

We should never be able to forget this month of December, if we thoroughly learned this lesson, and resolved that from now we should never stop climbing.

Think of all the things we should have to put under our feet in order to help us to rise. We sometimes encourage harsh and bitter thoughts. We give way to bursts of temper and passion. We say things that are unkind or even shameful. If we no longer allowed these any room in our life, but trampled them under our feet, each one would become a step of a ladder by which we should always be mounting higher. We should be growing every day more like the example that Jesus set before us in His own life. He put every sin under His feet, and so He was at the very top of the *Ladder of Life*.

You may be thinking that you could never climb so high as to come and stand beside Jesus, but He Himself says that that is what you are to aim at. You will have heard of the Pyramids of Egypt. They are great monuments of stone—the greatest in the world—and when seen from long distances, they appear as if no one could mount up them. But when you come nearer, you find the stones so placed that the way up is like a wonderful staircase.

The mighty pyramids of stone
That wedge-like cleave the desert airs,
When nearer seen and better known,
Are but gigantic flights of stairs.

Or you may be thinking of great men and women who have scaled the ladder of fame, till the whole world honours them. You may say to yourself, 'it would not be possible for me to get on so well.' But when you hear their story, you often discover that they had no better gifts and no greater opportunities than you, only, while others took their ease, they always kept on climbing.

The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they while their companions slept
Were toiling upward in the night.

Remembering all you have been taught about Christ—how good He was, how kind, how thoughtful for others—you say, 'I could never be like that. It is impossible for me.' Yet Jesus Himself says we can. To all who love Him, He says, 'Be ye perfect.' Now he would never tell us to be perfect if it were something quite beyond us to reach. We read in the Bible that if we love Christ with all our heart, then one day we shall be like Him. To be like Christ means that we shall have climbed to the very top of the *Ladder of Life*, and the month of December calls every one of us to keep on climbing.

The Importunate Widow and the Alleged Failure of Faith.

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II.

WE may take it as clear, then, that our Lord directs our eyes here not to the vindication which God's elect shall receive at the Second Advent, but to the constant succour which He gives them in the trials of their daily life. And this conclusion will be powerfully confirmed if we will permit His declaration to work upon us in its entirety, in its relation to the parable to which it refers. It does not bear the character of a special application of a general fact. It bears the character rather of the

enforcement of a great fact by a parallel instance. Only, the argument here is by contrast—not so much *ex similitudine* as *ex dissimilitudine*. What God is declared to do is not so much like what the judge is pictured in the parable as doing, as unlike it: and the contrasts are thrown up into the strongest emphasis. Over against the unjust judge, the righteous God is set. Over against the unjust judge's long delay in rendering his suitor justice, the swiftness of God in responding to the

cries of His elect is set. It does not appear that the widow had any personal claim upon the judge to whom she brought her case; it is intimated that God has a personal interest in those whose cries rise to Him—they are 'His elect.' The widow may have wearied the judge with repeated appeals; the cries of God's elect to Him are not merely repeated but continuous—they rise to Him unbrokenly day and night. The whole representation is *a fortiori* and it gathers force as it proceeds from its repeated enhancements. 'And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge says: and God—shall not *he* do justice to *his* elect, who cry to him *day and night*, and is he *slow* with respect to them? I say unto you that he will do justice to them *speedily!*' A wicked judge, the good God: a stranger suitor, God's own chosen ones: repeated demands, an unbroken cry: tardy justice, speedy succour. It is in this circle of contrasts that our Lord's declaration moves. And it is out of this series of contrasts that it must find its interpretation. How, for instance, should 'speedily' here not mean just *speedily*? How could the point of the remark be that God would postpone His intervention for the relief of His elect—until the judgment day?

This remark of our Lord's is not, then, 'eschatological.' It is not meant that it has no eschatological elements in it or is unconditioned by eschatological conceptions. It was the gospel of the Kingdom that our Lord came preaching, and there is no part of His teaching which is not at its core eschatological. Eschatological elements lie in the background of His most uneschatological declarations and may be continually detected in the perspective. In our present declaration, for example, we hear of 'God's elect,' and when we say 'God's elect,' we have already said eschatology: this is an eschatological conception. Though, therefore, our Lord is speaking here of God's hearing of prayer in general, and in that sense the saying is not 'eschatological,' it does not follow that as He speaks His thought is free from eschatological suggestions. We cannot be surprised, then, that a direct eschatological allusion crops out before He is done. 'Howbeit, the Son of man, when he comes,' He asks in concluding His enforcement of the lesson of the parable,— 'shall he find faith on the earth?' Even when He is speaking of the trials of His people in this life, and of God's open ear to their cries, He is

thinking no less of the term set to their evil days by His coming. During these days of distress His people are to live by prayer; through their prayers they shall obtain their relief. But afterwards—He comes; and this is the end of all. What will He find them doing when He comes to them to bring all their days of conflict to a close?

Precisely what our Lord means by this concluding question is, indeed, far from universally agreed upon. Of one thing, however, we may feel sure. He does not mean to assert, under the guise of a question, that all faith will have perished out of the earth before He comes again. And surely it would be even more impossible to suppose that He means to assert that faith will at least have almost perished out of the earth, or will have done so in great part, or, indeed, will have done so to any extent. There is no hint in His words of any such qualification of the catastrophe which He predicts—if He predicts any catastrophe. If our Lord's meaning is that faith will no longer be found on the earth when He comes again, it will be only right to take His assertion in its full meaning. But there is no reason to suppose He had any such meaning. Why should He, in the act of commending persistent prayer to His disciples and of promising God's unfailing and speedy help to His petitioning people in all their trials, suddenly turn to declare that after a while God shall have no people in the world to care for; that the cries that rise to Him now, day and night, shall cease; and that His whole rôle of prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God shall fall into abeyance? To ask whether the Son of Man shall find faith on earth when He comes—even if the form of the question suggests that an affirmative answer is doubtful¹—is, after all is said, something very far from asserting that it shall not be found.

In endeavouring to ascertain just what our Lord intends by the question, it may be well to begin by determining the sense which is to be put upon the term 'faith' here—or 'the faith,' we may say, since it has the article. On the face of it, it is clear that there is not meant by it the Christian religion; nor yet belief in Jesus as the Christ; nor yet the assurance that He will come again. Any one of these things the term might mean in a different context. But not here. Here it natur-

¹ Jülicher (p. 288): 'ἀρα no doubt, as in Ac 8⁶⁰, Gal 2¹⁷, indicating doubt of an affirmation.'

ally means that faith which sustains, and manifests itself in, persistent prayer.¹ This parable was spoken to inculcate the necessity of persistent prayer with unabating confidence. And, in His words of application, our Lord reasserts, with the greatest emphasis, the sure basis of this confidence in the character and purposes of God. It is naturally of this confidence that He continues to speak, when, in His closing question, He demands whether 'the faith'—the faith in question, the faith which He had been illustrating—shall still be found on the earth at His coming.

The question is, of course, a rhetorical one. Our Lord is not inquiring for information. But it is not, therefore, to be taken as a merely counterfeit one. Our Lord is not, in the form of a question, giving information. He neither expects to learn from His disciples, nor does He expect to teach them, by His question, whether such faith as He had been commending to them shall remain on the earth when He came again. His object is neither to elicit nor to communicate information: it is to rouse to effort. What He is aiming at is ethical impression. He wishes to encourage His disciples to preserve that attitude of confident trust in God which it is the purpose of the parable and all its accompanying words to inculcate. He, so to speak, in this final question 'puts it to' the disciples, whether 'the faith' of which He speaks shall be a permanent fact in the world. God's ears are ever open to the cries of His people: He is faithful. Are they, on their part, equally to be depended upon? If God is not like the unjust judge, are they like the importunate widow? Or will they, as she did not, fail? The design of the question is thus to incite the disciples to the preservation of the attitude of confident trust in God which it is the object of the parable to commend. And thus it takes its place as an essential part of the discourse, without which the discourse would not be complete. The parable was spoken with reference to the necessity of the preservation by the disciples of an attitude of persistent prayer. The discourse could not find its end therefore in an assurance of the faithfulness of God. The point is not what God will do. The point is what will the disciples do? Will they always pray and

not faint? What will the Son of Man find when history has run its course out to the end, and He comes again to take account of the ages? God certainly is and will continue to be faithful: will the disciples be faithful too? Not till the lesson of the parable is clinched by this direct appeal to the disciples to preserve their confidence in prayer, could the discourse come to its end. Only in such an appeal is its lesson driven thoroughly home. For the lesson is not that God will hear the cries of His people and grant them deliverance from their distresses; but that His people must needs always pray and not grow weary.

Whether God's people will in point of fact always pray and not faint is outside the scope of discussion. It would have been inconsequent to raise that question here. But the very purpose of the whole discussion is to incite to that confident trust in God which will lead to persistent prayer to Him for needed protection. And there could not easily be devised a way to give this incitement force and effectiveness, more pointed than our Lord's closing demand: 'God is ever ready to hear the cries of His people—What about your faith? Will it abide? When I come again, what shall I find?' We cannot infer, then, from our Lord's sharp question, as He turns suddenly upon His disciples and drives the lesson of His parable home, that faith will have perished—or almost perished—from the earth before He comes again. We can only infer that He would not have faith perish from the earth. It is therefore that by the great plea of the faithfulness of God, He urges His disciples to preserve it.

There are one or two points which seem to require brief notice in conclusion lest they should obtrude themselves as objections to the uneschatological interpretation of our paragraph.

It may be thought, for instance, that so strongly stressed a promise as we find here (vv. 7-8^a) of God's speedy intervention on behalf of His people in all the trials of life, would supersede the necessity of perseverance in prayer on their part, and so evacuate the parable of significance. We must bear in mind, however, that the promise is not made apart from, but in connexion with, perseverance in petition. It is those who cry unto Him day and night to whom the Lord promises that God will give them His speedy succour. The difficulty, moreover, if it be a difficulty, is inherent in the case and bears equally against any interpreta-

¹ Godet: 'Not *some faith* in general, but *the faith*—that special faith of which the widow's is an image, which, in spite of the judge's obstinate silence and long apparent indifference, perseveres in claiming its right.'

tion of our Lord's words. It might as easily be said that so strongly stressed a promise of the Lord's speedy coming to deliver His people would supersede the necessity of exhorting them to persevere in prayer for His coming. Whatever difficulty we find here rests really on our failure to estimate aright the inconstancy of our hearts: how quickly in the experience of trial we cease to trust God's promises and to seek to Him for our relief. The measure of our need of encouragement to perseverance is not the length of time through which we must endure, but the lassitude of our faith and our proneness to faint.

It may be felt again that the introduction of the coming of the Son of Man in v.^{8b} implies the dominating presence of that conception in the preceding context. That would be true, however, only if the Son of Man and His coming were introduced in v.^{8b} as a matter of course. So far is that from being the case that they are thrown forward in the sentence with great emphasis.¹ Their appearance is therefore notably abrupt, and by its suddenness it is advertised to us that something new is brought into view. A startling turn is given thus to the discussion with the effect of producing a revulsion of feeling and of calling the

¹ Plummer: 'Note the emphatic order, with *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου*, and *ἐλθῶν* being placed before the interrogative particle.' So also Meyer and Weiss.

disciples sharply back to a contemplation of their own part in the matter. 'Nevertheless, the Son of man when he comes—shall he'—I put it to you: shall He—'find faith on the earth?' This language admits indeed of no other explanation than that the coming of the Son of Man had not been in thought before and is introduced here unexpectedly and with tremendous effect.

Finally, it may be asked whether, on the un-eschatological interpretation of this parable, it is not made a mere doublet of the Parable of the Importunate Friend (Lk 11⁵⁻⁸). We need not dwell on the depreciatory adverb; for the rest the lesson of the two parables is, on the view taken, no doubt the same. But surely it is not contrary to our Lord's manner to enforce the lessons He would convey by more than one similitude. We have a couple of instances of such doublets from Him in the narrow compass of Matthew's great chapter of Parables of the Kingdom—in the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven, and in those of the Hidden Treasure and Pearl of Price. Obviously our Lord was fertile in similitudes, and no doubt He varied them endlessly in His daily teaching. We can infer from such doublets only on the one hand that the topic of which they treat was one to which He repeatedly adverted, and on the other that in the mind of His reporter as well as of Himself it was a topic of importance.

Contributions and Comments.

Bearing the Cross.

BOTH Matthew and Mark omit to say definitely that Jesus had part in bearing the cross to the scene of the crucifixion. They both emphasize the fact that Simon was 'compelled' to bear it—'compelled,' no doubt, because he rebelled against so great an indignity. (One wonders if he ever realized the privilege of sharing indignity with Jesus!) St. John is more explicit. He says that Jesus went out 'bearing the cross for himself.' He, however, omits any reference to Simon's part. He writes as if he were an eye-witness. Yet had he seen his master bearing too heavy a burden, would he not render assistance? We know so little of the circumstances. Luke's narrative is fuller. It witnesses to the accuracy of the other three. He makes an addition we think. Of late we have been taught to regard Luke as the careful

and accurate historian. He writes: 'And laid on him (Simon) the cross to bear it "after" Jesus' (Lk 23²⁶). What does 'after' mean? Does *ὀπισθεν* mean 'after' in 'time' or in 'position'? Probably the latter. If we accept that rendering, then we regard Luke as telling us that 'Jesus went to Golgotha bearing the cross, but that on the way hither the burden was too heavy for him, and that the soldiers compelled Simon to get under the beam "behind" (*ὀπισθεν*), and thus relieve Jesus of half the weight, but not replacing him altogether.' Thus both Jesus and Simon carried the cross at the same time. (Tradition pictures the cross of Jesus as being of more than the ordinary length, and consequently would be more than ordinarily heavy. Jesus retained His position under the beam *πρόσθεν* (before), and Simon *ὀπισθεν* (behind) Jesus.

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