

Maclaren on Hebrews Pt5

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Alexander Maclaren Sermons on The Epistle to the Hebrews Part 5

Hebrews 12:1 Weights and Sins

'Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us.' —Hebrews 12:1

THERE is a regular series of thoughts in this clause, and in the one or two which follow it, 'Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us; and let us run with patience the race that is set before us — looking unto Jesus.' That is to say, If we would run well, we must run light; if we would run light, we must look to Christ. The central injunction is, 'Let us run with patience'; the only way of doing that is the 'laying aside all weights and sin'; and the only way of laying aside the weights and sins is, 'looking unto Jesus.'

Of course the Apostle does not mean some one special kind of transgression when he says, 'the sin which doth so easily beset us.' He is speaking about sin generically — all manner of transgression. It is not, as we sometimes hear the words misquoted, 'that sin which doth most easily beset us.' All sin is, according to this passage, a besetting sin. It is the characteristic of every kind of transgression, that it circles us round about, that it is always lying in wait and lurking for us. The whole of it, therefore, in all its species, is to be cast aside if we would run with patience this appointed race. But then, besides that, there is something else to be put aside as well as sin. There is 'every weight' as well as every transgression— two distinct things, meant to be distinguished. The putting away of both of them is equally needful for the race. The figure is plain enough. We as racers must throw aside the garment that wraps us round — that is to say, 'the sin that easily besets us'; and then, besides that, we must lay aside everything else which weights us for the race — that is to say, certain habits or tendencies within us.

We have, then, to consider these three points ; — First, There are hindrances which are not sins. Secondly, If we would run, we must put aside these. And lastly, If we would put them aside, we must look to Christ.

In the first place, there are hindrances which are not sins. The distinction which the writer draws is a very important one. Sin is that which, by its very nature, in all circumstances, by whomsoever done, without regard to consequences, is a transgression of God's law. A 'weight' is that which, allowable in itself, legitimate, perhaps a blessing, the exercise of a power which God has given us — is, for some reason, a hindrance and impediment in our running the heavenly race. The one word describes the action or habit by its inmost essence, the other describes it by its accidental consequences. Sin is sin, whosoever does it; but weights may be weights to me, and not weights to you. Sin is sin in whatever degree it is done; but weights may be weights when they are in excess, and helps, not hindrances, when they are in moderation. The one is a legitimate thing turned to a false use; the other is always, and everywhere, and by whomsoever performed, a transgression of God's law.

Then, what are these weights? The first step in the answer to that question is to be taken by remembering that, according to the

image of this text we carry them about with us, and we are to put them away from ourselves. It is fair to say then, that the whole class of weights are not so much external circumstances which may be turned to evil, as the feelings and habits of mind by which we abuse God's great gifts and mercies, and turn that which was ordained to be for life into death. The renunciation that is spoken about is not so much the putting away from ourselves of certain things lying round about us, that may become temptations; as the putting away of the dispositions within us which make these things temptations. The other is, of course, included as well; but if we want to understand the true depth of the doctrine of self-denial and self-sacrifice which is taught here, we must remember that the sin and the weights alike lie within our own hearts — that they are our feelings, not God's perfect gifts — that they are our abuse of God's benefits, not the benefits which are given to us for our use. We shall have to see, presently, that By the power which we possess of turning all these outward blessings of God's hands into occasion for transgression, God's most precious endowments may become weights — but let us observe that, accurately and to begin with, the text enjoins us to put away what cleaves to us, and is in us, not what is lying round about us. Then, if it be mainly and primarily, legitimate feelings and thoughts, abused and exaggerated, which make the weights that we are to lay aside, what are the things which may thus become weights? Oh, brethren! a little word answers that. Everything. It is an awful and mysterious power that which we all possess, of perverting the highest endowments, whether of soul or of circumstances, which God has given us, into the occasions for faltering, and falling back in the divine life. Just as men, by devilish ingenuity, can distil poison out of God's fairest flowers, so we can do with everything that we have, with all the richest treasures of our nature, with the hearts which He has given us that we may love Him with them; with the understandings which He has bestowed upon us, that we may apprehend His divine truth and His wonderful counsel with them; with these powers of work in the world which He has conferred upon us, that by them we may bring to Him acceptable service and fitting offering; and, in like manner, with all the gladness and grace with which He surrounds our life, intending that out of it we should draw ever occasions for thankfulness, reasons for trust, helps towards God, ladders to assist us in climbing heavenward. Ah! and because we cleave to them too much, because we cleave to them not only in a wrong degree but in a wrong manner (for that is the deepest part of the fault), we may make them all hindrances. So, for instance, in a very awful sense is fulfilled that threatening, 'A man's foes shall be they of his own household,' when we make those that we love best our idols, not because we love them too well, but because we love them apart from God; when instead of drawing from those that are dear to us — our husbands, and wives, and children, and parents, and friends, and every other tender name — lessons of God's infinite goodness, and reasons why our hearts should flow perpetually with love to Him — we stay with them, and hang back from God, and forget that His love is best, His heart deepest, and His sufficiency our safest trust. That is one single instance; and as it is in that sacredest of regions, so is it in all others. Every blessing, every gladness, every possession, external to us, and every faculty and attribute within us, we turn into heavy weights that drag us down to this low spot of earth- We make them all sharp knives with which we clip the wings of our heavenward tendencies, and then we grovel in the dust.

And now, if this be the explanation of what the Apostle means by 'weights' — legitimate things that hinder us in our course towards God — there comes this second consideration, If we would run we must lay these aside. Why must we lay 'them aside? The whole of the Christian's course is a fight. We carry with us a double nature. The best of us know that 'flesh lusts against spirit, and spirit against flesh.' Because of that conflict, it follows that if ever there is to be a positive progress in the Christian race, it must be accompanied, and made possible, by the negative process of casting away and losing much that interferes with it. Yes! that race is not merely the easy and natural unfolding of what is within us. The way by which we come to 'the measure of the stature of perfect men' in Christ, is not the way by which these material bodies of ours grow up into their perfectness. They have but to be nourished, and they grow. 'The blade and the ear, and the full corn in the ear,' come by the process of gradual growth and increase. That law of growth is used by our Lord as a description, but only as a partial description, of the way by which the kingdom of Christ advances in the heart. There is another side to it as well as that, The kingdom advances by warfare as well as by growth. It would be easy if it were but a matter of getting more and more; but it is not that only. Every step of the road you have to cut your way through opposing foes. Every step of the road has to be marked with the blood that comes from wounded feet. Every step of the road is won by a tussle and a strife.

There is no spiritual life without dying, there is no spiritual growth without putting off 'the old man with his affections and lusts.' The hands cannot move freely until the bonds be broken. The new life that is in us cannot run with patience the race that is set before it, until the old life that is in us is put down and subdued. And if we fancy that we are to get to heaven by a process of persistent growth, without painful self-sacrifice and martyrdom, we know nothing about it. That is not the law. For every new step that we win in the Christian course there must have been the laying aside of something. For every progress in knowledge, there must have been a sacrifice and martyrdom of our own indolence, of our own pride, of our own blindness of heart, of our own perverseness of will. For every progress in devout emotion, there must have been a crucifying and slaying of our earthly affections, of our wavering hearts that are drawn away from God by the sweetness of this world. For every progress in strenuous work for God, there must have been a slaying of the selfishness which urges us to work in our own strength and for our own sake. All along the Christian course there must be set up altars to God on which you sacrifice yourselves, or you will never advance a step. The old legend that the Grecian host lay weather-bound in their port, vainly waiting for a wind to come and carry them to conquest; and that they were obliged to slay a human sacrifice ere the heavens would be propitious and fill their sails, may be translated into the deepest verity of

the Christian life. We may see in it that solemn lesson — no prosperous voyage, and no final conquest until the natural life has been offered up on the altar of hourly self-denial. That self-denial must reach beyond gross and undoubted sins. They must be swept away, of course, but deeper than these must the sacrificial knife strike its healing wound. If you would, run with patience, 'you must 'lay aside every weight,' as well as 'the sin which so easily besets you.'

So much for the why; well, then, how is this laying aside to be performed? There are two ways by which this injunction of my text may be obeyed. The one is, by getting so strong that the thing shall not be a weight, though we carry it; and the other is that feeling ourselves to be weak, we take the prudent course of putting it utterly aside. Or, to turn that into other words: the highest type of the Christian character would be, that we should, as the Apostle says, 'use the world without abusing it' — that they who possess should be as though they possessed not; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not.' The noblest style of a Christian would be a man, who exercising all the faculties which God had given him, and enjoying all the blessings wherewith God had surrounded him, walked his Christian course like some of those knights of old, lightly bearing his heavy mail, not feeling it a burden, but strong enough to bear the massive breastplate and to wield the ponderous sword, and fitted for his rough warfare by it all. It would be possible, perhaps, some day for us to come to this — that inasmuch as it is the feelings within us which make the weights, and not the objects without us — we should keep and enjoy the blessings and the gladness that we possess, and yet never thereby be thwarted or stayed in our journey heavenward. It would be the highest condition. I suppose we shall come to it yonder, where there will no longer be any need to maim ourselves that we may 'enter into life,' but where all the maimings that were done in this world for the sake of entering into life shall be compensated and restored, and each soul shall stand perfect and complete, wanting nothing.

But, alas! though that course be the highest, the abstract best, the thing for which we ought to strive and try; it is not the course for which the weakness and inaptness of the most of us makes us strong enough. And therefore, seeing that we have a nature so weak and feeble, that temptations surround us so constantly, that so many things legitimate become to us harmful and sinful — the path of prudence, the safe path, is absolutely and utterly to put them away from us, and have nothing to do with them.

Of course, there are many duties which, by our own sinfulness, we make weights, and we dare not, and we cannot if we would, lay them aside. A man, for instance, is born into certain circumstances, wherein he must abide; he has 'a calling whereunto he is called.' Your trade is a weight, your daily occupations are weights. The spirit of this commandment before us is not, 'Leave your plough, and go up into the mountain to pray; Again, a man finds himself surrounded by friends and domestic ties. He dare not, he must not, he cannot, shake himself free from these. There are cases in which to put away the occupation that has become a weight — to sacrifice the blessing that has become a hindrance — to abstain from the circumstances which clog and impede our divine life, is a sin. Where God sets us, we must stand, if we die. What God has given us to do, we must do. The duties that in our weakness become impediments and weights, we must not leave.

But for all besides these, anything which I know has become a snare to me — unless it be something in the course of my simple duty, or unless it be some one of those relations of life which I cannot get rid of — I must have done with it! It may be sweet, it may be very dear, it may be very near thy heart, it may be a part of thy very being : — never mind, put it away! If God has said to you, There, my child, stand there, surrounded by temptations! — then, like a man, stand to your colours, and do not take these words as if they said I am to leave a place because I find myself too weak to resist — a place in which God, for the good of others or for the good of myself, has manifestly set me. But for all other provinces of life, if I feel myself weak I shall be wise to fly. As Christ has said, 'If thy hand offend thee,' put it down on the block there, and take the knife in the other, 'and cut it off': it is better, it is better for thee to go into life with that maimed and bleeding stump, an imperfect man, than with all thy natural capacities and powers to be utterly lost at the last! And some of us, perhaps, may feel that these solemn lessons apply not only to affection and outward business. I may be speaking to some young man to whom study, and thought, are a snare. I know that I am saying a grave thing, but I do say, In that region too, the principle applies. Better be ignorant, and saved, than wise, and lost. Better a maimed man in Christ's fold, than a perfect man, if that were possible, outside of it.

I know that there is a large field for misconception and misapplication in the settlement of the practical question — Which of my weights arise from circumstances that I dare not seek to alter, and which from circumstances that I dare not leave unaltered? There is a large margin left for the play of honesty of purpose, and plain common-sense, in the fitting of such general maxims to the shifting and complicated details of an individual life. But no laws can be laid down to save us that trouble. No man can judge for another about this matter. It must be our own sense of what harms our spiritual life, and not other people's notions of what is likely to harm either theirs or ours, that guides us. What by experience I find does me harm, let me give up! No man has a right to come to me and say, There is a legitimate thing, an indifferent thing; it is not a sin; there is not in it, in itself, the essential element of transgression; but you must forsake it, because it is a weight to other people! To my own master I stand or fall. The commandment is, Have no weights! But the way to fulfil that commandment — whether by rejecting the thing altogether, or by keeping it, and yet not letting it be a weight, that is a matter for every one's own conscience, for every one's own judgment and practical prudence, guided by the Spirit of God, to determine. The obedience to the commandment is a simple matter of loyalty to Christ. But the manner of obedience is to be fixed by Christian wisdom. And remember that on both sides of the alternative there are dangers.

There is danger in the too great freedom which says, I am strong; I can venture to do this thing — another man cannot — and I will do it! There is a danger On the other side in saying, We are all weak, and we will forsake all these things together! The one class of moralists are apt to confound their own unsanctified inclinations with the dictates of Christian freedom. The other class are apt to confound their own narrowness with the commandments of God. The one class are apt to turn their liberty into a cloak of licentiousness. The other class are apt to turn their obligation into a yoke which neither they nor their disciples are able to bear. The Apostle pointed out the evils which these two ways of dealing with things indifferent are apt to foster when he said to those who adopt the one, 'Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not'; and to those who adopt the other 'Let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth.' That is to say, on the one hand, beware of the fancied superiority to the weaknesses and narrowness of your more scrupulous brother, which is prone to creep into the hearts of the more liberal and strong. Remember that perhaps the difference between you is not all in your favour. It may be that what you call over-scrupulous timidity is the fruit of a more earnest Christian principle than yours; and that what you call in yourself freedom from foolish scruples, is only the result of a less sensitive conscience, not of a more robust Christianity. Then for the other class, the lesson is, 'Let not him which eateth not, judge him that eateth.' Judge not from the height of your superior self-denial, your brother who allows himself what you avoid. Your besetting sin is self-righteous condemnation of those who perhaps, after all, are wiser as well as wider than you, and who in their strength may be able to walk as near to God on a road, which to you would be full of perils, as you are in the manner of life which you know to be needful for you. Let us all remember, besides, that a thing which to ourselves is no weight, may yet be right for us to forsake, out of true and tender brotherly regard to others who, weaker than we, or perhaps more conscientious than we, could not do the same thing without damaging their spirits and weakening their Christian life. 'Him that is weak in the faith, receive.' Him that is weak in the faith, help. And in all these matters indifferent, which are weights to one and not weights to another, let us remember, first, for ourselves, that a weight retained is a sin; and let us remember, next, for others, that they stand not by our experience, but by their own; and that we are neither to judge their strength, nor to offend their weakness.

And now, in the last place: This laying aside of every weight is only possible by looking to Christ. That self-denial of which I have been speaking has in it no merit, no worthiness. The man that practises it is not a bit better than the man that does not, except in so far as it is a preparation for greater reception of the spiritual life. Some people suppose that when they have laid aside a weight, conquered a hindrance, given up some bad habit, they have done a meritorious thing. Well, we are strengthened, no doubt, by the very act; but then, it is of no use at all except in so far as it makes us better fitted for the positive progress which is to come after it. What is the use of the racer betaking, himself to the starting-post, and throwing aside every weight, and then standing still? He puts aside his garments that he may run. We empty our hearts; but the empty heart is dull, and cold, and dark: we empty our hearts that Christ may fill them. That is not all: Christ must have begun to fill them before we can empty them. 'Looking to Jesus' is the only means of thorough-going, absolute self-denial. All other surrender than that which is based upon love to Him, and faith in Him, is but surface work, and drives the subtle disease to the vitals. The man that tries, by paring off an excrescence here, and giving up a bad habit there, to hammer and tinker and cut himself into the shape of a true and perfect man, may do it outwardly. He will scarcely do that, but it is possible he may partially. And then, what has he made himself? 'A whited sepulchre'; outside, — adorned, beautiful, clean; inside, — full of rottenness and dead men's bones! The self that was beaten in the open field of outward life, retires, like a defeated army, behind broad rivers; and concentrates itself in its fortresses, and prepares hopefully for a victorious resistance in the citadel of the heart.

My brother, if you would 'run with patience the race that is set before you,' you must 'lay aside, every weight.' If you would lay aside every weight, you must look to Christ, and let His love flow into thy soul. Then, self-denial will not be self-denial. It will be blessing and joy, sweet and easy. Just as the old leaves drop naturally from the tree when the new buds of spring begin to put themselves out, let the new affection come and dwell in thy heart, and expel the old. 'Lay aside every weight' — 'looking unto Jesus.' Then, too, you will find that the sacrifice and maiming of the old man has been the perfecting of the man. You will find that whatever you give up for Christ you get back from Christ, better, more beautiful, more blessed, hallowed to its inmost core, a joy and a possession for ever. For He will not suffer that any gift laid upon His altar shall not be given back to us. He will have no maimed man in His service. So, the hand that is cut off, the eye that is plucked out, the possessions that are rendered up, the idols that are slain — they are all given back to us again when we stand in God's own light in glory — perfect men, made after the image of Christ, and surrounded with all possessions transfigured and glorified in the light of God. 'There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting.

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Hebrews 12:2 The Perfecter of Faith

Set down at the right, hand of the throne of God. — Hebrews 12:2

ST. LUKE gives us two accounts of the Ascension, one at the end of his Gospel and one at the beginning of the Acts. The

difference of position suggests delicate shades of colouring and of distinction in the two narratives, the one is the ending of the sweet intercourse on earth, the other is the beginning of a new era and a different type of companionship. So in that which closes the Gospel, emphasis is put upon our Lord's ascension as being parted from; and all that is told us is of the final benediction befitting a farewell, and of the uplifted hands, which left upon their minds the last sweet impression of the departing friend. But if we turn to the Acts of the Apostles, where the incident is the same, the whole spirit of the narrative is altered. We see there the beginning of a new era, and so we read nothing about parting, but, instead of the indefinite expression, He blessed them, we hear of their promised investiture with a new power, and of there being laid upon them a new obligation — 'Ye shall be clothed with the Spirit: ye shall be My witnesses.' And the two men who stand by them, and are only mentioned in the Book of Acts, announce the great thought, that the departing Christ will return, 'He shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go.' All in that account has a forward aspect. It is a beginning with a new power, strengthened by a new duty, and having a far-off hope. Thus equipped, these eleven no more feel that their Lord is parted from them, nor that they are abandoned and forlorn; but they cast themselves into their new circumstances, and joyfully take up their new work. So the Ascension of Christ is represented in that second account as being the transition from the earthly to the heavenly life and type of communion with Him, and as the preparation for that great fact which my text enshrines in highly figurative language, as being the sitting at the right hand of the throne of God. The Ascension is no transient fact, it is the beginning of the permanent condition of the Church, and of the permanent present relations between Jesus Christ, God, the Church, and the world. So I desire to turn now to the various characteristics of the present and permanent relationship of Jesus Christ to these three — God, the Church, the world.

And first of all I wish to notice we have here the thought of the Enthroned

Christ. The attitude of sitting indicates repose. The position at the right

hand of the throne of God indicates participation in the divine energies and in the administration of the divine providences. But the point to observe is that the Ascension is declared to be the prerogative of the Man Christ Jesus. And so with great emphasis and significance, in the verse with a part of which I am now dealing, we have brought together the name of the humanity, the name that was borne by many another Jew in the same era as Jesus bore it, we have brought together the name of the humanity and the affirmation of the divine dignity, 'We see Jesus... set down at the right hand of the throne of God.' And over and over again, not only in this Epistle, But in other parts of Scripture, we have the same intentional, emphatic juxtaposition of the two ideas which shallow thinkers regard as in some sense incompatible — the humanity and the divinity.

Remember, for instance, 'this same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go.' And remember the rapturous and wonderful exclamation which broke from the lips of the proto-martyr. 'Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' So then that exaltation and ascension is — according to New Testament teaching, which is not contradicted by the deepest thought of the affinities and resemblances of the divine and the human — the lifting up of the Man into the glory which the Incarnate Word had with the Father before the world was. And just as the earthly life of that Incarnate Word has shown how divine a thing a human life here may be, so the heavenly life of the still Incarnate Word shows us what our approximation to, and union with, the divine nature may be, when we are purged and perfected in the Kingdom of God, whither the Forerunner is for us entered.

But further, in addition to this thought, there comes another which is constantly associated with the teaching of this session of the Son of Man at the right hand Of God, namely, that it is intercessory. That is a word the history of which will take us far, and I dare not enter upon it now. But one thing I wish to make very emphatic, and that is that the ordinary notion of intercession is not the New Testament notion. We limit it, or tend to limit it, to prayer for others. There is no such idea in the New Testament use of the phrase. It is a great deal wider than any verbal expression of sympathy and desire. It has to deal with realities and not with words. It is not a synonym for asking for another that some blessing may come upon him; but the intercession of the great High Priest who has gone into the holiest of all for us covers the whole ground of the acts by which, by reason of our deep and true union with Jesus Christ through faith, He communicates to His children whatsoever of blessing and power and sweet tokens of ineffable love He has received from the Father. Whatsoever He draws in filial dependence from the Divine Father He in brotherly unity imparts to us; and the real communication of real blessing, and not the verbal petitions for forgiveness, is what He is doing there within the veil. 'He is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them.'

But still further in this great figure of my text, the Enthroned Christ, there lies a wondrous thought which He Himself has given us, 'I go to prepare a place for you.' What activities are involved in that wondrous idea it boots us not to inquire, nor would it become us to say. We know that never could we tread those pure pavements except our robes and our feet had been washed By Him. But that is the consequence of His earthly work, and not of His heavenly and present energy. Perhaps in our ignorance of all that lies behind the veil, we can get little further than to see that the very fact of His presence is the preparation of the place. For that awful thought, that crushing thought, of eternal life under conditions bewilderingly different from anything we experience here, would be no joy unless we could say we shall see Him and be with Him. I know not how it may be with you, but I think that the nearer we come to the end of the earthly life, and the more the realities beyond begin to press upon our thoughts and our imaginations as those with

which we shall soon make acquaintance, we feel more and more how unquestionable the misery the thought of eternal life would bring if it were not for the fact that the world beyond is lighted up and made familiar by the thought of Christ's presence there. Can you fancy some poor clod-hopping rustic brought up from a remote village and set down all in a moment in the midst of some brilliant court? How out of place he would feel, how unhomelike it would appear, how ill at ease he would be; ay, and what an unburdening there would be in his heart, if amongst the strange splendour he detected beneath the crown and above the robes, sitting on the throne, one whom he had known in the far-off hamlet, and who there had taken part with him in all the ignoble toils and narrow interests of that rustic scene. Jesus said, 'I go to prepare a place for you,' and when I lift up my eyes to those far-off realities which overwhelm me when I try to think about them, I say, I am not dazzled by the splendour, I am not oppressed by the perpetuity of it, I do not faint at the thought of unlike conditions, for I shall be the same and He will be with me.

'It is enough that Christ knows all, And I shall be with Him.'

And so the Enthroned Christ is preparing a place for us. Ay, brethren, and He is not preparing it for us only when we die, but He is preparing it for us whilst we live; for it is only by faith in Him that we have boldness of access and confidence. And neither for the prayers and desires of Christian men on earth nor for the spirits of just men made perfect hereafter will the eternal golden gates swing open except His hand is on the bolt, and by His power the way into the Holiest is made manifest. And so set your minds as well as your affections on the things above, where Christ is sitting on the right hand of God.

Now, secondly, we have here the Present Christ. Matthew, in his Gospel, does not tell of the Ascension, but he preserves the promise, 'Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world,' and that promise is not contradicted, but is realised by the fact of Christ's ascension. He does tell us of the remarkable utterance to Mary on the morning of the Resurrection. 'Touch Me not, for I am not yet ascended to My Father.' The implication that we have plainly is, when I am ascended you may touch. And the contact of even her nervous and clutching hand round His feet is less than the touch and the presence for which that departure makes the way. 'He was parted from them' is the thought that ends the Gospel. He was parted for a season that thou mightest receive Him for ever, is the thought that begins the Acts and the history of the Church. And it is true of Him and His relation to us, and because it is true about Him and about His relation to us, it is also true about all those who sleep in Jesus. Their relation towards the earthly form ceases, and there is an empty place where they once stood.

But there is a presence more real and capable of yielding finer influences, strengthening and sanctifying, than ever came from the earthly presence. It is blessed to clasp hands, it is blessed to link arms, it is blessed to press together the lips; but there is a higher touch than these, and sight is a less clear vision than faith; and they who can pass across the abyss of the centuries and the yet broader and deeper and blacker abyss between earth and heaven, and lay the hand of faith on the hand of Christ, have passed through the veil, that is to say His flesh, and have clasped His real presence. Yes, and the thing that calls itself such, is but a part of the general retrogression of Catholicism to heathenism and materialism. We have the real presence if we have the Christ in our heart by faith. He is present with us; enthroned on high above all heavens, He yet is near the humblest heart, the companion of the lonely, the solace of all that trust Him. 'He trod the winepress alone,' in order that none of us need ever live alone or die alone.

And there is another side to this presence. As I have said, He is present with us here, and you and I may be present with Him yonder; for one of the Epistles tells us that, 'we die with Him that we may live with Him, and that God has quickened us (if we are Christian people) together with Him and made us sit together with Him in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.' Your life, Christian men and women, is in its roots and sources, and ought to be in its flow and course, 'hid with Christ in God,' and you should not only seek to realise the presence of the Master with you, but to climb to Himself, being present with Him.

Thirdly, this great figure of my text sets before us the working Christ. The attitude of sitting at the right hand of God suggests repose; but that is a repose which is consistent with, and is accompanied by, the greatest energy for continuous operation. You remember, no doubt (although, perhaps, not in its full significance), the great words with which the close of St. Mark's Gospel points on to the future, 'So then, after the Lord had spoken unto them, He was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went everywhere preaching the word.' The Master gone, the servants left; the Master resting, the servants journeying and toiling. It is like the two halves of Raphael's great transfiguration picture. The Lord and the three are up there in the amber light, the demoniac boy writhing in his convulsions, and the disciples by him helpless, down here. The gap is great. Yes. 'They went everywhere preaching the Word, the Lord also working with them, and confirming the Word with signs following.' There is the true notion of the repose of Christ resting indeed at the right hand of God, yet working with His servants scattered over the face of the earth. And so in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, the keynote is struck when St. Luke says, 'The former treatise have I made of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach until the day on which He was taken up'; and this treatise, O Theophilus, is the second volume of the one story, the history of all that Jesus Continued both to do and to teach after the day on which He was taken up. Acts of the Apostles? No; Acts of the Ascended Christ — that is the name of the book. Never mind about the apostles. They do come into the foreground; but the writer has little care about them. It is the Christ who is moving; and so we find it all through the

book, the Lord did this, the Lord did that, the Lord did the other thing; and the apostles are, I was going to say, the pawns on the chess-board. And so you remember, too, that dying Stephen saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. He sprang to his feet, not breaking the eternal repose, to look down and to send down help and sustenance and blessing and good cheer to the man there at the foot of the old wall ready to die for Him.

And that is. the type of the whole history of the Church, I have said that Christ's Ascension is the transition from the lower to the higher form of presence; and it is the transition to the wider form of work. He works for us, on us, in us, and with us, and as the apostle Peter said in expounding the significance of the Day of Pentecost, 'Being to the right hand of God exalted He hath shed forth this,' so the Christ is no longer tired, but is still working, working in us, with us, and for us.

And lastly, the metaphor of my text brings before us the returning Christ, It was not only the angel's message that declared that departure and ascension were not the last that the worker was going to see of. Jesus. The necessities of the case, if I may say so, tell us the same message. The Incarnation necessarily involves the Crucifixion; the Crucifixion (if it is what we believe it to be) as necessarily involves the Resurrection, 'for it was not possible that He should be holden of it,' the grim death. The Resurrection and the Ascension are but as it were the initial point, which is produced into the line of His heavenly session. It cannot be that Ascension is the last word to be said The path of the King does not run into a cul de sac like that. The world has not done with Jesus Christ. He is coming, was the great thought around which all the past clustered. He will come, is the great hope around which all the future hopes for the Church and the world are piled and built, 'He shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go,' corporeally, visibly, locally, in His manhood, in His divinity. 'As He was once offered to bear the sin of many, so shall He come the second time without sin unto salvation.' Brethren, that is the hope of the Church, discredited by many unworthy representations and mixed up with a great deal that does not commend it by the folly of those who believe in it; but standing out so distinct and so required by all that is gone before, that no Christian man can afford to relegate the expectation into the region of dimness, or to waver in his faith in it, without much imperilling his conception of his Master, and the blessedness of union with Him. You do not understand the Cross unless you believe in the throne; and you do not understand the throne unless you believe in the judgment-seat. The returning Christ shall judge the world. Brethren! Jesus is enthroned. Do you bow to His command? Do you trust His power? Do you see in Him the pattern of what you may be, and the pledge that you will be it if you

put your confidence in your Lord? The enthroned Christ is present. Do you walk in blessed and continuous communion with Him? The enthroned and present Christ is working. Do you trust in His operation, peacefully, for yourself, for the Church, for the world? Do you open your heart to the abundant energies with which He is flooding His Church, and which His Church is so sadly and so much allowing to run to waste? The enthroned, present, working Christ is coming back, and you and I have to choose whether we shall be of 'the servants whom the Lord, when He cometh, shall find watching,' and obeying His command with girt loins and lit lamps, and so will sweep with Him into the festal hall, and sit down with Him, on His throne; or whether we shall wail because of Him, and shrink abashed from the judgment-seat of Christ.

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Hebrews 12:4 Resisting Unto Blood

'Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.' — Hebrews 12:4

'Ye have not yet resisted' — then others had done so; and the writer bids his readers contrast their own comparative immunity from persecution from the fate of such, in order that they may the more cheerfully do the easier task devolved upon them. Who were those others?

If the supposition of many is correct that this Epistle was addressed to the Mother Church at Jerusalem, the fate of Stephen the first martyr, and of James the brother of John, who had 'had the rule over' that Church, may have been in the writer's mind. If the date assigned to the letter by some is accepted, the persecution under Nero, which had lighted the gardens of the Capitol with living torches, had already occurred; and the writer may have wished the-Jerusalem Church to Bethink themselves that they had fared better than their brethren in Rome. But whether these conjectures are adopted or no, there is another contrast evidently in the writer's mind. He has Been speaking of the long series of heroes of the faith, some of whom had been 'stoned and sawn asunder,' and he would have the Christians whom he addresses contrast their position with that of these ancient saints and martyrs. And there is another contrast more touching still, more wonderful and impressive, in his mind; for my text follows immediately upon a reference to Jesus Christ, 'who endured the Cross, despising the shame.' So Himself 'had resisted unto blood.' And thus the writer bids his readers think of the martyrs in the Mother Church; of the blood that had deluged the Church at Rome; of the slaughtered saints in past generations; and, above all, of the great Captain of their salvation; and, animated by the thoughts, manfully to bear and mightily to resist in the conflict that is laid upon them. 'Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against Sin.'

I. So then, we have here, to begin with, the permanent condition of the Christian life, as one of Warfare and resistance.

The imagery of the whole context is drawn from the arena. A verse or two before the writer was speaking about the race. Now he slightly shifts his point of view, and is speaking rather about the wrestling or the pugilistic encounters that were there waged. And his point is that always, and everywhere, however the forms may vary in which the conflict is carried on, there is inseparable from the Christian life an element of effort, endurance and antagonism. That is worth thinking about for a moment. It is all very well to sing of green pastures and still waters, and to rejoice in the blessings, the consolations, the tranquillities, the raptures of Christian experience, and to rejoice in the thought of the many mercies for body and soul which come to men through faith. That is all true and all blessed, but it is only one side of the truth. And unless we have apprehended, and have been educated to practice and experience the other side of the Christian life, which makes it a toil and a pain to the lower self, and a continual resistance, I venture to say that we have no right to the soothing and sweet and tender side of it; and have need to ask ourselves whether we know anything about Christianity at all. It is not given to us merely — it is not given to us chiefly — to secure those great and precious things which it does secure, but it is given to us in order that, enriched and steadied and strengthened by the possession of them, we should be the better fit for the conflict, just as a wise commander will see that his soldiers are well fed before he flings them into the battle.

But then, passing from that, which is only a side issue, let me remind you of what our antagonist is 'striving against sin.'

Now some people would take my text to mean solely the conflict which each of us has to wage with our own evils, meannesses and weaknesses. And some, guided by the context, would take the reference to be exclusively to the antagonisms with evils round about us, and with the embodiment of these in men who do not share Christian views of life or conduct. But I think that neither the one nor the other of these two exclusive interpretations can be maintained. For sin is one, whether embodied in ourselves or embodied in men or in institutions. And we have the same conflict to wage against precisely the same antagonist when we are occupied in the task of purging ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, and when we are occupied in the wider task of seeking to bring every man to recognise the power of Christ's love, and to live in purity by obedience to Him.

And so, the first field on which every Christian is to win his spurs, to prove his prowess, and to exercise his strength is the field within, where the lists are very narrow, and where self wages war against self in daily conflict. Every man of us carries his own worst enemy inside his own waistcoat. We have all lusts, passions, inclinations, desires, faults, vices, meannesses, selfishnesses, indolences, — a whole host of evils lying there like a nest of vipers within us, and our first task and our lifelong task, is to take the sting and the poison out of these, and to throttle them and to eat them out.

And then, and only after that, there comes the next thing — viz., the antagonism in which Christian men must permanently stand to a world which does not sympathise with their views, which is strange to the maxims that rule their lives, and which renders no fealty to the King whom they are sworn to obey. And that antagonism runs out into various forms. First of all, it is the solemn duty of every Christian to wage war so as to prevent himself from being caught up in the current of godless living which prevails round him. We have to fight to keep ourselves from being harmed by the world and the worldly communities amidst which we dwell. What would become of the captain of a ship who did not take care to have his compass corrected so as to neutralize the effects of all the mass of iron in his vessel? You walk as in the wards of a hospital. If you do not take precautions you will catch the disease that is in the air. It is as certain that careless Christian people who do not ever keep on guard against impending and surrounding evil shall be infected by it, as it is certain that if an Englishman goes out, say to the United States, he will come back with the intonations of our brethren on the other side of the Atlantic slipping unconsciously from his tongue. The first duty, imperative upon Christian people, is to realise that they live in the midst of an order of things that is not in accordance with the Master's principles, and so to beware that they do not catch the infection.

I do not need to say a word about the other form of antagonism, which is equally imperative, and which will prevent us from caring much about the judgments that may be formed of us by the people round us. 'With me it is a very small matter that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment.' But the resistance against sin, which is the Christian man's merciful warfare in the world, is not completed either by his keeping himself from complicity with surrounding evils or by his refusing to let antagonism divert him from his course. There is something more that is plain duty, and that is, that every Christian should be Christ's soldier in the attempt to get Christ's commandments recognised, and the principles of His word obeyed, in the world.

Society is not organised on Christian principles. You have only to look around you to see that. I do not need to dwell upon the various discordances between the plain teachings of this Book and every community, and every nation, and every individual; but let me remind you that until the Sermon on the Mount is the law for individuals and communities, the Christian man, if he is loyal to his Lord, must be 'striving against sin' in the endeavour to get established Christ's kingdom, which is the kingdom of righteousness. That sermon does not contain all Christian truth, but it is the Magna Carta of an applied Christianity; the laws of the kingdom from the lips of the King Himself.

So, brethren, I come to you with this for my message, that no Christian man is doing his work as Christ's soldier, 'striving against sin,' until he is seeking, with the best of his strength, to get Christ's law, which is righteousness, established on the face of the earth.

Talk of dynamiters and explosives, why, there is explosive power enough in Christianity to shatter to pieces the corruptions which make so large a part of modern social life. But, alas! the Christian Church has too long and too generally been employed in damping down the gunpowder instead of firing it, and seeking to explain away the large and plain commandments of the Master, instead of seeking to apply them.

There is a new spirit springing up around us to-day, for which we should be devoutly thankful, whilst at the same time we must forget that, like all new move-merits, it is apt to be one-sided and exaggerated. Much harm is done, I believe, in many directions by Christian teachers seeking to apply the principles of Christ's commandments to various phases of social iniquity without a clear knowledge of the facts of the case. But that being fully admitted, I still rejoice to believe that Christ's men round about us are waking up, as they never did before, to the solemn obligation laid upon Christian churches, if they are not to perish of inanition and inactivity, to proclaim and seek to have recognised Christ's laws for the individual and Christ's law for the community.

Only remember the limitations and the antecedents about which I have already spoken a word. No man has any business to go crusading among other people until he has cleansed himself. And the first task of the Christian reformer is with his own heart. And again, it is useless to deal with institutions unless you deal with the men who live under them. The main work of the Christian Church must ever be with individuals, and through their improvement the improvement of society will be most fully secured. But the error of many good and earnest men to-day is in thinking that if you set the 'environment,' as they call it, right you will get the men right. It is a mistake. Take a pack of drunken wastrels out of the slums and put them into model lodging-houses, and in a fortnight the lodging-houses will be as dirty, as the sties from which the men were dragged. Mend the men, and then you may hopefully set them in new environment; mend the men, and society will be mended. And, mend yourselves first, and then you will be able to mend society. Resist your own sin, and then go out to fight with the sin of others.

II. Notice the brunt of the battle which has been borne by others.

I have already said that the immediate context suggests two contrasts between the comparative immunity from persecution of the readers of the letter and certain others.

The first is that suggested by all that glorious muster-roll of heroes and martyrs of the faith which precedes this chapter. And I may say without dealing in rhetoric, or dilating on the subject, that Christian men in this generation may well bethink themselves of what it was that their fathers bore, and did, that has won for them this ease.

I remember an old church, on the slopes of one of the hills of Rome, which is covered over on all its interior walls with a set of the most gruesome pictures of the martyrs. There may be an unwholesome admiration and adoration of these. I think modern Christianity, in its complacency with itself, and this marvellous nineteenth century, of which we are so proud, would be all the better if it went back sometimes to remember that there were times when 'young men and maidens, and old men and children,' had to resist to blood; and when they went to their deaths as joyfully as a bride to the altar.

Ah, brethren I you Nonconformists in this generation, who have an easy-going religion, do not always remember how it was worn. Think of George Fox and the Friends. Think of the early Nonconformists, hunted and harried, their noses slit and ears cropped off, their pillories and exile, and then be ashamed to talk about the difficulties that you have to meet. 'Ye have not resisted unto blood.'

There is a far more touching contrast suggested, and apparently mainly in the writer's mind, because just before he has said, 'Consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners.' The word that he employs for 'consider' might be rendered 'compare, weigh in the balance,' Christ's sufferings and yours. He has borne the heavy end of the Cross of which He lays the light end upon our shoulders. Of course the more mysterious and profound aspects of Christ's death, in which He is no pattern for us, but the propitiation for our sins, do not come into view in this contrast. They are abundantly treated in the rest of the letter. But here the writer is thinking of Jesus Christ in His capacity of the Prince of sufferers for righteousness' sake, who could have escaped His Cross if He had chosen to abandon His warfare and His witness. Jesus Christ is a great deal more than that. And the differentia of His sufferings and death is not touched by such a consideration. But do not let us forget that He is that, and that whatever else His death is, it stands also as being the very climax of all suffering for righteousness. He is the King of the martyrs as well as the Sacrifice for the world's sin. Let us turn to Him, and mark the heroic strength of character, hidden from hasty observation by the sweet gentleness in which it was enshrined, like the iron hand in a velvet glove.

Let us understand how His pattern is held forth to us, and how the Cross is our example, as well as the ground of all our hope. 'Ye have not yet resisted ... Consider Him.'

III. And now, lastly, note the lighter warfare incumbent upon us.

The resistance changes its form, but in essence it continues. In old days warfare consisted in men bludgeoning each other, or engaging in hand-grips foot to foot and face to face. Nowadays it is artillery duels — a great deal more scientific, a great deal less

coarse; but it is warfare all the same. The world used to burn Christians, to hang them, to stone them. It does not do that now, but it fights them yet. The world has become partially Christianised, and the principles of Christianity have, in a certain imperfect way, infiltrated themselves through the mass, so that the antagonism is not quite as hot as it once was. And the Church has weakened its testimony and largely adopted the maxims of the world. So why should the world persecute a Church which is only a bit of the world under another name? But let any man for himself honestly try to live a life modelled on Christ's maxims, and let him cast himself against some of the clamant evils round about him, and seek to subdue them, because Christ has bidden him, and he will see whether the old antagonism is not there yet. What a chorus of select epithets will immediately be discharged! 'Impracticable,' 'fanatical,' 'one-sided,' 'revolutionary,' 'sour visaged,' 'Pharisee,' 'hypocrite.' These will be the sweet, smelling flowers in the garland that will be woven. Depend upon it, a Christian man who is bent on living out Christianity for himself, and on seeking to apply it around him, will have to fight and endure.

But all that is. as nothing — nothing — to what the front rank had to go through, and went through, joyfully. They fell in the trenches and filled them up, that the rear rank might pass across. They bore sword stabs; we have only to bear pin pricks. Stones were flung at them, as at Stephen outside the wall; handfuls of mud are all that we have to be afraid of.

So, brethren, accept thankfully to-day's form of the permanent conflict, and see that you do uncomplainingly, cheerfully, and thoroughly the task that is laid upon you. And do not think much of the discomforts and annoyances. For us to speak about sacrifices for Christ is as if a bargeman on a canal were to dilate on the perils of his voyage in the hearing of an Arctic explorer; or as if a man that went in a first-class carriage to London were to speak to an African traveller about 'the perils of the road.' 'Ye have not yet resisted unto blood. 'Consider Him'; and take up your cross, and follow Him.

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Hebrews 12:10 A Father's Discipline

'For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but He for our profit,, that we might be partakers of His holiness.' — Hebrews 12:10

FEW words of Scripture have been oftener than these laid as a healing balm on wounded hearts. They may be long unnoticed on the page, like a lighthouse in calm sunshine, but sooner or later the stormy night falls, and then the bright beam flashes out and is welcome. They go very deep into the meaning of life as discipline; they tell us how much better God's discipline is than that of the most loving and wise of parents, and they give that superiority as a reason for our yielding more entire and cheerful obedience to Him than we do to such.

Now, to grasp the full meaning of these words, we have to notice that the earthly and the heavenly disciplines are described in four contrasted clauses. which are arranged in what students call inverted parallelism — that is to say, the first clause corresponds to the fourth and the second to the third. 'For a few days' pairs off with 'that we might be partakers of His holiness.' Now, at first sight that does not seem a contrast; but notice that the 'for' in the former clause is not the 'for' of duration, but of direction. It does not tell us the space during which the chastisement or discipline lasts, but the end towards which it is pointed. The earthly parent's discipline trains a boy or girl for circumstances, pursuits, occupations, professions, all of which terminate with the brief span of life. God's training is for an eternal day. It would be quite irrelevant to bring in here any reference to the length of time during which an earthly father's discipline lasts, but it is in full consonance with the writer's intention to dwell upon the limited scope of the one and the wide and eternal purpose of the other.

Then, as for the other contrast — 'for their own pleasure,' or, as the Revised Version reads it, 'as Seemed good to them' — 'but He for our profit.' Elements of personal peculiarity, whim, passion, limited and possibly erroneous conceptions of what is the right thing to do for the child, enter into the training of the wisest and most loving amongst us; and we often make a mistake and do harm when we think we are doing good. But God's training is all from a simple and unerring regard to the benefit of His child. Thus the guiding principles of the two disciplines are contrasted in the two central clauses.

Now, these are very threadbare, commonplace, and old-fashioned thoughts; but, perhaps, they are so familiar that they have not their proper power over us; and I wish to try in this sermon, if I can, to get more into them, or to get them more into us, by one or two very plain remarks.

I. I would ask you to note, first, the grand, deep, general conception, here firmly laid hold of, of life as only intelligible when it is regarded as education or discipline.

God corrects, chastens, trains, educates. That is the deepest word about everything that befalls us. Now, there are involved in that

two or three very obvious thoughts, which would make us all calmer and nobler and stronger, if they were vividly and vitally present to us day by day.

The first is that all which befalls us has a will behind it and is co-operant to an end. Life is not a heap of unconnected incidents, like a number of links flung down on the ground, but the links are a chain, and the chain has a staple. It is not a law without a law-giver that shapes men's lives. It is not a blind, impersonal chance that presides over it. Why, these very meteors that astronomers expect in autumn to be flying and flashing through the sky in apparent wild disorder, all obey law. Our lives, in like manner, are embodied thoughts of God's, in as far as the incidents which befall in them are concerned. We may mar, we may fight against, may contradict the presiding divine purpose; but yet, behind the wild dance of flashing and transitory lights that go careering all over the sky, there guides, not an impersonal Power, but a living, loving Will He, not it; He, not they, men, circumstances, what people call second causes — He corrects, and He does it for a great purpose.

Ah! if we believed that, and not merely said it from the teeth outwards, but if it were a living conviction with us, do you not think our lives would tower up into a nobleness, and settle themselves down into a tranquillity all strange to them to-day?

But, then, further, there is the other thought to be grasped, that all our days we are here in a state of pupilage. The world is God's nursery. There are many mansions in the Father's house; and this earth is where He keeps the little ones. That is the true meaning of everything that befalls us. It is education. Work would not be worth doing if it were not. Life is given to us to teach us how to live, to exercise our powers, to give us habits and facilities of working. We are like boys in a training ship that lies for most of the time in harbour, and now and then goes out upon some short and easy cruise; not for the sake of getting anywhere in particular, but for the sake of exercising the lads in seamanship. There is no meaning worthy of us — to say nothing of God — in anything that we do, unless it is looked upon as schooling. We all say we believe that. Alas! I am afraid very many of us forget it,

But that conception of the meaning of each event that befalls us carries with it the conception of the whole of this life, as being an education towards another. I do not understand how any man can bear to live here, and to do all his painful work, unless he thinks that by it he is getting ready for the life beyond; and that 'nothing can bereave him of the force he made his own, being here.' The rough ore is turned into steel by being

'Plunged in baths of hissing tears, And heated hot with hopes and fears, And battered with the shocks of doom'

And then — what then? Is an instrument, thus fashioned, and tempered and polished, destined to be broken and 'thrown as rubbish to the void'? Certainly not. If this life is education, as is obvious' upon its very face, then there is a place where we shall exercise the faculties that we have acquired here, and manifest in loftier forms the characters which here we have made our own.

Now, brethren, if we carry these thoughts with us habitually, what a difference it will make upon everything that befalls us! You hear men often mauling and murmuring about the mysteries of the pain and sorrow and suffering of this world, wondering if there is any loving Will behind it all. That perplexed questioning goes on the hypothesis that life is meant mainly for enjoyment or for material good. If we once apprehended in its all- applicable range this simple truth, that life is a discipline, we should have less difficulty in understanding what people call the mysteries of Providence. I do not say it would interpret everything, but it would interpret an immense deal. It would make us eager, as each event came, to find out its special mission and what it was meant to do for us. It would dignify trifles, and bring down the overwhelming magnitude of the so- called great events, and would make us lords of ourselves, and lords of circumstances, and ready to wring the last drop of possible advantage out of each thing that befell us. Life is a Father's discipline.

II. Note the guiding principle of that discipline.

'They... as seemed good to them.' I have already said that, even in the most wise and unselfish training by an earthly parent, there will -mingle subjective elements, peculiarities of view and thought, and sometimes of passion and whim and other ingredients, which detract from the value of all such training. The guiding principle for each earthly parent, even at the best, can only be his conception of what is for the good of his child; and oftentimes that is not purely the guide by which the parent's discipline is directed. So the text turns us away from all these incompletenesses, and tells us, 'He for our profit' — with no sidelong look to anything else, and with an entirely wise knowledge of what is best for us, so that the result will be always and only for our good. This is the point of view from which every Christian man ought to look upon all that befalls him.

What follows? This, plainly: there is no such thing as evil except the evil of sin. All that comes is good — of various sorts and various complexions, but all generically the same. The inundation comes up over the fields, and men are in despair. It goes down; and then, like the slime left from the Nile in flood, there is better soil for the fertilising of our land. Storms keep sea and air from

stagnating. All that men earl evil in the material world has in it a soul of good.

That is an old, old commonplace; but, like the other one, of which I have been speaking, it is more often professed than realised, and we need to be brought back to the recognition of it more entirely than we ordinarily are. If it be that all my life is paternal discipline, and that God makes no mistakes, then I can embrace whatever comes to me, and be sure that in it I shall find that which will be for my good.

Ah, brethren, it is easy to say so when things go well; but, surely, when the night falls is the time for the stars to shine. That gracious word should shine upon some of us in to-day's perplexities, and pains, and disappointments, and sorrows — 'He for our profit.'

Now, that great thought does not in the least deny the fact that pain and sorrow, and so-called evil, are very real. There is no false stoicism in Christianity. The mission of our troubles would not be effected unless they did trouble us. The good that we get from a sorrow would not be realised unless we did sorrow. 'Weep for yourselves' said the Master, 'and for your children.' It is right that we should writhe in pain. It is right that we should yield to the impressions that are made upon us by calamities. But it is not right that we should be so affected as that we should fail to discern in them this gracious thought — 'for our profit.' God sends us many love-tokens, and amongst them are the great and the little annoyances and pains that beset our lives, and on each of them, if we would look, we should see written, in His own hand, this inscription: 'For your good.' Do not let us have our eyes so full of tears that we cannot see, or our hearts so full of regrets that we cannot accept, that sweet, strong message.

The guiding principle of all that befalls us is God's unerring knowledge of what will do us good. That will not prevent, and is not meant to prevent, the arrow from wounding, but it does wipe the poison off the arrow, and diminish the pain, and should diminish the tears.

III. Lastly, here we see the great aim of all the discipline.

The earthly parent trains his son, or her daughter, for earthly occupations. These last a little while. God trains us for an eternal end: 'that we should be partakers of His holiness.' The one object which is congruous with a man's nature, and is stamped on his whole being, as its only adequate end, is that he should be like God. Holiness is the Scriptural shorthand expression for all that in the divine nature which separates God from, and lifts Him above, the creature; and in that aspect of the word the gulf can never be lessened nor bridged between us and Him. But it also is the expression for the moral purity and perfection of that divine nature which separates Him from the creatures far more really than do the metaphysical attributes that belong to His infinitude and eternity; and in that aspect the great hope that is given to us is that we may rise nearer and nearer to that perfect whiteness of purity, and though we cannot share in His essential, changeless being, may 'walk' — as befits our limited and changeful natures — 'in the light, as He' — as befits His boundless and eternal being — 'is in the light.' That is the only end which it is worthy of a man, being what he is, to propose to himself as the issue of his earthly experience. If I fail in that, whatever else I have accomplished, I fail in everything. I may have made myself rich, cultured, learned; famous, refined, prosperous; but if I have not at least begun to be like God in purity, in will, in heart, then my whole career has missed the purpose for which I was made, and for which all the discipline of life has been lavished upon me. Fail there, and, wherever you succeed, you are a failure. Succeed there, and, wherever you fail, you are a success.

That great and only worthy end may be reached by the ministration of circumstances and the discipline through which God passes us. These are not the only ways by which He makes us partakers of His holiness, as we well know. There is the work of that Divine Spirit who is granted to every Believer to breathe into him the holy breath of an immortal and incorruptible life. To work along with these there is the influence that is brought to bear upon us by the circumstances in which we are placed and the duties which we have to perform. These may all help us to be nearer and liker to God.

That is the intention of our sorrows. They will wean us; they will refine us; and they will blow us to His breast, as a strong wind might sweep a man into some refuge from itself. I am sure that among my hearers there are some who can thankfully attest that they were brought nearer to God by some short, sharp sorrow than by many long days of prosperity. What Absalom, in his wayward, impulsive way, did with Joab is like what God sometimes does with His sons. Joab would not come to Absalom's palace, so Absalom set his corn on fire; and then Joab came. So God sometimes burns our harvests that we may go to Him.

But the sorrow that is meant to bring us nearer to Him may be in vain. The same circumstances may produce opposite effects. I dare say there are people listening to me now who have been made hard, and sullen, and bitter, and paralysed for good work, because they have some heavy burden or some wound that life can never heal, to be carded or to ache. Ah, brethren! we are often like shipwrecked crews, of whom some are driven by the danger to their knees, and some are driven to the spirit-casks. Take care

that you do not waste your sorrows; that you do not let the precious gifts of disappointment, pain, loss, loneliness, ill-health, or similar afflictions that come into your daily life, mar you instead of mending you. See that they send you nearer to God, and not that they drive you farther from Him. See that they make you more anxious to have the durable riches and righteousness which no man can take from you, than to grasp at what may yet remain, of fleeting: earthly joys.

So, brethren, let us try to school ourselves into the habitual and operative conviction that life is discipline. Let us yield ourselves to the loving will of the unerring Father, the perfect love. Let us beware of getting no good from what is charged to the brim with good. And let us see to it that out of the many fleeting circumstances of life we gather and keep the eternal fruit of being partakers of His holiness. May it never have to be said of any of us that we wasted the mercies which were judgments too, and found no good in the things, that our tortured hearts felt to be also evils, lest God, should have to wail over any of us, 'In vain have I smitten your children; they have received no correction!'

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Hebrews 12:17 Esau's Vain Tears

'For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.' — Hebrews 12:17

THESE words have been often understood as teaching a very ghastly and terrible doctrine, viz., that a man may earnestly and tearfully desire to repent, and be unable to do so. Such teaching has burdened many a heart, and has put obstacles before many feeble feet in the way of a return to God. It seems to me to be contradicted by a thousand places of Scripture, and to involve something very much like a contradiction in terms.

The Revised Version, by a very slight change, has dispelled that ugly dream. It has put the clause 'for he found no place of repentance' in a parenthesis. The effect of that is to bring the first and last clauses of the verse more closely together; and to show more clearly that what Esau is represented as seeking, and seeking with tears in vain, is not repentance, but the Father's blessing.

It may not, perhaps, be legitimate, regard being had to the construction of the sentence, to treat the clause in question as a parenthesis, because it is so closely connected with the succeeding clause by the antithesis of 'found' in the one and 'sought' in the other. But although that may be so, I have no doubt whatever that the truth intended to be conveyed by the parenthesis of the Revised Version is the true interpretation of the words before us; and that we are to find here simply the declaration that this man, at a given time of his life; 'would have inherited the blessing,' 'sought it carefully with tears,' and found it not.

Now the words, thus understood, teach a sufficiently grave and solemn lesson, though they do not teach the ghastly, and, as I believe, the erroneous thought that has been drawn from them. And it may be worth our while to consider for a moment the lessons that they do teach, and to try to lay them upon our hearts.

I. I begin then, first, with asking you to look at the history which is held up before us here as a solemn warning.

The character of Esau is a very simple one. In many respects he is much more attractive and admirable than his brother Jacob. He is frank, generous, quick to kindle into anger, but, as the story shows us too, quick to forgive; placable, easily to be entreated; with the wild Arab virtues of chivalry and generosity and bravery; and the vices belonging to such a character, of almost utter incapacity to rise beyond the present, and of a great susceptibility to mere material and sensual gratification.

And so he comes in from the field hungry and faint. The pottage smells savoury there, as it smokes in the dish before him. The birthright is a long way off, very unsubstantial, very ideal, and the thing that is nearest him, though it be small, shuts out from his view the far greater thing that lies beyond. Therefore he elects to secure present gratification of a material character, whatever becomes of future satisfaction of a higher and more spiritual nature.

And are you going to throw stones at him for that? Is it such a very unusual thing to find men choosing paths that will yield some modicum of sufficiently hot and sufficiently savory pottage, whatever becomes of their birthright? Is there nobody here that believes more in wealth than in purity? Is there no young man here who would rather live to make a fortune than to cultivate his own nature into loftiest beauty? Are there none of you that despise the priceless things, the things that have no price in the market because they are beyond all its wealth to purchase? Are there none of us who are such fools that a spoonful of pottage to-day seems to us to be more real and more precious than a whole heaven hereafter?

Esau had a show of reason. He said: 'I am ready to die, and what will my birthright do for me?' Better a thousand times that he, or we, should die as animals that we may live as the sons of God, than that we should buy existence at the price of true life. And so the man of our text is sufficiently like the rest of you, for you to have a fellow feeling to him that should make you wondrous kind, and his faults are nothing at all extraordinary, but only putting in graphic form, and in such disproportion as to be almost absurd, the

choice that the mass of men always make between present and future, between the material and the spiritual. And then the story goes on to tell us that, long years afterwards, we do not know how long, he found out what a fool he had been. Perhaps so much as thirty or forty years elapsed between the moment when he despised his birthright and the other moment that is set before us here. What are the points that come out in the narrative to which our text refers? 'When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry, and said unto his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father'... and again, 'Hast thou but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father. And Esau lifted up his voice and wept,' These are the parts of the history which the writer of the Hebrews recalls to his Jewish hearers. There is nothing in them about Esau's vainly seeking for repentance, but there is an account of his passionate weeping and loud entreaties that he yet might obtain a blessing from Isaac's trembling lips. In the story there is no word of his vainly trying to repent, but there is a real repentance in the sense in which alone that word can be employed, in reference to such an incident and upon that plane of things, viz., there is in him a decided and fundamental change of view, of mind, as to the value of the birthright that he had despised, and that is repentance; and there is bitter sorrow for what had passed, and that is repentance; and there is earnest desire that it might be different, and that is a sign of repentance. There is no sign of sorrow for sin, of repentance, in that sense of the word, but if we take the word not in the, religious meaning, but in what may be called its secular significance, there are in Esau's ease, as recorded in Genesis, both the elements of a decided alteration of mind and purpose, and of penitence and sorrow for the past. These, then, are the facts of the story, and these are the facts to which my text appeals, for it begins by saying, as to those to whom the whole narrative was familiar: 'Ye know how that.' Therefore all that follows must find its vindication in the story as it is Written in Genesis.

II. These, then, being the facts, let me now come, in the second place, to deal with the lesson which this story teaches us.

Remember what I have said as to points which come out in the narrative, that the man there seeks with tears for the blessing, that so far from vainly seeking to repent, in the lower sense of the word which alone is appropriate in the present ease, he does repent. Therefore that expression of our text 'he found no place of repentance' does not mean 'he found no place where he could repent,' but it means he found no field on which such repentance as he had could operate — so as to undo that which was past. His repentance did not alter the fixed destination of the blessing. His repentance, his change of mind as to the worth of the thing thrown away, and as to his own conduct in despising it, did not bring the thing back again to him. His tears did not obliterate what was done. He wished that it had been otherwise, but his wishes were vain.

And that is the lesson, my brethren, which this text as it stands is intended to teach us. We are pointed back to that tragic picture of Esau there, weeping, wringing his hands in the wild passion of his uncultured nature, when the blessing, seen to be desirable too late, had vanished from his convulsive grasp. And the lesson that is taught us is just this old solemn one. There may come in your life a time when the scales will fall from your eyes, and you will see how insignificant and miserable are the present gratifications for which you have sold your birthright, and may wish the bargain undone which cannot be undone. You cannot wash out bitter memories, you cannot blot out habits by a wish. Tears will not alter the irrevocable, you cannot avert consequences that fall upon a man, the consequences of a lifetime, by any weeping and wringing of your hands, and by any wish that they might disappear. 'What I have written I have written,' said Pilate, and in tragic sense it is true about many a man who at the end looks back upon many 'a line which dying he would wish to blot,' but which stands ineffaceable, not to be scratched out by any of your penknives, unless you can cut out the substance of the soul on which it is written.

My brother! learn the lesson. You young men and women, do you begin right, that there may not be in your career deeds or a set of the life which one day you may wake to see has been all madness and misery! Oh! it is an awful thing for men to stand looking back upon a past life which to them appears as the vale of Sodom, on the morning after the eruption, did to Abraham as he looked on it from Mature, 'and lo! the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace.' So foul with slime-pits of boiling bitumen, the indulged lusts of the flesh, and dark with curling smoke-wreaths which tell of infernal fires wasting the fields that might have waved fruitful with harvests, the dark remembrances and blighting habits of sin set on fire of hell, does many a man's life lie spread out to his gaze. How fain would he cancel the record, if he could! How fain would he

forget and reverse the history! How fain would he bring back his early innocence of these lusts and crimes! In vain! in vain!

The past stands — 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' I know, thank God for the knowledge, I know that — as we shall have to say presently — any man, at any moment of his earthly career, may find, if he seeks for it, the mercy of the Lord which bringeth salvation, but I know too that the salvation which comes to a man who has all his life been giving himself up to earth, and limiting his views and moulding his character by the present and its contemptible objects, will not be as large, as full, as blessed in many an aspect, as the salvation which might have been his if at an early stage in his life, with his character still to mould, and his memory still unwritten with evil, he had turned himself to his God, and found peace in the blood of Jesus Christ. Maimed and marred in a thousand ways, having memories which burn and sting, having habits which it will be hard to fight against; with the marks of thee gyves upon his wrists; and his eyes unaccustomed to the daylight, like the prisoner that came out of the Bastille after a lifetime of imprisonment there, and wanted to go back again because he could not bear freedom and sunshine: so many a man brought to God and saved yet so as by fire, near the end of his days, has to feel that it is not all the same whether a lifetime has

been spent in the temple and priestly service, or in the foul haunts of vice and debauchery.

We shall always have as much of God as we can hold, and as much of salvation as we desire; but the tragic thing is that a life spent in living, Esau-like, for the world and for the present, lames our desires and limits our capacities, so that even if such a man afterwards become a Christian, it may be impossible even for the giving God to give us as large a bestowment of His mercy and grace as we might otherwise have possessed. On the other side it is not to be forgotten 'the publicans and the harlots shall go into the Kingdom of God before you,' Pharisees and Sadducees. And there is such a thing as the deep repentance and the passionate trust with which a soul, all spattered and befouled with fleshly sins, may cleave to the Master that may overcome even these disabilities of which I have spoken. But in the main it remains true that even if Esau at the last gets a blessing, he bears away a less blessing than he might have done had his earlier life been different.

III. And now let me turn last of all to what I venture to consider the misapprehension which these words do not teach.

They do not teach that a man may desire to repent with tears and be unable to do so. That, it seems to me, is to assert a staring, stark contradiction, for if a man desire to repent he must have changed his views as to the conduct of which he desires to repent, and that change of View is the repentance which he desires. And if a man desires to repent there must be in him some measure of regret and sorrow for the conduct Of which he desires to repent, considered as sin against God, and that is repentance.

Nor do the words teach, as it seems to me, the cognate thought which has sometimes been deduced from them, that a man may desire to receive the salvation of His soul from God, and may not receive it. To desire is to possess; to possess in the measure of the desire, and according to its reality. There is no such thing in the spiritual realm as a real longing unfulfilled. 'Whosoever will, let him come and take of the water of life freely.' And the awful pictures that have been drawn of men weeping because they could not repent, and of men with passionate tears imploring from the Father in heaven the blessing which does not come to them, are slanders upon God and misapprehensions of His gospel. That gospel proclaims that wheresoever and whosoever will ask shall receive, or rather that God has already given, and that nothing but obstinate determination not to possess prevents any man from being enriched with the fulness of God's salvation.

Only remember, dear brethren, it is possible for a man to wish vagrantly, with half his will, to wish in a languid fashion, to wish while he is not prepared to surrender what stands in the way of his wish being gratified. And such wishing as that never got salvation, and never will. There are plenty of people that would like to Be saved as they understand it, and to be sure that they are so, who are not prepared to close with the terms of salvation. It is not wishing of that sort that I am talking about. Heaven may be had for the wishing, but it must be an honest wish, it must Be out-and- out wishing, it must be wishing which actuates the life, it must be wishing which drives you to the Cross of Christ. And then, in the measure of the desire shall be the gift; and the larger the petition, the larger the

benediction which comes fluttering down from heaven on to your head and into your heart.

We have all sold our birthright, but we have a Brother in whom we may win it back, the elder Brother of us prodigals, who, instead of grudging us the fatted calf and the festival welcome, Himself has died that they may be ours; and that no penitence may be unavailing, nor any longing be unsatisfied for ever more.

Whatever we are, whatever has been our past, however embruted in sensual vice, however entangled in material gains, we have but to turn ourselves to that gracious Lord our Brother, in whom the Father blesses us with all heavenly blessings, and we shall share in the birthright of His firstborn Son, 'being heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.'

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Hebrews 12:22, 23 With Whom Faith Lives

'Ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, 23, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven.' — Hebrews 12:22, 23

The magnificent passage of which these words are part sums up the contrast between Judaism and Christianity which this whole Epistle has been illustrating and enforcing. The writer takes the scene on Sinai as expressive of the genius of the former revelation, whose centre was a law which evoked the consciousness of sin, and kindled terror; and which was embodied in sensible and material symbols. Far other and better are the characteristics of the latter revelation. That excites no dread; is given from no flashing mountain with accompaniments of darkness and trumpet blasts and terrible words; and it brings us into contact with no mere material and therefore perishable symbols, but with realities none the less real because they are above sense, and not remote from us though they be.

For, says my text, 'Ye are come,' not 'Ye shall come.' The humblest life may be in touch with the grandest realities in the universe, and need not wait for death to draw aside the separating curtain in order to be in the presence of God and in the heavenly Jerusalem.

How are these things brought to us? By the revelation of God in Christ. How are we brought to them? By faith in that revelation. So every believing life, howsoever encompassed by flesh and sense, can thrust, as it were, a hand through the veil, and grasp the realities beyond. The scene described in the first words of my text may verily be the platform on which our lives are lived, howsoever in outward form they may be passed on this low earth; and the companions, which the second part of our text discloses, may verily be our companions, though we 'wander lonely as a cloud,' or seem to be surrounded by far less noble society. By faith we are come to the unseen realities which are come to us by the revelation of God in Christ. 'Ye are come unto Mount Zion.'

Now, looking generally at these words, they give us just two things — the scene and the companions of the Christian life. The remainder of the passage will occupy us on future occasions, but for the present I confine myself to the words which I have read. And I shall best deal with them, I think, if I simply follow that division into which they naturally fall, and ask you to note, first, where faith lives, and, second, with whom faith lives.

I. First, then, where faith lives.

'Ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.' There are two points here which carry us back to the topography of the ancient sacred city. In the literal Jerusalem, Zion was the lofty Acropolis, at once fortress and site of the king's palace, and round it clustered the dwellings of the city.

The two symbols are thus closely connected, and present substantially the same idea, and perhaps it is pressing a figure too far to find a diversity of meaning in the separate parts of this closely connected whole. But still it seems to me that there is a substantial difference of aspect in the two clauses.

The first thought, therefore, that I would suggest to you is this, that the life of a man who has truly laid hold of Jesus Christ, and so is living by faith, is on its inward side — that is, in deepest reality — a life passed in the dwelling of the great King. All through this letter, the writer is recurring to the thought of access to God, unimpeded and continual, as being the great gift which Jesus Christ has brought to us. And here he gathers it into the noblest symbol. There, lifted high above all the humbler roofs, flash the golden pinnacles of the great palace in which God Himself dwells. And we, toiling and moiling down here, surrounded by squalid circumstances, and annoyed by many cares, and limited by many narrownesses which we often find to be painful, and fighting with many sorrows, and seeming to ourselves to be, sometimes, homeless wanderers in a wilderness, may yet ever more 'dwell in the house of the Lord, to behold His beauty and to inquire in His temple.'

The privilege has for its other side a duty; the duty has for its foundation a privilege. For if it be true that the real life of every believing soul is a life that never moves from the temple-palace where God is, and that its inmost secret and the spring of its vitality is communion with God, what shall we say of the sort of lives that most of us most often live? Is there any truth in such exalted metaphors as this in reference to us? Does it not sound far liker irony than truth to say of people whose days are so shuttlecocked about by trifling cares, and absorbed in fleeting objects, and wasted in the chase after perishable delights, that they 'are come unto Mount Zion,' and dwell in the presence of God? Is my 'life hid with Christ in God'? There is no possibility of Death being your usher, to introduce you into the house of God not made with hands, unless faith has introduced you into it even whilst you tarry here, and unless your habitual direction of heart and mind towards Him keeps you ever more at least a waiter at His threshold, if you do not pass beyond. 'I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord than dwell in the tents of wickedness.'

My brother! do we so knit ourselves to Him, by heartfelt acceptance of the good news of His loving proximity to us which Jesus Christ brings, as that indeed we have left earth and care and sin at the foot of the mount, with the asses and the servants, and have our faces set to the lofty sweetnesses of our 'Father's house'? 'Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house,' and no less blessed are they 'in whose hearts are the ways' that lead to it.

Then let me remind you how Zion contrasts with Sinai, and thus suggests the thought that a true Christian life, based upon faith, has a communion with God which is darkened by no dread, nor disturbed by consciousness of unforgiven sin. We have set against each other the terrors of that theophany on Mount Sinai, attendant on, or rather precedent to, the giving of the law — the mountain wrapped in smoke; in the heart of the wreathing blackness the flashing fire; from out of the midst of it the long-drawn trumpet blasts, the proclamation of the coming of the King; and then the voice which, divine as it was, froze the marrow of the hearers' bones, that they entreated that no words like these should any more fall on their trembling ears.

That is the one picture. The other shows us the mount where the King dwells, serene and peaceful, the clouds far below the horizon; the flashing fire changed into lambent light; the blast of the trumpet stilled; the dread voice changed into a voice 'that speaketh better things' than were heard amidst the granite cliffs of the wilderness.

And so in vivid, picturesque form the writer gathers up the one great contrast between the revelation of which the message was law and its highest result the consciousness of sin and the shrinking that ensued, and the other of which the inmost heart is love, and the issue the attraction of hearts by the magnetism of its grace. The old fable of a mountain of loadstone which drew ships at sea to its cliffs is true of this Mount Zion, which is exalted above the mountains that it may draw hearts tossing on the restless sea of life to the 'fair havens' beneath its sheltering height, There is no dread, though there is reverence, and no fear, though there is awe, in the approach of those who come through Jesus Christ, and live beneath the smile of their reconciled God and Father. 'Ye are come unto Mount Zion,' the dwelling-place of the living God, from whose lips there will steal into the ears and the hearts of those who keep near Him, gracious words of consolation, so thrilling, so soothing, so enlightening, so searching, so encouraging, that they which hear them shall say, 'Speak yet again, that I may be blessed.'

And then there is the other aspect of this scene where faith lives. 'Ye are come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.' I need not remind you of how much we hear in this Epistle in reference to that city. It is generally set forth as being yet to come, as being the object of seeking rather than of possession. But the fact is that there are two aspects of it. In one it is future, in the other it is present, The general idea to be attached to it is simply that of the order and social state of those who love and serve God. Here, in this part of my text, we have to deal with the city rather than with its inhabitants. They follow thereafter, but, so far as we can separate between the two, we have just this idea enforced in the words that I am now commenting upon — viz., that the lowliest life, knit, as it seems to be, by so many bonds to the perishable associations and affinities of earth, yet, if it be a life of faith in Jesus Christ, has its true affinities and relationships beyond, and not here. 'We have our citizenship in heaven,' says the Apostle, 'from whence also we look for the Saviour.' And every Christian man and woman is therefore hound to two or three very plain duties.

If you are living by faith, you do not belong to this order in the midst of which you find yourself. See that you keep vivid the consciousness that you do not. Cultivate the sense of detachment from the present, of not being absorbed by, or belonging to, things which are not coeval with yourself, and from all of which you will have to pass. Cultivate the sense of having your true home beyond the seas; and look to it as emigrants' and colonists in a far-off land do to the old country, as being home. Live by the laws of your own city, and not by those that run in the community in which you dwell. You are under another jurisdiction. The examples, the maxims of low earthly prudence, or even of a somewhat higher earthly morality, are not your laws. You are not bound to do as the people round about you do.

'I appeal unto Caesar.' I take my orders from him. I send my despatches home, and report to headquarters, and if I get approbation thence, it does not matter what the people amongst whom I dwell think about me. Make your investments at home. The Jews invented banking and letters of credit in order that they might the more easily shift their wealth from one land to another as exigencies required. We are strangers where we are. Do not put your property into the country in which you live as an alien, and lock it up there; but remit, as you can do, to the land where you are going, and to which you belong. Home securities are a good deal better than foreign ones. 'Ye are come to the city of the living God.' 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth.'

II. And now let me turn to the other thought herewith whom does faith live.

I need not trouble you with merely expository remarks upon the diversity of arrangements which is possible in the second half of my text. Suffice it to say that just as the scene of the life of faith has been represented in a twofold and yet closely connected form as Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem, so the companions of that life are also represented in a twofold and yet closely connected form.

A slight alteration in the punctuation and order of the words in our text brings out, as it seems to me, the writer's idea. Suppose you put a comma after 'innumerable company,' and substitute for that phrase the original Greek word, so reading 'and to myriads' and then pause there. That is the general definition, on which follows the division of the 'myriads' into two parts; one of which is 'the general assembly of angels,' and the other is the 'Church of the firstborn which are written in heaven.' So then, of companions for us, in our lonely earthly life, there be two sorts, and as to both of them the condition of recognising and enjoying their society is the same — via, the exercise of faith,

Now the word rendered 'general assembly' has a grander idea in it than that. It is the technical word employed in classic Greek for the festal meetings of a nation at their great games or other solemn occasions, and always carries in it the idea of joy as well as of society. And so here the writer would have us think of one part of that great city, the heavenly Jerusalem, as, if I may so say, the dwelling-place of a loftier race of creatures whose life is immortal and pure joy; and that we, even we, have some connection with them. In an earlier part of this letter we read that they are all 'ministering spirits sent forth to minister to them that shall be heirs of

salvation.' But here the ministration is not referred to, simply the fact of union and communion.

I am not going to enter at any length upon that subject, concerning which we know but very little. But still it seems to me that our ordinary type of Christian belief loses a great deal because it gives so little heed to the numerous teachings of the New Testament in regard to the reality of the existence of such beings, and of the tie that unites them with lowly believers here. All the servants of the King are friends of one another. And howsoever many they may be, and howsoever high above us in present stature any may tower; and howsoever impossible it be for us to see the glancing and hear the winnowing of their silver wings, as they flash upon errands of obedience to Him, and rejoice to hearken to the voice of His word, there is joy in the true belief that the else waste places of the universe are filled with those who, in their loftiness, rejoice to bend to us, saying, 'I am thy fellow servant, and of them which worship God.' Brethren, we have a better face brightening the unseen than any angel face. But just because Jesus Christ fills the unseen for us, in Him we are united to all those of whom He is the Lord, and He is Lord of men as well as angels. So if the eyes of our hearts are opened, we, too, may see 'the mountain full of chariots of fire and horses of fire round about' the believing soul. And we, too, may come to the joyful assembly of the angels, whose joy is all the more poignant and deep when they, the elder brethren, see the prodigals return.

But the second group of companions is probably the more important for us. 'Ye are come,' says the text, not only to the angelic beings that cluster round His throne in joyful harmony, but also 'to the Church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven.' And, seeing that the names are in heaven, that means, evidently, men who themselves are here upon earth.

I have not time to dwell upon the great ideas which are here contained in the designation of the community of believing souls; I only remind you that probably the word 'church' is not so much employed here in its distinct ecclesiastical sense (for there are no ecclesiastical phrases in the Epistle to the Hebrews), as with allusion to the assembly of the Israelites beneath Mount Sinai, the contrast with which colours the whole of the context. It means, therefore, in general, simply the assembly of the firstborn. Can there be more than one firstborn in a family? Yes! In this family there can, for it is a name here not pointing to a temporary order, but to dignity and prerogative. The firstborn had the right of inheritance; the firstborn was sanctified to the Lord; the firstborn, by his 'primogeniture, was destined in the old system to be priest and king. All Israel collectively was regarded as the firstborn of the Lord. We, if our hearts are knit to Him who is preeminently firstborn amongst many brethren, obtain, by virtue of our union with Him, the rights and privileges, the obligations and responsibilities, of the eldest sons of the family of God. We inherit; we ought to be sanctified. It is for us, as the 'first fruits of His creatures,' to bring other men to Him, that through the Church the world may reach its goal, and creation may become that which God intended it to be.

These firstborn have their names written in heaven — inscribed on the register of the great city. And to that great community, invisible like the other realities in my text, and not conterminous with any visible society such as the existing visible Church, all those belong and come who are knit together by faith in the one Lord.

So, dear friends, it is for us to realise, in the midst, perhaps, of loneliness, the tie that knits us to every heart that finds in Jesus Christ what we do. In times when we seem to stand in a minority; in times when we are tormented by uncongenial surroundings; when we are tempted by lower society; when we are disposed to say, 'I am alone, with none to lean upon,' it does us good to think that, not only are there angels in heaven who may have charge concerning us, but that, all over the world, there are scattered brethren whose existence is a comfort, though we have never clasped their hands.

Such, then, is the scene, and such is the society, in which we may all dwell. Christian men and women, do you make conscience of realizing all this by faith, by contemplation, by direct endeavors to pierce beyond the surface and shows of things to the realities that are unseen? See to it that you avail yourself of all the power, the peace, the blessing which will be yours in the degree in which your faith makes these the home and companions of your lives.

How noble the lowest life may become, like some poor, rough sea-shell with a gnarled and dimly coloured, exterior, tossed about in the surge of a stormy sea, or anchored to a rock, but when opened all iridescent with rainbow sheen within, and bearing a pearl of great price! So, to outward seeming, my life may be rough and solitary and inconspicuous and sad, but, in inner reality, it may have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, and have angels for its guardians, and all the firstborn for its brethren and companions.

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Hebrews 12:23 Faith's Access to the Judge, and His Attendants

Ye are come... to God the Judge of an, and to the spirits of Just men made perfect.' — Hebrews 12:23

THE principle of arrangement in this grand section of this letter is obscure, and I am afraid that I cannot cast much, if any, light upon it. We might, at first sight, have expected that the two clauses of our present text should have been inverted, so as to bring all

the constituent parts of 'the city of the living God' closely together — viz., 'the angels,' the members of the militant Church on earth, and those of the triumphant Church in heaven; and also to bring together 'God the Judge of all,' and 'Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant.' But the arrangement, as it stands in our text, may be compared profitably with that of the preceding verses, which we were considering in the last sermon. There, as here, the allusion to the immediate presence of God passed at once into the reference to the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. And just as there Zion, the palace, was immediately connected with the city of the living God, so here the writer, harking back, as it were, to his original starting-point, no sooner names 'God the Judge' than he passes on to set before us 'the spirits of just men made perfect.' In the earlier clauses we have had the more general reference to the palace and the city around it. Here, if I may so say, we pass within the palace gates, and the writer tells us what we find there. This interweaving of the presence of God with that of the creatures that live in His love witnesses to the great truth that our God dwells in no isolated supremacy, but in the midst of a blessed society; and that the solitary souls who find their way into His presence have a welcome, not only from Him, but from all their brethren Of His great family.

So the arrangement may not be so inexplicable as, at first sight, it strikes us as being, if it suggests to us the close and indissoluble connection between God Himself and all those who, in every place, whether the place above or the place beneath, call upon the name of Him who is both their God and ours. In dealing with these words, I have simply to consider these two ideas thus set before us.

I. Faith plants us at the very bar of God.

'Ye are come to God the Judge of all.' Now, it is to be observed that, more accurately, the words might be rendered, 'Ye are come to the God of all as Judge'; for the point which the writer wishes to bring out is not so much the general idea of the divine presence, as that presence considered under a specific aspect, and referring to one mode of His action — viz., the judicial. It is further to be noticed that the judgment which is here spoken about is not, as the very language, 'Ye are come to the Judge; implies, future, but present. The Old Testament, with continual reference to which this letter is saturated, has a great deal more to say about the present continuous judgment which God works all through the ages than about the final future judgment. And, in accordance, not only with the language of our text, which makes coming a present thing, but, in accordance also with the whole tone of the Old Testament, we should recognise here, not so much a reference to the final tribunal Before which all mankind must stand (at which the Judge is characteristically represented in the New Testament as being, not God the Father, But Jesus Christ), as to the continual judgment, both in the sense of decision as to character and infliction of consequences, which is being exercised now by the God of all.

So, then, the first thought that I would suggest from this idea is, Here is a truth which it is the office of faith to realise continually in our daily lives. Your loving access to God, Christian men and women, has brought you right under the eye of the Judge, and, though there be no terror in our approach to that tribunal, there ought to be a wholesome awe as the permanent attitude of our spirits, the awe which is the very opposite of the cowering dread which hath torment. He would be a bold criminal who would commit crimes in the very judgment-hall and before the face of his judge. And that must be a very defective Christian faith which, like the so-called faith of many amongst us, goes through life and sins in entire oblivion of the fact that it stands in the very presence of the Judge of all the earth. Oh, if we could rend the veil as death will rend it, and see the things which are, as faith will help us to see them — for it thins, if it does not tear, the envious curtain between — would it be possible that we should live the low, mean, selfish, earthly, sinful lives, devoured by anxieties, defaced by stains, depressed by trivial sorrows, which, alas! so many of us do live? 'Ye are come..., unto God the Judge of all.' 'If ye call Him Father, who, without respect of persons, judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.'

Then, again, notice that this judgment of God is one which a Christian man should joyfully accept. 'The Lord will judge His people,' says one of the psalms. 'You only have I known of all the inhabitants of the earth; therefore will I punish you for your iniquities,' says one of the prophets. Such sayings represent this present judgment as inevitable, just because of the close connection into which true faith brings a man with his Father in heaven. Inevitable, and likewise most blessed and desirable, for in the thought are included all the methods by which, in providence, and by ministration of His truth and of His Spirit, God reveals to us our hidden meannesses; and delivers us sometimes, even by the consequences which accrue from them, from the burden and power of our sin.

So, then, the office of faith in regard to this continuous judgment which God is exercising upon us because He loves us is, first of all, to open our hearts to it by confession, by frank communion, by referring all our actions to Him to court that investigation. That judgment is no mere knowledge by cold omniscience, such as a heathen conception of the divine eye might make it to be; but just as a careful gardener will go over his rose-trees, and the more carefully the more precious they are in his sight, to pick from each nestling-place at the junction of the leaves with the stem the tiny insects that are sucking out the sap and destroying them, so God will search our hearts in order to pluck from these the crawling evils which, microscopic and tiny as they may be, will yet, in their

multitude innumerable, be destructive of our spirits' lives.

It is a gospel when we say, 'The Lord will judge His people.' Therefore in many a psalm we have the writers spreading themselves out before God, and beseeching Him to come and search them, and try them, and sift them through His sieve, and know them altogether, in the sure confidence that wheresoever He beholds an evil He will be ready to cure it, and that whosoever spreadeth out his sin before God will be lightened of the burden of his sin.

This merciful judgment, which is, in fact, all directed to the perfecting and sanctifying of its subjects, reaches its end in the measure in which we register its decisions in our consciences. God writes His mind about us on them, and when they speak they are only speaking an echo of the sentence that has been pronounced from that loftier tribunal. Therefore, whosoever professeth himself to be a Christian and does anything, be it great or small, which his conscience rebukes when done, and prohibited before it was done, that man is despising the judgment of God, and bringing down upon himself the condemnation which follows despised judgment. 'If we should judge ourselves we should not be judged.' Reverence your consciences: they are the echo of the Judge's voice; peruse their records; they are the register of the Judge's sentence; and whensoever that inward voice speaks, bow before it and say, 'Lord! servant heareth.'

And then, further, remember that this judgment is one that demands our thankful acceptance of the discipline which it puts in force. If we knew ourselves we should bless God for our sorrows. These are His special means of drawing His children away from their evil. 'When we are chastened, we are chastened of the Lord that we should not be condemned with the world.' Oh! there would be less impatience, less blank amazement when suffering comes to us, less vain and impotent regrets for vanished blessings, if we saw in all the dealings of our Father's hands the results of His judgment, and believed that it is better for us to be separated, though it be with violence and much bleeding of torn-away hearts, from our idols than that our idolatry should destroy us and mar them. 'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.' This judgment is not only the merciful separation of us from our sins, but it is also a judgment on our behalf.

The office of the early Jewish judges was not only the judicial one which we mean by the word, but was much wider, and some trace of that wider idea runs through almost all the Old Testament references to the divine judgment. It comes to mean, not merely a decision adverse or favorable, as the ease may be, as to the moral character of its subjects, but it also substantially means pleading their cause, defending their right, intervening for them, and so in many a psalm you will find such petitions as this, 'Judge me, O Lord; for I am poor and needy. Plead my cause against them which rise up against me.' And the same conception of the Judge's office appears in one of our Lord's parables, familiar to us all, in which we are told that 'the Lord will judge His own elect though He bear long with them.'

Thus, another of the blessed thoughts that come out of this conception of our approach to 'the Judge of all' is that we may confidently commit our cause to Him, and leave our vindication in His hands. So, abstinence from self-assertion, from self-vindication, from vengeance or recompense, patience, courage, consolation, strength, all these virtues will be ours if we understand to whom we come by our faith, and can behold, on the throne of the universe, One who will plead our cause, and undertake for us whensoever we are burdened and oppressed.

II. Secondly, Faith carries us while living to the society of the living dead.

'The Judge of all, and the spirits of just men made perfect.' Immediately on the thought of God arising in the writer's mind, there rises also the blessed thought of the blessed company in the centre of whom He lives and reigns. We can say little about that subject, and perhaps the less we say the more we shall understand, and the more deeply we shall feel. We get glimpses but no clear vision, as when a flock of birds turn in their rapid flight, and for a moment the sun glances on their white wings; and then, with another turn, they drift away, spots of blackness in the blue. So we see but for a moment as the light falls, and then lose the momentary glory, but we may at least reverently note the exalted words here.

'The spirits of... men made perfect.' That is to say, they dwell freed from the incubus and limitations, and absolved from the activities, of a bodily organisation. We cannot understand such a condition. To us it may seem to mean passivity or almost unconsciousness, but we know, as another New Testament writer has told us, that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord; and that in some deep, and to us now undiscoverable, fashion, that which the corporeal frame does for men here, immersed in the material world, there the encircling Christ in whom they rest does for them. We know little more, but we have a glimpse of a land of deep peace in which repose is not passivity nor unconsciousness; any more than service is weariness. And there we have to leave it, knowing only this, that it is possible for a man to exist and to be, in a relative sense, perfected without a body. Then, further, these spirits are 'perfect.'

The writer has said, at the close of the preceding chapter, that the ancient saints 'without us should not be made perfect.' And here he employs the same word with distant reference, as I suppose, to his previous declaration. From which I infer that that old thought is true, that Jesus Christ shot some rays of His victorious and all-reconciling power from His Cross into the regions of darkness, and brought thence those who had been waiting for His coming through many a long age. A great painter has left on the walls of a little cell in his Florentine convent a picture of the victorious Christ, white-robed and banner-bearing, breaking down the iron gates that shut in the dark, rocky cave; and flocking to Him, with outstretched hands of eager welcome, the whole long series from the first man downwards, hastening to rejoice in His light, and to participate in His redemption.

So the ancient Church was 'perfected' in Christ; but the words refer, not only to those Old Testament patriarchs and saints, but to all who, up to the time of the writer's composition of his letter, 'slept in Jesus.' They have reached their goal in Him. The end for which they were created has been attained. They are in the summer of their powers, and full-grown adults, whilst we here, the maturest and the wisest, the strongest and the holiest, are but as babes in Christ.

But yet that 'perfecting' does not exclude progress, continuous through all the ages; and especially it does not exclude one great step in advance which, as Scripture teaches us, will be taken when the resurrection of the body is granted. Corporeity is the perfecting humanity. Body, soul, and spirit, these make the full-summed man in all his powers. And so the souls beneath the altar, clothed in white, and rapt in felicity, do yet wait 'for the adoption, even the redemption of the body.'

Mark, further, that these spirits perfected would not have been perfected there unless they had been made just here. That is the first step, without which nothing in death has any tendency to ennoble or exalt men. If we are ever to come to the perfecting of the heavens, we must begin with the justifying that takes place on earth.

Let me point you to one other consideration, bearing not so much on the condition as on the place of these perfected spirits. It is very significant, as I tried to point out, that they should be closely associated in our text with 'God the Judge of all.' Is there any hint there that men who have been redeemed, who being unjust, have been made just, and have had experience of restoration and of the misery of departure, shall, in the ultimate order of things, stand nearer the throne than unfallen spirits, and teach angels? If the 'just man made perfect,' and not the festal assembly of the angels, that are brought into connection here with 'the Judge of all.' Is there any hint that in some sense these perfected spirits are assessors of God in His great judgment? 'Ye shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel,' seems to point in that direction. But the ground is precarious, and I only point to the words in passing as possibly affording a foothold for a 'perhaps.'

But the more important consideration is the real unity between poor souls here who are knit to Jesus Christ, and the spirits of the just made perfect who stand so close to the judgment seat.

Ah, brethren! we have to alter the meaning of the words 'present' and 'absent' when we come to speak of spiritual realities. The gross localized conceptions that are appropriate to material space, and to transitory time, have nothing to do with that higher religion. It is no mere piece of rhetoric or sentiment to say that where our treasure is, there are our hearts, and where our hearts are there are we.

Love has no localities. It knits together two between whom oceans wide roll; it knits together saints on earth and saints in heaven. To talk of place is irrelevant in reference to such a union; for if our love, our aims, our hopes be the same, we are together. And if they on the upper side, and we on the lower, grasp each the outstretched hand of the same God, then we are one in Him, and the same life will tingle through our earthly frames and through their perfected spirits. He is the centre of the great wheel whose spokes are light and blessedness; and all who stand around Him are brought into unity by their common relation to the centre.

Our sorrows would be less sorrowful, our loss less utter, if we truly believed that while apart we are still together. Our courage and our hope would rise if we came closer in loving contemplation and believing thought to the present blessedness of those once our fellow-travelers, who, weak as we, have entered into rest. Heaven itself would gain some touch of true attractiveness if we more clearly saw, and more thankfully felt, that there is

'the Judge of all,' and there also 'the spirit of just men made perfect.' But howsoever great may be the encouragement, the consolation, the quieting that come from them, let us turn away our eyes from the surrounding and lower seats to fix them on the central throne. Let us ever realise that we are ever in our great Judge's eye. Let us spread out our hearts for His scrutiny and decision, for His discipline if need be. Let us commit to Him our cause, and, in the peace that comes therefrom, we may understand why it was that psalmists of old called upon earth to rejoice and the hills to be glad because He 'cometh to judge the earth, to judge the world with righteousness, and the people with His truth.'

Hebrews 12:24 The Messenger of the Covenant and its Seat

'Ye are come..., to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.' — Hebrews 12:24

IN previous sermons on the preceding context, we have had frequent occasion to remark on the parallel and contrast between Sinai and Zion, as expressive of the difference between the genius of Judaism and Christianity, which shapes the whole of this section. That contrast and parallel are most obvious at its beginning and here at its close.

In the beginning we had the mountain of the Law, swathed in darkness, lit by flashing flame, contrasted with the sunny slopes of Zion, palace-crowned, and the wild desert set in opposition to the city of peace that clustered round the foot of Zion's Mount. Here at the close we have the key-words of the old revelation laid hold of and applied to the new. Judaism was a covenant in the form of a law, of which the terms were these: 'Do, and thou shalt live!' The gospel is a covenant in the form of a promise, of which the tenor is 'Believe and live; live and do!' The ancient covenant had Moses for its mediator, passing between the mountain and the plain. The gospel has a better and a truer link of union between God and man than any mere man, however exalted, can be. The ancient system had its sprinkled blood, by which the men on whom it fell entered into the covenant, and were ceremonially sanctified. The new covenant has its blood. An awful voice rolled amongst the peaks of Sinai. That 'blood of sprinkling' speaks too. And then the writer blends with that allusion another, to the voice of the blood of the first martyr, every drop of which cried to God for retribution, and points to the blood of the more innocent Abel, every drop of which appeals to the Father's heart for pardon.

Now it may be said that thus to present Christian truth under the guise of the symbols of an ancient ceremonial and external system is a retrograde step. And some people, who think themselves very enlightened, tell us that the time is past for looking at Christianity from such a point of view. One great man has let himself talk about 'Hebrew old clothes.' I am very much mistaken if these old clothes will not turn out to be something like the raiment that the Hebrews wore in the wilderness, 'which waxed not old for forty years,' and outlasted a great many suits that other people had cut for themselves. We have only to ponder upon these emblems until they become significant to us, in order to see that, instead of being antiquated and effete, they are throbbing with life, and fit as close to the needs of to-day as ever they did. They came with a special message, no doubt, to these men to whom this letter was first addressed, who were by descent and habit Hebrews, and saturated with the law. But their message is quite as much to you and me; and I desire now simply to bring out the large and permanent meanings which lie beneath them.

I. First, then, note that God's revelation to us is in the form of a covenant.

Now, of course, when we talk about a covenant or compact between two men, we mean a matter of bargaining on the terms of which both have been consulted, and which has assumed its final form after negotiations and perhaps compromise. But there are necessarily limitations to the transference of all human ideas to divine relations. One such limitation is expressed in the very language of the original. The word rendered 'covenant' suppresses the idea of conjunction, and emphasises that of appointment. By which we are to learn that the covenant which God makes with man is of His own settling and is not the result of mutual giving and taking; that men have nothing to do with the determining of these conditions; that He Himself has made them, and that He is bound by them, not because we have arranged them with Him, but because He has announced them to us. With that limitation we can take the idea and apply it to the relation between God and us, established in the great message of the gospel.

For what is the notion that underlies the old-fashioned, and to some of you obsolete and unwelcome word? Why, simply this, it is a definite disclosure of God's purpose as affecting you and me, by which disclosure He is prepared to stand and to be bound. It is a revelation, but a revelation that obliges the Revealer to a certain course of conduct; or, if you would rather have a less theological word, it is a system of promise under which God mercifully has willed that we should live. And just as when a king gives forth a proclamation, he is bound by the fact that he gave it forth, so God, out of all the infinite possibilities of His action, condescends to tell us what His line is to be, and He will adhere to it. He lets us see the works of the clock, if I may so say, not wholly, but in so far as we are affected by His action.

What, then, are the terms of this covenant? We have them drawn out, first, in the words of Jeremiah, who apprehended, when he was dwelling in the midst of that eternal system, that it could not be a final system; and next, by the writer of this letter quoting the prophet, who, in the midst of the vanishing of that which could be shaken, saw emerging, like the fairy form of the fabled goddess out of the sea-foam, the vast and permanent outlines of a nobler system. The promises of the covenant are, then, full forgiveness as the foundation of all, and built upon that, a knowledge of God inwardly illuminating and making a man independent of external helps, though he may sometimes be grateful for them; then a mutual possession which is based upon these, whereby I, even I, can venture to say, God is mine, and, more 'wonderful still, I, even I, can venture to believe that He bends down from heaven and says: 'And thou, thou art Mine!' and then, as the result of all — named first, but coming last in the order of nature — the law of His commandment will be so written upon the heart that delight and duty are spelt with the same letters, and His will is our will. These

are the elements, or you can gather them all up into one, namely, the promise of eternal life— based upon forgiveness, operating through the knowledge of God, and issuing in perfect conformity to His blessed will.

If these, then, be the articles of the paction, think for a moment of the blessedness that lies hived in this ancient, and to some of us musty, thought of a covenant of God's. It gives a basis for knowledge. Unless He audibly and articulately and verifiably utters His mind and will, I know not There men are to go to get it. Without an actual revelation from heaven, of other nature, of clearer contents, of more solid certitude than the revelations that may have been written upon the tablets of our hearts, over which we have too often scrawled the devil's message, and over and above the ambiguous articles that may be picked out and pieced together, from reflection upon providence and nature, we need something better and firmer, more comprehensively and more manifestly authoritative, before we are entitled to say, 'Behold! I know that God loves me, and that I may put my trust in Him.' Brethren! I for my part believe that between agnosticism on that side, and the full evangelized faith of the New Testament in a supernatural revelation on this side, all forms of so-called Christianity which shy at the idea of a supernatural 'revelation are destined to have the life squeezed out of them, and that what will be left will be the two logical positions; first, God, if there be a God, never spoke, and we do not know anything about Him; and, second, 'God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son.' If there be a God at all, and if there be in Him any love and any righteousness, it is infinitely more reasonable to suppose that He should have spoken His mind and heart to men, and given them a covenant on which they can reckon, than that He has been from the beginning a dumb God, that never opened His mouth with a word of guidance or of sympathy for the sons of men. Believe that who may; I cannot believe in a pure theism, which has no place for a supernatural revelation.

And then, again, let me remind you how here is the one foothold, if I may so say, for confidence. If God hath not spoken there is nothing to reckon upon. There are perhaps, probabilities if you like, possibilities, but nothing beyond, and no man can build a faith on a peradventure. There must be solid ground on which to rest; and here is solid ground: 'I make a covenant with you.' 'God is not a man that He should lie, nor the Son of Man that He should repent.' And armed with that great thought that He has verily rent the darkness and spoken words which commit Him and assure us, we, even the weakest of us, may venture to go to Him, and plead with Him that He cannot and dare not alter the thing that has gone forth out of His mouth; and so, in deepest reverence, can approach Him and plead the necessity of a great Must under which He has placed Himself by His own word. God is faithful, the covenant-making and the covenant- keeping God.

II. Secondly, mark that Jesus Christ is the Executor of this covenant.

Moses, of course, was a go-between, in a mere external sense; from the mountain to the plain and from the plain to the mountain, he passed, and in either case simply carried a message bearing God's will to man or man's submission to God. But we have to dig far deeper into the idea than that of a mere outward messenger who carries what is entrusted to him, as an errand boy might, if we are to get the notion of Christ's relation to these great promises, which, massed together, are God's covenant with us. Observe that the emphasis is here laid on the manhood of the Lord. It is Jesus who is the 'Mediator of the covenant': and observe, too, that that idea passes into the wider notion of His place as the link uniting God and man. The depth of the thought is only reached when we recognise His divinity and His humanity. He is the ladder with its foot on earth and its top in heaven.

Because God dwells in Him, and the word became flesh, He is able to lay His hand upon both, and to bring God to man and man to God.

He brings God to man. If what I have been saying is at all true, that for all solid faith we must have an articulate declaration of the divine mind and heart, it seems to me to be equally irrefragable that for any such declaration of the divine heart and mind we must have a human vehicle. God speaks through men. It is His highest way of making Himself known to mere men. And Jesus Christ in His Manhood declares God to us. Not by the mere words which He speaks, as a teacher and a wise man, a religious genius and a saint, a philosopher and a poet, a moralist and a judge; but by these, and also by His life, by His emotions of pity and gentleness and patience, and by everything that He does and everything that He endures, He speaks to us of God.

Brethren, where shall a poor man rest his soul outside of the direct or indirect influences of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ? Why I the very men who reject Him to-day, on the plea that they have learnt a nobler conception of God than they can find in Christianity, owe their conception of Him to the gospel which they reject. Where else is there certitude solid enough to resist the pressure of sorrow and of sin; confidence enough to maintain faith in the face of difficulty and conscious evil and death; or energy enough in a creed to make religion an all-controlling influence and an all-gladdening stay except in Jesus Christ? I venture to say, nowhere. Nowhere beyond the limits to which either the river or the water of life has manifestly flowed; or some rills and rivulets from it have crept underground to give strange verdure to some far-off pasture; nowhere else is there found the confidence in the Father's heart which is the property of the Christian man, and the result of the Christian covenant. Jesus Christ brings God to man by the declaration of His nature incarnate in humanity.

And, on the other hand, He brings man to God: for He stands to each of us as our true Brother, and united to us by such close and

real bends as that all which He has been and done may be ours if we join ourselves to Him by faith. And He brings men to God, because in Him only do we find the drawings that incline wayward and wandering hearts to the Father. And He seals for us that great Covenant in His own person and work, in so far as what He in manhood has done has made it possible that such promises should be given to us. And, still further, He is the Mediator of the covenant, in so far as He Himself possesses in His humanity all the blessings which manhood is capable of deriving from the Father, and He has them all in order that He may give them all. There is the great reservoir from which all men may fill their tiny cups.

Men tell us that they want no Mediator between them and God. Ah, my brother! go down into your own hearts; try to understand what sin is; and then go up as near as you can to the dazzling white light, and try partially to conceive of what God's holiness is, and tell us, Do you think you, as you are, could walk in that light and not be consumed? It seems to me that no man who has any deep knowledge of his own heart, and any, though it be inadequate, yet true, conception of the divine nature, dare take upon his lips that boast that we often hear, 'We need none to come between us and God.'

For me, I thankfully hear Him say, 'No man cometh to the Father but by Me'; and pray for grace to tread in that only way that leadeth unto God. III. Note the sprinkling of the blood which seals the covenant.

There is an allusion there, as I have already suggested, to the ceremonial at Sinai, when, in token of their entrance into the covenant, the Blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled upon the crowd; and also an allusion to the voice of the blood of the innocent Abel, which 'cried to God from the ground.' The writer has already referred to that in the earlier part of the letter; and here he weaves the two together because, with whatever differences of representation, the substantial meaning of both images is the same. The blood shed establishes the covenant; and the blood sprinkled brings us into it.

If Jesus had not died, there would have been no promises for us, beginning in forgiveness and ending in wills delighting in God's law. It is 'the new covenant in His blood.' The death of Christ is ever present to the divine mind and determines the divine action.

Hence the allusion to the voice, in contrast both to the dread voice that echoed among the grim peaks of Sinai, and to that which, as if each drop had a tongue, called from Abel's innocent blood for retribution. Christ's, too, has a voice, and that an all-powerful one. It cries for pardon with the same authority of intercession as we hear in His wondrous high-priestly prayer: 'Father, I will.'

Further, that sprinkling, which introduced technically and formally these people into that covenant, represents for us the personal application to ourselves of the power of His death and of His life by which we may make all God's promises our own, and be cleansed from all sin. It is 'sprinkled.' Then it is capable of division into indefinitely small portions, and of the closest contact with individuals. That is but a highly metaphorical way of saying that Jesus Christ has died for each of us, that each of us may find acceptance and cleansing, and the inheritance of all the promises, if we put our trust in Him.

For remember, these words of my text are the end of a great sentence, which begins, 'Ye are come.'

Faith is that coming. What did Christ say? 'He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger. He that believeth on Me shall never thirst.' There is His own interpretation of the metaphor. Whosoever trusts Him, comes to Him. If I put my tremulous faith on that dear Lord, though He be on the throne of the universe, and I down here, in this far-away dim corner of His creation, I am with Him where He is, and no film of distance need separate us. If we trust Him we come to Him. If we rest upon Him as our advocate and hope, then the loud voice of our sins will not be heard, accusing-tongued though they be, above the voice of His pleading blood.

And they who come to Christ, therein and thereby, come to all other glorious and precious persons and things in the universe. For, as I have already said, my text is the end of a long sentence, and is last named as being the foundation of all that precedes, and the condition of our finding ourselves in touch with all the other glories of which the writer has been speaking. He that comes to Christ is in the city. He that comes to Christ is — not will be — in the palace. He that comes to Christ is in the presence of the Judge. He that comes to Christ touches angels and perfected spirits, and is knit to all that are knit to the same Lord. He that comes to Christ comes to cleansing, and enters into the fulness of the promise, and lives in the presence and companionship of his present-absent Lord. If we come to Jesus by faith, Jesus will come at last to us to receive us to Himself; and join us to the choirs of the perfected spirits who 'have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

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Hebrews 12:25 Refusing God's Voice

See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh: for if they escaped not who refused Him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him that speaketh from heaven. — Hebrews 12:25

THE writer has finished his great contrast of Judaism and Christianity as typified by the mounts Sinai and Zion. But the scene at the former still haunts his imagination and shapes this solemn warning. The multitude gathered there had shrunk from the divine voice,

and 'entreated that it might not be spoken to them any more.' So may we do, standing before the better mount of a better revelation. The parallel between the two congregations at the two mountains is still more obvious if we remark that the word translated in my text 'refuse' is the same as has just been employed in a previous verse, describing the conduct of the Israelites, where it is rendered 'entreated.' It may seem strange that after so joyous and triumphant an enumeration of the glorious persons and things with whom we are brought into contact by faith, there should come the jarring note of solemn warning which seems to bring back the terrors of the ancient law. But, alas! the glories and blessedness into which faith introduces us are no guarantees against its decay; and they who are 'come unto Mount Zion and the city of the living God,' may turn their backs upon all the splendour, and wander away into the gaunt desert.

I. So we have here, first of all, the solemn possibility of refusal.

Now, to gain the whole force and solemnity of this exhortation, it is very needful to remember that it is addressed to professing Christians, who have in so far exercised real faith, as that by it 'they are come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God.' We are to keep that clear, or we lose the whole force and meaning of this exhortation before us, which is addressed distinctly, emphatically, and, in its true application, exclusively to Christian men — 'See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh.'

Then, again, it is to be noted that the refusal here spoken about, and against which we professing Christians are thus solemnly warned, is not necessarily entire intellectual rejection of the gospel and its message. For the Israelites, who made the original 'refusal,' to which that against which we are warned is paralleled, recognised the voice that they would not listen to as being God's voice; and just because it was His voice, wanted to hear no more of it. And so, although we may permissibly extend the words before us to include more than is thereby originally meant, yet we must remember that the true and proper application of them is to the conduct of men who, recognising that God is speaking to them, do not want to hear anything more from Him. That is to say, this warning brings to us Christians the reminder that it is possible for us so to tamper with what we know to be the uttered will and expressed commandment of God, as that our conduct is tantamount to saying, 'Be silent, O Lord! and let me not hear Thee speak any more to me.' The reason for that refusal, which thus, in its deepest criminality and darkest sin, can only be made by men that recognise the voice to be God's, lies just here, 'they could not endure that which was commanded.' So, then, the sum of the whole thing is this, that it is possible for Christian people so to cherish wills and purposes which they know to be in diametrical and flagrant contradiction to the will and purpose of God, that obstinately they prefer to stick by their own desires, and, if it may be, to stifle the voice of God.

Then remember, too, that this refusal, which is reality is the rising up of the creature's will, tastes, inclinations, desires, against the manifest and recognised will of God, may, and as a matter of fact often does, go along with a great deal of lip reverence and unconsciously hypocritical worship. These men, from whom the writer is drawing his warning in the wilderness there, said, 'Do not let Him speak! We are willing to obey all that He has to command; only let it come to us through human lips, and not in these tremendous syllables that awe our spirits.' They thought themselves to be perfectly willing to keep the commandments when they were given, and all that they wanted was some little accommodation to human weakness in the selection of the medium by which the word was brought. So we may be wrenching ourselves away from the voice of God, because we uncomfortably feel that it is against our resolves, and all the while may never know that we are unwilling to obey His commandments. The unconscious refusal is the formidable and the fatal One.

It comes by reason, as I have said, fundamentally of the rising up of our own determinations and wishes against His commandments; but it is also due to other causes operating along with this. How can you hear God's voice if you are letting your own yelping dog-kennel of passions speak so loudly as they do? Will God's voice be heard in a heart that is all echoing with earthly wishes, loudly clamant for their gratification, or with sensual desires passionately demanding their food to be flung to them? Will God's voice be heard in a heart where the janglings of contending wishes and earthly inclinations are perpetually loud in their brawling? Will it be heard in a heart which has turned itself into a sounding-board for all the noises of the world and the voices of men? The voice of God is heard in silence, and not amidst the Babel of our own hearts. And they who, unconsciously, perhaps, of what they are doing, open their ears wide to hear what they themselves in the lower parts of their souls prescribe, or bow themselves in obedience to the precepts and maxims of men-round them, are really refusing to hear the voice of God.

It is not to be forgotten, howsoever, that whilst thus the true and proper application of these words is to Christian men, and the way by which we refuse to listen to that awful utterance is by withdrawing our lives from the control of His will, and dragging away our contemplations from meditation upon His word, yet there is a further form in which men may refuse that voice, which eminently threatened the persons to whom this warning was first directed. All through this letter we see that the writer is in fear that his correspondents should fall away into intellectual and complete rejection of Christianity. And the reason was mainly this, that the fall of the ancient and ramrod system of the old covenant might lead them to distrust all revelation from God, and to cast aside the gospel message. So the exhortation of my text assumes a special closeness of application to us whose lot has been cast in revolutionary times, as was theirs, and who have, in our measure, something of that same experience to go through which made the sharp trial of these Hebrew Christians. To them, solid and permanent as they had fancied them, ancient and God-appointed

realities and ordinances were melting away; and it was natural that they should ask themselves, 'Is there anything that will not melt, on which we can rest?' And to us in this day much of the same sort of discipline is appointed; and we, too, have to see, both in the religious and in the social world, much evidently waxing old and ready to vanish away which our fathers thought to be permanent. And the question for us is, Is there anything that we can cling to? Yes! to the 'voice that speaks from heaven' in Jesus Christ. As long as that is sounding in our ears we can calmly look out on the evanescence of the evanescent, and confidently rely on the permanence of the permanent. And so, brother, though this, that, and the other of the externals of Christianity, in polity, in form, in mode, may be passing away, be sure of this, the solid core abides; and that core lies in the first word of this letter. 'God... hath spoken unto us in His Son.' See that no experience of mutation leads you to falter in your confidence in that voice, and 'see that ye refuse not Him that speaketh.'

II. Again, note the sleepless vigilance necessary to counteract the tendency to refusal.

'See that ye refuse not.' A warning finger is, as it were, lifted. Take heed against the tendencies that lie in yourself and the temptations around you. The consciousness of the possibility of the danger is half the battle.

'Blessed is the man that feareth always,' says the psalm. 'The confident' — by which is meant the presumptuous, and not the trustful — 'goeth on and is punished.' The timid — by which I mean the self-distrustful — clings to God, because he knows his danger, and is safe. If we think that we are on the verge of falling, we are nearer standing than we ever are besides. To lay to heart the reality and the imminence and the gravity of the possibility that is disclosed here is an essential part of the means for preventing its becoming a reality. They who would say 'I cannot turn away because I have come,' have yet to learn the weakness of their own hearts and the strength of the world that draws them away. There is no security for us except in the continual temper of rooted self-distrust, for there is no motive that will drive us to the continual confidence in which alone is security but the persistent pressure of that sense that in ourselves we are nothing, and cannot but fall. I want no man to live in that selfish and anxious dread 'which hath torment,' but I am sure that the shortest road to the brave security which is certain of never being defeated is the clear and continual consciousness that 'In ourselves we nothing can, Full soon were we down-ridden; But for us fights the proper Man, Whom God Himself hath bidden.'

The dark underside of the triumphant confidence, which on its sunny side looks up to heaven and receives its light, is that self-distrust which says always to ourselves, 'We have to take heed lest we refuse Him that speaketh.'

If there is any need to dwell upon specific methods by which this vigilance and continuous self-distrust may work out for us our security, one would say — by careful trying to reverse all these conditions which, as we have seen, lead us surely to the refusal. Silence the passions, the wishes, the voices of your own wills and tastes and inclinations and purposes. Bring them all into close touch with Him. Let there be no voice in your hearts till you know God's will; and then with a leap let your hearts be eager to do it. Keep yourselves out of the babble of the world's voices; and be accustomed to go by yourselves and let God speak. Nature seems to be silent to the busy traveller who never gets away from the thumping of the piston of the engine and the rattle of the wheels of the train.

Let him go and sit down by himself on the mountain top, and the silence becomes all vocal and full of noises. Go into the lone place of silent contemplation, and so get near God, and you will hear His voice. But you will not hear it unless you still the beating of your own heart. Even in such busy lives as most of us have to live it is possible to secure some space for such solitary communion and meditation if we seriously feel that we must, and are ready to cut off needless distractions. He who thus has the habit of going alone with God will be able to hear His voice piercing through the importunate noises of earth, which drown it for others. Do promptly, precisely, perfectly, all that you know He has said. That is the way to sharpen your ears for the more delicate intonations of His voice, and the closer manifestations of His will. If you do not, the voice will hush itself into silence. Thus bringing your lives habitually into contact with God's word, and testing them all by it, you will not be in danger of 'refusing Him that speaketh.'

III. Lastly, note the solemn motives by which this sleepless vigilance is enforced.

'If they escaped not who refused Him that spake on earth' — or, perhaps, 'who on earth refused Him that spake' — 'much more shall not we escape if we turn away from Him that speaketh from heaven.' The clearness of the voice is the measure of the penalty of non-attention to it. The voice that spoke on earth had earthly penalties as the consequence of disobedience. The voice that speaks from heaven, by reason of its loftier majesty, and of the dearer utterances which are granted to us thereby, necessarily involves more severe and fatal issues from negligence to it.

Mark how the words of my text deepen and darken in their significance in the latter portion. In the first we had simply 'refusal,' or the desire not to hear the voice, and in the latter portion that has solidified and deepened itself into 'turning away from Him.' That is to say, when we once begin, as many professing Christians have begun, to be intolerant of God's voice meddling with their lives, we are upon an inclined plane, which, with a sharp pitch and a very short descent, carries us down to the darker condition of 'turning away from Him.' The man who stops his ears will very soon turn his back and be in flight, so far as he can, from the voice. Do not

tamper with God's utterances. If you do, you have begun a course that ends in alienation from Him.

Then mark, again, the evils which fell upon these people who turned away from Him that speaketh on earth were their long wanderings in the wilderness, and their exclusion from the Land of Promise, and final deaths in the desert, where their bleaching bones lay white in the sunshine. And if you and I, dear friends, by continuous and increasing deafness to our Father's voice, have turned away from Him, then all that assemblage of flashing glories and majestic persons and of reconciling blood to which we come by faith, will melt away, 'and leave not a wrack behind.' We shall be like men who, in a dream, have thought themselves in a king's palace, surrounded by beauty and treasures, and awaken with a start and a shiver to find themselves alone in the desert. It will be loss enough if the fair city which hath foundations, and the palace-home of the king on the mountain, and the joyful assemblage of the angels, and the Church of the firstborn, and the spirits of the just made perfect, and the blood of sprinkling, all pass away from our vision, and instead of them there is nothing left but this mean, vulgar, fleeting world. They will pass if you do not listen to God, and that is why so many of you have so little conscious contact with the unseen and glorious realities to which faith gives access.

But then there are dark and real penalties to come in another life which the writer dimly shows to us. It is no part of my business to enlarge upon these solemn warnings. An inspired man may do it. I do not think that it is reverent for me to do it much. But at the same time, let me remind you that terror is a legitimate weapon to which to appeal, and unwelcome and unfashionable as its use is nowadays, it is one of the weapons in the armoury of the true preacher of God's Word. I believe we Christian ministers would do more if we were less chary of speaking out 'the terror of the Lord.' And though I shrink from anything like vulgar and rhetorical and sensational appeals to that side of divine revelation, and to what answers to it in us, I consider that I should be a traitor to the truth if I did not declare the fact that such appeals are legitimate, and that such terror is a part of the divine revelation.

So, dear friends, though I dare not dwell upon these, I dare not burke them. I remind you — and I do no more — of the tone that runs through all this letter, of which you have such instances as these, 'If the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression received its just recompense of reward, how shall We escape if we neglect so great salvation?' and 'Of how much sorer punishment, think you, shall they be thought worthy who have counted the blood of the Covenant wherewith they were sanctified a common thing?' 'See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh,' for the clearer, the tenderer, the more stringent the beseechings of the love and the warnings of Christ's voice, the more solemn the consequences if we stop our ears to it. Better to hear it now, when it warns and pleads and beseeches and comforts and hallows and quickens, than to hear it first when it rends the tombs and shakes the earth, and summons all to judgment, and condemns some to the outer darkness to which they had first condemned themselves