

Sermonettes on the Golden Texts.

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I.

'Blessed are they that keep His testimonies, and that seek Him with the whole heart.'—Ps. cxix. 2.

THE word 'keep' is one that has a considerable variety of meaning in the English language. It is one of those words that must exasperate a foreigner in trying to learn our language. When he finds it used in such a phrase as to keep the garden, in the sense of to till it, and to keep in the heart, in the sense of to remember, and to keep the feast, meaning to celebrate it, and so on, it is almost more than could be expected of one unaccustomed to the intricacies of our speech, that he should keep his temper as well.

There is no obscurity here, however, to anyone familiar with our tongue. We read of the man in the parable who kept his pound carefully wrapt in a napkin. That was a wrong kind of keeping. It was put to no use. Do not keep the testimonies in any such way. They are not something simply to be stored away and kept intact in the memory. It is told of Mary, again, that she 'kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.' That is liker what we have to do with the testimonies. It is what the Psalmist evidently did. The law of the Lord was a great and endless wonder to him. He never ceased to marvel at its beauty, and could not get words enough to describe his awe and admiration of it.

But it is not enough to ponder on God's law. To keep it in any true and worthy sense means to observe it, to put it into practice in our lives. You know how, if you have many things to do during the day, a good plan is to jot them all down in a notebook, in case some of them might escape your memory. Some people, when an idea strikes them, note it down at once, lest it might escape them again. I have heard of some men, even in the night-time when in bed, if a helpful and suggestive thought occurred to them, getting up there and then, and making a note of it, lest they might forget it by the morning. Well, the truest way to keep God's testimonies is to put them in practice, to write them, as it were, upon the tablet of your life. They are yours then in

the most lasting way. They become a part of yourself. You are a 'living epistle.'

Yes, but it is an epistle 'written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.' That is one thing about the testimonies, namely, that the more you try to keep them, the more you will feel your utter inability of your own power to do so; yea, not only to keep them, but even to interpret them, for God's commandment is exceeding broad. What we need* for the understanding of His law is God Himself as the Interpreter, and, above all, for the keeping of it, we need His gracious help. Blessed, therefore, are they that seek Him with the whole heart.

With the whole heart, heartily; that is the important thing. If you got an invitation to spend a holiday at a friend's house, it would mean everything whether it was a hearty invitation or not. If you thought he did not quite mean it, and was only asking you in a conventional sort of way, you would not be likely to accept the invitation; but if you were sure it was a hearty request, that would give all the pleasure in going. Just so must it be in seeking God. It must be a genuine, whole-hearted search if we would expect Him to reveal His presence to us. And then, to the hearty seeker, He will not fail to give a large and loving response.

II.

'The word of our God shall stand for ever.'—ISA. xl. 8.

PEOPLE have often been mistaken in their ideas as to the things that would last, from the days of Noah's ark and the tower of Babel downwards. What a grand-looking scheme that was of the building of the tower! Had a company been formed, and shares been issued in connection with it, they would have been enthusiastically subscribed for. And yet the whole thing turned out a gigantic bubble. Noah, on the other hand, with his ark scheme, found not a single supporter. Yet that would have been a very profitable speculation. There's money in it, people say of some mercantile proposal. There was more than money in that scheme of Noah's, there was life in it. And that is what is true of God's Word. There is life in it,

and that's why it lasts. The 'vital spark of heavenly flame' is there, and nothing can stay its prospering in the thing whereto God hath sent it. There is a sense in which it is the height of presumption for man to speak of upholding God's Word; that is, if it be meant thereby that, but for man's upholding, the Word would not stand.

And so, too, with that other part of the common phrase,—upholding and defending. The defending is good and needful in its way, but if it be implied that the Word of God might be overthrown but for man's defence of it, and that there is any call to tremble for the Ark, we are making a great mistake and cherishing a needless fear. That was a good reply Spurgeon once gave to someone who had been expressing anxiety, in his presence, about the future of the Bible, and saying that something would need to be done in the way of defending it from the attacks of assailants. 'Defend the Bible!' said Spurgeon, 'why, how would you defend a lion? Open his cage door and let him out, and he will need no other defence.' And so, give the Bible free scope, and it will be its own grand defence, and win its gracious way.

Certainly it has not been for want of efforts to overthrow it that the Word of God stands. Let us be thankful for those efforts. They have only helped to test 'the impregnable Rock.' Change of view and loss there have been of various kinds, but change and loss have been but gain, in leading to a better grasp of the Divine meaning, and a firmer assurance of the indestructible nature of the Word. We sometimes say, and often correctly enough, of the introduction of some new thing, that it has come to stay; but never was that truer of anything than of God's Word,—it has come to stay.

But what benefit, it might be said, will it be, even though the Word stand for ever, if men come and go, if all flesh is grass, if we are only like the grass that grows and withers? What benefit will the abiding Word be to us in our fleeting life? Ah, but that is only one aspect of human life. It is life in connexion with the world that is fleeting; but there is also a life in connexion with the Word. The Old Testament says, 'All flesh is grass.' The New Testament goes even further, and says, 'The world passeth away.' But if the New Testament goes beyond the Old in its declaration of the temporary nature of all things earthly, it goes beyond the Old, too,

in its manifestation of the permanent view of life. The Old Testament says, 'The Word of God abideth.' The New says, 'He that doeth the will of God abideth.' It has a clear and triumphant note for the individual. Yes, if, even as regards the grass, according to the song,

Ilka blade o' grass keeps (catches) its ain drap o' dew,

how much more may mortal man find, in the eternal Word, that which shall be as the dew to his soul, the refreshing, transfiguring element, not renewing for a brief day only, but after the power of an endless life!

What a multitude of meetings, such as none can number, has taken place between men and God through the Word! And just as, in the world, there are certain towns and cities characterized, more than others, by meetings between parted friends,—such as seaports where steamers from the Colonies or foreign parts arrive,—so, in God's Word, there are great texts, golden texts, whither many anxious, needy, sinful men and women have come, and there found God as the strength of their life and their portion for ever. There are grand, heart-filling texts, where many, as John Knox put it, have first cast anchor, and have realized how true, in the highest sense, may be the poet's line—

Fill my empty heart with a word.

III.

'Ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye search for Me with all your heart.'—JER. xxix. 13.

As we have had the thought of this text several times before us of late, let us look at it here in another aspect. The text tells us of a seeking that will not be fruitless. Let us consider some of the vain pursuits of life.

Some pursuits are vain because you cannot overtake what you pursue. We have all tried, in our time, to catch our own shadow, but that is a thing we soon learn to give up attempting. And many a butterfly chase you have had, have you not? The butterflies themselves seemed to enter into the spirit of it, and lure you on, flitting from flower to flower just when you almost had them; the only result of the chase, perhaps, being that you got lost yourself, and there was a fine hue and cry till your mother found you again. Well, we have had many a vain pursuit since then; some

of us. We have given up the butterflies, but we find that other things, too, take wings to themselves and fly away.

People everywhere are pursuing happiness; in a thousand different ways, it may be, but, all the same, the universal wish is, 'I want to be happy.' But there is something very curious about happiness, for while, the more you pursue her, the less likely are you to overtake her, yet, if you just leave her alone, and pay no attention to her, probably she will come up to you of her own accord, like a coy maiden, and say, as Ruth to Naomi, 'Whither thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge.' Give up the pursuit as a vain one, and think only of duty, of what is right, and you are most likely to find that happiness, instead of the pursued, will become the pursuer. That was a very good advice that Mr. Barrie's sentimental hero, of the unsentimental name, gave to Elspeth when about to part from her—'When I am away, try for a whole day to be better than you ever were before, and think of nothing else, and then, when prayer-time comes, you will see that you have been happy without knowing it.' The author was writing, doubtless, out of his own experience there. Try it for yourselves, and you will see how well it works.

But, again, some pursuits are vain because, even if you do overtake the object of your pursuit, it is worthless. It is not worth the trouble and pains and anxiety and cost you have spent upon it. You get it in your hand at last, and the bubble bursts. You catch it after great effort, and it is only dry stubble. Not only as children but in manhood, and even in old age, we may still be pursuing very profitless things. I read recently of an old man, bordering upon a hundred, who sat in his chair at the door of his house, and would tell those who stopped, in passing, to speak to him, that in a few months he would be a hundred years old, and then they would put him in the papers. His ambition, the object of his pursuit, was to reach the hundred, and to be publicly mentioned in the papers as a centenarian. Poor man, with the experience of a century behind him, was there nothing higher than that to set his heart upon? How different from that beautiful satisfaction of aged Simeon, when at last he held the infant Saviour in his arms, and said, 'Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word: for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation'!

What are you after? we sometimes say to one when we do not see his drift, what object he has in view. What are you after, I would say to you, in that life's journey you are just beginning? What are you after? Will your pursuits only turn out to be as the dry stubble, when the journey is ending? Ah, that's just the worst time too, to find then that all you've got is only chaff. One might stand it at the beginning, with the hope of better things in new attempts; but, at the end, to find but the stubble is a bitter, bitter discovery. But there is one pursuit that will never end 'in shallows and in miseries,' even though it lead 'o'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent.' Look to Christ. Take Him early as your Saviour and Guide. Strive to live as He would have you live; and then, whatever you may gain or lose as to the world, you will find God and gain your life.

IV.

'For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.'—LUKE ii. 11.

THE kingdom of God, Jesus said, cometh not with observation, and neither did the King of the kingdom come with observation. Born in a manger,

Guests rudely went and came, where slept the royal Child.

Some, however, were interested. The angels knew what His coming meant. And those mysterious Wise Men from the East had some dim idea of the wondrous event. But the shepherds were honoured above all with the outburst of angelic song and the glad tidings of great joy. Yes, there was another—Herod—to whom a hint of the tidings came, but it brought no joy to his heart. The angels' song would have been no song to him had he heard it. Rather would he have said with Mephistopheles—

Discord I hear, and intolerable jangling.

The angels knew it was true, and they sang; the Wise Men hoped it was true, and they followed; Herod feared it was true, and he plotted; the shepherds were told it was true, and they glorified and praised God.

This was the gift of God long foretold, first whispered of at Eden's gate, seen afar off by patriarch's eye, waited for by devout souls, sung of by inspired bards. And now, at last, it is not

prophet, priest, or king, but humble shepherds, that are honoured with the first intimation of the good news.

Unto you is born a Saviour. It was news for the world, but as truly it was news for them. God's gift was to the world, but it is also unto you and unto me. It was not a mere general blessing that was not to mean much to any individual soul. The worst of general blessings, as a rule, is that they do not signify much in any particular case. When the Chancellor of the Exchequer introduces his budget, and has the pleasure of intimating a large surplus, he goes on to tell of his intention, in consequence, to reduce taxation in this or that line. But though it may mean a big reduction taken in the lump, it does not amount to much in the case of any individual householder. Altogether it may be a huge sum, but the relief comes to very little in the separate homes of the people. It was not so, however, with God's unspeakable Gift. It was not merely a Saviour to the world, but a Saviour unto each. Each needs, and each may have, the Saviour in all His fulness.

Some years ago, according to a reporter of the scene, during the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York to Ireland, as they were driving in state one day through the streets of Dublin, an old woman, bent and tattered, was standing on the kerbstone in front of the crowd. The Duchess happened to notice her in passing, and gave her a kindly smile. There was no time for more, but the old woman noticed the smile that was meant for her, and she sent after the retreating carriage a characteristic Irish blessing. But what would you think if the

royal pair had gone to Ireland specially for the purpose of blessing that poor creature, not with a smile merely, but by taking her into the carriage beside them? The idea is an extravagant one. They went, as we know, with no little purpose of that kind. They went with a view to establishing a kindlier relationship between the two countries, Great Britain and Ireland,—a vague sort of blessing that did not mean much in any particular case. But Jesus did not come merely to establish a kindlier relationship between heaven and earth. He came to bless and to satisfy each separate soul. Just as we each need and get a satisfying portion in our daily meals for the bodily wants, so the soul's hunger is supplied in Christ as the bread of life.

Christmas is a season specially associated with the sending of gifts. Is it not the very essence of Christianity to think of others, as God thought of us? A colonial post-office is an interesting scene about the time the Christmas mail is being sent off. Here is a soldier filling in a postal order for a pound, perhaps, to his old father and mother in the home country; and here is a man, who has prospered in the land of his adoption, sending a few pounds to a brother or sister not so well off; and the same sort of thing goes on up to the closing of the mail. After all, as Barrie says, 'Money may be always a beautiful thing. It is we that make it grimy.' Not at Christmas time only, however, but at all times, let us learn in some way or other to be givers; and not merely for the sake of others, but for our own sake. To grasp is the great end of the world's commandment, but to give is the end of that Saviour's Who gave Himself for us.

At the Literary Table.

THE BOOKS OF THE MONTH.

KNOX'S HISTORY OF THE REFORMATION.
EDITED BY C. J. GUTHRIE, Q.C. (*A. & C. Black.*
Crown 8vo, pp. xxvi, 364. 7s. 6d.)

There are few more thankless, as there are few more needless, tasks than the expurgating or the modernizing of a book. For if the book will not do unless it is expurgated, it had best be left alone; and if it will not do unless it is modernized, it will not do better then. So when we heard that

Mr. Guthrie had set himself the task of modernizing Knox's *History*, we had little hope of his enterprise.

But it is a great success. For Mr. Guthrie has had the wisdom and restraint to give us Knox himself, not Knox either expurgated or modernized. He has modernized the spelling and nothing else. He has also broken up the sentences into paragraphs and the paragraphs into chapters, but that