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Messages from the Epistle to the Hebrews.

BY THE BISHOP OF DURHAM.

X.—HEBREWS XII. 1-14.

THE Epistle approaches its close. The writer has much yet to say to the disciples upon many things, all connected with that main interest of their lives, a resolute fidelity to the Lord, to the Gospel, and to one another. But he has not yet quite done with that side of their "exceeding need" to which the antidote is *the faith* which can deal with the future as the present, with the unseen as the seen. Upon this theme, from one aspect or another, is spent the passage now before us.

First, the appeal is to the recollection that the combat, the race, the victory of faith as it was for the Hebrew believers, "the contest set before *us*" (ver. 1), not only had been fought and won before them by the saints of the old time, but that those saints were now, from their blessed rest, as "spirits of the just made perfect" (ver. 23), watchers and witnesses of their successors' course. "We have, lying around us, so great a cloud of witnesses" (ver. 1). "We" are running, like the competitors in the Hellenic stadium, in the public view of a mighty concourse, so vast, so aggregated, so placed aloft, that no word less great than "cloud" occurs as its designation: that "*long cloud*" as it is finely called in Watts' grand hymn, "Give me the wings of faith." True, the multitudinous watchers are unseen, but this only gives faith another opportunity of exercise; we are to treat the Blessed as seen, for we know that they are there, living to God, one with us, fellows of our life and love. So, let us address ourselves afresh to the spiritual race, the course of faith. Let us, as athletes of the soul, strip all encumbrance off, "every weight" of allowed sin, all guilty links with the world of rebellion and self-love; "the sin which doth so easily beset us," clinging so soon around the feet, like a net of

fine but stubborn meshes, till the runner gives up the hopeless effort and is lost.¹

We thus explain the "witnesses" to mean spectators, watchers, not testifiers. The context seems to us to decide somewhat positively for this explanation. It is an altogether pictorial context; the imagery of the foot-race comes suddenly up, and in a moment raises before us the vision of the stadium and its surroundings. The reader cannot see the course with his inner eyes without also seeing the hosts of eager lookers-on who made, at every such occasion, in the old world as now, the life of the hour. In such a context nothing but explicit and positive reasons to the contrary could give to the word "witnesses," and to the word "cloud" in connexion with it, any other allusion. True, these watchers are all, as a fact, also evidential "witnesses," testifiers to the infinite benefit and success of the race of faith. But that thought lies almost hidden behind the other. It is as loving, sympathetic, inspiring lookers-on that the old saints, from Abel onwards, here are seen gathered, crowded and intent, around us as we run.

The conception runs off, of course, into mystery, as every possible conception as to the unseen does, even when Scripture is most explicit about unseen facts. We ask, and ask in vain, what is the medium through which these observers watch us, the air and light, as it were, in which their vision acts; what is their proximity to us the while; to what extent they are able to know the entire conditions of our race. But all this leaves faith in peaceful possession of a fact of unspeakable animation. It tells the discouraged or tired Christian, tempted to think of the unseen as a dark void, that it is rather a bright and thronging world, in mysterious touch and continuity with this, and that our forerunners, from those of the remotest past down to the last-called beloved one who has passed out of our sight,

¹ I cannot think possible the alternative (marginal) rendering of *εὐπεριώτατον* in the Revised Version—"admired by many." There is example for the meaning in classical Greek, but *the idea* is totally out of keeping with the spirit of this passage.

know enough about us to mark our advance, and to prepare their welcome at the goal.

In that rich treasury of sacred song, *Hymns from the Land of Luther*, is included the translation of a noble hymn by Simon Dach, *O wie selig seid ihr doch, ihr Frommen*, "O how happy are ye, saints forgiven." That hymn beautifully illustrates this verse. It is written responsively. One stanza, sung upward, is the utterance from earth of the troubled Church's longing for her rest. The next, sung from above, is the answer of the Blessed, telling of their love, of their sympathy born of like sufferings of their own, of their bright foreview for their still toiling brethren of the promised crown. So the two choirs answer each other, turn by turn, till at last both join in a glorious concert of blended song, a closing strain of faith and praise. Let us listen often for those answers from above.

But the holy writer has more to say yet about the motives to faith. He points the weary saints upward even beyond the "cloud" to a Form radiant and supreme. They are to run, conscious of the witnesses, but yet more "looking off (*ἀφορῶντες*) unto JESUS, the Leader, Master (*ἀρχηγόν*), and Perfecter of faith"; that is, the Lord of the whole host of the believing, and Himself the consummate Worker in the field of faith, who, for a joy promised *but not seen*, "endured the Cross," when its immediate aspect was an inexpressible outrage and disgrace; reaching the throne of all existence, as the Son of Man, in spite of every possible appearance to the contrary (ver. 2). Yes, and not only was that final victory won by Him, but He arrived at it by a path full of the conflicts which threaten faith. He "endured the contradiction of sinners against Himself" (ver. 3). Year by year, day by day, from the Pharisee, from the worldling, from the leaders of religion, from the inconstant crowd, He had "contradiction" to endure—sometimes even from "the men of His own household." He was challenged to prove His claims; He was insulted over His assertion of them, or over His silence about them. In every way, at every turn, they

spoke against Him to His face, as He slowly advanced, through a life of love and suffering, to the Agony and the Crucifixion.

Let us not think that all this put no strain, even in the blessed Messiah, upon faith. It may seem scarcely reverent (I know devout and thoughtful Christians who have felt it to be so) to speak of our blessed Lord as exercising faith, as being the supreme Believer. But we need not shrink from the thought. It is no more irreverent, surely, than to accept the evidence of the Gospels to His perfect human capacity to be weary, to be surprised, to be specially moved to compassion by *the sight* of suffering. In His sinless conformity "in all things to His brethren" (of this we are amply sure), there was never for one moment room in Him for error of thought or of word, as He acted as the supreme and absolute Prophet of His Church. But there was room, so we are expressly told, on one tremendous occasion at least (Matt. xxvi. 37), for a mysterious "bewilderment" (*ἀδημονεῖν*) of His blessed human soul. Can we doubt that the victory won in the Garden, after which He went with profound calmness to the unjust Priest, and Pilate, and the Cross, was of the nature of a victory of faith? Did He not then treat the coming "joy" as a reality, although in so awful a sense and measure He did not "feel" it then? The "bewilderment" did not drive Him back from our redemption—why? Because "He TRUSTED in God that He would deliver Him" (Ps. xxii. 9; Matt. xxvii. 42), whatever should be the contents of "the cup" from which His whole humanity turned away as *almost* impossible to drink.

And may we not be sure that on many a previous occasion, of minor and yet bitter trial, when evil men gathered round Him with cynical objections and ruthless denials of His claims, the victory was akin to the victory of Gethsemane? Often, surely, a strange "bewilderment" must have beset the Redeemer's soul, of which the external token was the sigh, the groan, the tears, which showed Him to be so truly man.

We all hold, in doctrinal orthodoxy, that the Lord's sufferings, both of soul and body, were no "docetic" semblance, but

a deep and infinitely pathetic reality. But we need at times to think somewhat deliberately in order to receive the full impression of that truth upon the heart. And then, I think, we are constrained to see in Him, who thus really suffered and really "endured," the supreme Exemplar of the victory of faith, the perfect Sympathizer with the tried believer.

From this pregnant thought, of the Faith exercised by JESUS, the disciple is led in the remainder of our passage direct to the practical inferences for himself. The days, for those first readers of the Epistle, were indeed evil. Though not yet called to martyrdom (ver. 4), they were hard beset, not only by importunate reasonings and appeals which, as we have seen all along, were straining their spiritual allegiance, but by actual outrages (see, *e.g.*, x. 34), by the "scourging" (ver. 6) of bitter social persecution. Well, "looking off unto" Him who had so greatly endured, they were, in these things also, to see the unseen and to presentiate the future. From the Proverbs (Prov. iii. 11, 12), that book where the Apostolic insight so often finds the purest spiritual messages,¹ he quotes (vers. 5, 6) the tender words which bid the chastened child see in his chastening the assurance (ver. 8) of his happy, holy sonship in the home of a Father, "the Father of our spirits," who, unlike our earthly fathers even at their best (and that was a noble best indeed), not only chastens, but chastens with an unerring result of holiness in the submissive child—yea, a holiness which is one with His own (ver. 10), His Spirit in our wills.

Beautiful is *the sympathy* of this appeal to live, by faith, the life of victorious patience. "All chastening, for the present, seems not to belong to joy but grief" (ver. 11). Yes, the immediate pain is fully recognized, not ignored. It is not spoken of as if, in view of its sequel, it did not matter. "It belongs to grief." Scripture is full of this tender insight into the bitterness of even our salutary sorrows, and its appeals to patience are all the more potent for that insight. "Never-

¹ It was evidently a book dear to St. Peter's mind, as his First Epistle shows.

theless afterward it produces the peace-bringing fruit of righteousness," the sense of a profound inward rest, found in conformity to the "sweet, beloved will of God," in living correspondence to the Father's rule, "for those who have been exercised, as in a spiritual *gymnastic* (*γυμνασμένους*), thereby." That "exercise" was to tell at once, as they surrendered their wills to it in faith, in the present sense of the certainty of future blessing. "Brace the slack hands" to toil, "and the unstrung knees" to march (ver. 12), "and make straight paths for your feet," using your will, faith-strengthened, to choose the line of the will of God, and that alone. So should "the lame thing" be "healed" rather than "turned aside." The walk, feeble and halting always when the will is divided, should be restored to firmness and certainty again.

"Nevertheless, afterward." That is the watchword of the whole pregnant passage. Nature, shortsighted and impatient, can deal with the seen and the present only. Grace, in its victorious form of patient faith, already takes hold upon the "afterward," and works on, and walks on, "as seeing Him that is invisible."

With the thought of the witness-cloud around us, and "looking off" to the Prince of Faith, ascended, yet present with us, and sure of the ultimate and eternal "fruit of righteousness" which lies hidden in the chastening of the Father of our spirits—we too will live by faith, taking God at His word, and saying Amen to His will, even to the end.



The Licensing Bill.

BY THE REV. CANON FORD, B.A.

EVEN a cursory examination of this measure, which has aroused such intense popular interest, will convince the unprejudiced that it contains large possibilities of real reform. Among its proposals are the systematic reduction of the number of licences, local option with regard to the granting of new