

ARTICLE VII.

MARTYRDOM, IN THE APOCALYPSE.

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A GENUINE epistle should carry incidental evidence of the condition of the persons to whom it was addressed, as well as of the writer's condition. Assuming what is generally admitted, that the Christians to whom the Apocalypse was first sent were suffering persecution and in imminent peril of martyrdom, and assuming what the more recent critics admit, that it was written during the persecution under Domitian (A.D. 96?), we propose to consider some of its unstudied intimations of such experience on their part, together with some historical facts illustrating and confirming these intimations.

In the opening of the book (i. 5) the writer salutes the churches he is about to address, and pronounces upon them a benediction "from Jesus Christ the Faithful Witness" (*ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστός*). This may mean simply that Jesus Christ is faithful and trustworthy in the testimony he is about to give through his apostle John, although this does not exhaust the meaning of the word *μάρτυς*; indeed it hardly touches its most pathetic significance. Jesus, for whom John is now speaking, had suffered violent death rather than retract one iota of what he had said and taught. He not only bore witness to the truth, but he sealed his testimony with blood. John is now writing, at Christ's suggestion, to his followers, who are in bitter trial, and sorely tempted to renounce the profession of their faith. He therefore says to them, not merely that the Master is faithful and will fulfil all his promises unto them, but he says this in words which remind them of that Master's steadfastness in like trials. The language pictures to their faith their divine Redeemer enduring the cross for the truth's sake, and thus appeals to them to show the same steadfastness unto the bit-

ter end. The stimulating argument of the passage is in substance this: Jesus was the Faithful Martyr, a witness steadfast unto death. Be *thou* also faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

This construction of the passage finds confirmation in ii. 13, where the same words (*ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός*) are applied to Antipas, and there rendered "my faithful martyr who was slain," etc.; and this would seem a specially appropriate and beautiful allusion if, as some commentators suppose, this Antipas was the beloved Timothy, angel of the church at Ephesus before John assumed the oversight of it.

It is further illustrated and confirmed by a passage in a letter from the persecuted Christians in Gaul to their brethren in Asia Minor, giving an account of the sufferings of their fellow Christians there under the emperors Aurelius and Commodus: "Though they had neither once nor twice, but many times, endured martyrdom, . . . they did not proclaim themselves martyrs, for it did not become us to apply this name to them; but if any one of us, either by letter or in conversation, called them martyrs, they seriously reprov'd us. *For they cheerfully yielded the title of martyr to Christ, the true and faithful martyr*" (witness). Alluding to those martyrs who had already departed they said: "They now are martyrs whom Christ has thought worthy to be received in their confession, setting the seal to their martyrdom (testimony) by the issue."¹

Moreover, John, in verse 9, speaks of himself as he would not, were they whom he addressed enduring only the ordinary trials of life: "I, John, who also am your brother and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ." That is, I am not only your brother in Christ, — sharer with you in the hope of his kingdom — but your co-partner in the tribulation (*ἁλψει*) and in the patience, or patient endurance (*ὑπομονῆς*), of this tribulation which comes upon us on account

¹ Eusebius, V. 2.

of Jesus Christ. For this cause am I a prisoner on this desolate rock, etc. The whole paragraph is exceedingly intense, but on that very account the more inappropriate, unless addressed to experiences of a like intensity.

Thus the book opens with a bold allusion to the fact that Christ died a martyr. Its first utterance from him is written in blood, as if prophetic of what his followers must endure, and of the heroism necessary to endure it.

The opening salutation of the Apocalypse is followed by its introduction proper, viz. seven brief epistles to as many prominent churches in Western Asia Minor. While admitting that these may have been representative churches of all then in existence, or, indeed, of all yet to be in the world, we regard these letters to them as none the less *bona fide* epistles, suited to the characters of those churches at that time, and therefore good incidental authority as to their condition at the time. As the circumstances of Daniel and of Amos tinged, if they did not suggest, the imagery of their respective prophecies, so did John's knowledge of Ephesus and of its sister churches, as well as of the temper and conduct of Nero and Domitian, enter unconsciously into the imagery of the Apocalypse. The Spirit did not rigidly control the style, but having suggested the truth, left John to dress it somewhat according to his personal knowledge and taste, incidentally weaving in allusions and illustrations furnished by passing events.

Now what intimations, if any, do these letters give that the Christians to whom they were addressed were then suffering persecution?

To the church in Ephesus the Great Head says (ii. 2, 8) : " I know thy works — thy labor unto weariness (*κόπῳ*), thy patience under such labor, and thou hast patient endurance (*ὑπομονήν*), and hast borne burdens for my name's sake, and hast not fainted under them," etc. This does not necessarily indicate active persecution, but rather those intense experiences which spring up on the borders of persecution. The tenor of this epistle is at least very different from that

of Paul to the same church some thirty years before, and when as yet the Pagan emperors had not stretched forth the hand to vex the followers of Christ; and still more unlike the general tenor of his verbal address to the elders of that church who met him at Miletus while on his way to Jerusalem (Acts xx).

The message to the church in Smyrna opens thus: "These things saith he who was dead, but lives again" [the conqueror of death and therefore his followers need not fear it]: "I know thy tribulation" (Θλίψις). This word, the first specification as to their condition, bears us at once into the midst of fiery trials. There is nothing ordinary in *tribulation*. "Fear nothing of what thou shalt suffer [not even this which I now foretell]; behold the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried, and ye shall have tribulation ten days." Here it is no longer cruel and treacherous *men* that annoy; neither unfeeling Pagan nor apostate Jew now vexes them, nor any inferior demon, but the arch rebel himself—the malignant and unrelenting accuser of the brethren. The measures employed, then, will be worthy of the leader! The *prison* has already played a melancholy part in the tragedies of persecution, sometimes as a school preparatory to the stake and the block, more often as a means of wasting and worrying out the fortitude which fire and axe could not daunt. Bishop Pathinus, of Southern France, was cast into prison at the age of ninety, and survived its horrors only two days. Tertullian thus encourages his incarcerated brethren: "The prison is also the abode of the *evil* spirit, where he assembles those who belong to him; but you are come to the prison for the very purpose of treading him under foot in his own abode. . . . The prison is darkness, but ye are light; it has fetters but ye are free, in God's sight. . . . Discard the name of prison, and call it retirement. . . . The limbs feel not the pressure of the stocks when the soul is in heaven." ¹

"Tried," cruelly and malignantly by him who imprisoned

¹ Neander's Memorials, 97, 98.

them. God tries his people lovingly, as a means of purifying and strengthening them; Satan tries them maliciously, in the sense of soliciting or tempting them to sin. He *tries* to break down the steadfastness of their faith and profession. "Ten days," meaning rather a short than a long or indefinite period. An intense fire the sooner burns out. "The war will be short; it may be desperate!" "Be thou faithful unto the death, and I will give thee a crown of life." Count not life dear as weighed against fidelity to the Master. Give it up, as he did, if the persecutor insists upon it; so shall you win and wear the crown of life eternal!

Neither gentleness nor violence of interpretation can make these word-clusters yield anything but scarlet. Accordingly, Dean Trench says this epistle "strikes the key-note of martyrdom." And it is all the more significant if, as this careful critic thinks it probable, the venerable, firm, and lovely Polycarp — already ripe for martyrdom and waiting for his crown — was the veritable person to whom this epistle was addressed; at that very moment less an angel figuratively of a bleeding church on earth, than one literally of the church triumphant in heaven.

The church in Pergamos is thus saluted: "I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, — where Satan's seat is; and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth."

The intensity of their trial is indicated, first, by the title twice given to the place, as Satan's seat — Satan's dwelling-place. It was therefore the capital of the confederacy, in which the prince of this world, whom Christ had once cast out, held his infernal court, plotting restoration; secondly, a distinguished Christian of their number, Antipas, had already there gained the martyr's crown; thirdly, the phrase "*even in those days* wherein Antipas," etc., implies a period of special tribulation, which only the specially steadfast could survive. It was a period when the enemy, in a fit of desperation, undertook to storm these Christians' stronghold. It

was to their honor that they had not faltered, even in these terrible days.

The epistle to the church in Thyatira, having noticed the fact that a pestilent heresy had corrupted a portion of that church, and that this must be purged out so as by fire, adds for the few who had remained faithful: "That which ye have already, hold fast till I come"; implying a coming trial in which they would be sorely tempted to recant. A similar direction is given to the church in Sardis: "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die; for I have not found thy works perfect [perfected, *πεπληρωμένα*] before God. Remember, and hold fast"; i.e. be steadfast unto the bitter end.

In the epistle to the church in Sardis there is nothing which bears directly on our subject, unless it be that the Saviour's promise to him who should overcome — "I will *confess* his name before my Father, and before his angels" — was designed especially for such as feared to confess Christ, or concealed a previous confession. We may at least use the occasion to make some quotations showing how the faithful among the primitive Christians regarded the duty of a prompt and open confession of their faith in Christ; and how this significant act stood in their minds for the whole Christian character, since the faithful were often called simply confessors. Thus Victorinus, a distinguished rhetorician of Rome in the fourth century, embraced Christianity. For a while he shrunk from a public profession, out of regard to his former friends. At last, fearing that Christ might, according to his own words, deny him, if he persisted in concealing his faith, he came forward to profess. It then being proposed to him to make a profession of his faith and receive baptism before a private assembly, he utterly refused, saying it were unreasonable for him to be ashamed to confess his hopes of salvation before the people, while he publicly professed before them daily his character as a rhetorician. Of this Augustine, who relates the fact (Conf. VIII.), says in flowers of sacred rhetoric: "He now blushed not to be the

child of thy Christ, and the new-born babe of thy fountain ; submitting his neck to the yoke of humility, and subduing his forehead to the reproach of the cross. . . . Rome wondering ; the church rejoicing.”

Justin Martyr thus repels one of the slanders of Trypho the Jew : “ As for us who have received the religion of the holy Jesus, yourselves know very well that there is none throughout the world that is able to fright us from our profession. . . . Of our great love of an eternal and pure life, we desire to converse with God the Father and Creator of all things, and *hasten to confess*. . . . No one is ashamed, none is sorry, save that he had not long before become a Christian. If he is informed against, he glories in the charge ; if accused, he makes no defence ; if questioned, he confesses even of his own accord. . . . We declare and openly profess in the midst of all your tortures ; even while bleeding and torn we proclaim aloud that we worship God through Christ.”

Certain confessors at Rome who had already been confined in prison for a year, wrote thus to Cyprian of Carthage, who at this time, was more influential in the church than the bishop of Rome : “ What more glorious and blessed lot can, by God’s grace, fall to man, than amid tortures and the fear of death itself to confess God the Lord ; than with lacerated bodies and a spirit departing, but yet free, to confess Christ the Son of God ; than to become fellow-sufferers with Christ, in the name of Christ ? If we have not yet shed our blood, we are ready to shed it. Pray then, beloved Cyprian, that the Lord would daily confirm and strengthen each one of us more and more with the power of his might ; and that he, the best of leaders, would finally conduct his soldiers, whom he has disciplined and proved in the dangerous camp, to the field of battle which is before us, armed with those divine weapons which can never be conquered.”¹

The charge to the church in Philadelphia is quite as pungent, and still more to this point : “ Thou hast a little strength,

¹ Neander, I. 133.

and hast not denied my name. Because thou hast kept the word of my patience [my word requiring patient endurance], I also will keep thee [preserve thee in, and deliver thee] from the hour of temptation. Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown."

These hearty commendations for not having denied Christ's name amid sore temptations, together with these urgent and oft-repeated exhortations to hold on and hold out, naturally suggest, by way of contrast, the case of the fallen, or *lapsi*, as the early Christian writers called them; those whose faith wavered in times of severe trial, and who, perhaps, publicly recanted in order to save their life; but many of whom, as soon as the indignation was overpast, repented, and hastened to seek restoration to the name and honor which they had forfeited.

Thus, in the epistle of the Christians in Lyons and Vienna to their brethren in Asia, from which we have already quoted, we read this mournfully tender passage, interjected amid the inspiring records of Christian heroism: "Others, indeed, appeared unprepared and inexperienced, and yet so weak as to be incapable of bearing the intensity of the mighty contest. Of these, indeed, *about ten also fell away*, causing great sorrow and excessive grief to our brethren, and damping the ardor of those who had not yet been taken. These, however, although they endured all manner of affliction, nevertheless were always present with the martyrs, and never left them. Then indeed we were all struck with great fear on account of the uncertainty of their holding out in the profession, not indeed dreading the tortures inflicted, but looking at the end, and trembling lest they should apostatize."¹

A confessor at Rome during the Decian persecution, writing to a confessor at Carthage in order to engage the intercessory prayer of the African martyrs for a fallen sister, says: "I pray you to mourn with me for the death of my sister, who in this desolation has fallen away from Christ; for she has sacrificed [unto the heathen gods], and offended the

¹ Eusebius, V. 1.

Lord, as appears evidently unto us. On account of her transgression I spend this joyful time of Easter in tears, both day and night.”¹

While halting between two opinions and taking counsel of their timidity, how timely and stirring these exhortations. “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die.” “Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.” Parallels in spirit to these, and not unworthy to come in here as illustrations, may be found far and wide in the messages which Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, a century and a half later than this, sent from his place of concealment as opportunity offered, for the strengthening and comforting of his church during the terrible persecution under Decius.

Speaking to his clergy of the confessors, he says: “There remains something more than they have yet fulfilled; for it is written: “Praise no man before his decease”; and our Lord says: “He that endureth *unto the end* shall be saved.” To the confessors themselves he thus writes: “Still we are in the world; still we are on the battle-field; we fight for our daily life. Hence you must strive that, after such a beginning, you may make progress; that what you have so happily begun may be brought to perfection. It is but little, if a man has been able only to *obtain*; it is something more to be able to *keep* what he has obtained, even as faith and regeneration cannot bring unto eternal life merely by being once received; they must be kept. . . . Not in *that* sense have we joined the soldiers of the Lord, that we think of nothing but peace, and flee from conflict; since in the conflict the Lord has gone before us as the teacher of humility, patience, and suffering; since what he has taught us to accomplish he has himself accomplished, and what he exhorts us to suffer he has first suffered for us.” And then he adds these comforting and strengthening words for those who were scattered abroad, and thus deprived of social Christian fellowship: “*He* is not alone who has Christ for a companion

¹ Eusebius, XIII.

of his flight. He is not alone, who, preserving the temple of God, is not without God wherever he may be. And it is no small honor of martyrdom when a man dies not publicly and among many, since he dies for Christ's sake. It is enough that *he* is a witness of his martyrdom who tries and crowns the martyrs." ¹

The epistle to the Laodiceans suggests the near neighborhood of persecution, from which it was their misfortune and shame to be left free. They are fearfully rebuked for their lukewarmness in the divine life, and impaled on high for the warning of the indolent and apathetic in all times. It emphasizes this rebuke and illustrates their guilt to consider their surroundings at the time. Everything in their neighborhood was throbbing with feeling and energy. The sacred body of Christ was sweating blood at every pore. The agonizing shriek of brethren and sisters floated by on every breeze. That whole household of churches was in dire affliction. Every fibre of principle and of sensibility in every soul was on the stretch, and sung out a shrill agony when it was snapped. The burning zeal of the faithful was fast eating them up. Even the cold-iron Roman persecutor was red-hot *in his way*. But the Laodiceans were neither cold nor hot. They had neither the poor merit of zeal in a bad cause, nor sympathy for those who were suffering in a good cause; and the bold figure of speech in which the Redeemer intimates that to be cold, as the heathen persecutor, without any of the forms or professions of love, were better than to remain thus, sets forth his holy disgust with such an apathy amid such circumstances. Thrice dead does this church seem, that it is begirt about with the experiences and exhibitions of such intense living, — "a mountain of ice in a sea of fire!"

We should observe one marked feature common to all these seven epistles, viz. that the promised reward, whatever it be, is conditional upon their *overcoming* in this conflict; and to this point, as by a *nota bene*, their attention is challenged in each epistle by these same words: "He that hath

¹ Eusebius, XIII.

ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." Moreover, the varied and expressive imagery which sets forth the promised rewards implies the severity of the conflict. Every conceivable form of reward is offered, because they were to pass through every possible form of suffering.

We are aware that nothing is more common in the New Testament than the representation of Christian life under the figures of warfare and conflict; but this emphatic repetition of the word *overcome*, with the energetic words attending it, requires for it an extraordinary meaning, — the very highest significance which the words will bear.

When the New Testament elsewhere speaks of the Christian conflict, it is as an officer by his camp-fire rehearses at length the story of a past battle or the probabilities of a future one, and how he would have his faithful soldiers acquit themselves in it. But the allusions to conflict in these epistles are like the brief, sharp, spirited words of that officer when leading his men into the thickest fight. There is an intensity in them which were unnatural, not to say impossible, except in the face of tragic realities. Such burning words are born only of fiery occasions.

Thus far the testimony of the introduction of the Apocalypse as to the status of the Christians to whom it was first addressed. Does the book proper correspond to the introduction in this particular?

In chapter vi. 9-11 we read: "And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled." Here are two points of interest in relation to our subject: First, these

were martyrs for Christ, clothed in white, in token of steadfastness to their profession, even unto the death; peculiarly honored in heaven because faithful amid peculiar trials on earth.

Further light is thrown upon this point by comparison with a similar passage in vii. 13-15: "And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes; and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb; therefore are they before the throne of God." Here John's attention is directed to a celestial group whose robes are unusually resplendent; and wishing to know the reason of this honorable distinction, he is told that these came out of "great tribulation, . . . therefore are they before the throne of God," or in his immediate presence. "Great tribulation" would naturally suggest to the reader of that day the tribulation of persecution. He would therefore understand, unless otherwise instructed, that these glorious ones were martyrs and confessors, and, like those alluded to in chapter vi., were clothed with unusual honors because they had passed unscathed through unusual trials.

A second point of interest in this passage (vi. 11) is, that others still of their brethren were yet to be slain for Christ's sake. The appointed number of blood-witnesses (*μάρτυρες*) was not yet full. Hence those already slain, and who were impatient that God the holy and true should complete the appointed number, so that their death might be avenged, were bidden to wait for a little season, when, it was implied, their prayer would be answered. Their agonizing appeal to the holiness and truth of God to avenge their wrongs — as if he could not be God and not avenge them — are impressive proofs of the greatness of those wrongs. As that fearful sonnet-prayer of the great Christian poet of England in behalf of the persecuted Piedmontese, commencing "Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints," could not have been ex-

torted from his soul but by the most wanton cruelties on the part of their tormentors. What experiences of the primitive Christians answer to these strong representations except the cruel outrages they suffered at the hands of heathen persecutors? Nothing could be better suited to stir up the minds of the persecuted believers to the highest point of heroic endurance than this, which we will venture to call pictorial representation.

The leaders of our Revolution prepared the people to stand fast to the bold and hazardous Declaration of Independence by a graphic recital of the wrongs they had submitted to from the parent country, notwithstanding their earnest but respectful remonstrances. The great English dramatist represents the wily Anthony as filling the Roman populace with a perfect frenzy to avenge Caesar's death by holding up before them dead Caesar's mantle, and showing the gashes which the knives of the conspirators had made in it—bidding them look at "Sweet Caesar's wounds—poor, poor dumb mouths." In the Parisian Revolution of 1848 it was a man deeply read in human nature who, in order to fire the passions of the populace to avenge their fellow-citizens who had been shot down by the soldiers of the king, piled their dead bodies into a cart together, and then drew it by hand, and with torch-lights, through the streets of Paris at midnight; while they who dragged it along sang, marking the time with their melancholy tread, "Sweet is it to die for one's country," interspersing this dirge with stirring strains from the *Marsellaise*. Is it any wonder that the morrow opened upon the streets of that city swarming with blouses eager for martyrdom on the barricades? It is something as if the loyal people of this nation should behold in visions of the night their patriotic brethren who have already fallen at the head of their brave ranks in battle; and the noble captives who for weary months were pining away in Southern prisons; and the many loyal spirits in the revolted states, overpowered, but patiently waiting the time of their deliverance; and from all these should hear the mournfully

harmonious cry, pleading with that Sovereign Justice that is never appealed to in vain: "How long, O Lord, how long!" Could human nature behold this unmoved? Would not the avenues to every recruiting office be soon choked with volunteers? Thus, but without the tragical grossness of these scenes, does this apocalyptic picture appeal to the Christian heroism of the reader, making his blood leap and boil along his veins. To followers of Christ who were constantly exposed to violent death for their Master's sake, no appeal could have been more effectual.

Let us, for a moment, turn aside from our main point to say, as something suited to our day, that this revelation in the fifth seal would seem to show: first, that the persecuted saints remember in heaven the wounds which the body of their Redeemer *in them* suffered on earth. Those wrongs were too deeply scored into their souls to be erased by the processes of death and coronation. Secondly, these saints, though trophies of a mercy which will always be uppermost in their minds, retain also a strong sense of justice. For God's sake and the sake of the universe their prayer will still be: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" Thirdly, these saints in heaven cannot rest till retributive justice overtakes the wilful and incorrigible enemies of their Redeemer; as the best communities on earth cannot be made quiet while known felons and murderers are at large. Fourthly, saints in heaven will therefore rejoice, and sing Alleluia, — their joy will be completed when God shall have vindicated his justice in full upon the blood-seeking enemies of his Son. Fifthly, until such retribution is made, these saints will find a comparative satisfaction in praying for it and expecting it. Though under the altar and pleading, they are still in heaven, and full of a substantial though not completed peace and rest.

In chapter xiii. 1-10, we have the picture of a beast, with seven heads and ten horns, rising out of the sea and making war upon the saints. It is not possible that the Christians

of that time should have applied this picture to any other than pagan persecuting Rome. After giving a vivid picture of his desperate rage against the church, the writer abruptly bids the reader take notice: "He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity; he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints." That is, the arm of the persecutor shall ere long break by its own force; violence shall overthrow violence. Here, then, is a call upon the saints for patience and faith — patience while they suffer these terrors; faith that their sufferings will soon end.

The remembrance of the fiery trials of Christians during Nero's reign, some thirty years before, would furnish them explanation and commentary for this remarkable passage. They would read this bold prediction by the lurid light of the fires which that amateur murderer of the innocent had kindled: "He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity." This would recall to mind the fact that Nero himself, soon after his persecution, was a lonely, shivering, midnight fugitive from the face of his own indignant subjects; secreting himself in the narrowest apartment of an obscure country cottage — a fugitive emperor, begging protection from the meanest of his subjects!

"He that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword"; this, too, would remind them that even before his hiding-place was suspected, his heart failed him, and he called aloud for some friendly hand to release him from the burden of life; and when no one answered, "What," said he; "have I neither friend nor foe to rid me of this load?" And when at last discovered, he half butchered himself by a faltering thrust at his throat, and left the good work to be completed by his blood-thirsty pursuers, whom he had trained to relish such pastime. Thus did he who first raised the sword of state against the church of Christ fulfil this prophecy in a double death by violence, as an assassinated suicide.

When they read still further (xiv. 10), "the same shall be

tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb," they must have recalled, as a fearful commentary upon it, the time when, at the instigation of this demoniac monster and trifier, followers of the Lamb were clothed in robes saturated with pitch, and then set on fire by night to illuminate his pleasure gardens on the Vatican hill, — "martyrs in their shirts of fire," as modern poetry has christened them, — a royal entertainment indeed!

It was but a little season after this was first read, before Domitian, Nero's successor in persecution, who added to his cruelty the blasphemy of calling himself "Lord and God," also perished by the hand of assassins. It is said that, becoming suspicious even of his domestics, he lined the walls of his favorite walks with stones whose polished surfaces would reflect the approach of any stealthy foot from behind; but all this precaution could not screen or shield him from the ministers of vengeance whom the Head of the church sent to fulfil his promise for those who lift up the sword against his beloved. It is remarkable how literally this prediction was fulfilled upon the whole line of persecuting emperors. Of sixteen who, as primaries or subordinates, were more or less active in this bloody work, there is probable evidence that ten were assassinated, two were suicides to avoid a more violent death, one died in battle, one was flayed alive and salted, and two died in peace, one of whom owed his natural death to the fact that he had laid down the sword and retired to private life.

On a few of the still extant tombstones of the early Christians at Rome, some of whom may have died under Nero, are engraved small cups with inscriptions thereon, which indicate that the persons buried there were forced to drink poison as a means of death. Thus we read: "The cup could not give to Constans the crown which the steel was permitted to offer"; i.e. the poison failing to do its work (as Christ had promised, Mark xvi. 18) the steel was called in. Now as the older Christians to whom the Apocalypse was first sent

might recollect having seen in their childhood followers of Christ removed in this manner, by cup or steel, or both, what a vividness would that recollection give to the new promise just arrived from Patmos: "The same [who have administered this bitter portion to others] shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation" (xiv. 10).

In chapter xvi. seven angels are sent to pour out the vials of God's wrath upon the earth, in retribution for its bloody treatment of the church: "And the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea, and it became as the blood of a dead man; and every living soul died in the sea. And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters, and they became blood. And I heard the angel of the waters say [the guardian angel whose special charge it was to preserve these waters pure, but who was still more interested to have God's holy character vindicated], Thou art righteous, O Lord, because thou hast judged thus; for they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou [in turn] hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy." "Even so," responds an angel from the altar, speaking for another court of heaven, "even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments." The retribution was in keeping with the sin; there was propriety and beauty in it; it was in good taste,—a literal retribution,—a giving back of the same element which had been paid out. Whether or not the divine nemesis has a special pleasure in retributions of the same kind and quality with the sins, it is certain that the human mind takes a special satisfaction in them. Its instinctive response to such judgments always is—"Even so, Amen!"

We introduce here, as throwing a side-light upon our subject, a clause from xiv. 4: "*These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth.*"

The attention of John was arrested by a company of the heavenly host standing near the Lamb on Mount Zion, bearing the Father's name upon their foreheads as if they were

his peculiar possession, and singing that new song in which none but the redeemed could bear a part. Anticipating the reader's interest to learn who these are and wherefore thus distinguished, John says, "these are they which follow the Lamb *whithersoever* he goeth." The phrase intimates that whereas some had followed him only while it was agreeable or respectable, but had fallen back in the day of sore tribulation, these had followed him regardless of circumstances; and thus is their unfaltering fidelity on earth rewarded in heaven. So the disciples in Gaul to their brethren in Asia, speak of the martyr Vettius Epagathus thus: "For he was, and is still, a genuine disciple of Christ, *following the Lamb whithersoever he goeth.*" So also Ignatius, about a quarter of a century after John wrote, when in the amphitheatre, and just before the wild beasts were let into the arena, looking up to the immense conclave of faces that encircled him around, calmly said: "Romans, spectators of this present scene, I am here, not because of any crime, nor to absolve myself from any charge of wickedness, *but to follow Christ*, by the love of whom I am impelled, and whom I long for irrepressibly."

This apocalyptic picture, designed to implant and encourage the martyr spirit, had its effect upon the infant and persecuted church; for from this time forward to the end of persecutions, the Lamb was never without steadfast followers, even in those places where Satan's seat was. Did the first emperor-persecutor originate the inhuman device of lighting up his gardens at night by clothing a number of the doomed sect with robes of fire? Here were more than his depraved ingenuity knew how to dispose of, ready thus to let their light shine to honor their Redeemer amid that pagan midnight. Were followers of the Lamb called for by other emperors, to be torn limb from limb by hungry beasts, for the amusement of the hundred thousand heathen spectators assembled in the new Coliseum? Rome had already within her precincts enough who counted not their lives dear unto them to supply the daily demands of that arena for months

in succession. Though to declare one's self a Christian was to hear on the morrow the summary verdict: "away with him to the lions"; and though sometimes, in scarcity of other food, the ravenous beasts of the amphitheatre were fed on Christian flesh as an economical measure, yet voluntary confessors were so numerous and willing that the greedy populace never came short of their daily recreation, nor did the young lions lack or suffer hunger.

Did a Roman governor at Ephesus once issue his bold edict of extermination against all the followers of Christ in his province, thinking thus to uproot the growing evil utterly, or frighten it back beneath the soil? So also did so many Christians in that province come forward, voluntarily professing themselves the followers of Christ, and claiming the fulfilment of his threat, which would win them all a crown in a better kingdom, that the astonished pagan shrunk from the bloody intent, which promised to leave him a mournful ruler over a depopulated district. "What," said he, with a wit tempered with chagrin, "are there no precipices and halters" by which to help yourselves out of your wretched life?

Did successive emperors thus by turns, for nearly two hundred years, try to crush the young life out of Christianity? They sadly mistook its ethereal quality; for as Tertullian had said to them: "*Semen est sanguis Christianorum*" — The blood of Christians is seed. Every precious drop sowed, sprang up multifold. The common sentiment, amounting to a universal ambition, among the followers of the Lamb during all that period, was to gain a martyr's name and crown. When summoned to die, they answered, singing: "We ascend to the place of punishment as if we were ascending to heaven"; and when gone, their surviving brethren could write of them in no less glowing terms than these: "The faithful proceeded with cheerful steps; their countenances shone with much grace and glory; their bonds were as the most beautiful ornaments; and they themselves looked as brides adorned with their richest array, breathing the fragrance of Christ so much that some thought they had been

literally perfumed.”¹ From the east to the west of the broad empire, wherever the central heart could throb out its hostility to the Lamb, there were found, without searching, his faithful disciples as ready to follow him to the arena or the prison or the stake as to Jerusalem or to Caesar’s palace — an “*ingens multitudo*,” as Tacitus said of them in a particular province, ready, like Paul, not only to be bound, but to die for Christ.

After singing of both judgment and mercy, the writer again suddenly pauses to repeat (xiv. 12): “Here is [another occasion for] the patience of the saints. Here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ.” [amid severe trials]. And then is added in close connection, and as if referring expressly to such faithful martyrs: “And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, blessed are the dead which die in the Lord; yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, and their works do follow them!”

“They rest from their labors.” There it was — underneath the palaces and gardens of their persecutors, and within a fifteen minutes’ walk of the place where they first read these comforting words from John — that a multitude which no man can number of Christian martyrs were, from that day forward, laid down to rest from their sufferings, and their place of repose received, from the faith in which they died, that sweet name, *cemetery* — a place for sleep and rest, while they waited a glorious resurrection to the life to come.

The most frequent epitaphs upon the tombstones of these early sufferers for Christ, buried and preserved in the Catacombs, are: In peace; In Christ; He sleeps in peace; In the peace of Christ. The following are literal copies from these sacred records: Gemella sleeps in peace; Victorina, in peace and in Christ; Vidalio, in the peace of Christ; The sleeping-place of Elpis; Aselus sleeps in Christ. And around these records are engraved the sweet symbols of the lamb, the olive leaf, and the dove, breathing peace and love.

¹ Milner, I. 177.

But lest we should infer that their life and death were as peaceful as their sleep, we read : Primitius in peace, after many torments, a most valiant martyr ; Paulus was put to death in tortures in order that he might live in eternal bliss ; Clementia, tortured, dead, sleeps, will rise ; Lannus, Christ's martyr, rests here—under Diocletian he suffered—in Christ. In all these sacred records of the dead in Christ, engraved on rocky tablets—and hundreds of them have been carefully arranged, so that they may be easily read, along the left of a gallery in the Vatican—there is never a word of murmur or despair ; never one that breathes revenge upon their persecutors, and rarely one that indicates the manner of their unjust and cruel death ; but all whispers of peace and rest in Christ, together with significant emblems of the resurrection and the life to come. Whatever Rome above ground may be, or may have been during these past eighteen centuries, *subterranean* Rome has remained steadfast in its primitive faith ; it has suffered no division or heresy ; it has put on no earthly pomp to smother its spirit ; it has craved no earthly power ; it has never worried Christ's poor, or tampered with his words. It is therefore the best interpreter the world has of the character and faith of those who lived and died under the influence of the immediate successors of the apostles. The soil all around the eternal city was not only enriched at first by the precious blood of Christ's faithful witnesses, but it is still full of the seeds of resurrection life, waiting to be quickened by the first shining of the Sun of Righteousness at his second coming, to judge the world. Those primitive saints were " great in deeds, greater in sufferings, greatest in death, for the honor of Christ." They fulfilled to the letter what Cyprian in his apology claimed for them : " We do not speak great things, but we *live* them." Persecution could lop off members, but its thrusts could not reach the Heart of the church. It could silence human tongues, but the great Truth only pleaded and cried the more earnestly ; and for every faithful one stricken down from among the followers of the Lamb, two sprang forward into

his place. The blood of Christians *was* seed, and therefore the Christian church has been immortal. Its Head still lives, and therefore the gates of hell shall never prevail against it.

Paul, speaking for the religion which he preached and by which he lived, said: "When I am weak then am I strong"; for "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty, and things that are not to bring to naught the things that are." And Julian—speaking for himself, and for the pagan religion which had been trying for nearly three centuries, first to destroy and then to withstand Christianity, but had seen it steadily rising in authority, until at last it sat down on the right hand of the majesty of the empire, without thinking it any robbery so to do—testified to the same truth, but in a different form and spirit, when he cried out in despair, as he was giving up the ghost: "O Galilean, thou hast conquered!"

These stirring truths appear once more, and in still another dress, in xx. 4, 5, 6: "And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them; and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years." The principal subjects of these verses were martyrs on account of their faithfulness to Christ. This faithfulness is indicated by the fact that they had not the mark of the beast on their foreheads, i.e. they did not publicly recant and compromise with the persecutor who represented the pagan religion; nor had they his mark on their hands, i.e. they did not, even in secret, lift up the hand to this abomination, to worship it, or swear by it, or touch any of its profane symbols. And

now these faithful blood-witnesses, who were without spot and above suspicion, enjoy a peculiar blessedness as the reward of their unflinching fidelity. They sit on thrones, participating in judgment, as a victor king calls a council of his generals to advise as to the disposition to be made of the captives. "They are priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years," being as it were the cabinet of the Great King, and uniting in themselves both the regal and sacerdotal dignity. They have even some advantage over the pious dead who had fallen asleep in times of peace (although the precise nature of this advantage is not defined), for we read, "and the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished." "On such the second death hath no power," i.e. their first dying, in so marked a way, utterly vanquished the mighty enemy. And as a premature death was what they suffered for Christ, so an early restoration from its dominion would be their appropriate reward: "Holy and blessed is he that hath part in the first resurrection!"

Thus does this passage resound once more, and for the last time, the key-note of the Apocalypse, viz. the martyr's spirit and the martyr's reward, kindling a like spirit in those who should read and understand. Then follows the brief account of the general resurrection, the judgment, the eternal retributions, and especially the superlative blessedness of the righteous redeemed in the new Jerusalem, with which fitting scene the glowing representations of the Apocalypse close.

The foregoing resumé of the bearings of the Apocalypse on this one point indicates what fearful and desperate forces "the gates of hell" are, and yet that even they shall not prevail against the church of Christ; it indicates the intense and persistent hatred of the depraved heart against Christian godliness, but also the more powerful Christian love which can overcome that hatred. It shows also what a love Christ's followers have for his church, and how much they are willing to do and to suffer in its behalf; say rather, how much he

enables them to suffer and do ; for they love him only as he first loves them. It also shows the power of the passive Christian graces. The followers of Christ can break down certain obstacles by energetic *doing* ; other and more stubborn difficulties can be melted down best by submissive and meek suffering, provided always it comes by reason of well-doing and for Christ's sake. Again, it shows that not only endurance and suffering, but even the sufferer's death may promote the cause for which he dies. Certain great works are completed only by the death of him who laid their foundations. From the day of Christ's crucifixion to the day of his second coming, martyrdom for the truth in his cause is a surprising power. We but imperfectly comprehend as yet, and perhaps on earth we never shall comprehend, the full significance of suffering in the redeemed as well as in their Redeemer. As remission, at first, was made possible only by the shedding of blood, so has the knowledge of this expiation been set home to the heart and conscience of the lost only by the spirit of martyrdom. The weakness of the church of this day is its lack of the martyr spirit. Its veins are full, but of a colorless fluid. The vital scarlet has been bleached out by critical analysis and overculture. There is no lack of those who are willing to *live* for Christ ; but where are the primitive "multitudes" equally ready to *die* for him ? Where are the followers of Christ to-day who count death in the way of duty as the climax of their life, without which life were an incompleated work ? Finally, it shows that the sufferings of the followers of a suffering Saviour may become the occasion of a closer resemblance to, and familiarity with him, and on this account may be welcomed by them, even as Paul has said (Col. i. 24) : " Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh, for his body's sake, which is the church."