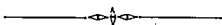


season. But between this occasion and the feeding of the five thousand there occurred sundry miracles, a conspiracy of the Pharisees and the Herodians to destroy Him, the delivery of all the parables preserved in St. Matt. xiii., the ordination of the twelve Apostles, and the death of John the Baptist—events amply sufficient to occupy a year. Therefore we conclude that the synoptical Gospels imply, at all events, three passovers during our Lord's ministry. St. John alone tells us of the fourth, or, rather, of the first. But now when we turn to St. Luke, at a period subsequent to the feeding of the five thousand, that is, the third passover, we find our Lord saying in a parable, "These three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree and find none. Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?" And the dresser of the vineyard replies, "Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it and dung it; and if it bear fruit well, and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down." Can anything be more evident than that, from these considerations, the three first Gospels imply a ministry of at least three years, which St. John confirms by indications of part of a fourth, and it is only when the Gospels are read carelessly, as if the writers meant no more by what they said than their careless readers understand them to mean, that they give any countenance to a one year's ministry, or even seem to be in conflict with St. John.

(To be continued.)

STANLEY LEATHES, D.D.



ART. II.—THE SERVANT OF CHRIST.

NO. XI.—CONVERSION.

I WISH to discuss the question whether all conversions must be sudden: whether we must be able to register their day and hour.

No such doctrine is to be found in the Bible. It is best to go at once to the Fountain of all Wisdom, our Divine Lord Himself, and He will set the question at rest for ever. No, He says: "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." You may be the wisest man alive. You may be the most learned theologian. You may be the most touching and eloquent preacher. But the Spirit of God will beat you. You will no more be able to measure His coming or His going, or say when He began to influence such a person, or where His influence came from, or how it worked, than you can say

that the wind started in Africa, and it went to the North Pole, and after turning round in a hurricane it went to India or Australia. The wind is an invisible force, acting through causes which you cannot number or explain; you cannot say whether it will come loud or soft, violent or gentle, rushing with mighty and irresistible power, or low and sweet, breathing of love and peace. So is the Spirit of God acting on the human heart. You cannot say when it began, or how it came, or what it did. All that you can do is to see that it has been there, and to join in the choirs of the angels as they rejoice over one sinner that repenteth.

What we have to think of first is that when, after the creation, God looked down at human nature as He had made it, behold, it was very good. The human heart in the beginning had desires after good, and not after evil; it had relationship with God, and not with devils. It had the power implanted in it of seeing truth, and beauty, and purity, and goodness, and not merely of seeing them, but of loving them too. But because in the perfection which God had given man it was necessary that he should be able to choose for himself, so it was possible for man to be tempted, and possible for him to fall. He was tempted, and he did fall. But not entirely was his sympathy for truth and beauty and purity and goodness wiped out by that fall. None of his children, indeed, nor his children's children, could be born without that sinful inclination when it was once established in the race; but, still, they had this wonderful spiritual eye, this wonderful spiritual likeness to God, in which they had been created, and which made them able to love things that were God-like and lovely. The Spirit of God had not deserted man altogether. Still around his heart, however dark, ignorant and wicked it might be, lay the Spirit of God, like a mighty sea with a powerful tide beating against the barriers of that heart, and ready to burst in and cleanse it out as soon as ever the opposing doors should give way. The Spirit of the Father and of the Word was given to every man that was born into the world in his conscience, as a light to lighten him through life, if he would only look to it. Thus, in countless instances, from the very beginning of the world down to the sacrifice on Calvary for the sins of the whole earth, both amongst the chosen people and among the heathens, the wicked man had been turning away from his wickedness that he had committed, and was doing that which was lawful and right. Conversion had been going on. Souls were being saved. As the coming sacrifice of the Lamb of God stood in good stead for the Jew who lived by faith, so also it stood in good stead for the heathen.

Then came that mighty revolution in the spiritual history of the world. The Son of God died and rose again, and liveth for evermore. He put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. He poured out of His Spirit upon all flesh.

Now, while He was alive, conversions were not instantaneous. The twelve Apostles whom He gathered about Him did not by any means see Him all at once as their Saviour, or become new creatures, so to speak, at a blow. It was only very gradually that they overcame their doubts, their earthliness, their narrowness, even while they were companying with Jesus. It was not till the Holy Spirit came as a rushing mighty wind on the day of Pentecost that they were finally and completely made new men. So it was with all our Lord's disciples. They were gradually, slowly, attracted, won over and converted. And the different degrees of faith which they showed is abundantly seen in the different characters of the miracles of healing which He wrought. Some had high, clear, commanding faith, like the centurion who got his servant healed at a distance. Others had hardly courage to make themselves known at all, like Nicodemus, who came by night, like the poor woman who did but touch the hem of His garment and was made whole.

When the Spirit had been poured out, then came the time for instant conversions. On the first day were added 3,000 souls through the preaching of Peter. After the death of Ananias and Sapphira multitudes, both of men and women, were added to the Lord through the signs and wonders worked by the Apostles in Solomon's Porch. About the time of the ordination of the seven deacons, the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. At the dispersion which came through the persecution caused by Saul of Tarsus, the people of Samaria, with one accord, gave heed to the things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. Saul himself was the most glorious instance of sudden conversion on record, and, naturally, his whole after-ministry was full of it.

All this, in the early days of Christianity, was likely to be the rule rather than the exception. The Gospel was complete, the Gospel was new, the Spirit had been poured out, and was ready to be poured out on each new case. It was, as St. Paul said, a change from darkness into marvellous light. There were a few to whom the revelation of Christ came only as the crowning glory of a whole life of devotion. Such was Lydia, the seller of purple, who had before been fearing God, and gladly received the knowledge of His Son. Such were evidently Lois and Eunice, the mother and grandmother of Timothy.

Such was Timothy himself; from a child he had known the holy Scriptures, and had evidently loved them and profited by them. Such was Cornelius, the devout centurion, to whom the visit of Peter was granted as a reward for his alms and his prayers. Such, doubtless, were the aged Simeon, the prophetess Anna, Mary, the mother of our Lord, and the exemplary Zacharias and Elizabeth. Such were the devout women at Athens. But most of St. Paul's converts were from among the pagan Greeks, and to them, no doubt, the change seemed generally very startling and sudden, as it did to the jailer of Philippi, who came in trembling and crying, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Yet all the while, even in the very places where Christianity was being preached and where these sudden conversions were taking place, in those very places and at those very times the older and slower and less certain way of salvation and conversion were going on. Christianity did not become like a little land of Goshen, where the sun shined, while all the rest of the country was wrapt in black night. No, Christianity was not limited to one place or to one set of places, nor did it win all who were in one particular place or one particular set of places. It had a few converts here, and a few converts there, and a few converts somewhere else; but it was everywhere side by side with the pagans and the heathens, sharing the same life with them and breathing the same air. It would have been impossible even for St. Paul to convert all the people in a town of 10,000 inhabitants. It would have taken him months and years, whereas he had to move quickly from place to place and sow the good seed in as many soils as he could visit, content to leave the growth to God. It does not follow that all who did not believe at once in any particular town where he went were eternally condemned. Not all could have heard him. Prejudice and ignorance for which they were not answerable may have prevented hundreds and thousands. Not all were prepared to believe. With multitudes God would be content that the old slow, uncertain way of conversion and salvation, that by obedience to the conscience, benefiting without knowing it in the general redemption of the world by Christ, should be sufficient. It does not follow that because the nation of the Jews as a whole rejected Christ, that every individual Jew alive at that time would perish.

And then when once one whole generation of suddenly converted Christians had lived and died, and brought up their children as far as they could in the fear of God and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, there would be besides the sudden conversions more of what we may venture to call conversions by education and training. These suddenly converted

parents would have brought their children to be baptized. Whatever baptism did or did not for them, at any rate it would do this : it would bring those children to Jesus in obedience to His command ; it would place them in His arms for His blessing ; it would offer them with prayer to Him ; it would make them members of the Christian society, with its responsibilities and privileges ; it would give Almighty God the opportunity of pardoning the sinfulness with which they were born, and it would ensure that they would be Christianly and virtuously brought up. Some of those children would not answer the expectations formed for them, and would be led captive of the devil. But with many it would be different. They would grow up with an abhorrence of sin, they would hate their own sins, they would be all on the side of goodness, beauty, truth, justice, and virtue ; they would believe in the Lord Jesus to the saving of their souls ; they would have the witness of the Spirit in their hearts, and it would show forth its fruits and graces in their lives. So from their earliest childhood to their latest breath, in spite of weaknesses, temptations, and falls, they would continue children of God, members of Christ, and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. Some would have less difficulty in this career of quiet Christian growth than others. Some would need arousing again and again. Some, perhaps, would fall for a time and be recovered. But perhaps none of this sort would be able, like St. Paul and the earliest Christian converts, to name the day and the hour when they first saw Jesus to the saving of their souls.

All this gives us a very wide and grand view of the working of the Spirit, and of the breadth and length and height and depth of that God who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers ; of that God who, being Himself infinitely various and manifold, makes Himself known to the human heart in more ways than one. It shows us that the ways of conversion are infinite. We see first the old way, the way that was slow and uncertain and dark and dim, but which for some people to whom the Gospel has not been made known in the way that it has been made known to us is still going on, the light lighting every man that cometh into the world ; the Gentiles, having not the law, doing by nature the things contained in the law, and being a law to themselves, showing the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another. We see also sometimes those rare and beautiful natures on whom Satan seems to have no power, and who answer to the description given by our Lord of the just persons who need no repentance. Their conversion is very gentle and very gradual, like a sweet breeze in

a summer day. We see also the great mass of Christian people who have been born of Christian parents, in a Christian land, with the Christian privileges in their hands, nurtured in Christian education: we see some of them rejecting all these unspeakable blessings, but we see many of them growing from their earliest childhood with unwavering faith more and more unto the perfect day. Those of them who have fallen in the race we often see the lovingkindness of God using many different means to bring back again to Himself. Sometimes they may be even won, St. Peter tells us, by the conversation of a good wife, without being preached to at all. The baptism of the Spirit is needed for all. Now, indeed, coming as a fire burning in men's hearts, consuming the chaff of sin, while He purifies and stores up all that is good and true; now coming as in a moment, and arresting a man in a course of evil, revealing the iniquity of sin and giving the power to reform; now coming as the gradual dawning of day upon the youthful soul who has never been wholly without it; here in a sermon or a prayer, there in the lesson of childhood; now by the example of a noble life or the lessons of history; again, in the study of Scripture or the truths written on the page of nature—the Spirit breatheth where it willeth. Every man who comes to the wide kingdom of heaven has been born again somehow by that blessed Spirit. It is not for us to limit His action. Some even seem to be converted, as it was epigrammatically said by one, over and over again, again and again drinking from the fount of living waters, again and again dedicating themselves anew to God.

However the critical life-giving change may have come, it fixes the mind on the Saviour of the world; it makes us see He can and will make all things right for us both as to the past and as to the future; it convinces us that amid all the mysteries of life there is one mystery which God has allowed us to penetrate in Him, and that is the redemption and restoration of the world through His Son. It makes us able to discriminate between what is brutish and what is spiritual; it makes us aware of the ugliness of what is brutish and the evil consequence which cannot help following brutish behaviour; it makes us see the quiet, reasonable, persuasive beauty of the Christian pattern, and draws us ever more and more towards it. The struggle between the brutish and the spiritual may be long, we may not be able to rid ourselves all at once, or even after protracted struggles, from the influence of the old brutish nature within us; we may fall and struggle, and have much to regret and lament again and again, but when the new birth has come to life in us we do, on the whole, love light rather than darkness; our consciences do continue to accuse us

when we go wrong, we do listen to them, even if sometimes unwillingly ; we do love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity ; we do reflect on our conduct when it is not after His example ; we are open to conviction and improvement on any point where we need discipline ; we do feel that we are making some progress, however halting and feeble ; we *are* sure that we have principles to live by ; we do try to live by faith ; we are not altogether strangers to the love of our fellow-men through our Saviour ; we do look forward with steady hope to the future beyond the grave. Such is the new birth in its broad outlines. We do not know how it is, but we pray that we may not be presumptuous in hoping that it is really ours.

"*Marvel not,*" says our Lord, "*that I say unto thee, Ye must be born again.*" Few who know that they are sinners will wonder that we need to be changed. Take some average Christian congregation : what a mass of sins belongs to us in our natural state ! If our misdoings were to rise up in palpable form like some grim array of ghostly apparitions, what a state of things they would present ! How ashamed we should each be for others to see our own particular accusing memories ! Is there no fragile, tender mother in that array with mute, appealing look, her heart broken by the furious, ungovernable ill-temper, wanton waywardness, obstinate, selfish wilfulness of that child whom she brought with such joyful anguish into the world, who was once her darling, whom she fondled at her knees, over whom she prayed so often, and on whom she fixed her proudest hopes ? Is there no venerable father bowed down with sorrow and disappointment at the ingratitude of the offspring whom he had cherished, or at the shattering of his buoyant expectations ? Is there no weeping girl whose affections have been trifled with, whose soul has been treated as the plaything of the hour, and who has been cast aside for other interests ? Is there in that procession from the dim regions of the irreparable past that we are imagining no companion who has been led astray by encouragement, suggestion or example, no lie that has been told and which cannot now be unsaid, no cruelty perpetrated, no harsh, rude speech spoken, no anger stirred up by hastiness, no foolish, idle, improper words that have been uttered, the very echoes of which we should now be ashamed to hear ? Are there no still more ignoble memories of interest centred on our brutish nature, of thoughts encouraged which should have been expelled, of wantonness and lasciviousness ? Have we no image before us, as we look back, of foolish pride, inflated vanity, contemptuous conceit that made us either detested or ridiculous, devouring ambition which made us unscrupulous or dishonest, or that engrossing selfishness which takes all the sunshine out of life,

destroys the chance of sympathy with others, and maims and deforms our souls as if by some fatal catastrophe? Or even if we do not look back, but summon the influences of the present to confront us, is there not much to make us sad, much that we wish to alter? The longer we live in the Christian life the more we see how much there is of which we ought to be rid. The more we look at the example of our Lord, the more deeply we feel our own utter unworthiness to be named in the same breath with Him, how immeasurably far we are behind what He was. Does no vision of inconsistency come into our thoughts, of states of mind and temper and feeling and inclination most entirely incompatible with our religious pretensions? As we read the Word of God or hear its sentences, are there not whole fields of Christian practice revealed to us where we have never so much as set foot? Does it not make us loathe our weakness, our worldliness, our coldness, deadness and hypocrisy?

We cannot, indeed, marvel that Christ says to us, "*Ye must be born again.*" Of such as we are, who can be surprised at being told that we want a new nature? Believing, as we do, that the new birth is a change and a process, we shall never be content or think we are sufficiently new already. That would be like a beggar who, when once clothed by some kind, generous hand, were to fancy that he would never want any new clothes as long as he lived. It would be like a man who, when he was once washed, should imagine he need never think about water again; like one who supposed that his carriage would never wear out or his horse never grow old. It is, perhaps, the past that makes us feel most deeply the need of the new nature: foul, we wish to be clean; selfish, we wish to learn self-denial; proud, we long to be humble; foolish, we wish for wisdom; passionate, we ask to be temperate; inconstant, we have to grow steady; untruthful, sly or cunning, we know we must be taught candour. But we can never rest satisfied with the present. Faith will always show us some fresh height to be gained before we can look down into the far and beautiful country of the future beyond. Some would tell you that as long as you have one thought or wish not in captivity to the Cross of Christ you are not new-born. I do not say so. I know too well the deceitful nature of our hearts. I know too well that just as the natural birth is a slow, a tedious, a painful process, so is the spiritual. I prefer to recognise with St. John the probability of all coming short, not seldom, before the goal is reached, and saying, 'If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.'

WILLIAM SINCLAIR.