

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 285

If most of us are sorry we are leaving the Psalms in our daily readings, the edge of our sorrows is taken off by the fact that we are commencing the Proverbs—an almost equally enjoyable portion of the word of truth in another way. The Psalms give prominence to God's relation to our life and all our ways, as Creator, Sustainer, Regulator, and King. The Proverbs deal more with what we might call self-management by the means of His precepts, statutes, and judgment. Their object is defined in the brief preface with which the first chapter begins:

"To give subtlety to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion,"
to impart *"the instruction of wisdom, justice and judgment and equity."*

How valuable a result is this we easily estimate when we consider the difference between a man mentally furnished with these things and the man who is not.

Among all the chapters of Proverbs, none excels the one we have read—the 3rd. This is what we understand by a favourite chapter in Scotland. It is (or was—for Scotland is degenerating, like all the rest of the world, in its reverence for the Bible)—it was part of the domestic discipline in many a house two generations ago, to make the children learn it. Of course the children did not like it. They did not know what was good for them. They did not like day-school lessons, let alone those that had to do with higher wisdom. But wise parents disregarded their dislikes and compelled them to learn, with the result that when the children grew to men, they loved the things they disliked, and saw the vast importance of having been made acquainted with them in early days—thanking wise parents for having enforced the lessons of wisdom, instead of cursing foolish parents, as I have heard men do, for having allowed them to grow up as fools.

The reason of early aversion to these proverbs of wisdom is apparent in the very opening verse of this chapter:

*"My son, forget not **my law**, but let thine heart keep **my commandments.**"*

The idea of "law": the idea of having to do anything but just what they are inclined to do is repugnant to all children, and more or less to all men. Children would play all day in the streets and fields if left to themselves, and grow up a nuisance to themselves and their neighbours. So most men, apart from the compulsion of law or necessity, would waste their time in a demoralising lounge of one kind or another. Man at bottom is a lawless barbarian—barbarian because lawless. He has the capacity to become beautiful under law: apart from it, he sinks to the hideous savage. Of course, there are degrees because there are intermediate operations of law, but the general principle holds good. Hence it is the very advice that God can give us, to forget not His law and to surrender ourselves to the keeping of His commandments.

Let us consider how great are the inducements to take this advice, as regards past, present, and future. Inducement as regards the past may seem an inadmissible thought. In reality, it is the foundation of all inducement in our present circumstances. For what do these terms "law," "commandments," imply?—that God has laid down a law—that God has given commandments—in a word, that God has **spoken**. If He has not spoken, there can be no law and commandments. Men might apply these terms to the principles of conduct deducible from experience and the natural constitution of things, but this would not be the same thing. What men might think they ought to do is a different thing from what they are bound to do as a matter of law uttered in commandment. It is with this we have to do. The great testimony of the Bible is that God hath spoken; and the great evidence of all history rationally construed is that this testimony is true. We do not require to go into it on this occasion. We have only to think of Christ and Moses, the Jews and the Bible, to realise the strong foundation on which the matter stands. Some have said, "Why this perpetual harp upon the foundation?" Because

of the perpetual tendency to forget it, and the perpetual propensity to assail it. We are like men in a roaring river who have clutched at a rock standing up from the bed of the river, not far from the waterfalls: if we let go, we shall be carried down to destruction. A flood of death is roaring around us; not only so, but men on the banks and men in the flood are exerting themselves to the utmost to force those who are holding on to the rock to relax their hold. In such a situation, it is inevitable that men who are not asleep or drunk or stupefied should use their whole strength in holding on and shouting to others to hold on. Our rock is the evidence of the truth of the statement of Paul that God spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, and last of all spake by His Son, since which there has been an intentional interval of silence—covered, however, by the written record of the communications that have already taken place.

If God have given us a law—if God have spoken commandments, how great the inducements to forget them not but keep them: for who can give safe and excellent law like God “fountain of Being, source of Good?” It was needful for us that He should speak. It is not enough that we see the footprints of creative wisdom in the universe. It is not enough to be able to say, “The universe must have an all-wise and Omnipotent Author”: we need to hear from Him. We stand in need of His direction. He has made the wonderful mechanism of our being, and He only knows how it ought to be worked so as to realise the objects of its existence. Man is not fit for self-management even in matters of private behaviour. He needs the divine law to know how to get on. It is a necessity of our being that we know Him and love Him and worship Him and obey Him. Apart from this, we decline to demoralisation and death. The wise of this world puff at this idea as a figment of exploded dogma. There are exploded dogmas but this is not one of them. It is a truth that ranks with the laws that regulate the motions of the heavenly bodies. Whatever theories men may form of the history of human progress, the fact invincibly remains that the highest developments have been in the channel of divine revelation and that the minor developments have all been collateral, directly or indirectly, with the influence of that revelation.

Next, consider the inducements to obedience that are connected with the present operations of divine law. Who so beautiful among men—and who so happy—as the men who are in subjection to it? Is not a man a nobler man who recognizes the Supreme and his obligation to obey Him, than the man who feels only his own feelings and sees only the things that have been created in their limited relations one to another? Is not a man who loves men a more beautiful character than the man who loves only himself? Is not the man who always speaks the truth a more valuable man than the man who can lie to serve his own ends? Is not a man who fulfils his promises—whose word can be trusted—who keeps his covenants even if they turn against him—who requires no parchments or signatures to be kept to his bond—a more useful and a more estimable man than the man who cannot be relied upon to do what he says unless it continues to his interest to do so? And what about the merciful man—the man of pity—the man who does not exact even his rights if they bear hardly on his neighbour—the man who puts up with insult and injury—who does not even return railing for railing but contrariwise, blessing? Such a man, a man is, who “forgets not the law of God and lets his heart keep the commandments.” He is not to be met with very plentifully, but when you meet him, you meet a man that all men love and respect as no law-forgetting man is ever loved and respected. And if you carry such a man about with you, you know something of a man who is in peace all the day long, however much he may suffer from the occasional external visitations of the present evil world.

The fact that human nature is seen at its best, and felt at its best, when it is in harmony with the requirements of the divine law is not only one of the greatest inducements to comply with the opening exhortation of this 3rd chapter of Proverbs.

But what are we to say about the future bearing of the matter? Men may tire of the answer in the weariness and abortion of mortal life, but the answer which this chapter exhibits is the unquestionable and unalterable truth.

“Length of days is in Wisdom’s right hand, and in her left hand riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her, and happy is every one that retaineth her.”

How long the length of days, how high the riches and honour, how sweet her ways of pleasantness, how much peaceful all her paths, is only fully known to those who know and believe the Gospel of the Kingdom. No doubt many a Jew has read these words of Solomon with the idea that they describe results to be experienced in the present life, and no doubt in faint measure they apply in that way. But their chief application is to the glorious things disclosed in the great and precious promises—whether in the covenants, the prophets, or in the apostolic writings. The length of days is what David in Psalm 21:4 describes as *“length of days for ever and ever”*—the gift of an immortal nature in which the possessors *“shall not die any more.”* The riches and honour are not to be estimated except by trying to realise what it must be to belong to a body of kings to whom the wealth and high places of the sinner will be turned over in all the earth. Of the pleasantness, we only get a glimpse when we hear the song of the 144,000 *“as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder”*: and when we read that

“He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them, and they shall hunger no more, nor thirst any more: neither shall the sun light on them or any heat. For the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne shall feed them and shall lead them to living fountains of water: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Rev. 7:15-17).

The greatness of the peace is expressed in the beautiful language of Isaiah:

“Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders: thou shalt call thy walls salvation and thy gates praise.”

“No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon: it shall not be found there: but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isaiah 60:18 & 35:9).

It is, in fact, impossible to exaggerate the glory of the future, associated with the keeping of the commandments of God. It is, therefore, no more mere rhapsody that in this Proverbs 3 exclaims:

“Happy is the man that findeth wisdom and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things that thou canst desire are not to be compared with her” (verses 13-15).

Contrast with this the fact that folly has no future, but that of cloud, vexation, darkness, and death. As the last verse says,

“Shame shall be the promotion of fools.”

Do we not realise this even now, when we see a grey-haired sinner who has spent his days in self-gratification? Who is interested in him? Who will mourn his departure? Who would have pleasure in bringing him back to the land of the living when his mean and dishonoured person has finally dissolved in dust? It may be that he has what is called “a pile.” It may be that he is able to say with the man in Christ’s parable:

“Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years: take thine ease: eat, drink, and be merry.”

Of what advantage will it be to him when the inevitable moment arrives for the spirit to return to God who gave it?—and especially should he be among those whose deliberate rejection of the claims of God entails an unhappy place among those of whom Daniel speaks, who come forth at the resurrection to *“shame and everlasting contempt.”*

How powerful, then, are the considerations which impel us in the path of obedience. There is need for all their power. The conflict is a severe one. The current of life as it now is upon earth is all against a walk in wisdom. The universal sentiment is in the wrong shape. So far from the merchandise of wisdom being considered better than the merchandise of silver, it is a merchandise that has no chance at all in the market of the world. Talk of wisdom to men in business: what is their rejoinder? “We have no time for anything of that sort here.” Talk of it to them when they have got home: “This is not the place for these subjects.” Talk of it to them on Sunday: “The fact is, this is our only holiday; we must go out into the country; or we are so worn out, we must rest at home.” When is the time and where? Never. Down they rush in the stream of time to disappear in the bottomless gulf of oblivion.

Then supposing (as you find scarcely a listener to the voice of wisdom) you resolve upon doing your own best, how difficult is your way. Here is the word of God commanding you,

“Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck: write them on the table of thine heart”

—**Mercy and Truth!**

A summary of all the virtues almost:

Mercy—a kindness that takes your neighbour’s side into account, and that will not insist on the last pound of flesh if it is going to inflict hardship:

Truth—meaning what you say and saying that which is true—scorning to take advantage by falsehood—how do you find these principles work out in your dealings with men? You may be respected, but it is a respect that has in it the element of pity bordering on contempt: “The simpleton! The amiable fool! How does he expect to carry on business in that way?” The temptation is great to let mercy forsake you, and to put aside truth as an inconvenience, except when it answers. Instead of “binding them about thy neck,” you will be liable to unbuckle the accoutrement with which you started from home: instead of writing them on the table of thy heart, you will be in danger of allowing the friction of intercourse with worldly men to rub out the faint scribbles that remain.

There is nothing left for it but to obey that other injunction that says,

“Put on the whole armour of God that ye may be able to stand in the evil day.”

As this chapter advises:

“Trust in the Lord with all thy heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding.”

It is a hard fight, but it is one in which the victory may be won. We must win. We must not be overcome. We may occasionally go down in the tussle and get trampled on, and receive a wound or two: but we must get on our feet again and renew the struggle under the cheering words of the Captain of our Salvation,

“To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”

“Eye hath not seen nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive the things which the Lord hath prepared for those that love Him.”

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