Maclaren on Deuteronomy

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Deuteronomy
Sermons by Alexander Maclaren

Deuteronomy 7:9: God's Faithfulness

‘Know therefore that the Lord thy God, He is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love Him.’—DEUT. vii. 9 .

‘Faithful,’ like most Hebrew words, has a picture in it. It means something that can be (1) leant on, or (2) builded on.

This leads to a double signification—(1) trustworthy, and that because (2) rigidly observant of obligations. So the word applies to a steward, a friend, or a witness. Its most wonderful and sublime application is to God. It presents to our adoring love—

I. God as coming under obligations to us.

A marvellous and blessed idea. He limits His action, regards Himself as bound to a certain line of conduct.

1. Obligations from His act of creation.

‘A faithful Creator,’ bound to take care of those whom He has made. To supply their necessities. To satisfy their desires. To give to each the possibility of discharging its ideal.

2. Obligations from His past self.

‘God is faithful by whom ye were called,’ therefore He will do all that is imposed on Him by His act of calling.

He cannot begin without completing. There are no abandoned mines. There are no half-hewn stones in His quarries, like the block at Baalbec. And this because the divine nature is inexhaustible in power and unchangeable in purpose.

3. Obligations from His own word.

A revelation is presupposed by the notion of faithfulness. It is not possible in heathenism. ‘Dumb idols,’ which have given their worshippers no promises, cannot be thought of as faithful. By its grand conception of Jehovah as entering into a covenant with Israel, the Old Testament presents Him to our trust as having bound Himself to a known line of action. Thereby He becomes, if we may so phrase it, a constitutional monarch.

That conception of a Covenant is the negation of caprice, of arbitrary sovereignty, of mystery. We know the principles of His government. His majestic ‘I wills’ cover the whole ground of human life and needs for the present and the future. We can go into no region of life but we find that God has defined His conduct to us there by some word spoken to our heart and binding Him.

4. Obligations from His new Covenant and highest word in Jesus Christ.

‘He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.’

II. God as recognising and discharging these obligations.

That He will do so comes from His very nature. With Him there is no change of disposition, no emergence of unseen circumstances,

no failure or exhaustion of power.

That He does so is matter of fact. Moses in the preceding context had pointed to facts of history, on which he built the 'know therefore' of the text. On the broad scale the whole world's history is full of illustrations of God's faithfulness to His promises and His threats. The history of Judaism, the sorrows of nations, and the complications of national events, all illustrate this fact.

The personal history of each of us. The experience of all Christian souls. No man ever trusted in Him and was ashamed. He wills that we should put Him to the proof.

III. God as claiming our trust.

He is faithful, worthy to be trusted, as His deeds show.

Faith is our attitude corresponding to His faithfulness. Faith is the germ of all that He requires from us. How much we need it! How firm it might be! How blessed it would make us!

The thought of God as 'faithful' is, like a precious stone, turned in many directions in Scripture, and wherever turned it flashes light. Sometimes it is laid as the foundation for the confidence that even our weakness will be upheld to the end, as when Paul tells the Corinthians that they will be confirmed to the end, because 'God is faithful, through whom ye were called into the fellowship of His Son' (1 Cor. i. 9). Sometimes there is built on it the assurance of complete sanctification, as when he prays for the Thessalonians that their 'whole spirit and soul and body may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord' and finds it in his heart to pray thus because 'Faithful is He that calleth you, who will also do it' (1 Thess. v. 24). Sometimes it is presented as the steadfast stay grasping which faith can expect apparent impossibilities, as when Sara 'judged Him faithful who had promised' (Heb. xi. 11). Sometimes it is adduced as bringing strong consolation to souls conscious of their own feeble and fluctuating faith, as when Paul tells Timothy that 'If we are faithless, He abideth faithful; for He cannot deny Himself' (2 Tim. ii. 13). Sometimes it is presented as an anodyne to souls disturbed by experience of men's unreliableness, as when the apostle heartens the Thessalonians and himself to bear human untrustworthiness by the thought that though men are faithless, God 'is faithful, who shall establish you and keep you from evil' (2 Thess. iii. 2, 3). Sometimes it is put forward to breathe patience into tempted spirits, as when the Corinthians are comforted by the assurance that 'God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able' (1 Cor. x. 13). Sometimes it is laid as the firm foundation for our assurance of pardon, as when John tells us that 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins' (1 John i. 9). And sometimes that great attribute of the divine nature is proposed as holding forth a pattern for us to follow, and the faith in it as tending to make us in a measure steadfast like Himself, as when Paul indignantly rebuts his enemies' charge of levity of purpose and vacillation, and avers that 'as God is faithful, our word toward you is not yea and nay' (2 Cor. 1:18).

Deuteronomy 8:2 The Lesson of Memory

'Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these lofty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or no.'— DEUT. viii. 2

The strand of our lives usually slips away smoothly enough, but days such as this, the last Sunday in a year, are like the knots on a sailor's log, which, as they pass through his fingers, tell him how fast it is being paid out from the reel, and how far it has run off.

They suggest a momentary consciousness of the swift passage of life, and naturally lead us to a glance backwards and forwards, both of which occupations ought to be very good for us. The dead flat upon which some of us live may be taken as an emblem of the low present in which most of us are content to pass our lives, affording nowhere a distant view, and never enabling us to see more than a street's length ahead of us. It is a good thing to get up upon some little elevation and take a wider view, backwards and forwards.

And so now I venture to let the season preach to us, and to confine myself simply to suggesting for you one or two very plain and obvious thoughts which may help to make our retrospect wise and useful. And there are two main considerations which I wish to submit. The first is —what we ought to be chiefly occupied with as we look back; and secondly, what the issue of such a retrospect ought to be.

I. With what we should be mainly occupied as we look back.

Memory, like all other faculties, may either help us or hinder us. As is the man, so will be his remembrance. The tastes which rule his present will determine the things that he likes best to think about in the past. There are many ways of going wrong in our retrospects. Some of us, for instance, prefer to think with pleasure about things that ought never to have been done, and to give a wicked immortality to thoughts that ought never to have had a being. Some men's tastes and inclinations are so vitiated and corrupted that they find a joy in living their badnesses over again. Some of us, looking back on the days that are gone, select by

instinctive preference for remembrance, the vanities and frivolities and trifles which were the main things in them whilst they lasted. Such a use of the great faculty of memory is like the folly of the Egyptians who embalmed cats and vermin. Do not let us be of those, who have in their memories nothing but rubbish, or something worse, who let down the drag-net into the depths of the past and bring it up full only of mud and foulnesses, and of ugly monsters that never ought to have been dragged into the daylight.

Then there are some of us who abuse memory just as much by picking out, with perverse ingenuity, every black bit that lies in the distance behind us, all the disappointments, all the losses, all the pains, all the sorrows. Some men look back and say, with Jacob in one of his moods, 'Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life!' Yes! and the same man, when he was in a better spirit, said, and a great deal more truly, 'The God that fed me all my life long, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil.' Do not paint like Rembrandt, even if you do not paint like Turner. Do not dip your brush only in the blackness, even if you cannot always dip it in molten sunshine.

And there are some of us who, in like manner, spoil all the good that we could get out of a wise retrospect, by only looking back in such a fashion as to feed a sentimental melancholy, which is, perhaps, the most profitless of all the ways of looking backwards.

Now here are the two points, in this verse of my text, which would put all these blunders and all others right, telling us what we should chiefly think about when we look back, and from what point of view the retrospect of the past must be taken in order that it should be salutary. 'Thou shalt remember all the way by which the Lord thy God hath led thee.' Let memory work under the distinct recognition of divine guidance in every part of the past. That is the first condition of making the retrospect blessed. 'To humble thee and to prove thee, and to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or no'; let us look back with a clear recognition of the fact that the use of life is to test, and reveal, and to make, character. This world, and all its outward engagements, duties, and occupations, is but a scaffolding, on which the builders may stand to rear the true temple, and when the building is reared you may do what you like with the scaffolding. So we have to look back on life from this point of view, that its joys and sorrows, its ups and downs, its work and repose, the vicissitudes and sometimes contrariety of its circumstances and conditions, are all for the purpose of making us , and of making plain to ourselves, what we are. 'To humble thee,' that is, to knock the self-confidence out of us, and to bring us to say: 'I am nothing and Thou art everything; I myself am a poor weak rag of a creature that needs Thy hand to stiffen me, or I shall not be able to resist or to do.' That is one main lesson that life is meant to teach us. Whoever has learnt to say by reason of the battering and shocks of time, by reason of sorrows and failures, by reason of joys, too, and fruition,—'Lord, I come to Thee as depending upon Thee for everything,' has wrung its supreme good out of life, and has fulfilled the purpose of the Father, who has led us all these years, to humble us into the wholesome diffidence that says: 'Not in myself, but in Thee are all my strength and my hope.'

I need not do more than remind you of the other cognate purposes which are suggested here. Life is meant, not only to bring us to humble self-distrust, as a step towards devout dependence on God, but also to reveal us to ourselves; for we only know what we are by reflecting on what we have done, and the only path by which self-knowledge can be attained is the path of observant recollection of our conduct in daily life.

Another purpose for which the whole panorama of life is made to pass before us, and for which all the gymnastic of life exercises us, is that we may be made submissive to the great Will, and may keep His commandments.

These thoughts should be with us in our retrospect, and then our retrospect will be blessed: First, we are to look back and see God's guidance everywhere, and second, we are to judge of the things that we remember by their tendency to make character, to make us humble, to reveal us to ourselves, and to knit us in glad obedience to our Father God.

II. And now turn to the other consideration which may help to make remembrance a good, viz., the issues to which our retrospect must tend, if it is to be anything more than sentimental recollection.

First, let me say: Remember and be thankful. If what I have been saying as to the standard by which events are to be tried be true; if it be the case that the main fact about things is their power to mould persons and to make character, then there follows, very plainly and clearly, that all things that come within the sweep of our memory may equally contribute to our highest good.

Good does not mean pleasure. Bright-being may not always be well-being, and the highest good has a very much nobler meaning than comfort and satisfaction. And so, realising the fact that the best of things is that they shall make us like God, then we can turn to the past and judge it wisely, because then we shall see that all the diversity, and even the opposition, of circumstances and events, may co-operate towards the same end. Suppose two wheels in a great machine, one turns from right to left and the other from left to right, but they fit into one another, and they both produce one final result of motion. So the moments in my life which I call blessings and gladness, and the moments in my life which I call sorrows and tortures, may work into each other, and they will do so if I take hold of them rightly, and use them as they ought to be used. They will tend to the highest good whether they be light or dark; even as night with its darkness and its dews has its ministration and mission of mercy for the wearied eye no less than day with its brilliancy and sunshine; even as the summer and the winter are equally needful, and equally good for the crop. So in our lives it is

good for us, sometimes, that we be brought into the dark places; it is good for us sometimes that the leaves be stripped from the trees, and the ground be bound with frost.

And so for both kinds of weather, dear brethren, we have to remember and be thankful. It is a hard lesson, I know, for some of us. There may be some listening to me whose memory goes back to this dying year as the year that has held the sorest sorrow of their lives; to whom it has brought some loss that has made earth dark. And it seems hard to tell quivering lips to be thankful, and to bid a man be grateful though his eyes fill with tears as he looks back on such a past. But yet it is true that it is good for us to be drawn, or to be driven, to Him; it is good for us to have to tread even a lonely path if it makes us lean more on the arm of our Beloved. It is good for us to have places made empty if, as in the year when Israel's King died, we shall thereby have our eyes purged to behold the Lord sitting on the Royal Seat.

'Take it on trust a little while,
Thou soon shalt read the mystery right,
In the full sunshine of His smile.'

And for the present let us try to remember that He dwelleth in the darkness as in the light, and that we are to be thankful for the things that help us to be near Him, and not only for the things that make us outwardly glad. So I venture to say even to those of you who may be struggling with sad remembrances, remember and be thankful.

I have no doubt there are many of us who have to look back, if not upon a year desolated by some blow that never can be repaired, yet upon a year in which failing resources and declining business, or diminished health, or broken spirits, or a multitude of minute but most disturbing cares and sorrows, do make it hard to recognise the loving Hand in all that comes. Yet to such, too, I would say: 'All things work together for good,' therefore all things are to be embraced in the thankfulness of our retrospect.

The second and simple practical suggestion that I make is this: Remember, and let the memory lead to contrition. Perhaps I am speaking to some men or women for whom this dying year holds the memory of some great lapse from goodness; some young man who for the first time has been tempted to sensuous sin; some man who may have been led into slippery places in regard to business integrity. I draw a 'bow at a venture' when I speak of such things—perhaps some one is listening to me who would give a great deal if he or she could forget a certain past moment of this dying year, which makes their cheeks hot yet whilst they think of it. To such I say: Remember, go close into the presence of the black thing, and get the consciousness of it driven into your heart; for such remembrance is the first step to deliverance from the load, and to your passing, emancipated from the bitterness, into the year that lies before you.

But even if there are none of us to whom such remarks would specially apply, let us summon up to ourselves the memories of these bygone days. In all the three hundred and sixty-five of them, my friend, how many moments stand out distinct before you as moments of high communion with God? How many times can you remember of devout consecration to Him? How many, when—as visitors to the Riviera reckon the number of days in the season in which, far across the water, they have seen Corsica—you can remember this year to have beheld, faint and far away, 'the mountains that are round about' the 'Jerusalem that is above'? How many moments do you remember of consecration and service, of devotion to your God and your fellows? Oh! what a miserable, low-lying stretch of God-forgetting monotony our lives look when we are looking back at them in the mass. One film of mist is scarcely perceptible, but when you get a mile of it you can tell what it is—oppressive darkness. One drop of muddy water does not show its pollution, but when you have a pitcherful of it you can see how thick it is. And so a day or an hour looked back upon may not reveal the true godlessness of the average life, but if you will take the twelvemonth and think about it, and ask yourself a question or two about it, I think you will feel that the only attitude for any of us in looking back across a stretch of such brown barren moorland is that of penitent prayer for forgiveness and for cleansing.

But I dare say that some of you say: 'Oh! I look back and I do not feel anything of that kind of regret that you describe; I have done my duty, and nobody can blame me. I am quite comfortable in my retrospect. Of course there have been imperfections; we are all human, and these need not trouble a man.' Let me ask you, dear brother, one question: Do you believe that the law of a man's life is, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself'? Do you believe that that is what you ought to do? Have you done it? If you have not, let me beseech you not to go out of this year, across the artificial and imaginary boundary that separates you from the next, with the old guilt upon your back, but go to Jesus Christ, and ask Him to forgive you, and then you may pass into the coming twelvemonth without the intolerable burden of unremembered, unconfessed, and therefore unforgiven, sin.

The next point that I would suggest is this: Let us remember in order that from the retrospect we may gain practical wisdom. It is astonishing what unteachable, untamable creatures men are. They learn wisdom about all the little matters of daily life by experience, but they do not seem to do so about the higher. Even a sparrow comes to understand a scarecrow after a time or two, and any rat in a hole will learn the trick of a trap. But you can trick men over and over again with the same inducement, and, even whilst the hook is sticking in their jaws, the same bait will tempt them once more. That is very largely the case because they do not

observe and remember what has happened to them in bygone days.

There are two things that any man, who will bring his reason and common-sense to bear upon the honest estimate and retrospect of the facts of his life, may be fully convinced of. These are, first, his own weakness. One main use of a wise retrospect is to teach us where we are weakest. What an absurd thing it would be if the inhabitants of a Dutch village were to let the sea come in at the same gap in the same dyke a dozen times! What an absurd thing it would be if a city were captured over and over again by assaults at the same point, and did not strengthen its defences there! But that is exactly what you do; and all the while, if you would only think about your own past lives wisely and reasonably, and like men with brains in your heads, you might find out where it was that you were most open to attack; what it was in your character that most needed strengthening, what it was wherein the devil caught you most quickly, and might so build yourselves up in the most defenceless points.

Do not look back for sentimental melancholy; do not look back with unavailing regrets; do not look back to torment yourselves with useless self-accusation; but look back to see how good God has been, and look back to see where you are weak, and pile the wall, higher there, and so learn practical wisdom from retrospect.

Another phase of the practical wisdom which memory should give is deliverance from the illusions of sense and time. Remember how little the world has ever done for you in bygone days. Why should you let it befool you once again? If it has proved itself a liar when it has tempted you with gilded offers that came to nothing, and with beauty that was no more solid than the 'Easter-eggs' that you buy in the shops—painted sugar with nothing inside—why should you believe it when it comes to you once more? Why not say: 'Ah! once burnt, twice shy! You have tried that trick on me before, and I have found it out!' Let the retrospect teach us how hollow life is without God, and so let it draw us near to Him.

The last thing that I would say is: 'Let us remember that we may hope. It is the prerogative of Christian remembrance, that it merges into Christian hope. The forward look and the backward look are really but the exercise of the same faculty in two different directions. Memory does not always imply hope, we remember sometimes because we do not hope, and try to gather round ourselves the vanished past because we know it never again can be a present or a future. But when we are occupied with an unchanging Friend, whose love is inexhaustible, and whose arm is unwearied, it is good logic to say: 'It has been, therefore it shall be.'

With regard to this fleeting life, it is a delusion to say 'to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant'; but with regard to the life of the soul that lives in God, that is true, and true for ever. The past is a specimen of the future. The future for the man who lives in Christ is but the prolongation, and the heightening into superlative excellence and beauty, of all that is good in the past and in the present. As the radiance of some rising sun may cast its bright beams into the opposite sky, even so the glowing past behind us flings its purples and its golds and its scarlets on to the else dim curtain of the future.

Remember that you may hope. A paradox, but a paradox that is a truth in the case of Christians whose memory is of a God that has loved and blessed them whose hope is in a God that changes never; whose memory is charged with 'every good and perfect gift that came down from the Father of Lights,' whose hope is in that same Father, 'with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.' So on every stone of remembrance, every Ebenezer on which is graved: 'Hitherto hath the Lord helped us,' we can mount a telescope—if I may so say—that will look into the furthest glories of the heavens, and be sure that the past will be magnified and perpetuated in the future. Our prayer may legitimately be; 'Thou hast been my help, leave me not, neither forsake me!' And His answer will be: 'I will not leave thee until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.' Remember that you may hope, and hope because you remember.

Deuteronomy 12:18 The Eating of the Peace Offering

'But thou must eat them before the Lord thy God in the place which the Lord thy God shall choose, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy manservant, and thy maidservant, and the Levite that is within thy gates: and thou shalt rejoice before the Lord thy God in all that thou puttest thine hands unto.'— DEUT. xii. 18

There were three bloody sacrifices, the sin-offering, the burnt-offering, and the peace-offering. In all three expiation was the first idea, but in the second of them the act of burning symbolised a further thought, namely, that of offering to God, while in the third, the peace-offering, there was added to both of these the still further thought of the offerer's participation with God, as symbolised by the eating of the sacrifice. So we have great verities of the most spiritual religion adumbrated in this external rite. The rind is hard and forbidding, the kernel is juicy and sweet.

I. Communion with God based on atonement.

II. Feeding on Christ.

What was sacrifice becomes food. The same Person and facts, apprehended by faith, are, in regard to their bearing on the divine

government, the ground of pardon, and in regard to their operation within us, the source of spiritual sustenance. Christ for us is our pardon; Christ in us is our life.

III. The restoration to the offerer of all which he lays on God's altar.

The sacrifice was transformed and elevated into a sacrament. By being offered the sacrifice was ennobled. The offerer did not lose what he laid on the altar, but it came back to him, far more precious than before. It was no longer mere food for the body, and to eat it became not an ordinary meal, but a sacrament and means of union with God. It was a hundredfold more the offerer's even in this life. All its savour was more savoury, all its nutritive qualities were more nutritious. It had suffered a fiery change, and was turned into something more rich and rare.

That is blessedly true as to all which we lay on God's altar. It is far more ours than it ever was or could be, while we kept it for ourselves, and our enjoyment of, and nourishment from, our good things, when offered as sacrifices, are greater than when we eat our morsel alone. If we make earthly joys and possessions the materials of our sacrifice, they will not only become more joyful and richer, but they will become means of closer union with Him, instead of parting us from Him, as they do when used in selfish disregard of Him.

Nor must we forget the wonderful thought, also mirrored in this piece of ancient ritual, that God delights in men's sacrifices and surrenders and services. 'If I were hungry, I would not tell thee,' said the Psalmist in God's name in regard to outward sacrifices; 'Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?' But he does 'eat' the better sacrifices that loving hearts or obedient wills lay on His altar. He seeks for these, and delights when they are offered to Him. 'He hungered, and seeing a fig tree by the wayside, He came to it.' He still hungers for the fruit that we can yield to Him, and if we will, He will enter in and sup with us, not disdaining to sit at the poor table which we can spread for Him, nor to partake of the humble fare which we can lay upon it, but mending the banquet by what He brings for our nourishment, and hallowing the hour by His presence.

Deuteronomy 18:9-22 Prophets and the Prophet

It is evident from the connection in which the promise of 'a prophet like unto Moses' is here introduced that it does not refer to Jesus only; for it is presented as Israel's continuous defence against the temptation of seeking knowledge of the divine will by the illegitimate methods of divination, soothsaying, necromancy, and the like, which were rampant among the inhabitants of the land. A distant hope of a prophet in the far-off future could afford no motive to shun these superstitions. We cannot understand this passage unless we recognise that the direct reference is to the institution of the prophetic order as the standing means of imparting the reliable knowledge of God's will, possessing which, Israel had no need to turn to them 'that peep and mutter' and bring false oracles from imagined gods. But that primary reference of the words does not exclude, but rather demands, their ultimate reference to Him in whom the divine word is perfectly enshrined, and who is the bright, consummate flower of the prophetic order, which 'spake of Him,' not only in its individual predictions, but by its very existence.

A glance must be given to the exhaustive list of pretenders to knowledge of the future or to power of shaping it magically, which occurs in verses 10, 11 , and suggests a terrible picture of the burdens of superstition which weighed on men in these days of ignorance, as the like burdens do still, wherever Jesus is not known as the one Revealer of God, and the sole Lord of all things. Of the eight terms employed, the first three refer to different means of reading the future, the next two to different means of influencing events, and the last three to different ways of consulting the dead. The first of these eight properly refers to drawing lots, but includes other methods; the second is an obscure word, which is supposed by some to mean a 'murmurer,' and may refer rather to the low mutterings of the soothsayer than to the method of his working; the third is probably a general expression for an interpreter of omens, especially of those given by the play of liquid in a 'cup,' such as Joseph 'divined' by.

Two names for magicians follow, of which the former seems to mean one who worked with charms such as African or American Indian 'medicine men' use, and the latter, one who binds by incantations, or one who ties magic knots, which are supposed to have the power of hindering the designs of the person against whom they are directed. The word employed means 'binding,' and maybe used either literally or metaphorically. The malicious tying of knots in order to work harm is not dead yet in some backward corners of Britain. Then follow three names for traffickers with spirits,—those who raise ghosts as did the witch of Endor, those who have a 'familiar spirit,' and those who in any way consult the dead. It is a grim catalogue, bearing witness to the deep-rooted longing in men to peer into the darkness ahead, and to get some knowledge of the purposes of the awful unseen Power who rules there. The longing is here recognised as legitimate, while the methods are branded as bad, and Israel is warned from them, by being pointed to the merciful divine institution which meets the longing.

It is clear, from this glance at the context, that the 'prophet' promised to Israel must mean the order, not the individual; and it is interesting to note, first, the relation in which that order is presented as standing towards all that rabble of diviners and sorcerers, with their rubbish of charms and muttered spells. It sweeps them off the field, because it is truly what they pretend to be. God knows men's longings, and God will meet them so far as meeting them is for men's good. But the characteristics of the prophet are set in

strong contrast to those of the diviners and magicians, and lift the order high above all the filth and folly of these others. First, the prophet is ‘raised up’ by God; the individual holder of the office has his ‘call’ and does not ‘prophesy out of his own heart.’ The man who takes this office on himself without such a call is ipso facto branded as a false prophet. Then he is ‘from the midst of thee, of thy brethren,’—springing from the people, not an alien, like so many of these wandering soothsayers, but with the national life throbbing in his veins, and himself participant of the thoughts and emotions of his brethren. Then he is to be ‘like unto’ Moses,—not in all points, but in his receiving direct communications from God, and in his authority as God’s messenger. The crowning characteristic, ‘I will put My words into his mouth, and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him,’ invests his words with divine authority, calls for obedience to them as the words of God Himself, widens out his sphere far beyond that of merely foretelling, brings in the moral and religious element which had no place in the oracles of the soothsayer, and opens up the prospect of a continuous progressive revelation throughout the ages (‘all that I shall command him’). We mutilate the grand idea of the prophet in Israel if we think of his work as mainly prediction, and we mutilate it no less if we exclude prediction from it. We mutilate it still more fatally if we try to account for it on naturalistic principles, and fail to see in the prophet a man directly conscious of a divine call, or to hear in his words the solemn accents of the voice of God.

The loftiness and the limitations of ‘the goodly fellowship of the prophets’ alike point onwards to Jesus Christ. In Him, and in Him alone, the idea of the prophet is fully realised. The imperfect embodiments of it in the past were prophecies as well as prophets. The fact that God has ‘spoken unto the fathers by the prophets,’ leads us to expect that He will speak ‘to us in a Son,’ and that not by fragments of His mighty voice, but in one full, eternal, all-embracing and all-sufficient Word. Every divine idea, which has been imperfectly manifested in fragmentary and sinful men and in the material creation, is completely incarnated in Him. He is the King to whom the sins and the saintlinesses of Israel’s kings alike pointed. He is the Priest, whom Aaron and his sons foreshadowed, who perfectly exercises the sympathy which they could only feel partially, because they were compassed with infirmity and self-regard, and who offers the true sacrifice of efficacy higher than ‘the blood of bulls and goats.’ He is the Prophet, who makes all other means of knowing the divine will unnecessary, hearing whom we hear the very voice of God speaking in His gentle words of love, in His authoritative words of command, in His illuminating words of wisdom, and speaking yet more loudly and heart-touchingly in the eloquence of deeds no less than divine; who is ‘not ashamed to call us brethren,’ and is ‘bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh’; who is like, but greater than, the great lawgiver of Israel, being the Son and Lord of the ‘house’ in which Moses was but a servant. ‘To Him give all the prophets witness,’ and the greatest of them was honoured when, with Moses, Elijah stood on the Mount of Transfiguration, subordinate and attesting, and then faded away when the voice proclaimed, ‘This is My beloved Son, hear Him,’—and they ‘saw no one save Jesus only.’

Deuteronomy 28:47, 48 A Choice of Masters

‘Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things; 48. Therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies . . . in want of all things: and He shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until He have destroyed thee.’— DEUT. 28:47, 48

The history of Israel is a picture on the large scale of what befalls every man.

A service—we are all born to obedience, to depend on and follow some person or thing. There is only a choice of services; and he who boasts himself free is but a more abject slave, as the choice for a nation is either the rule of settled order and the sanctities of an established law, or the usurpation of a mob and the intolerable tyranny of unbridled and irresponsible force.

I. The service of God or the service of our enemies.

Israel was the servant in turn of Egypt, Philistia, Edom, Assyria, Babylon, Syria, and Rome. It was every invader’s prey. God’s invisible arm was its only guard from these, and an all-sufficient guard as long as it leaned on Him. When it turned from Him it fell under their yoke. Its lawful Lord loved it; its tyrants hated it.

So with us. We have to serve God or enemies. Our lusts, our passions, the world, evil habits—in a word, our sins ring us round. God is the only defence against them.

The contrast between the one and the many—a king or an ochlocracy. The contrast of the loving Lord and the hostile sins.

II. A service which is honour or a service which is degradation.

God alone is worthy of our absolute submission and service. How low a man sinks when he is ruled by any lesser authority! Such obedience is a crime against the dignity of human nature, and the soul is not without a galling sense of this now and then, when its chains rattle.

III. A service which is freedom because it is rendered by love, or a service which is hard slavery.

‘With joy for the abundance of all things.’ How sin palls upon us, and yet we commit it. The will is overborne, conscience is stifled.

IV. A service which feeds the spirit or a service which starves it.

The soul can only in God get what it wants. Prison fare is what it receives in the other service. The unsatisfying character of all sin; it cloys, and yet leaves one hungry. It is ‘that which satisfieth not.’ ‘Broken cisterns which hold no water.’

V. A service which is life or a service which is death.

The dark forebodings of the text grow darker as it goes on. The grim slavery which it threatens as the only alternative to joyful service of God is declared to be lifelong ‘penal servitude,’ and not only is there no deliverance from it, but it directly tends to wear away the life of the hopeless slaves. For the words that follow our text are ‘and he shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until he have destroyed thee.’ That is dismally true in regard to any and every life that has shaken off the service of God which is perfect freedom, and has persisted in the service of sin. Such service is suicidal; it rivets an iron yoke on our necks, and there is no locksmith who can undo the shackles and lift it off, so long as we refuse to take service with God. Stubbornly rebellious wills forge their own fetters. Like many a slave-owner, our tyrants have a cruel delight in killing their slaves, and our sins not only lead to death, but are themselves death.

But there is a bright possibility before the most down-trodden vassal of sin. ‘The bond-servant abideth not in the house for ever.’ He is not a son of the house, but has been brought into it, stolen from his home. He may be carried back to his Father’s house, and there ‘have bread enough and to spare,’ if a deliverer can be found. And He has been found. Christ the Son makes us free, and if we trust Him for our emancipation we ‘shall be free indeed,’ ‘that we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, should serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.’

Deuteronomy 30:11-20 The Spirit of the Law

This paragraph closes the legislation of this book, the succeeding chapters being in the nature of an epilogue or appendix. It sums up the whole law, makes plain its inmost essence and its tremendous alternatives. As in the closing strains of some great symphony, the themes which have run through the preceding movements are woven together in the final burst of music. Let us try to discover the component threads of the web.

The first point to note is the lofty conception of the true essence of the whole law, which is enshrined here. ‘This commandment which I command thee this day’ is twice defined in the section (vs. 16, 20), and in both instances ‘to love Jehovah thy God’ is presented as the all-important precept. Love is recognised as the great commandment. Leviticus may deal with minute regulations for worship, but these are subordinate, and the sovereign commandment is love. Nor is the motive which should sway to love omitted; for what a tender drawing by the memories of what He had done for Israel is put forth in the name of ‘Jehovah, thy God!’ The Old Testament system is a spiritual system, and it too places the very heart of religion in love to God, drawn out by the contemplation of his self-revelation in his loving dealings with us. We have here clearly recognised that the obedience which pleases God is obedience born of love, and that the love which really sets towards God will, like a powerful stream, turn all the wheels of life in conformity to His will. When Paul proclaimed that ‘love is the fulfilling of the law,’ he was only repeating the teaching of this passage, when it puts ‘to walk in His ways,’ or ‘to obey His voice,’ after ‘to love Jehovah thy God.’ Obedience is the result and test of love; love is the only parent of real obedience.

The second point strongly insisted on here is the blessedness of possessing such a knowledge as the law gives. Verses 11-14 present that thought in three ways. The revelation is not that of duties far beyond our capacity: ‘It is not too hard for thee.’ No doubt, complete conformity with it is beyond our powers, and entire, whole-hearted, and whole-souled love of God is not attained even by those who love Him most. Paul’s position that the law gives the knowledge of sin, just because it presents an impossible elevation in its ideal, is not opposed to the point of view of this context; for he is thinking of complete conformity as impossible, while it is thinking of real, though imperfect, obedience as within the reach of all men. No man can love as he ought; every man can love. It is blessed to have our obligations all gathered into such a commandment.

Again, the possession of the law is a blessing, because its authoritative voice ends the weary quest after some reliable guide to conduct, and we need neither try to climb to heaven, nor to traverse the wide world and cross the ocean, to find certitude and enlightenment enough for our need. They err who think of God’s commandments as grievous burdens; they are merciful guide-posts. They do not so much lay weights on our backs as give light to our eyes.

Still further, the law has its echo ‘in thy heart.’ It is ‘graven on the fleshly tables of the heart,’ and we all respond to it when it gathers up all duty into ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God,’ and our consciences say to it, ‘Thou speakest well.’ The worst man knows it better than the best man keeps it. Blurred and illegible often, like the half-defaced inscriptions disinterred from the rubbish mounds that once were Nineveh or Babylon, that law remains written on the hearts of all men.

A further point to be well laid to heart is the merciful plainness and emphasis with which the issues that are suspended on obedience or disobedience are declared. The solemn alternatives are before every man that hears. Life or death, blessing or cursing, are held out to him, and it is for him to elect which shall be realised in his case. Of course, it may be said that the words 'life' and 'death' are here used in their merely physical sense, and that the context shows (vs. 17, 18) that life here means only 'length of days, that thou mayest dwell in the land.' No doubt that is so, though we can scarcely refuse to see some glimmer of a deeper conception gleaming through the words, 'He is thy life,' though it is but a glimmer. We have no space here to enter upon the question of how far it is now true that obedience brings material blessings. It was true for Israel, as many a sad experience that it was a bitter as well as an evil thing to forsake Jehovah was to show in the future. But though the connection between well-doing and material gain is not so clear now, it is by no means abrogated, either for nations or for individuals. Moral and religious law has social and economic consequences, and though the perplexed distribution of earthly good and ill often bewilders faith and emboldens scepticism, there still is visible in human affairs a drift towards recompensing in the world the righteous and the wicked.

But to us, with our Christian consciousness, 'life' means more than living, and 'He is our life' in a deeper and more blessed sense than that our physical existence is sustained by His continual energy. The love of God and consequent union with Him give us the only true life. Jesus is 'our life,' and He enters the spirit which opens to Him by faith, and communicates to it a spark of His own immortal life. He that is joined to Jesus lives; he that is separated from Him 'is dead while he liveth.'

The last point here is the solemn responsibility for choosing one's part, which the revelation of the law brings with it. 'I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse, therefore choose life.' We each determine for ourselves whether the knowledge of what we ought to be will lead to life or to death, and by choosing obedience we choose life. Every ray of light from God is capable of producing a double effect. It either gladdens or pains, it either gives vision or blindness. The gospel, which is the perfect revelation of God in Christ, brings every one of us face to face with the great alternative, and urgently demands from each his personal act of choice whether he will accept it or neglect or reject it. Not to choose to accept is to choose to reject. To do nothing is to choose death. The knowledge of the law was not enough, and neither is an intellectual reception of the gospel. The one bred Pharisees, who were 'whited sepulchres'; the other breeds orthodox professors, who have 'a name to live and are dead.' The clearer our light, the heavier our responsibility. If we are to live, we have to 'choose life'; and if we do not, by the vigorous exercise of our will, turn away from earth and self, and take Jesus for our Saviour and Lord, loving and obeying whom we love and obey God, we have effectually chosen a worse death than that of the body, and flung away a better life than that of earth.

Deuteronomy 32:9 God's True Treasure in Man

The Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.'— Deut 32:9

'Jesus Christ (Who) gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people.'— Titus 2:14 .

I choose these two texts because they together present us with the other side of the thought to that which I have elsewhere considered, that man's true treasure is in God. That great axiom of the religious consciousness, which pervades the whole of Scripture, is rapturously expressed in many a psalm, and never more assuredly than in that one which struggles up from the miry clay in which the Psalmist's 'steps had well-nigh slipped' and soars and sings thus: 'The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup; Thou maintainest my lot,' 'The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.'

You observe the correspondence between these words and those of my first text: 'The Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.' The correspondence in the original is not quite so marked as it is in our Authorised Version, but still the idea in the two passages is the same. Now it is plain that persons can possess persons only by love, sympathy, and communion. From that it follows that the possession must be mutual; or, in other words, that only he can say 'Thou art mine' who can say 'I am Thine.' And so to possess God, and to be possessed by God, are but two ways of putting the same fact. 'The Lord is the portion of His people, and the Lord's portion is His people,' are only two ways of stating the same truth.

Then my second text clearly quotes the well-known utterance that lies at the foundation of the national life of Israel: 'Ye shall be unto Me a peculiar treasure above all people,' and claims that privilege, like all Israel's privileges, for the Christian Church. In like manner Peter (see note 1 Peter 2:9) quotes the same words, 'a peculiar people,' as properly applying to Christians. I need scarcely remind you that 'peculiar' here is used in its proper original sense of belonging to, or, as the Revised Version gives it, 'a people for God's own possession' and has no trace of the modern signification of 'singular.' Similarly we find Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians giving both sides of the idea of the inheritance in intentional juxtaposition, when he speaks (see note Ephesians 1:14) of the 'earnest of our inheritance . . . unto the redemption of God's own possession.' In the words before us we have the same idea; and this text besides tells us how Christ, the Revealer of God, wins men for Himself, and what manner of men they must be whom He counts as His.

Therefore there are, as I take it, three things to be spoken about now. First, God has a special ownership in some people. Second, God owns these people because He has given Himself to them. Third, God possesses, and is possessed by, His inheritance, that He may give and receive services of love. Or, in briefer words, I have to speak about this wonderful thought of a special divine ownership, what it rests upon, and what it involves.

I. God has special ownership in some people.

'The Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.' Put side by side with those other words of the Old Testament: 'All souls are Mine,' or the utterance of the 100th Psalm rightly translated: 'It is He that hath made us, and to Him we belong.' There is a right of absolute and utter ownership and possession inherent in the very relation of Creator and creature; so that the being made is wholly and altogether at the disposal, and is the property, of Him that makes him.

But is that enough for God's heart? Is that worth calling ownership at all? An arbitrary tyrant in an unconstitutional kingdom, or a slave-owner, may have the most absolute right of property over his subject or his slave; may have the right of entire disposal of all his industry, of the profit of all his labour; may be able to do anything he likes with him, may have the power of life and death; but such ownership is only of the husk and case of a man: the man himself may be free, and may smile at the claim of possession. 'They may ' own ' the body, and after that have no more than they can do.' That kind of authority and ownership, absolute and utter, to the point of death, may satisfy a tyrant or a slave-driver, it does not satisfy the loving heart of God. It is not real possession at all. In what sense did Nero own Paul when he shut him up in prison, and cut his head off? Does the slave-owner own the man whom he whips within an inch of his life, and who dare not do anything without his permission? Does God, in any sense that corresponds with the longing of infinite love, own the men that reluctantly obey Him, and are simply, as it were, tools in His hands? He covets and longs for a deeper relationship and tenderer ties, and though all creatures are His, and all men are His servants and His possession, yet, like certain regiments in our own British army, there are some who have the right to bear in a special manner on their uniform and on their banners the emblazonment, 'The King's Own.' 'The Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.'

Well, then, the next thought is that the special relationship of possession is constituted by mutual love. I said at the beginning of these remarks that as concerns men's relations, the only real possession is through love, sympathy, and communion, and that that must necessarily be mutual. We have a perfect right to apply the human analogy here; in fact, we are bound to do it if we would rightly understand such words as those of my text; and it just leads us to this, that the one thing whereby God reckons that He possesses a man at all is when His love falls upon that man's heart and soaks into it, and when there springs up in the heart a corresponding emotion and affection. The men who welcome the divine love that goes through the whole world, seeking such to worship it, and to trust it, and to become its own; and who therefore lovingly yield to the loving divine will, and take it for their law—these are the men whom He regards as His 'portion' and 'the lot of His inheritance.' So that God is mine, and that 'I am God's,' are two ends of one truth; 'I possess Him,' and 'I am possessed by Him,' are but the statement of one fact expressed from two points of view. In the one case you look upon it from above, in the other case you look upon it from beneath. All the sweet commerce of mutual surrender and possession which makes the joy of our hearts, in friendship and in domestic life, we have the right to lift up into this loftier region, and find in it the last teaching of what makes the special bond of mutual possession between God and man.

And deep words of Scripture point in that direction. Those parables of our Lord's: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, in their infinite beauty, whilst they contain a great deal besides this, do contain this in their several ways; the money, the animal, the man belong to the woman of the house, to the shepherd, to the father. Each is 'lost' in a different fashion, but the most clear revelation is given in the last parable of the three, which explains the other two. The son was 'lost' when he did not love the father; and he was 'found' by the father when he returned the yearning of the father's heart.

And so, dear brethren, it ever is; the one thing that knits men to God is that the silken cord of love let down from Heaven should by our own hand be wrapped round our own hearts, and then we are united to Him. We are His and He is ours by the double action of His love manifested by Him, and His love received by us.

Now there is nothing in all that of favouritism. The declaration that there are people who have a special relationship to the divine heart may be so stated as to have a very ugly look, and it often has been so stated as to be nothing more than self-complacent Pharisaism, which values a privilege principally because its possession is an insult to somebody else that has it not.

There has been plenty of Christianity of that sort in the world, but there is nothing of it in the thoughts of these texts rightly looked at. There is only this: it cannot but be that men who yield to God and love Him, and try to live near Him and to do righteousness, are His in a manner that those who steel themselves against Him and turn away from Him are not. Whilst all creatures have a place in His heart, and are flooded with His benefits, and get as much of Him as they can hold, the men who recognise the source of their blessing, and turn to it with grateful hearts, are nearer Him than those that do not do so. Let us take care, lest for the sake of seeming to preserve the impartiality of His love, we have destroyed all in Him that makes His love worth having. If to Him the good and the bad, the men who fear Him and the men who fear Him not, are equally satisfactory, and, in the same manner, the objects of

an equal love, then He is not a God that has pleasure in righteousness; and if He is not a God that 'has pleasure in righteousness,' He is not a God for us to trust to. We are not giving countenance to the notion that God has any step-children, any petted members of His family, when we cleave to this—they that have welcomed His love into their hearts are nearer to Him than those that have closed the door against it.

And there is one more point here about this matter of ownership on which I dwell for a moment, namely, that this conception of certain men being in a special sense God's possession and inheritance means also that He has a special delight in, and lofty appreciation of, them. All this material creation exists for the sake of growing good men and women. That is the use of the things that are seen and temporal; they are like greenhouses built for the great Gardener's use in striking and furthering the growth of His plants; and when He has got the plants He has got what He wanted, and you may pull the greenhouse down if you like. And so God estimates, and teaches us to estimate, the relative value and greatness of the material and the spiritual in this fashion, that He says to us in effect: 'All these magnificences and magnitudes round you are small and vulgar as compared with this—a heart in which wisdom and divine truth and the love and likeness of God have attained to some tolerable measure of maturity and of strength.' These are His 'jewels,' as the Roman matron said about her two boys. The great Father looks upon the men that love Him as His jewels, and, having got the jewels, the rock in which they were embedded and preserved may be crushed when you like. 'They shall be Mine,' saith the Lord, 'My treasures in that day of judgment which I make.'

And so, my brother, all the insignificance of man, as compared with the magnitude and duration of the universe, need not stagger our faith that the divinest thing in the universe is a heart that has learnt to love God and aspires after Him, and should but increase our wonder and our gratitude that He has been mindful of man and has visited him, in order that He might give Himself to men, and so might win men for Himself.

II. That brings me, and very briefly, to the other points that I desire to deal with now. The second one, which is suggested to us from my second text in the Epistle to Titus, is that this possession, by God, of man, like man's possession of God, comes because God has given Himself to man.

The Apostle puts it very strongly in the Epistle to Titus: 'The glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us that He might purify unto Himself a people for a possession .' Israel, according to one metaphor, was God's 'son,' begotten by that great redeeming act of deliverance from the captivity of Egypt (Deut. 32:6-19). According to another metaphor, Israel was God's bride, wooed and won for His own by that same act. Both of these figures point to the thought that in order to get man for His own He has to give Himself to man.

And the very height and sublimity of that truth is found in the Christian fact which the Apostle points to here. We need not depart from human analogies here either. Christ gave Himself to us that He might acquire us for Himself. Absolute possession of others is only possible at the price of absolute surrender to them. No human heart ever gave itself away unless it was convinced that the heart to which it gave itself had given itself to it.

And on the lower levels of gratitude and obligation, the only thing that binds a man to another in utter submission is the conviction that that other has given himself in absolute sacrifice for him. A doctor goes into the wards of an hospital with his life in his hands, and because he does, he wins the full confidence and affection of those whom he treats. You cannot buy a heart with anything less than a heart. In the barter of the world it is not 'skin for skin,' but it is 'self for self'; and if you want to own me, you must give yourself altogether to me. And the measure in which teachers and guides and preachers and philanthropists of all sorts make conquests of men is the measure in which they make themselves sacrifices for men.

Now all that is true, and is lifted to its superlative truth, in the great central fact of the Christian faith. But there is more than human analogy here. Christ is not only self-sacrifice in the sense of surrender, but He is sacrifice in the sense of giving Himself for our redemption and forgiveness. He has not only given Himself to us, He has given Himself for us. And there, and on that, is builded, and on that alone has He a right to build, or have we a right to yield to it, His claim to absolute authority and utter command over each of us.

He has died for us, therefore the springs of our life are at His disposal; and the strongest motives which can sway our lives are set in motion by His touch. His death, says this text, redeems us from iniquity and purifies us. That points to its power in delivering us from the service and practice of sin. He buys us from the despot whose slaves we were, and makes us His own in the hatred of evil and the doing of righteousness. Moved by His death, we become capable of heroisms and martyrdoms of devotion to Him. Brethren, it is only as that self-sacrificing love touches us, which died for our sins upon the Cross, that the diabolical chain of selfishness will be broken from our affections and our wills, and we shall be led into the large place of glad surrender of ourselves to the sweetness and the gentle authority of His omnipotent love.

III. The last thought that I suggest is the issues to which this mutual possession points. God owns men, and is owned by them, in order that there may be a giving and receiving of mutual services of love.

‘The Lord’s portion is His people.’ That in the Old Testament is always laid as the foundation of certain obligations under which He has come, and which He will abundantly discharge. What is a great landlord expected to do to his estate? ‘What ought I to have done to my vineyard?’ the divine Proprietor asks through the mouth of His servant the prophet. He ought to till it, He ought not to starve it, He ought to fence it, He ought to cast a wall about it, He ought to reap the fruits. And He does all that for His inheritance. God’s honour is concerned in His portion not being waste. It is not to be a ‘garden of the sluggard,’ by which people who pass can see the thorns growing there. So He will till it, He will plough it, He will pick out the weeds, and all the disciplines of life will come to us, and the ploughshare will be driven deep into the heart, that ‘the peaceable fruit of righteousness’ may spring up. He will fence His vineyard. Round about His inheritance His hand will be cast, within His people His Spirit will dwell. No harm shall come near thee if thy love is given to Him; safe and untouched by evil thou shalt walk if thou walk with God. ‘He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of Mine eye.’ The soul that trusts Him He takes in charge, and before any evil can fall to it ‘the pillared firmament must be rottenness, and earth be built on stubble.’ ‘He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.’ ‘The Lord’s portion is His people,’ and ‘none shall pluck them out of His hand.’

And on the other side, we belong to God in Christ. What do we owe Him? What does the vineyard owe the husbandman? Fruit. We are His, therefore we are bound to absolute submission. ‘Ye are not your own.’ Life, circumstances, occupations, all—we hold them at His will. We have no more right of property in anything than a slave in the bad old days had in his cabin and patch of ground. They belonged to the master to whom he belonged. Let us recognise our stewardship, and be glad to know ourselves His, and all events and things which we sometimes think ours, His also.

We are His, therefore we owe absolute trust. The slave has at least this blessing in his lot, that he need have no anxieties; nor need we. We belong to God, and He will take care of us. A rich man’s horses and dogs are well cared for, and our Owner will not leave us unheeded. Our well-being involves His good name. Leave anxious thought to masterless hearts which have to front the world with nobody at their backs. If you are God’s you will be looked after.

We are His, therefore we are bound to live to His praise. That is the conclusion which one Old Testament passage draws. ‘This people have I formed for Myself; they shall show forth My praise’ (Isaiah xliii. 21). The Apostle Peter quotes these words immediately after those from Exodus, which describe Israel as ‘a people for God’s own possession,’ when he says ‘that ye should show forth the praise of Him who hath called you.’ Let us, then, live to His glory, and remember that the servants of the King are bound to stand to their colours amid rebels, and that they who know the sweetness of possessing God, and the blessedness of yielding to His supreme control, should acknowledge what they have found of His goodness, and ‘tell forth the honour of His name, and make His praise glorious.’ Let not all the magnificent and wonderful expenditure of divine longing and love be in vain, nor run off your hearts like water poured upon a rock. Surely the sun’s flames leaping leagues high, they tell us, in tongues of burning gas, must melt everything that is near them. Shall we keep our hearts sullen and cold before such a fire of love? Surely that superb and wonderful manifestation of the love of God in the Cross of Christ should melt into running rivers of gratitude all the ice of our hearts.

‘He gave Himself for me!’ Let us turn to Him and say: ‘Lo! I give myself to Thee. Thou art mine. Make me Thine by the constraint of Thy love, so utterly, and so saturate my spirit with Thyself, that it shall not only be Thine, but in a very deep sense it shall be Thee, and that it may be “no more I that live, but Christ that liveth in me.”’

Deuteronomy 32:11 The Eagle and Its Brood

‘As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings.’—DEUT.32:11

This is an incomplete sentence in the Authorised Version, but really it should be rendered as a complete one; the description of the eagle’s action including only the two first clauses, and (the figure being still retained) the person spoken of in the last clauses being God Himself. That is to say, it should read thus, ‘As an eagle stirreth up his nest, fluttereth over his young, He spreads abroad His wings, takes them, bears them on His pinions.’ That is far grander, as well as more compact, than the somewhat dragging comparison which, according to the Authorised Version, is spread over the whole verse and tardily explained, in the following, by a clause introduced by an unwarranted ‘So’—‘the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him.’

Now, of course, we all know that the original reference of these words is to the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, and their training in the desert. In the solemn address by Jehovah at the giving of the law (Exodus xix. 4), the same metaphor is employed, and, no doubt, that passage was the source of the extended imagery here. There we read, ‘Ye know what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto Myself.’ The meaning of the glowing metaphor, with its vivid details, is just that Jehovah brought Israel out of its fixed abode in Goshen, and trained it for mature national life by its varied desert experiences. As one of the prophets puts the same idea, ‘I taught Ephraim to go,’ where the figure of the parent bird training its callow fledglings for flight is exchanged for that of the nurse teaching a child to walk. While, then, the text primarily refers to the experience of the infant nation in the forty years’ wanderings, it carries large truths about us all; and sets forth the true meaning and importance of life.

There seem to me to be three thoughts here, which I desire to touch on briefly: first, a great thought about God; then an illuminating thought about the true meaning and aspect of life; and lastly a calming thought about the variety of the methods by which God carries out our training.

I. Here is a great thought about God.

Now, it may come as something of a shock if I say that the bird that is selected for the comparison is not really the eagle, but one which, in our estimation, is of a very much lower order—viz. the carnivorous vulture. But a poetical emblem is not the less fitting, though, besides the points of resemblance, the thing which is so used has others less noble. Our modern repugnance to the vulture as feeding on carcasses was probably not felt by the singer of this song. What he brings into view are the characteristics common to the eagle and the vulture; superb strength in beak and claw, keenness of vision almost incredible, magnificent sweep of pinion and power of rapid, unwearied flight. And these characteristics, we may say, have their analogues in the divine nature, and the emblem not unfitly shadows forth one aspect of the God of Israel, who is 'fearful in praises,' who is strong to destroy as well as to save, whose all-seeing eye marks every foul thing, and who often pounces on it swiftly to rend it to pieces, though the sky seemed empty a moment before.

But the action described in the text is not destructive, terrible, or fierce. The monarch of the sky busies itself with tender cares for its brood. Then, there is gentleness along with the terribleness. The strong beak and claw, the gaze that can see so far, and the mighty spread of wings that can lift it till it is an invisible speck in the blue vault, go along with the instinct of paternity: and the fledglings in the nest look up at the fierce beak and bright eyes, and know no terror. The impression of this blending of power and gentleness is greatly deepened, as it seems to me, if we notice that it is the male bird that is spoken about in the text, which should be rendered: 'As the eagle stirreth up his nest and fluttereth over his young.'

So we just come to the thought that we must keep the true balance between these two aspects of that great divine nature—the majesty, the terror, the awfulness, the soaring elevation, the all-penetrating vision, the power of the mighty pinion, one stroke of which could crush a universe into nothing; and, on the other side, the yearning instinct of Fatherhood, the love and gentleness, and all the tender ministries for us, His children, to which these lead. Brethren, unless we keep hold of both of these in due equipoise and inseparably intertwining, we damage the one which we retain almost as much as the one which we dismiss. For there is no love like the love that is strong, and can be fierce, and there is no condescension like the condescension of Him who is the Highest, in order that He may be, and because He is ready to be, the lowest. Modern tendencies, legitimately recoiling from the one-sidedness of a past generation, are now turning away far too much from the Old Testament conceptions of Jehovah, which are concentrated in that metaphor of the vulture in the sky. And thereby we destroy the love, in the name of which we scout the wrath.

'Infinite mercy, but, I wis,
As infinite a justice too.'
'As the vulture stirreth up his nest,

'—that is the Old Testament revelation of the terribleness and gentleness of Jehovah. 'How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wing?'—that is the New Testament modification of the image. But you never could have had the New unless you first had had the Old. And you are a foolish man if, in the name of the sanctity of the New, you cast away the teaching of the Old. Keep both the metaphors, and they will explain and confirm each other.

II. Here we have an illuminating thought of the meaning of life.

What is it all for? To teach us to fly, to exercise our half-fledged wings in short flights, that may prepare us for, and make it possible to take, longer ones. Every event that befalls us has a meaning beyond itself; and every task that we have to do reacts upon us, the doers, and either fits or hinders us for larger work. Life as a whole, and in its minutest detail, is worthy of God to give, and worthy of us to possess, only if we recognise the teaching that is put into picturesque form in this text—that the meaning of all which God does to us is to train us for something greater yonder. Life as a whole is 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,' unless it is an apprenticeship training. What are we here for? To make character. That is the aim and end of all—to make character; to get experience; to learn the use of our tools. I declare it seems to me that the world had better be wiped out altogether, incontinently, unless there is a world beyond, where a man shall use the force which here he made his own. 'Thou hast been faithful in a few things; behold I will make thee ruler over many things.' No man gets to the heart of the mystery of life or has in his hand the key which will enable him to unlock all the doors and difficulties of human experience, unless he gets to this—that it is all meant as training.

If we could only carry that clear conviction with us day by day into the little things of life, what different things these, which we call the monotonous trifles of our daily duties, would become! The things may be small and unimportant, but the way in which we do them is not unimportant. The same fidelity may be exercised, and must be brought to bear, in order to do the veriest trifle of our daily lives rightly, as needs to be invoked, in order to get us safely through the crises and great times of life. There are no great principles for

great duties, and little ones for little duties. We have to regulate all our conduct by the same laws. Life is built up of trifles, as mica-flakes, if there be enough of them, make the Alpine summits towering thousands of feet into the blue. Character may be manifested in the great moments, but it is made in the small ones. So, life is meant for discipline, and unless we use it for that, however much enjoyment we get out of it, we misuse it.

III. Lastly, there is here a calming thought as to the variety of God's methods with us.

'As the eagle stirreth up his nest.' No doubt the callow brood are much warmer and more comfortable in the nest than when they are turned out of it. The Israelites were by no means enamoured with the prospect of leaving the flesh-pots and the onions and the farmhouses that they had got for themselves in Goshen, to tramp with their cattle through the wilderness. They went after Moses with considerable disinclination.

Here we have, then, as the first thing needed, God's loving compulsion to effort. To 'stir up the nest' means to make a man uncomfortable where he is;—sometimes by the prickings of his conscience, which are often the voices of God's Spirit; sometimes by changes of circumstances, either for the better or for the worse; and oftentimes by sorrows. The straw is pulled out of the nest, and it is not so comfortable to lie in; or a bit of it develops a sharp point that runs into the half-feathered skin, and makes the fledgling glad to come forth into the air. We all shrink from change. What should we do if we had it not? We should stiffen into habits that would dwarf and weaken us. We all recoil from storms. What should we do if we had them not? Sea and air would stagnate, and become heavy and putrid and pestilential, if it were not for the wild west wind and the hurtling storms. So all our changes, instead of being whimpered over, and all our sorrows, instead of being taken reluctantly, should be recognised as being what they are, loving summonses to effort. Then their pressure would be modified, and their blessing would be secured when their purpose was served.

But the training of the father-eagle is not confined to stirring up the nest. What is to become of the young ones when they get out of it, and have never been accustomed to bear themselves up in the invisible ether about them? So 'he fluttereth over his young.' It is a very beautiful word that is employed here, which 'flutter' scarcely gives us. It is the same word that is used in the first chapter of Genesis, about the Spirit of God ' brooding on the face of the waters'; and it suggests how near, how all-protecting with expanded wings, the divine Father comes to the child whose restfulness He has disturbed.

And is not that true? Had you ever trouble that you took as from Him, which did not bring that hovering presence nearer you, until you could almost feel the motion of the wing, and be brushed by it as it passed protectingly above your head? Ah, yes! 'Stirring the nest' is meant to be the precursor of closer approach of the Father to us; and if we take our changes and our sorrows as loving summonses from Him to effort, be sure that we shall realise Him as near to us, in a fashion that we never did before.

That is not all. There is sustaining power. 'He spreadeth abroad his wings; he taketh them; beareth them on his wings.' On those broad pinions we are lifted, and by them we are guarded. It matters little whether the belief that the parent bird thus carries the young, when wearied with their short flights, is correct or not. The truth which underlies the representation is what concerns us. The beautiful metaphor is a picturesque way of saying, 'In all their afflictions He was afflicted; and the Angel of His presence saved them.' It is a picturesque way of saying, 'Thou canst do all things through Christ which strengtheneth thee.' And we may be very sure that if we let Him 'stir up our nests' and obey His loving summons to effort, He will come very near to strengthen us for our attempts, and to bear us up when our own weak wings fail. The Psalmist sang that angels' hands should bear up God's servant. That is little compared with this promise of being carried heavenwards on Jehovah's own pinions. A vile piece of Greek mythology tells how Jove once, in the guise of an eagle, bore away a boy between his great wings. It is foul where it stands, but it is blessedly true about Christian experience. If only we lay ourselves on God's wings—and that not in idleness, but having ourselves tried our poor little flight —He will see that no harm comes to us.

During life this training will go on; and after life, what then? Then, in the deepest sense, the old word will be true, 'Ye know how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to Myself '; and the great promise shall be fulfilled, when the half-fledged young brood are matured and full grown, 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.'

Deuteronomy 32:31 Their Rock and Our Rock

'Their rock is not as our Rock, even our enemies themselves being Judges.'— DEUT. 32:31 .

Moses is about to leave the people whom he had led so long, and his last words are words of solemn warning. He exhorts them to cleave to God. The words of the text simply mean that the history of the nation had sufficiently proved that God, their God, was 'above all gods.' The Canaanites and all the enemies whom Israel had fought had been beaten, and in their awe of this warrior people acknowledged that their idols had found their lord. The great suit of 'Jehovah versus Idols' has long since been decided. Every one acknowledges that Christianity is the only religion possible for twentieth century men. But the words of the text lend themselves to a wider application, and clothe in a picturesque garb the universal truth that the experience of godless men proves the

futility of their objects of trust, when compared with that of him whose refuge is in God.

I. God is a Rock to them that trust Him.

We note the singular frequency of that designation in this song, in which it occurs six times. It is also found often in the Psalms. If Moses were the singer, we might see in this often-repeated metaphor a trace of influence of the scenery of the Sinaitic peninsula, which would he doubly striking to eyes accustomed to the alluvial plains of Egypt. What are the aspects of the divine nature set forth by this name?

(1) Firm foundation: the solid eternity of the rock on which we can build.

Petra: faithfulness to promises, unchanging.

(2) Refuge: 'refuge from the storm'; 'my rock and my fortress and my high tower.'

(3) Refreshment: rock from which water gushed out; and (4) Repose: 'shadow of a great rock'; 'shadow from the heat.'

Trace the image through Scripture, from this song till Christ's parable of the man who 'built his house on a rock.'

(**Ed note**: **Christ, the Rock, the Stone** - Click here for Scripture chain & chart (would make a great Sunday School series)

II. Every man's experience shows him that there is no such refuge anywhere else.

We do not assert that every man consciously comes to that conclusion. All we say is that he would do so if he rightly pondered the facts. The history of every life is a history of disappointment. Take these particulars just stated and ask yourselves: What does experience say as to the possibility of our possessing such blessings apart from God? There is no need for us to exaggerate, for the naked reality is sad enough. If God is not our best Good, we have no solid good. Every other 'rock' crumbles into sand. Else why this restless change, why this disquiet, why the constant repetition, generation after generation, of the old, old wail, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'? Why does every heart say Amen to the poet and the dramatist singing of 'the fever and the fret,' the tragic fare of man's life?

Our appeal is not to men in the flush of excitement, but to them in their hours of solitary sane reflection. It is from 'Philip drunk to Philip sober.' We each have material for judging in our own case, and in the cases of some others. The experiment of living with other 'rocks' than God has been tried for millenniums now. What has been the issue? You know what Christianity claims that it can do to make a life stable and safe. Do you know anything else that can? You know what Christian men will calmly say that they have found. Can you say as much? Let us hear some dying testimonies. Hearken to Jacob: 'The God which hath fed me all my life long unto this day, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil.' Hearken to Moses: 'The Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are judgment, a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is He.' Hearken to Joshua: 'Not one good thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake.' Hearken to David: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . .. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.' Hearken to Paul: 'The Lord stood by me and strengthened me, and I was delivered . . . the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and will save me unto His heavenly kingdom.' What man who has chosen to take refuge or build on men and creatures can look backward and forward in such fashion?

III. Every man's own nature tells him that God is his true Rock.

Again I say that here I do not appeal to the surface of our consciousness, nor to men who have sophisticated themselves, nor to people who have sinned themselves, into hardness, but to the voice of the inner man which speaks in the depths of each man's being.

There is the cry of Want: the manifest want of the soul for God.

There is the voice of Reason.

There is the voice of Conscience.

IV. Yet many of us will not take God for our Rock.

Surely it is a most extraordinary thing that men should be 'judges,' being convinced in their deepest consciousness that God is the only Foundation and Refuge, and yet that the conviction should have absolutely no influence on their conduct. The same stark, staring inconsequence is visible in many other departments of life, but in this region it works its most tragic results. The message which many of my hearers need most is—follow out your deepest convictions, and be true to the inward voice which condenses all your experience into the one counsel to take God for the 'strength of your hearts and your portion for ever,' for only in Him will you find what you need for life and strength and riches. If He is 'our Rock,' then we shall have a firm foundation, a safe refuge, inexhaustible refreshment and untroubled rest. Lives founded on aught beside are built on sand and will be full of tremors and

unsettlements, and at last the despairing builder and his ruined house will be washed away with the dissolving ‘sandbank and shoal of time’ on which he built.

Deuteronomy 33:3 God and His Saints

‘He loved the people; all His saints are in Thy hand: and they sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words.’— DEUT. xxxiii. 3

The great ode of which these words are a part is called ‘the blessing wherewith Moses blessed the children of Israel before his death.’ It is mainly an invocation of blessing from Heaven on the various tribes, but it begins, as the national existence of Israel began, with the revelation of God on Sinai, and it lays that as the foundation of everything. It does not matter, for my purposes, in the smallest degree, who was the author of this great song. Whoever he was, he has, by dint of divine inspiration and of his own sympathy with the inmost spirit of the Old Covenant, anticipated the deepest things of Christian truth; and these are here in the words of our text.

I. The first thing that I would point out is the Divine Love which is the foundation of all.

‘He loved the people.’ That is the beginning of everything. The word that this singer uses is one that only appears in this place, and if we regard its etymology, there lies in it a very tender and beautiful expression of the warmth of the divine love, for it is probably connected with words in an allied language which mean the bosom and a tender embrace , and so the picture that we have is of that great divine Lover folding ‘the people’ to His heart, as a mother might her child, and cherishing them in His bosom.

Still further, the word is in a form in the Hebrew which implies that the act spoken about is neither past, present, nor future only, but continuous and perpetual. Thus it suggests to us the thought of timeless, eternal love, which has no beginning, and therefore has no end, which does not grow, and therefore will never decline nor decay, but which runs on upon one lofty level, with neither ups nor downs, and with no variation of the impulse which sends it forth; always the same, and always holding its objects in the fervent embrace of which the text speaks.

Further, mark the place in this great song where this thought comes in. As I said, it is laid as the beginning of everything. ‘We love Him because He first loved us’ was the height to which the last of the Apostles attained in the last of his writings. But this old singer, with the mists of antiquity around him, who knew nothing about the Cross, nothing about the historical Christ, who had only that which modern thinkers tell us is a revelation of a wrathful God, somehow or other rose to the height of the evangelical conception of God’s love as the foundation of the very existence of a people who are His. Like an orchid growing on a block of dry wood and putting forth a gorgeous bloom, this singer, with so much less to feed his faith than we have, has yet borne this fair flower of deep and devout insight into the secret of things and the heart of God. ‘He loved the people’— therefore He formed them for Himself; therefore He brought them out of bondage; therefore He came down in flashing fire on Sinai and made known His will, which to know and do is life. All begins from the tender, timeless love of God.

And if the question is asked, Why does God thus love? the only answer is, Because he is God. ‘Not for your sakes, O house of Israel . . . but for Mine own name’s sake.’ The love of God is self-originated. In it, as in all His acts, He is His own motive, as His name, ‘I am that I am,’ proclaims. It is inseparable from His being, and flows forth before, and independent of, anything in the creature which could draw it out. Men’s love is attracted by their perception or their imagination of something loveable in its objects. It is like a well, where there has to be much work of the pump-handle before the gush comes. God’s love is like an artesian well, or a fountain springing up from unknown depths in obedience to its own impulse. All that we can say is, ‘Thou art God. It is Thy nature and property to be merciful.’

‘God loved the people.’ The bed-rock is the spontaneous, unalterable, inexhaustible, ever-active, fervent love of God, like that with which a mother clasps her child to her maternal breast. The fair flower of this great thought was a product of Judaism. Let no man say that the God of Love is unknown to the Old Testament.

II. Notice how, with this for a basis, we have next the guardian care extended to all those that answer love by love.

The singer goes on to say, mixing up his pronouns, in the fashion of Hebrew poetry, somewhat arbitrarily, ‘all His saints are in Thy hand.’ Now, what is a ‘saint’? A man who answers God’s love by his love. The notion of a saint has been marred and mutilated by the Church and the world. It has been taken as a special designation of certain selected individuals, mostly of the ascetic and monastic type, whereas it belongs to every one of God’s people. It has been taken by the world to mean sanctimoniousness and not sanctity, and is a term of contempt rather than of admiration on their lips. And even those of us, who have got beyond thinking that it is a title of honour belonging only to the aristocracy of Christ’s Kingdom, are too apt to mistake what it really does mean. It may be useful to say a word about the Scriptural use and true meaning of that much-abused term. The root idea of sanctity or holiness is not moral character, goodness of disposition and of action, but it is separation from the world and consecration to God. As surely as a

magnet applied to a heap of miscellaneous filings will pick out every little bit of iron there, so surely will that love which He bears to the people, when it is responded to, draw to itself, and therefore draw out of the heap, the men that feel its impulse and its preciousness. And so ‘saint’ means, secondly, righteous and pure, but it means, first, knit to God, separated from evil, and separated by the power of His received love.

Now, brethren, here is a question for each of us: Do I yield to that timeless, tender clasp of the divine Father and Mother in one? Do I answer it by my love? If I do, then I am a ‘saint,’ because I belong to Him, and He belongs to me, and in that commerce I have broken with the world. If we are true to ourselves, and true to our Lord, and true to the relation between us, the purity of character, which is popularly supposed to be the meaning of holiness , will come. Not without effort, not without set-backs, not without slow advance, but it will come; for he that is consecrated to the Lord is ‘separated’ from iniquity. Such is the meaning of ‘saint.’

‘All His saints are in Thy hand.’ The first metaphor of our text spoke of God’s bosom, to which He drew the people and folded them there. This one speaks of His ‘hand.’ They lie in it. That means two things. It means absolute security, for will He not close His fingers over His palm to keep the soul that has laid itself there? And ‘none shall pluck them out of My Father’s hand.’ No one but yourself can do that. And you can do it, if you cease to respond to His love, and so cease to be a saint. Then you will fall out of His hand, and how far you will fall God only knows.

Being in God’s hand means also submission. Loyola said to his black army, ‘Be like a stick in a man’s hand.’ That meant utter submission and abnegation of self, the willingness to be put anywhere, and used anyhow, and done anything with. And if I by my reception of, and response to, that timeless love, am a saint belonging to God, then not only shall I be secure, but I must be submissive. ‘All His saints are in Thy hand.’ Do not try to get out of it; be content to let it guide you as the steersman’s hand turns the spokes of the wheel and directs the ship.

Now, there is a last thought here. I have spoken of the foundation of all as being divine love, of the security and guardian care of the saints, and there follows one thought more:—

III. The docile obedience of those that are thus guarded.

As the words stand in our Bible, they are as follow:—‘They sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words.’ These two clauses make up one picture, and one easily understands what it is. It represents a group of docile scholars, sitting at the Master’s feet. He is teaching them, and they listen open-mouthed and open-eared to what he says, and will take his words into their lives, like Mary sitting at Christ’s feet, whilst Martha was bustling about His meal. But, beautiful as that picture is, there has been suggested a little variation in the words which gives another one that strikes me as being even more beautiful. There are some difficulties of language with which I need not trouble you. But the general result is this, that perhaps instead of ‘sitting down at Thy feet’ we should read ‘followed at Thy feet.’ That suggests the familiar metaphor of a guide and those led by him who, without him, know not their road. As a dog follows his master, as the sheep their shepherd, so, this singer felt, will saints follow the God whom they love. Religion is imitation of God. That was a deep thought for such a stage of revelation, and it in part anticipates Christ’s tender words: ‘He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him, for they know His voice.’ They follow at His feet. That is the blessedness and the power of Christian morality, that it is keeping close at Christ’s heels, and that instead of its being said to us, ‘Go,’ He says, ‘Come,’ and instead of our being bid to hew out for ourselves a path of duty, He says to us, ‘He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.’ They follow at His feet, as the dog at his master’s, as the sheep at their shepherd’s.

They ‘receive His words.’ Yes, if you will keep close to Him, He will turn round and speak to you. If you are near enough to Him to catch His whisper He will not leave you without guidance. That is one side of the thought, that following we receive what He says, whereas the people that are away far behind Him scarcely know what His will is, and never can catch the low whisper which will come to us by providences, by movements in our own spirits, through the exercise of our own faculties of judgment and common-sense, if only we will keep near to Him. ‘Be ye not as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding, whose mouths must be held in with bit and with bridle, else they will not come near to thee,’ but walk close behind Him, and then the promise will be fulfilled: ‘I will guide thee with Mine eye.’ A glance tells two people who are in sympathy what each wishes, and Jesus Christ will speak to us, if we keep close at His heels.

They that follow Him will ‘receive His words’ in another sense. They will take them in, and His words will not be wasted. And they will receive them in yet another sense. They will carry them out and do them, and His words will not be in vain.

So, dear brethren, the peace, the strength, the blessedness, the goodness, of our lives flow from these three stages, which this singer so long ago had found to be the essence of everything, recognition of the timeless tenderness of God, the yielding to and answering that love, so that it separates us for Himself, the calm security and happy submission which follow thereon, the imitation of Him in daily life, and the walking in His steps, which is rewarded and made more perfect by hearing more distinctly the whisper of His loving, commanding voice.

Deuteronomy 33:12: Israel the Beloved

‘The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by Him; and the Lord shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between His shoulders.’— DEUT. 33:12

Benjamin was his father’s favourite child, and the imagery of this promise is throughout drawn from the relations between such a child and its father. So far as the future history of the tribes is shadowed in these ‘blessings’ of this great ode, the reference of the text may be to the tribe of Benjamin, as specially distinguished by Saul having been a member of it, and by the Temple having been built on its soil. But we find that each of the promises of the text is repeated elsewhere, with distinct reference to the whole nation. For example, the first one, of safe dwelling, reappears in verse 28 in reference to Israel; the second one, of God’s protecting covering, is extended to the nation in many places; and the third, of dwelling between His shoulders, is in substance found again in chap. i. 31 , ‘the Lord thy God bare thee, as a man doth bear his son.’ So that we may give the text a wider extension, and take it as setting forth under a lovely metaphor, and with a restricted reference, what is true of all God’s children everywhere and always.

I. Who are the ‘beloved of the Lord’?

The first answer to that question must be—all men. But these great blessings, so beautifully shadowed in this text, do not belong to all men; nor does the designation, ‘the beloved of the Lord,’ belong to all men, but to those who have entered into a special relation to Him. In these words of the Hebrew singer there sound the first faint tones of a music that was to swell into clear notes, when Jesus said: ‘If a man love Me, he will keep My Word, and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him.’ They who are knit by faith and love to God’s only-begotten and beloved Son, by that union receive ‘power to become the sons of God,’ and share in the love which is ever pouring out from the Father’s heart on ‘the Son of His love.’

II. What are their blessed privileges?

The three clauses of the text express substantially the same idea, but with a striking variety of metaphors.

1. They have a sure dwelling-place.

There is a very slight change of rendering of the first clause, which greatly increases its ‘force, and preserves the figure that is obscured by the usual translation. We should read ‘shall dwell safely on ,’ rather than ‘ by , Him.’ And the effect of that small change in the preposition is to bring out the thought that God is regarded as the foundation on which His beloved build their house of life, and dwell in security and calm. If we are sons through the Son, we shall build our houses or pitch our tents on that firm ground, and, being founded on the Rock of ages, they will not fall when all created foundations reel to the overthrow of whatever is built on them . It is not companionship only, blessed as that is, that is promised here. We have a larger privilege than dwelling by Him, for if we love His Son, we build on God, and ‘God dwelleth in us and we in Him.’

What spiritual reality underlies the metaphor of dwelling or building on God? The fact of habitual communion.

Note the blessed results of such grounding of our lives on God through such habitual communion. We shall ‘dwell safely.’ We may think of that as being objective safety—that is, freedom from peril, or as being subjective—that is, freedom from care or fear, or as meaning ‘trustfully,’ confidently, as the expression is rendered in Psalm xvi. 9 (margin), which is for us the ground of both these. He who dwells in God trustfully dwells both safely and securely, and none else is free either from danger or from dread.

2. They have a sure shelter.

God is for His beloved not only the foundation on which they dwell in safety, but their perpetual covering. They dwell safely because He is so. There are many tender shapes in which this great promise is presented to our faith. Sometimes God is thought of as covering the weak fugitive, as the arching sides of His cave sheltered David from Saul. Sometimes He is represented as covering His beloved, who cower under His wings, ‘as the hen gathereth her chickens’ when hawks are in the sky. Sometimes He appears as covering them from tempest, ‘when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall,’ and ‘the shadow of a great rock’ shields from its fury. Sometimes He is pictured as stretching out protection over His beloved’s heads, as the Pillar of cloud lay, long-drawn-out, over the Tabernacle when at rest, and ‘on all the Glory was a defence.’ But under whatever emblem the general idea of a covering shelter was conceived, there was always a correlative duty on our side. For the root-meaning of one of the Old Testament words for ‘faith’ is ‘fleeing to a refuge,’ and we shall not be safe in God unless by faith we flee for refuge to Him in Christ.

3. They have a Father who bears them on His shoulders.

The image is the same as in chap. i. already referred to. It recurs also in Isaiah (xlvi. 3, 4) , ‘Even to hoar hairs will I carry you, and I have made and I will bear, yea, I will carry, and will deliver’; and in Hosea (11:3) , ‘I taught Ephraim to go; I took them on My arms.’

The image beautifully suggests the thought of the favourite child riding high and happy on the strong shoulder, which lifts it above

rough places and miry ways. The prose reality is: ‘My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’

The Cross carries those who carry it. They who carry God in their hearts are carried by God through all the long pilgrimage of life. Because they are thus upheld by a strength not their own, ‘they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint,’ and though marches be long and limbs strained, they shall ‘go from strength to strength till every one of them appears before God in Zion.’

Deuteronomy 33:16 At the Bush

‘.. The goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.’— DEUT. xxxiii. 16

I Think this is the only reference in the Old Testament to that great vision which underlay Moses’ call and Israel’s deliverance. It occurs in what is called ‘the blessing wherewith Moses, the man of God, blessed the children of Israel before his death,’ although modern opinion tends to decide that this hymn is indeed much more recent than the days of Moses. There seems a peculiar appropriateness in this reference being put into the mouth of the ancient Lawgiver, for to him even Sinai, with all its glories, cannot have been so impressive and so formative of his character as was the vision granted to him when solitary in the wilderness. It is to be noticed that the characteristic by which God is designated here never occurs elsewhere than in this one place. It is intended to intensify the conception of the greatness, and preciousness, and all-sufficiency of that ‘goodwill.’ If it is that ‘of Him that dwelt in the bush,’ it is sure to be all that a man can need. I need not remind you that the words occur in the blessing pronounced on ‘Joseph’—that is, the two tribes which represented Joseph—in which all the greatest material gifts that could be desired by a pastoral people are first called down upon them, and then the ground of all these is laid in ‘the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.’ ‘The blessing—let it come on the head of Joseph.’

So then here, first, is a great thought as to what for us all is the blessing of blessings—God’s ‘goodwill.’ ‘Goodwill’-the word, perhaps, might bear a little stronger rendering. ‘Goodwill’ is somewhat tepid. A man may have a good enough will, and yet no very strong emotion of favour or delight, and may do nothing to carry his goodwill into action. But the word that is employed here, and is a common enough one in Scripture, always carries with it a certain intensity and warmth of feeling. It is more than ‘goodwill’; it is more than ‘favour’; perhaps ‘delight’ would be nearer the meaning. It implies, too, not only the inward sentiment of complacency, but also the active purpose of action in conformity with it, on God’s part. Now it needs few words to show that these two things, which are inseparable, do make the blessing of blessings for every one of us—the delight, the complacency, of God in us, and the active purpose of good in God for us. These are the things that will make a man happy wherever he is.

If I might dwell for a moment upon other scriptural passages, I would just recall to you, as bringing up very strongly and beautifully the all-sufficiency and the blessed effects of having this delight and loving purpose directed towards us like a sunbeam, the various great things that a chorus of psalmists say that it will do for a man. Here is one of their triumphant utterances: ‘Thou wilt bless the righteous; with favour wilt Thou compass him as with a shield.’ That crystal battlement, if I may so vary the figure, is round a man, keeping far away from him all manner of real evil, and filling his quiet heart as he stands erect behind the rampart, with the sense of absolute security. That is one of the blessings that God’s favour or goodwill will secure for us. Again, we read: ‘By Thy favour Thou hast made my mountain to stand strong.’ He that knows himself to be the object of the divine delight, and who by faith knows himself to be the object of the divine activity in protection, stands firm, and his purposes will be carried through, because they will be purposes in accordance with the divine mind, and nothing has power to shake him. So he that grasps the hand of God can say, not because of his grasp, but because of the Hand that he holds, ‘The Lord is at my right hand; I shall not be greatly moved. By Thy favour Thou hast made our mountain to stand strong.’ And again, in another analogous but yet diversified representation, we read: ‘In Thee shall we rejoice all the day, and in Thy favour shall our horn be exalted.’ That is the emblem, not only of victory, but of joyful confidence, and so he who knows himself to have God for his friend and his helper, can go through the world keeping a sunny face, whatever the clouds may be, erect and secure, light of heart and buoyant, holding up his chin above the stormiest waters, and breasting all difficulties and dangers with a confidence far away from presumption, because it is the consequence of the realisation of God’s presence. So the goodwill of God is the chiefest good.

Now, if we turn to the remarkable designation of the divine nature which is here, consider what rivers of strength and of blessedness flow out of the thought that for each of us ‘the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush’ may be our possession.

What does that pregnant designation of God say? That was a strange shrine for God, that poor, ragged, dry desert bush, with apparently no sap in its gray stem, prickly with thorns, with ‘no beauty that we should desire it,’ fragile and insignificant, yet it was ‘God’s house.’ Not in the cedars of Lebanon, not in the great monarchs of the forest, but in the forlorn child of the desert did He abide. ‘The goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush’ may dwell in you and me. Never mind how small, never mind how sapless, never mind how lightly esteemed among men, never mind though we make a very poor show by the side of the ‘oaks of Bashan’ or the ‘cedars of Lebanon.’ It is all right; the Fire does not dwell in them. ‘Unto this man will I look, and with him will I dwell, who is of a humble and a contrite heart, and who trembleth at My word.’ Let no sense of poverty, weakness, unworthiness, ever draw the faintest film of fear across our confidence, for even with us He will sojourn. For it is ‘the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush’ that

we evoke for ours.

Again, what more does that name say? He 'that dwelt in the bush' filled it with fire, and it 'burned and was not consumed.' Now there is good ground to object to the ordinary interpretation, as if the burning of the bush which yet remains unconsumed was meant to symbolise Israel, or, in the New Testament application, the Church which, notwithstanding all persecution, still remains undestroyed. Our brethren of the Presbyterian churches have taken the Latin form of the words in the context for their motto— Nec Tamen Consumebatur . But I venture to think that that is a mistake; and that what is meant by the symbol is just what is expressed by the verbal revelation which accompanied it, and that was this: 'I AM THAT I AM.' The fire that did not burn out is the emblem of the divine nature which does not tend to death because it lives, nor to exhaustion because it energises, nor to emptiness because it bestows, but after all times is the same; lives by its own energy and is independent. 'I am that I have become,'—that is what men have to say. 'I am that I once was not, and again once shall not be,' is what men have to say. 'I am that I am' is God's name. And this eternal, ever-living, self-sufficing, absolute, independent, unwearied, inexhaustible God is the God whose favour is as inexhaustible as Himself, and eternal as His own being. 'Therefore the sons of men shall put their trust beneath the shadow of Thy wings,' and, if they have 'the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush,' will be able to say, 'Because Thou livest we shall live also.'

What more does the name say? He 'that dwelt in the bush' dwelt there in order to deliver; and, dwelling there, declared 'I have seen the affliction of My people, and am come down to deliver them.' So, then, if the goodwill of that eternal, delivering God is with us, we, too, may feel that our trivial troubles and our heavy burdens, all the needs of our prisoned wills and captive souls, are known to Him, and that we shall have deliverance from them by Him. Brethren, in that name, with its historical associations, with its deep revelations of the divine nature, with its large promises of the divine sympathy and help, there lie surely abundant strengths and consolations for us all. The goodwill, the delight, of God, and the active help of God, may be ours, and if these be ours we shall be blessed and strong.

Do not let us forget the place in this blessing on the head of Joseph which my text holds. It is preceded by an invoking of the precious things of Heaven, and 'the precious fruits brought forth by the sun. . . of the chief things of the ancient mountains, and the precious things of the lasting hills, and the precious things of the earth and the fulness thereof.' They are all heaped together in one great mass for the beloved Joseph. And then, like the golden spire that tops some of those campaniles in Italian cities, and completes their beauty, above them all there is set, as the shining apex of all, 'the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.' That is more precious than all other precious things; set last because it is to be sought first; set last as in building some great structure the top stone is put on last of all; set last because it gathers all others into itself, secures that all others shall be ours in the measure in which we need them, and arms us against all possibilities of evil. So the blessing of blessings is the 'goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.'

In my text this is an invocation only; but we can go further than that. You and I can make sure that we have it, if we will. How to secure it? One of the texts which I have already quoted helps us a little way along t he road in answer to that question, for it says, 'Thou, Lord, wilt bless the righteous. With favour wilt thou compass him as with a shield.' But it is of little use to tell me that if I am 'righteous' God will 'bless me,' and 'compass me with favour.' If you will tell me how to become righteous, you will do me more good. And we have been told how to be righteous—'If a man keep My commandments My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him.' If we knit ourselves to Jesus Christ, and we can all do that if we like, by faith that trusts Him, and by love, the child of faith, that obeys Him, and grows daily more like Him—then, without a doubt, that delight of God in us, and that active purpose of good in God's mind towards us, will assuredly be ours; and on no other terms.

So, dear brethren, the upshot of my homily is just this—Men may strive and scheme, and wear their finger-nails down to the quick, to get some lesser good, and fail after all. The greatest good is certainly ours by that easy road which, however hard it may be otherwise, is made easy because it is so certain to bring us to what we want. Holiness is the condition of God's delight in us, and a genuine faith in Christ, and the love which faith evokes, are the conditions. So it is a very simple matter You never can be sure of getting the lower good You can be quite sure of getting the highest. You never can be certain that the precious things of the earth and the fulness thereof will be yours, or that if they were, they would be so very precious; but you can be quite sure that the 'goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush' may lie like light upon your hearts, and be strength to your limbs.

And so I commend to you the words of the Apostle, 'Wherefore we labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him.' To minister to God's delight is the highest glory of man. To have the favour of Him that dwelt in the bush resting upon us is the highest blessing for man. He will say 'Well done! good and faithful servant.' 'The Lord taketh pleasure'—wonderful as it sounds —'in them that fear Him, in them that hope in His mercy,' and that, hoping in His mercy, live as He would have them live.

Deuteronomy 33:25 Shod for the Road

'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be.'— DEUT. xxxiii. 25

There is a general correspondence between those blessings wherewith Moses blessed the tribes of Israel before his death, and the

circumstances and territory of each tribe in the promised land. The portion of Asher, in whose blessing the words of our text occurs, was partly the rocky northern coast and partly the fertile lands stretching to the base of the Lebanon. In the inland part of their territory they cultivated large olive groves, the produce of which was trodden out in great rock-hewn cisterns. So the clause before my text is a benediction upon that industry—'let him dip his foot in oil.' And then the metaphor naturally suggested by the mention of the foot is carried on into the next words, 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass,' the tribe being located upon rocky sea-coast, having rough roads to travel, and so needing to be well shod. The substance, then, of that promise seems to be—strength adequate to, and unworn by, exercise; while the second clause, though not altogether plain, seems to put a somewhat similar idea in unmetaphorical shape. 'As thy days, so shall thy strength be,' probably means the promise of power that grows with growing years.

So, then, we have first that thought that God gives us an equipment of strength proportioned to our work,—shoes fit for our road. God does not turn people out to scramble over rough mountains with thin-soled boots on; that is the plain English of the words. When an Alpine climber is preparing to go away into Switzerland for rock work, the first thing he does is to get a pair of strong shoes, with plenty of iron nails in the soles of them. So Asher had to be shod for his rough roads, and so each of us may be sure that if God sends us on stony paths He will provide us with strong shoes, and will not send us out on any journey for which He does not equip us well.

There are no difficulties to be found in any path of duty, for which he that is called to tread it is not prepared by Him that sent him. Whatsoever may be the road, our equipment is calculated for it, and is given to us from Him that has appointed it.

Is there not a suggestion here, too, as to the sort of travelling we may expect to have? An old saying tells us that we do not go to heaven in silver slippers, and the reason is because the road is rough. The 'primrose way' leads somewhere else, and it may be walked on 'delicately.' But if we need shoes of iron and brass, we may pretty well guess the kind of road we have before us. If a man is equipped with such coverings on his feet, depend upon it that there will be use for them before he gets to the end of his day's journey. The thickest sole will make the easiest travelling over rocky roads. So be quite sure of this, that if God gives to us certain endowments and equipments which are only calculated for very toilsome paths, the roughness of the road will match the stoutness of the shoes.

And see what He does give. See the provision which is made for patience and strength, for endurance and courage, in all the messages of His mercy, in all the words of His love, in all the powers of His Gospel, and then say whether that looks as if we should have an easy life of it on our way home. Those two ships that went away a while ago upon the brave, and, as some people thought, desperate task of finding the North Pole—any one that looked upon them as they lay in Portsmouth Roads, might know that it was no holiday cruise they were meant for. The thickness of the sides, the strength of the cordage, the massiveness of the equipment, did not look like pleasure-sailing.

And so, dear brethren, if we think of all that is given to us in God's Gospel in the way of stimulus and encouragement, and exhortation, and actual communication of powers, we may calculate, from the abundance of the resources, how great will be the strain upon us before we come to the end, and our 'feet stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem.' Go into some of the great fortresses in continental countries, and you will find the store-rooms full of ammunition and provisions; bread enough and biscuits enough, as it seems, for half the country, laid up there, and a deep well somewhere or other in the courtyard. What does that mean? It means fighting, that is what it means. So if we are brought into this strong pavilion, so well provisioned, so massively fortified and defended, that means that we shall need all the strength that is to be found in those thick walls, and all the sustenance that is to be found in those gorged magazines, and all the refreshment that is to be drawn from that free, and full, and inexhaustible fountain, before the battle is over and the victory won. Depend upon it, the promise 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass.' means, 'Thy road shall be rocky and flinty'; and so it is.

And yet, thank God! whilst it is true that it is very hard and very difficult for many of us, and hard and difficult—even if without the 'very'—for us all, it is also true that we have the adequate provision sufficient for all our necessities—and far more than sufficient! It is a poor compliment to the strength that He gives to us to say that it is enough to carry us through. God does not deal out His gifts to people with such an economical correspondence to necessities as that. There is always a wide margin. More than we can ask, more than we can think, more than we can need is given us.

If He were to deal with us as men often deal with one another, asking us, 'Well, how much do you want? cannot you do with a little less? there is the exact quantity that you need for your support'—if you got your bread by weight and your water by measure, it would be a very poor affair. See how He actually does—He says, 'Child, there is Mine own strength for you'; and we think that we honour Him when we say, 'God has given us enough for our necessities!' Rather the old word is always true: 'So they did eat and were filled; and they took up of the fragments that remained seven baskets-full,' and after they were satisfied and replete with the provision, there was more at the end than when they began.

That suggests another possible thought to be drawn from this promise, namely, that it assures not only of strength adequate to the difficulties and perils of the journey, but also of a strength which is not worn out by use.

The ‘portion’ of Asher was the rocky sea-coast. The sharp, jagged rocks would cut to pieces anything made of leather long before the day’s march was over; but the travellers have their feet shod with metal, and the rocks which they have to stumble over will only strike fire from their shoes. They need not step timidly for fear of wearing them out; but, wherever they have to march, may go with full confidence that their shoeing will not fail them. A wise general looks after that part of his soldiers’ outfit with special care, knowing that if it gives out, all the rest is of no use. So our Captain provides us with an inexhaustible strength, to which we may fully trust. We shall not exhaust it by any demands that we can make upon it. We shall only brighten it up, like the nails in a well-used shoe, the heads of which are polished by stumbling and scrambling over rocky roads.

So we may be bold in the march, and draw upon our stock of strength to the utmost. There is no fear that it will fail us. We may put all our force into our work, we shall not weaken the power which ‘by reason of use is exercised,’ not exhausted. For the grace which Christ gives us to serve Him, being divine, is subject to no weariness, and neither faints nor fails. The bush that burned unconsumed is a type of that Infinite Being who works unexhausted, and lives undying, after all expenditure is rich, after all pouring forth is full. And of His strength we partake.

Whensoever a man puts forth an effort of any kind whatever—when I speak, when I lift my hand, when I run, when I think-there is waste of muscular tissue. Some of my strength goes in the act, and thus every effort means expenditure and diminution of force. Hence weariness that needs sleep, waste that needs food, languor that needs rest. We belong to an order of being in which work is death, in regard to our physical nature; but our spirits may lay hold of God, and enter into an order of things in which work is not death, nor effort exhaustion, nor is there loss of power in the expenditure of power.

That sounds strange, and yet it is not strange. Think of that electric light which is made by directing a strong stream upon two small pieces of carbon. As the electricity strikes upon these and turns their blackness into a fiery blaze, it eats away their substance while it changes them into light. But there is an arrangement in the lamp by which a fresh surface is continually being brought into the path of the beam, and so the light continues without wavering and blazes on. The carbon is our human nature, black and dull in itself; the electric beam is the swift energy of God, which makes us ‘light in the Lord.’ For the one, decay is the end of effort; for the other, there is none. ‘Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.’ Though we belong to the perishing order of nature by our bodily frame, we belong to the undecaying realm of grace by the spirit that lays hold upon God. And if our work weary us, as it must do so long as we continue here, yet in the deepest sanctuary of our being, our strength is greatened by exercise. ‘Thy shoes shall be iron and brass.’ ‘Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years.’ ‘Stand, therefore, having your feet shod with the preparedness of the Gospel of peace.’

But this is not all. There is an advance even upon these great promises in the closing words. That second clause of our text says more than the first one. ‘Thy shoes shall be iron and brass,’ that promises us powers and provision adapted to, and unexhausted by, the weary pilgrimage and rough road of life. But ‘as thy days, so shall thy strength be,’ says even more than that. The meaning of the word rendered ‘strength’ in our version is very doubtful, and most modern translators are inclined to render it ‘rest.’ But if we adhere to the translation of our version, we get a forcible and relevant promise, which fits on well to the previous clause, understood as it has been in my previous remarks. The usual understanding of the words is ‘strength proportioned to thy day,’ an idea which we have found already suggested by the previous clause. But that explanation rests on, or at any rate derives support from, the common misquotation of the words. They are not, as we generally hear them quoted, ‘As thy day, so shall thy strength be,’—but ‘day’ is in the plural, and that makes a great difference. ‘As thy days, so shall thy strength be,’ that is to say: the two sums—of ‘thy days’ and of ‘thy strength’—keep growing side by side, the one as fast as the other and no faster. The days increase. Well, what then? The strength increases too. As I said, we are allied to two worlds. According to the law of one of them, the outer world of physical life, we soon reach the summit of human strength. For a little while it is true, even in the life of nature, that our power grows with our days. But we soon reach the watershed, and then the opposite comes to be true. Down, steadily down, we go. With diminishing power, with diminishing vitality, with a dimmer eye, with an obtuser ear, with a slower-beating heart, with a feebler frame, we march on and on to our grave. ‘As thy days, so shall thy weakness be,’ is the law for all of us mature men and women in regard to our outward life.

But, dear brethren, we may be emancipated from that dreary law in regard to the true life of our spirits, and instead of growing weaker as we grow older, we may and we should grow stronger. We may be and we should be moving on a course that has no limit to its advance. We may be travelling on a shining path through the heavens, that has no noon-tide height from which it must slowly and sadly decline, but tends steadily and for ever upwards, nearer and nearer to the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance. ‘The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more till the noon-tide of the day.’ But the reality surpasses even that grand thought, for it discloses to us an endless approximation to an infinite beauty, and an ever-growing possession of never exhausted fulness, as the law for the progress of all Christ’s servants. The life of each of us may and should be continual accession and increase of power through all the days here, through all the ages beyond. Why? Because ‘the life which I live, I live by the faith of the Son of God.’ Christ liveth in me. It is not my strength that grows, so much as God’s strength in me which is given more abundantly as the days roll. It is so given on one condition. If my faith has laid hold of the infinite, the exhaustless, the immortal energy of God, unless there is something fearfully wrong about me, I shall be becoming purer, nobler, wiser, more observant of His

will, gentler, liker Christ, every way fitter for His service, and for larger service, as the days increase.

Those of us who have reached middle life, or perhaps gone a little over the watershed, ought to have this experience as our own in a very distinct degree. The years that are past ought to have drawn us somewhat away from our hot pursuing after earthly and perishable things. They should have added something to the clearness and completeness of our perception of the deep simplicity of God's gospel. They should have tightened our hold and increased our possession of Christ, and unfolded more and more of His all-sufficiency. They should have enriched us with memories of God's loving care, and lighted all the sky behind with a glow which is reflected on the path before us, and kindles calm confidence in His unfailing goodness. They should have given us power and skill for the conflicts that yet remain, as the Red Indians believe that the strength of every defeated and scalped enemy passes into his conqueror's arm. They should have given force to our better nature, and weakening, progressive weakening, to our worse. They should have rooted us more firmly and abidingly in Him from whom all our power comes, and so have given us more and fuller supplies of His exhaustless and ever-flowing might.

So it may be with us if we abide in Him, without whom we are nothing, but partaking of whose strength 'the weakest shall be as David, and David as an angel of God.'

If for us, drawing nearer to the end is drawing nearer to the light, our faces will be brightened more and more with that light which we approach, and our path will be 'as the shining light which shines more and more unto the noon-tide of the day,' because we are closer to the very fountain of heavenly radiance, and growingly bathed and flooded with the outgoings of His glory. 'As thy days, so shall thy strength be.'

The promise ought to be true for us all. It is true for all who use the things that are freely given to them of God. And whilst thus it is the law for the devout life here, its most glorious fulfilment remains for the life beyond. There each new moment shall bring new strength, and growing millenniums but add fresh vigour to our immortal life. Here the unresting beat of the waves of the sea of time gnaws away the bank and shoal whereon we stand, but there each roll of the great ocean of eternity shall but spread new treasures at our feet and add new acres to our immortal heritage. 'The oldest angels,' says Swedenborg, 'look the youngest.' When life is immortal, the longer it lasts the stronger it becomes, and so the spirits that have stood for countless days before His throne, when they appear to human eyes, appear as—'young men clothed in long white garments,'—full of unaging youth and energy that cannot wane. So, whilst in the flesh we must obey the law of decay, the spirit may be subject to this better law of life, and 'while the outward man perisheth, the inward man be renewed day by day.' 'Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall; but they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength.'

Deuteronomy 34:5-6, A Death in the Desert

'So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. 6. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, . . . but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day.'— DEUT. xxxiv. 5, 6

A fitting end to such a life! The great law-giver and leader had been all his days a lonely man; and now, surrounded by a new generation, and all the old familiar faces vanished, he is more solitary than ever. He had lived alone with God, and it was fitting that alone with God he should die.

How the silent congregation must have watched, as, alone, with 'natural strength unabated,' he breasted the mountain, and went up to be seen no more! With dignified reticence our chapter tells us no details. He 'died there,' in that dreary solitude, and in some cleft he was buried, and no man knows where. The lessons of that solitary death and unknown tomb may best be learned by contrast with another death and another grave—those of the Leader of the New Covenant, the Law-giver and Deliverer from a worse bondage, and Guide into a better Canaan, the Son who was faithful over His own house, as Moses was 'faithful in all his house, as a servant.' That lonely and forgotten grave among the savage cliffs was in keeping with the whole character and work of him who lay there.

'Here,—here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,
Lightnings are loosened,
Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,
Peace let the dew send!
Lofty designs must close in like effects;
Loftily lying,
Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,
Living and dying.'

Contrast that grave with the sepulchre in the garden where Jesus lay, close by a city wall, guarded by foes, haunted by troops of weeping friends, visited by a great light of angel faces. The one was hidden and solitary, as teaching the loneliness and mystery of

death; the other revealed light in the darkness, and companionship in the loneliness. The one faded from men's memory because it was nothing to any man; no impulses, nor hopes, nor gifts, could come from it. The other forever draws hearts and memories, because in it was wrought out the victory in which all our hopes are rooted. An endured cross, an empty grave, an occupied throne, are as the threefold cord on which all our hopes hang. Moses was solitary as God's servant in life and death, and oblivion covered his mountain grave. Christ's 'delights were with the sons of men.' He lived among them, and all men 'know his sepulchre to this day.'

I. Note, then, first, as a lesson gathered from this lonely death, the penalty of transgression.

One of the great truths which the old law and ordinances given by Moses were intended to burn in on the conscience of the Jew, and through him on the conscience of the world, was that indissoluble connection between evil done and evil suffered, which reaches its highest exemplification in the death which is the 'wages of sin.' And just as some men that have invented instruments for capital punishment have themselves had to prove the sharpness of their own axe, so the lawgiver, whose message it had been to declare, 'the soul that sinneth it shall die,' had himself to go up alone to the mountain-top to receive in his own person the exemplification of the law that had been spoken by his own lips. He sinned when, in a moment of passion (with many palliations and excuses), he smote the rock that he was bidden to address, and forgot therein, and in his angry words to the rebels, that he was only an instrument in the divine hand. It was a momentary wavering in a hundred and twenty years of obedience. It was one failure in a life of self-abnegation and suppression. The stern sentence came.

People say, 'A heavy penalty for a small offence.' Yes; but an offence of Moses could not be a small offence.' Noblesse oblige! The higher a man rises in communion with God, and the more glorious the message and office which are put into his hands, the more intolerable in him is the slightest deflection from the loftiest level. A splash of mud, that would never be seen on a navvy's clothes, stains the white satin of a bride or the embroidered garment of a noble. And so a little sin done by a loftily endowed and inspired man ceases to be small.

Nor are we to regard that momentary lapse only from the outside and the surface. One little mark under the armpit of a plague-sufferer tells the physician that the fatal disease is there. A tiny leaf above ground may tell that, deep below, lurks the root of a poison plant. That little deflection, coming as it did at the beginning of the resumption of his functions by the Lawgiver after seven-and-thirty years of comparative abeyance, and on his first encounter with the new generation that he had to lead, was a very significant indication that his character had begun to yield and suffer from the strain that had been put upon it; and that, in fact, he was scarcely fit for the responsibilities that the new circumstances brought. So the penalty was not so disproportionate to the fault as it may seem.

And was the penalty such a very great one? Do you think that a man who had been toiling for eighty years at a very thankless task would consider it a very severe punishment to be told, 'Go home and take your wages'? It did not mean the withdrawal of the divine favour. 'Moses and Aaron among his priests. . . . Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.' The penalty of a forgiven sin is never hard to bear, and the penalty of a forgiven sin is very often punctually and mercifully exacted.

But still we are not to ignore the fact that this lonely death, with which we are now concerned, is of the nature of a penal infliction. And so it stands forth in consonance with the whole tone of the Mosaic teaching. I admit, of course, that the mere physical fact of the separation between body and spirit is simply the result of natural law. But that is not the death that you and I know. Death as we know it, the ugly thing that flings its long shadows across all life, and that comes armed with terrors for conscience and spirit, is 'the wages of sin,' and is only experienced by men who have transgressed the law of God. So far Moses in his life and in his death carries us—that no transgression escapes the appropriate punishment; that the smallest sin has in it the seeds of mortal consequences; that the loftiest saint does not escape the law of retribution.

And no further does Moses with his Law and his death carry us. But we turn to the other death. And there we find the confirmation, in an eminent degree, of that Law, and yet the repeal of it. It is confirmed and exhausted in Jesus Christ. His death was 'the wages of sin.' Whose? Not His. Mine, yours, every man's. And because He died, surrounded by men, outside the old city wall, pure and sinless in Himself, He therein both said 'Amen' to the Law of Moses, and swept it away. For all the sins of the world were laid upon His head, He bore the curse for us all, and has emptied the bitter cup which men's transgressions have mingled. Therefore the solitary death in the desert proclaims 'the wages of sin'; that death outside the city wall proclaims 'the gift of God,' which is 'eternal life.'

II. Another of the lessons of our incident is the withdrawal, by a hard fate, of the worker on the very eve of the completion of his work.

For all these forty years there had gleamed before the fixed and steadfast spirit of the sorely tried leader one hope that he never abandoned, and that was that he might look upon and enter into the blessed land which God had promised. And now he stands on the heights of Moab. Half a dozen miles onwards, as the crow flies, and his feet would tread its soil. He lifts his eyes, and away up

yonder, in the far north, he sees the rolling uplands of Gilead, and across the deep gash where the Jordan runs, he catches a glimpse of the blue hills of Naphtali or of Galilee, and the central mountain masses of Ephraim and Manasseh, where Ebal and Gerizim lift their heads; and then, further south, the stony summits of the Judaean hills, where Jerusalem and Bethlehem lie, and, through some gap in the mountains, a gleam as of sunshine upon armour tells where the ocean is. And then his eye falls upon the waterless plateau of the South, and at his feet the fertile valley of Jordan, with Jericho glittering amongst its palm trees like a diamond set in emeralds, and on some spur of the lower hill bounding the plain, the little Zoar. This was the land which the Lord had promised to the fathers, for which he had been yearning, and to which all his work had been directed all these years; and now he is to die, as my text puts it, with such pathetic emphasis, 'there in Moab,' and to have no part in the fair inheritance.

It is the lot of all epoch-making men, of all great constructive and reforming geniuses, whether in the Church or in the world, that they should toil at a task, the full issues of which will not be known until their heads are laid low in the dust. But if, on the one hand, that seems hard, on the other hand there is the compensation of 'the vision of the future and all the wonder that shall be,' which is granted many a time to the faithful worker ere he closes his eyes. But that is not the fate of epoch-making and great men only; it is the law for our little lives. If these are worth anything, they are constructed on a scale too large to bring out all their results here and now. It is easy for a man to secure immediate consequences of an earthly kind; easy enough for him to make certain that he shall have the fruit of his toil. But quick returns mean small profits; and an unfinished life that succeeds in nothing may be far better than a completed one, that has realised all its shabby purposes and accomplished all its petty desires. Do you, my brother, live for the far-off; and seek not for the immediate issues and fruits that the world can give, but be contented to be of those whose toil waits for eternity to disclose its significance. Better a half-finished temple than a finished pigstye or huckster's shop. Better a life, the beginning of much and the completion of nothing, than a life directed to and hitting an earthly aim. 'He that soweth to the spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting,' and his harvest and garner are beyond the grave.

III. Again, notice here the lesson of the solitude and mystery of death.

Moses dies alone, with no hand to clasp his, none to close his eyes; but God's finger does it. The outward form of his death is but putting into symbol and visibility the awful characteristics of that last moment for us all. However closely we have been twined with others, each of us has to unclasp dear hands, and make that journey through the narrow, dark tunnel by himself. We live alone in a very real sense, but we each have to die as if there were not another human being in the whole universe but only ourselves. But the solitude may be a solitude with God. Up there, alone with the stars and the sky and the everlasting rocks and menacing death, Moses had for companion the supporting God. That awful path is not too desolate and lonely to be trodden if we tread it with Him.

Moses' lonely death leads to a society yonder. If you refer to the thirty-second chapter you will find that, when he was summoned to the mountain, God said to him, 'Die in the mount whither thou goest up, and be gathered to thy people.' He was to be buried there, up amongst the rocks of Moab, and no man was ever to visit his sepulchre to drop a tear over it. How, then, was he 'gathered to his people'? Surely only thus, that, dying in the desert alone, he opened his eyes in 'the City,' surrounded by 'solemn troops and sweet societies' of those to whom he was kindred. So the solitude of a moment leads on to blessed and eternal companionship.

So far the death of Moses carries us. What does the other death say? Moses had none but God with him when he died. There is a drearier desolation than that, and Jesus Christ proved it when He cried, 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' That was solitude indeed, and in that hour of mysterious, and to us unfathomable, desertion and misery, the lonely Christ sounded a depth, of which the lawgiver in His death but skimmed the surface. Christ was parted from God in His death, because He bore on Him the sins that separate us from our Father, and in order that none of us may ever need to tread that dark passage alone, but may be able to say, 'I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me'—Thou, who hast trodden every step in its rough and dreary path, uncheered by the presence which cheers us and millions more. Christ died that we might live. He died alone that, when we come to die, we may hold His hand and the solitude may vanish.

Then, again, our incident teaches us the mystery that wrapped death to that ancient world, of which we may regard that unknown and forgotten sepulchre as the visible symbol. Deep darkness lies over the Old Testament in reference to what is beyond the grave, broken by gleams of light, when the religious consciousness asserted its indestructibility, in spite of all appearance to the contrary; but never growing to the brightness of serene and continuous assurance of immortal life and resurrection. We may conceive that mysteriousness as set forth for us by that grave that was hidden away in the defiles of Moab, unvisited and uncared for by any.

We turn to the other grave, and there, as the stone is rolled away, and the rising sunshine of the Easter morning pours into it, we have a visible symbol of the life and immortality which Jesus Christ then brought to light by His Gospel. The buried grave speaks of the inscrutable mystery that wrapped the future: the open sepulchre proclaims the risen Lord of life, and the sunlight certainty of future blessedness which we owe to Him. Death is solitary no more, though it be lonely as far as human companionship is concerned; and a mystery no more, though what is beyond is hidden from our view, and none but Christ has ever returned to tell the tale, and He has told us little but the fact that we shall live with Him.

We rejoice that we have not to turn to a grave hid amongst the hills where our dead Leader lies, but to an open sepulchre by the city

wall in the sunshine, from whence has come forth the ever-living ‘Captain of our salvation.’

IV. The last lesson is the uselessness of a dead leader to a generation with new conflicts.

Commentators have spent a great deal of ingenuity in trying to assign reasons why God concealed the grave of Moses. The text does not say that God concealed it at all. The ignorance of the place of his sepulchre does not seem to have been part of the divine design, but simply a consequence of the circumstances of his death, and of the fact that he lay in an enemy’s land, and that they had had something else to do than go to look for the grave of a dead commander. They had to conquer the land, and a living Joshua was what they wanted, not a dead Moses.

So we may learn from this how easily the gaps fill. ‘Thirty days’ mourning,’ and says my text, with almost a bitter touch,’ so the days of mourning for Moses were ended.’ A month of it, that was all; and then everybody turned to the new man that was appointed for the new work. God has many tools in His tool-chest, and He needs them all before the work is done. Joshua could no more have wielded Moses’ rod than Moses could have wielded Joshua’s sword. The one did his work, and was laid aside. New circumstances required a new type of character—the smaller man better fitted for the rougher work. And so it always is. Each generation, each period, has its own men that do some little part of the work which has to be done, and then drop it and hand over the task to others. The division of labour is the multiplication of joy at the end, and ‘he that soweth and he that reapeth rejoice together.’ But whilst the one grave tells us, ‘This man served his generation by the will of God, and was laid asleep and saw corruption,’ the other grave proclaims One whom all generations need, whose work is comprehensive and complete, who dies never. ‘He liveth and was dead, and is alive for evermore.’ Christ, and Christ alone, can never be antiquated. This day requires Him, and has in Him as complete an answer to all its necessities as if no other generation had ever possessed Him. He liveth for ever, and for ever is the Shepherd of men.

So Aaron dies and is buried on Hor, and Moses dies and is buried on Pisgah, and Joshua steps into his place, and, in turn, he disappears. The one eternal Word of God worked through them all, and came at last Himself in human flesh to be the Everlasting Deliverer, Redeemer, Founder of the Covenant, Lawgiver, Guide through the wilderness, Captain of the warfare, and all that the world or a single soul can need until the last generation has crossed the flood, and the wandering pilgrims are gathered in the land of their inheritance. The dead Moses pre-supposes and points to the living Christ. Let us take Him for our all-sufficing and eternal Guide.