the Psalmist's experience impels him to a vow (2 Samuel 22:50). He will give thanks to God among the nations. God's mercies bind, and, if rightly felt, will joyfully impel, the receiver to spread His name as far as his voice can reach. Love is sometimes silent, but gratitude must speak. The most unmusical voice is tuned to melody by God's great blessings received and appreciated, and they need never want a theme who can tell what the Lord has done for their souls. 'Then shall... the tongue of the dumb sing.' A dumb Christian is a monstrosity. We are 'the secretaries of His praise,' and have been saved ourselves that we may declare His goodness.

2 Samuel 22:51 has been supposed by some to be a liturgical addition, on the ground that, if David were the author, he would not be likely to name himself thus. But there does not seem to be anything unnatural in his mentioning himself by name in such a connection, and the reference to his dynasty, based as it is on Nathan's promise, is most fitting. The last thought about his mercies which the humble gratitude of the Psalmist utters is that they were not given to him for any good in himself, nor to be selfishly enjoyed, but that they were bestowed on him because of the place that he filled in the divine purposes, and belonged to 'his seed' as truly as to himself. So lowly had his prosperity made him. So truly had he sunk himself in his office, and in the great things that God meant to do through him and his house. We know better than David did what these were, and how the promise on which he

rested his hopes of the duration of his house is fulfilled in his Son, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and who bears God's name to all the nations.

2 Samuel 23:1-7 The Dying King's Last Vision and Psalm

'Now these be the last words of David. David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, 2. The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue. 3. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. 4. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain. 5. Although my house be not so with God; yet He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire, although He make it not to grow. 6. But the sons of Belial shall be all of them as thorns thrust away, because they cannot be taken with hands: 7. But the man that shall touch them must be fenced with iron and the staff of a spear; and they shall be utterly burned with fire in the same place.'— 2 Samuel 23:1-7

It was fitting that 'the last words of David' should be a prophecy of the true King, whom his own failures and sins, no less than his consecration and victories, had taught him to expect. His dying eyes see on the horizon of the far-off future the form of Him who is to be a just and perfect Ruler, before the brightness of whose presence and the refreshing of whose influence, verdure and beauty shall clothe the world. As the shades gather round the dying monarch, the radiant glory to come brightens. He departs in peace, having seen the salvation from afar, and stretched out longing hands of greeting toward it. Then his harp is silent, as if the rapture which thrilled the trembling strings had snapped them.

1. We have first a prelude extending to the middle of 2 Samuel 23:3 .

In it there is first a fourfold designation of the personality of the Psalmist-prophet, and then a fourfold designation of the divine oracle spoken through him. The word rendered in verse 1 'saith' is really a noun, and usually employed with 'the Lord' following, as in the familiar phrase 'saith the Lord.' It is used, as here, with the genitive of the human recipient, in Balaam's prophecy, on which this is evidently modeled. It distinctly claims a divine source for the oracle following, and declares, at the outset, that these last words of David were really the faithful sayings of Jehovah. The human and divine elements are smelted together. Note the description of the human personality. First, the natural 'David the son of Jesse,' like 'Balaam the son of Beor' in the earlier oracle. The aged king looks back with adoring thankfulness to his early days and humble birth, as if he were saying, 'Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should proclaim the coming King.' Then follow three clauses descriptive of what 'the son of Jesse' had been made by the grace of God, in that he had been raised on high from his low condition of a shepherd boy, and anointed as ruler, not only by Samuel and the people, but by the God of their great ancestor, whose career had presented so many points of resemblance to his own, the God who still wrought among the nation which bore the patriarch's name, as He had wrought of old; and that, besides his royalty, he had been taught to sing the sweet songs which already were the heritage of the nation. This last designation shows what David counted God's chief gift to him,—not his crown, but his harp. It further shows that he regarded his psalms as divinely inspired, and it proves that already they had become the property of the nation. This first verse heightens the importance of the subsequent oracle by dwelling on the claims of the recipient of the revelation to be heard and heeded.

Similarly, the fourfold designation of the divine source has the same purpose, and corresponds with the four clauses of 2 Samuel 23:1 , 'The Spirit of the Lord spake in [or "into"] me.' That gives the Psalmist's consciousness that in his prophecy he was but the recipient of a message. It wonderfully describes the penetrating power of that inward voice which clearly came to him from without, and as clearly spoke to him within. Words could not more plainly declare the prophetic consciousness of the distinction between himself and the Voice which he heard in the depths of his spirit. It spoke in him before he spoke his lyric prophecy. 'His word was upon my tongue.' There we have the utterance succeeding the inward voice, and the guarantee that the Psalmist's word was a true transcript of the inward voice. 'The God of Israel said,' and therefore Israel is concerned in the divine word, which is not of private reference, but meant for all. 'The Rock of Israel spake,' and therefore Israel may trust the Word, which rests on His immutable faithfulness and eternal being.

II. The divine oracle thus solemnly introduced and guaranteed must be worthy of such a prelude. Abruptly, and in clauses without verbs, the picture of the righteous Ruler is divinely flashed before the seer's inward eye. The broken construction may perhaps indicate that he is describing what he beholds in vision. There is no need for any supplement such as 'There shall be,' which, however true in meaning, mars the vividness of the presentation of the Ruler to the prophet's sight. David sees him painted on the else blank wall of the future. When and where the realisation may be he knows not. What are the majestic outlines? A universal sovereign over collective humanity, righteous and God-fearing. In the same manner as he described the vision of the King, David goes on, as a man on some height telling what he saw to the people below, and paints the blessed issues of the King's coming.

It had been night before He came,—the night of ignorance, sorrow, and sin,—but His coming is like one of these glorious Eastern sunrises without a cloud, when everything laughs in the early beams, and, with tropical swiftness, the tender herbage bursts from the ground, as born from the dazzling brightness and the fertilizing rain. So all things shall rejoice in the reign of the King, and humanity be productive, under His glad and quickening influences, of growths of beauty and fruitfulness impossible to it without these.

The abrupt form of the prophecy has led some interpreters to construe it as, 'When a king over men is righteous... then it is as a morning,' etc. But surely such a platitude is not worthy of being David's last word, nor did it need divine inspiration to disclose to him that a just king is a great blessing. The only worthy meaning is that which sees here, in words so solemnly marked as a special revelation closing the life of David, 'the vision of the future and all the wonder that should be,' when a real Person should thus reign over men. The explanation that we have here simply the ideal of the collective Davidic monarchy is a lame attempt to escape from the recognition of prophecy properly so called. It is the work of poetry to paint ideals, of prophecy to foretell, with God's authority, their realisation. The picture here is too radiant to be realised in any mere human king, and, as a matter of fact, never was so in any of David's successors, or in the whole of them put together. It either swings in vacuo, a dream unrealized, or it is a distinct prophecy from God of the reign of the coming Messiah, of whom David and all his sons, as anointed kings, were living prophecies. 'The Messianic idea entered on a new stage of development with the monarchy, and that not as if the history stimulated men's imaginations, but that God used the history as a means of further revelation by His prophetic Spirit.

III. The difficult verse, 2 Samuel 23:5, whether its first and last clauses be taken interrogatively or negatively, in its central part bases the assurance of the coming of the king on God's covenant (2 Samuel 7), which is glorified as being everlasting, provided with all requisites for its realisation, and therefore 'sure,' or perhaps 'preserved,' as if guarded by God's inviolable sanctity and faithfulness.

The fulfilment of the dying saint's hopes depends on God's truth. Whatever sense might say, or doubt whisper, he silences them by gazing on that great Word. So we all have to do. If we found our hopes and forecasts on it, we can go down to the grave calmly, though they be not fulfilled, sure that 'no good thing can fail us of all that He hath spoken.' Living or dying, faith and hope must stay themselves on God's word. Happy they whose closing eyes see the form of the King, and whose last thoughts are of God's faithful promise! Happy they whose forecasts of the future, nearer or more remote, are shaped by His word! Happy they who, in the triumphant energy of such a faith, can with dying lips proclaim that His promises overlap, and contain, all their salvation and all their desire!

If we read the first and last clauses negatively, with Revised Version and others, they, as it were, surround the kernel of clear-eyed faith, in the middle of the verse, with a husk, not of doubt, but of consciousness how far the present is from fulfilling the great promise. The poor dying king looks back on the scandals of his later reign, on his own sin, on his children's lust, rebellion, and tragic deaths, and feels how far from the ideal he and they have been. He sees little token of growth toward realisation of that promise; but yet in spite of a stained past and a wintry present, he holds fast his confidence. That is the true temper of faith, which calls things that are not as though they were, and is hindered by no sense of unworthiness nor by any discouragements born of sense, from grasping with full assurance the promise of God. But the consensus of the most careful expositors inclines to take both clauses as questions, and then the meaning would be, 'Does not my house stand in such a relation to God that the righteous king will spring from it? It is, in this view, a triumphant question, expressing the strongest assurance, and the next clause would then lay bare the foundation of that relation of David's house as not its goodness, but God's covenant (' for He hath made'). Similarly the last clause would be a triumphant question of certainty, asserting in the strongest manner that God would cause that future salvation for the world, which was wrapped up in the coming of the king, and in which the dying man was sure that he should somehow have a share, dead though he were, to blossom and grow, though he had to die as in the winter, before the buds began to swell. The assurance of immortality, and of a share in all the blessings to come, bursts from the lips that are so soon to be silent.

IV. But the oracle cannot end with painting only blessings as flowing from the king's reign. If he is to rule in righteousness and the fear of the Lord, then he must fight against evil. If his coming causes the tender grass to spring, it will quicken ugly growths too. The former representation is only half the truth; and the threatening of destruction for the evil is as much a part of the divine oracle as the other. Strictly, it is 'wickedness'—the abstract quality rather than the concrete persons who embody it—which is spoken of. May we recall the old distinction that God loves the sinner while He hates the sin? The picture is vivid. The wicked—and all the enemies of this King are wicked, in the prophet's view—are like some of these thorn-brakes, that cannot be laid hold of, even to root them out, but need to be attacked with sharp pruning-hooks on long shafts, or burned where they grow. There is a destructive side to the coming of the King, shadowed in every prophecy of him, and brought emphatically to prominence in his own descriptions of his reign and its final issues. It is a poor kindness to suppress that side of the truth. Thorns as well as tender grass spring up in the quickening beams; and the best commentary on the solemn words which close David's closing song is the saying of the King himself: 'In the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them.'

2 Samuel 23:3, 4 The Royal Jubilee 1

He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. 4. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth, by clear shining after rain.’—

2 Samuel 23:3, 4

One of the Psalms ascribed to David sounds like the resolves of a new monarch on his accession. In it the Psalmist draws the ideal of a king, and says such things as, ‘I will behave myself wisely, in a perfect way. I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes. I hate the work of them that turn aside. Mine eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me.’ That psalm we may regard as the first words of the king when, after long, weary years, the promise of Samuel’s anointing was fulfilled, and he sat on the throne.

My text comes from what purports to be the last words of the same king.

He looks back, and again the ideal of a monarch rises before him. The psalm, for it is a psalm, though it is not in the Psalter, is compressed to the verge of obscurity; and there may be many questions raised about its translation and its bearing. These do not need to occupy us now, but the words which I have selected for my text may, perhaps, best be represented to an English reader in some such sentence as this—‘If (or when) one rules over men justly, ruling in the fear of God, then it shall be as the light of the morning when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds.’ With such a monarch all the interests of his people will prosper. His reign will be like the radiant dawn of a cloudless day, and his land like the spring pastures when the fresh, green grass is wooed out of the baked earth by the combined influence of rain and sunshine. David’s little kingdom was surrounded by giant empires, in which brute force, wielded by despotic will, ground men down, or squandered their lives recklessly. But the King of Israel had learned, partly by the experience of his own reign, and partly by divine inspiration, that such rulers are not true types of a monarch after God’s own heart. This ideal king is neither a warrior nor a despot. Two qualities mark him, Justice and Godliness. Pharaoh and his like, oppressors, were as the lightning which blasts and scorches. The true king was to be as the sunshine that vitalizes and gladdens. ‘He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass, and as showers that water the earth.’

We do not need to ask the question here, though it might be very relevant on another occasion, whether this portraiture is a mere ideal, floating in vacuo, or whether it is a direct prophecy of that expected Messianic king who was to realise the divine ideal of sovereignty. At all events we know that, in its highest and deepest significance, the picture of my text has lived and breathed human breath, in Jesus Christ, who both in His character and in His influence on the world, fulfilled the ideal that floated before the eyes of the aged king.

I do not need to follow the course of thought in this psalm any farther. You will have anticipated my motive for selecting this text now. It seems to me to gather up, in vivid and picturesque form, the thoughts and feelings which to-day are thrilling through an Empire, to which the most extended dominion of these warrior kings of old was but a speck. On such an occasion as this I need not make any apology, I am sure, for diverging from the ordinary topics of pulpit address, and associating ourselves with the many millions who to-day are giving thanks for Queen Victoria.

My text suggests two lines along which the course of our thoughts may run. The one is the personal character of this ideal monarch; the other is its effects on his subjects.

I. Now, with regard to the former, the pulpit is, in my judgment, not the place either for the discussion of current events or the pronouncing of personal eulogiums.

But I shall not be wandering beyond my legitimate province, if I venture to try to gather into a few words the reasons, in the character and public life of our Queen, for the thankfulness of this day. Our text brings out, as I have said, two great qualities as those on which a throne is to be established, Justice and Godliness. Now, the ancient type of monarch was the fountain of justice, in a very direct sense; inasmuch as it was his office, not only to pronounce sentence on criminals, but to give decisions on disputed questions of right. These functions have long ceased to be exercised by our monarchs, but there is still room for both of those qualities—the Justice which holds an even balance between parties and strifes, the Righteousness which has supreme regard to the primary duties that press alike upon prince and pauper, and the Godliness which, as I believe, is the root from which all righteousness, as between man and man, and as between prince and subject, must ever flow. Morality is the garb of religion; religion is the root of morality. He, and only he, will hold an even balance and discharge his obligations to man, whose life is rooted in, and his acts under the continual influence of, the fear of God which has in it no torment, but is the parent of all things good.

We shall not be flatterers if we thankfully recognise in our Sovereign Lady the presence of both these qualities. I have spoken of the first inaugural words of the King of Israel, and the resolutions that he made. It is recorded that when, to the child of eleven years of age, the announcement was made that she stood near in the line of succession to the throne, the tremulous young lips answered, ‘It is a great responsibility; but I will be good.’ And all round the world to-day her subjects attest that the aged monarch

has kept the little maiden's vow. Contrast that life with the lives of the other women who have sat on the throne of England. Think of the brilliant Queen, whose glories our greatest poets were not ashamed to sing, with the Tudor masterfulness in her, and not a little of the Tudor grossness and passion, and remember the blots that stained her glories. Think of her sister, the morbidly melancholy tool of priests, who goes down the ages branded with an epithet only too sadly earned. Think of another woman that ruled over England in name, the weak instrument of base intrigues. And then turn to this life which we are looking upon to-day. Think of the nameless scandals, the hideous immorality of the reigns that preceded hers, and you will not wonder that every decent man and every modest woman was thankful that, with the young girl, there came a breath of purer air into the foul atmosphere. I am old enough to remember hearing, as a boy, the talk of my elders as to the probabilities of insurrection if, instead of our Queen, there had come to the throne the brother of her two predecessors. The hopes of those early days have been more than fulfilled.

It is not for us to determine the religious character of others, and that is too sacred a region for us to enter; but this we may say, that in all these sixty years of diversified trial, there has been no act known to us outsiders inconsistent with the highest motive, the fear of the Lord; and some of us who have worshipped in the humble Highland church where she has bowed have felt that on the throne of Britain sat a Christian.

Nor need we forget how, from that root of fear of God, there has come that wondrous patience and faithfulness to duty, the form of 'Justice' which is possible for a constitutional monarch. We have little notion of how pressing and numerous and continual the royal duties must necessarily be. They have been discharged, even when the blow that struck all sunshine out of life left an irrepressible shrinking from pageantry and pomp. Joys come; joys go. Duties abide, and they have been done.

Nor can we forget, either, how the very difficult position of a constitutional monarch, with the semblance of power and the reality of narrow restrictions, has been filled. Our Sovereign has never set herself against the will of the people, expressed by its legitimate representatives, even when that will may have imposed upon her the sanction of changes which she did not approve. And that is much to say. We have seen young despots whose self-will has threatened to wreck a nation's prosperity.

Nor can we forget how all the immense influence of position and personality has been thrown on the side of purity and righteousness. Even we outsiders know how, more than once or twice, she has steadfastly set her face against the admission to her presence of men and women of evil repute, and has in effect repeated David's proclamation against vice and immorality at his accession: 'He that worketh wickedness shall not dwell within my house.'

Nor must we forget, either, the simplicity, the beauty, the tenderness of her wedded and family life, her love of rural quiet, and of wholesome communion with Nature, and her eagerness to take her people into her confidence, as set forth in the book which, whatever its literary merits, speaks of her earnest appreciation of Nature and her wish for the sympathy of her subjects.

Then came the bolt from the blue, that sudden crash that wrecked the happiness of a life. Many of us, I have no doubt, remember that dreary December Sunday morning when, while the nation was standing in expectation of another calamity from across the Atlantic, there flashed through the land the news of the Prince's death; thrilling all hearts, and bringing all nearer to her, the lonely widow, than they had ever been in her days of radiant happiness. How pathetically, silently, nobly, devoutly, that sorrow has been borne, it is not for us to speak. She has become one of the great company of sad and lonely hearts, and in her sadness has shown an eager desire to send messages of sympathy to all whom she could reach, who were in like darkness and sorrow.

Brethren, I have ventured to diverge so far from the ordinary run of pulpit ministrations because I feel that to-day all of us, whatever may be our political or ecclesiastical relationships and proclivities, are one in thanking God for the monarch whose life has been without a stain, and her reign without a blot.

II. Now let me say a word as to the other line of thought which my text suggests, the effect of such a reign on the condition of the subject.

Now, of course, in the narrowly limited domain of that strange creation, a constitutional monarchy, there is far less opportunity for the Sovereign's direct influence on the Subject than there was in the ancient kingdoms of which David was thinking in his psalm. The marvellous progress of Britain during these sixty years is due, not to our Sovereign, but to a multitude of strenuous workers and earnest thinkers in a hundred different departments, as well as to the evolution of the gifts that come down to us from our ancient inheritance of freedom. But we shall much mistake if, for that reason, we set aside the monarch's character and influence as of no account in the progress

A supposition, which is a violent one, may be made which will set this matter in clearer light. Suppose that during these sixty years we had had a king on the throne of England like some of the kings we have had. The sentiment of loyalty is not now of such a character as that it will survive a vicious sovereign. If we had had such a monarch as I have hinted at, the loyalty of the good would for all these years have been suffering a severe strain, and the forces that make for evil would have been disastrously strengthened. Dangers escaped are unnoticed, but one twelvemonth of the reign of a profligate would shake the foundations of the monarchy, and would open the floodgates of vice; and we should then know how much the nation owed to the Queen whose life

was pure, and who cast all her influence on the side of 'things that are lovely and of good report.'

Take another supposition. Suppose that during these years of wonderful transition, when the whole aspect of English politics and society has been transformed, we had had a king like George III., who set his opinion against the nation's will constitutionally expressed. Then no man knows with what storm and tumult, with what strife and injury, the inevitable transition would have been effected. Be sure of this, that the wise self-effacement of our Sovereign during these critical years of change is largely the reason why they have been years of peace, in which the new has mingled itself with the old without revolution or disturbance. It is due to her in a very large degree that

'Freedom broadens slowly down

From precedent to precedent.'

I need not dilate on the changed Britain that she looks out upon and rules to-day. I need not speak—there will be many voices to do that, in not altogether agreeable notes, for there will be a dash of too much self-complacency in them—about progress in material wealth, colonial expansion, the increase of education, the gentler manners, the new life that has been breathed over art and literature, the achievements in science and philosophy, the drawing together of classes, the bridging over of the great gulf between rich and poor by some incipient and tentative attempts at sympathy and brotherhood.

Nor need I dwell upon the ecclesiastical signs of the times, in which, mingled as they are, there is at least this one great good, that never since the early days have so large a proportion of Christian men been 'seeking after the things that make for peace,' and realizing the oneness of all believers who hold the Headship of Christ.

All this review falls more properly into other hands than mine. Only I would put in a caution—do not let us mingle self-conceit with our congratulations; and, above all, do not let us 'rest and be thankful.' There is much to be done yet. Listening ears can catch on every side vague sounds that tell of unrest and of the stirrings into wakefulness of

'The spirit of the years to come,

Yearning to mix itself with life.'

I seem to hear all around me the rushing in the dark of a mighty current that is bearing down upon us. Great social questions are rapidly coming to the front—the questions of distribution of wealth, abolition of privilege, the relations of labour and capital, and many others are clamant to be dealt with at least, if not solved. There is much to be done before Jesus Christ is throned as King of England. War has to be frowned down; the brotherhood of man has to be realised, temperance has to be much more largely practised than it is.

I need not go over the catalogue of desiderata, of agenda —things that have to be done—in the near future. Only this I would say—Christian men and women are the last people who should be ready to 'rest and be thankful,' for the principles of the Gospel that we profess, which have never been applied to the life of nations as they ought to be, will solve the questions which make the despair of so many in this generation. We shall best express our thankfulness for these past sixty years by each of us taking our part in the great movement which, in the inevitable drift of things to democracy, is going to 'cast the kingdom old into another mould,' and which will, I pray, make our people more of what John Milton long ago called them, 'God's Englishmen.' We have taught the nations many things. Our Parliament is called the Mother of Parliaments. Ours is

'The land where, girt with friends or foes,

A man may say the thing he will.'

It has taught the nations a tempered freedom, and that a monarchy may be a true republic. May we rise to the height of our privileges and responsibilities, and teach our subject peoples, not only mechanics, science, law, free trade, but a loftier morality, and the name of Him by whom kings reign and princes decree justice!

We, members of the free Churches of England, come seldom under the notice of royalty, and have little acquaintance with courts, but we yield to none in our recognition of the virtues and in our sympathy with the sorrows of the Sovereign Lady, the good woman, who rules these lands, and we all heartily thank God for her to-day, and pray that for long years still to come the familiar letters V.R. may stand, as they have stood to two generations, as the symbol of womanly purity and of the faithful discharge of queenly duty.

2 Samuel 23:15-17 A Libation to Jehovah

And David longed, and said, Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Beth-lehem, which is by the gate! 16. And the three mighty men brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Beth-

lehem, that was by the gate, and took it and brought it to David: nevertheless he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the Lord. 17. And he said, Be it far from me, O Lord, that I should do this; is not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives? therefore he would not drink it. These things did these three mighty men.’— 2 Samuel 23:15-17 .

David's fortunes were at a low ebb. He was in hiding in his cave of Adullam, and a Philistine garrison held Bethlehem, his native place. He was little different from an outlaw at the head of a band of 'broken men,' but there were depths of chivalry and poetry in his heart. Sweltering in his cave in the fierce heat of harvest, he thought of his native Bethlehem; he remembered the old days when he had watered his flock at the well by its gate, or mingled with the people of the little town, in their evening assemblies round it. The memories of boyhood rose up radiant before him, and as he was immersed in the past, the grim present, the perils that threatened his life, the savage, gaunt rocks without a trace of greenness that girded him, the privations to which he was exposed, were all forgotten, and he longed for one more draught of the water that tasted so cool and sweet to memory. Three of his 'mighty men,' bound to him by loyal devotion and unselfish love, were ready to die to win for their chief a momentary gratification. So they slipped away from Adullam, 'brake through the host of the Philistines,' and brought back the longed-for draught. David's reception of the dearly-bought, sparkling gift was due to a noble impulse. The water seemed to him to be dyed with blood, and to be not water so much as 'lives of men.' It had become too precious to be used to satisfy his longing. It would be base self-indulgence to drink what had been won by such self-forgetting devotion. God only had the right to receive what men had risked their lives to obtain, and therefore he 'poured it out unto the Lord.'

The story gleams out of the fierce narratives in which it is embedded, like a flower blooming on some grim cliff. May we not learn lessons from it?

I. David's longing.

David, a fugitive in the cave, haunted by the 'nostalgia' that made Bethlehem seem so fair and dear, may stand for us as an example of the longings and thirsts that sometimes force themselves into consciousness in every soul. Below the bustle and strife of daily life, occupied as it must be with material and often ignoble things, below the hardness into which the world has compressed men's surface nature, there lies a yearning for the cool water that rises hard by the gate of our native home. True, it is with many of us overlaid for the most part by coarser desires, and may be as unlike our usual dominant longings and aims, as David's tender outbreak of sentiment was to the prevailing tenor of his life, in those days when he was an outlaw and a freebooter. But the longing, though often stifled, is not wholly quenched. It is misinterpreted by the man who is conscious of it, and far too often he tries to slake the thirst by fiery and drugged liquors which but make it more intense. Happy are they who know what it is that their parched palates crave, and have learned, while yet the knowledge avails, to say, 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God!' 'Blessed are they who thirst after' the water of the well of Bethlehem, 'for they shall be filled!'

II. The three heroes' devotion.

These three rough soldiers, lawless and fierce as they were, had been so mastered by their chief that they were ready to dare anything to please him. Who would have looked for such delicacy of feeling and such enthusiastic self-surrender in such men?

They stand as grand instances of the height of devotion of which the rudest nature is capable, when once its love and loyalty to the Beloved are evoked.

How such deeds ennoble the lowest types of character, and make us think better of men, and more sadly of the contrast between their habitual characteristics and the possibilities that lie slumbering in their ignoble lives! There are sparks in the hard cold flint, if only they could be struck out. There is water in the rock, if only the right hand, armed with the wonder-working rod, smites it.

Let us not judge men too harshly by what they do and are, but let us try to bring their sleeping possibilities into conscious exercise.

Let us remember that love and self-sacrifice, which is the very outcome and natural voice of love, ennoble the most degraded.

But these heroic three may suggest to us a sadder thought. They were ready to die for David; would they have been as ready to die for God? These noble emotions of love, leading to glad flinging away of life to pleasure the beloved, are freely given to men, but too often withheld from God, We lavish on our beloveds or on our chosen leaders, a devotion that ought to shame us, when contrasted with the scantiness of our grudging devotion and self-surrender to Him. If we loved God a tenth part as ardently as we love our wives or husbands or parents or children, and were willing to do and bear as much for Him as we are willing to bear for them, how different our lives would be! We can love utterly, enthusiastically, self-forget-tingly, absorbed in the beloved, and counting all surrender of self to, and the sacrifice of life itself for, him or her a delight. Many of us do love men so. Do we love God so?

But these heroic three may suggest another thought. Their self-sacrificing love was illustrious; but there is a nobler, more wonderful, more soul-subduing instance of such love. They broke through the ranks of the Philistines to bring David a draught from the well of

Bethlehem. Jesus has broken through the ranks of our enemies to bring us the water of which 'if a man drink, he shall live for ever.' If we would see the highest example of self-sacrificing love, we must turn to look, not on the instances of it that shine through the ages on the page of history, and make men thrill as they gaze, and think better of the human nature that can do such things, but on the Christ hanging on the Cross because He loved those who did not love Him, and giving His life a ransom for sinners.

III. David's reception of the water.

The chivalrous devotion of the three touched an answering chord in their chivalrous chief. His heart filled at the thought of what they had risked, and revolted from employing what had been thus won for no higher use than to gratify a piece of sentiment in himself. The sparkling water was too sacred to be taken for any baser use than as a libation to Jehovah. And who can doubt that the three were more fully repaid for their devotion, as David poured it out unto the Lord, than if he had drunk it eagerly up? His feeling and his act indicate beautiful delicacy of instinct, and swiftness of perception of how to requite the devotion of the three.

We may separate into its two parts the generous impulse which sprang as one whole in David's breast. There was the shrinking from using the water to slake his thirst merely, and there was the resolve to pour it out as a libation to God. Both parts of that whole may yield us profitable thoughts.

To risk their lives for the water was noble in the three; to have quaffed it as if it had been drawn like any other water from a well, would have been ignoble in David. There are things that it may be noble to give and ignoble to accept. There are sacrifices which we are not entitled to allow others to make for our sakes. Gratifications which can only be procured at the hazard of men's lives are too dearly bought.

Would not a civilization, that draws much of its comforts and appliances from 'sweated industries,' and is languidly amused by seeing men and women performers peril their lives nightly, and lose them too, for its gratification, be the better for copying David's recoil from drinking 'the blood of men that went in jeopardy of their lives'? Is there not 'blood' on many a woman's ball-dress, on many an article of luxury, on many an amusement?

There are sacrifices which we have no right to accept from others. The three had no right to risk life for such a purpose, and David would have been selfish if he had drunk the water. Do not such thoughts lead us by contrast to Him who has done what none other can do? 'None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give his life a ransom for him'; but Jesus can and Jesus does, and what it would be impossible, and wrong if it were possible, for one man to do for another, He has done for us all, and what it would be base for a man to accept from another if that other could give it, it is blessed and the beginning of all nobleness of character for us to accept from Him. David would not drink because the cup seemed to him to be red with blood. Jesus offers to us a cup, not of cold water only but of 'water and blood,' and bids us drink of it and remember Him.

The generous devotion of the three kindled answering emotions in David's breast. It would be a churlish soul that was not warmed into some faint replica of such self-sacrifice, and most of us would be ashamed of ourselves if we were unmoved by such love. But does the supreme example of it affect us as much as the lesser examples of it do? How many of us stand before it like the peaks of the Alps that front full south, and lift an unmelted breastplate of snow to the midday sun! How many of us have lived all our lives in presence of Jesus' infinite love and self-surrender for us each, and never have felt one transient touch of answering love!

The other part of David's impulse was to offer to God what was too precious for his own use. That is the fitting destination of our most precious and prized possessions. And whatever is thus offered becomes more precious by being offered. The altar sanctifies and enhances the worth of the gift. What we give to God is more our own than if we had kept it to ourselves, and develops richer capacities of ministering to our delight. It is so with our greatest surrender, the surrender of ourselves. When we give ourselves to Jesus, He renders us back to ourselves, far better worth having than before. We are never so much our own as when we are wholly Christ's. And the same thing is true as to all our riches of mind, heart, or worldly wealth. If we wish to taste their most delicate and refined sweetness, let us give them to Jesus, and the touch of His hand, as He accepts them and gives them back to us, will leave a lingering fragrance that nothing else can impart. Was not the water from the well of Bethlehem sweeter to David as he poured it out unto the Lord than if he had greedily gulped it down?