

LIFE'S BATTLE LOST AND WON

EZEKIEL xxxvii. 1-10

LESS than a score of years before the birth of Christ, a Roman general, Quintilius Varus, crossed the Rhine and penetrated the Teutoburg forest in Westphalia. The warlike Germans surrounded the Roman encampment. For three days a fierce battle raged, then the camp was rushed; and ere the sun set eighteen thousand legionaries were lying dead in the recesses of the forest. When tidings of this disaster were brought to the Emperor Augustus he was struck to the heart. Those who stood near him would sometimes hear him exclaim, "Bring me back my legions, Varus"; but the dead soldiers had passed beyond recall. Years afterwards, another general of Rome, leading a retributive expedition into the heart of the forest, came to a large open space which told its own sorrowful tale: "In the centre of the field were the whitening bones of men, as they had fled or stood their ground, strewn everywhere or piled in heaps. Near lay fragments of weapons and limbs of horses, also human heads, prominently nailed to trunks of trees."¹ It was here that the legions of Varus had made their last stand.

The prophet Ezekiel, himself one of the children of the captivity, was commissioned by God to preach repentance and faith to the exiled community, but his most earnest words aroused no spiritual desire. The Jews in Babylon were "impudent children and stiff-necked"; they scorned his message, mocking his entreaties. Then the prophet turned from preaching to prayer. One of his prayer-chambers was "a wide open valley" to which he was accustomed to resort, in order that he might pour out his heart to God. Possibly this valley, like so many others in those days, had been a place of carnage; under the green herbage the bones of thousands may have been mouldering. Perhaps the thought of this supplied the imagery of his vision. Israel had been given a war to wage against sin, a battle to win on behalf of truth. That battle had been lost, the war had ended in disaster: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, our bones are dried, and our hope is lost; we are cut off for our parts." Now, however, the

¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, i, 61.

solemn voice addresses the bones which lie bleaching and withered : " Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live . . . and ye shall know that I am the Lord."

A lost battle may be retrieved, a lost life may be restored, a decadent church may be revived.

The restoration which the prophet foresaw resolves itself into two distinct operations of the Spirit-illuminated word. There is first a movement towards unity among the bones that lie scattered abroad : " I beheld, and lo, there were sinews upon them, and flesh came up, and skin covered them above : but there was no breath in them." After this, there is the Breath of God falling on lifeless lips, the prelude to a spiritual awakening.

May the former movement not prefigure the recovery of the national life ? Israel to-day is returning to the land of the promises, the national spirit has been re-born, the language of psalmists and prophets is being freely spoken, even by women and children. In the synagogues, the Scriptures when they are read will be intelligible to many of those to whom they at one time conveyed no message of instruction ; and those who hear shall be insensibly delivered from the bondage of Talmudism. But as yet the breath of life does not animate the nation.

All this has been accompanied with " noise and shaking " ; or, as the Revised Version has it, with " thundering and an earthquake ". The next step in the restoration will be not less impressive. The prophet prays for the coming of the " mighty rushing wind " of Pentecost. " Come from the four winds ", he prays, " O Breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." One recalls the vision of Daniel in which he saw the four winds of heaven striving, breaking forth upon the Great Sea (Daniel vii. 2). Euroclydon unaided will lash the Mediterranean into fury, but when all the elements are let loose together, we realize that we are in the grasp of forces more powerful than words can express.

Turning, however, from the consideration of unfulfilled prophecy, let us think of the Church of God and her members in connection with revival.

I

The discrimination of the two parts of the process of recovery as envisaged by the prophet does not apply to spiritual blessing

in the same way as it serves to illustrate national revival. Although repentance and faith may be distinguished, they cannot be separated. True repentance is the fruit of faith, a living belief is always penitent. Yet the call to repentance is first in order of thought: "Break off your sins by righteousness," says the prophet; and again, "Break up the fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord." If we would invite the Lord to come to His Church with blessing, we must prepare His way. We must lay aside worldliness, we must renounce unfaith. We must put ourselves without reserve in the hands of the Holy One, that He may create in us a pure heart and a right spirit.

This is revival—in its beginning. Spiritual quickening is granted first to the Church; then, through the Church, it passes to the great world beyond. The Comforter, said Jesus, when He is come to you, will convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. And this is revival—in its fulness.

The word "revival" has fallen into disesteem in the judgment of many. This can only be because the name has been wrongly applied. A revival which has been created by the Spirit of God is purely beneficial; nor is it of a temporary character—what God does endures for ever. We are still enjoying the fruits of all the revivals with which the Church has been visited, from the Day of Pentecost to the last great awakening. And St. Paul assures us that the revival of which the prophet here speaks, the restoration of Israel to faith and love, will be to all the nations as life from the dead.

To-day it seems as if the tide were drawing out. If so, it is the ebb before the flow. When the enemy comes in as a flood the Spirit of the Lord uplifts the divine standard, and leads on to victory. And perhaps things are not so menacing as they seem. Unbelief has an unrestrained volubility, but its convictions have rooted themselves in a shallow soil. Underneath the vaunt of indifference and a passionate desire for the pleasures of the hour, there is a deep heart-hunger, a feeling after God if haply one may find Him. And this not in one nation only, but in all. God has not left Himself without a witness. If the Divine Spirit were to descend in power upon the Church to-day, the mightiest revival that the world has ever known might ensue.

By what means shall this be brought about?

A twofold duty of prophesying is laid upon Ezekiel : " Prophecy over these bones ", and " Prophecy unto the Breath ".

(a) " Son of man, prophesy over these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." A living man confronts the dead. In preaching there must be life in the speaker—life, and a conscious relation to the Living One. Lord Leighton once, addressing a company of artists at the Royal Academy, said, " Gentlemen, you can only put into a picture what is in yourself." It is not merely required that we who speak to men for God should ourselves be formally justified ; it is necessary that we live in the continual enjoyment of the grace which we offer to others, and in the habitual exercise of those virtues which we desire to encourage in them. When George Whitfield said, " I can never preach rightly to sinners, until I am myself heart-broken for sin," he indicated one application of this principle. Only one who is penitent can call sinners to repentance ; only a believing man can invite tempted and troubled souls to the repose of faith ; only a joyful Christian can encourage his brethren to be glad in the Lord ; and it is only one who is unfeignedly following after Christ-likeness who can direct his fellows in those paths which the Master trod.

This first, then, a living experience of the truth which we are called to declare is essential to success in preaching. After this we may place carefulness in the communication of the truths which are committed to the Lord's messenger. " Again He said unto me, Prophecy over these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones : Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live. . . . So I prophesied as I was commanded ; and as I prophesied there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone."

This is indeed the foolishness of preaching, to address a graveyard full of withered bones. And yet, it is just in this very " foolishness " that the power of Gospel preaching resides. For the minister of Christ calls upon men to do what they cannot do ; and in that invitation the power of God is enshrined. A man—plain and unlearned perhaps—goes out, and charges those who are dead in trespasses and sins to awake and live. And as a matter of fact they do arise and pass into newness of life. The thing, you say, is impossible. It is impossible, but it is done.

You say, a dead man cannot hear. He cannot hear the voice of man, but he can listen to the word spoken by God. The divine voice followed Lazarus four days' journey down into the region and shadow of death. The brother beloved had not been cognizant of the lamentations of his friends; he had been unaware of the tears of his sisters. But when, in the urgent call of Jesus, the word of God rang through the tomb, the deaf ear heard, and Lazarus came forth from the sepulchre.

Preaching, as an appeal to the impossible, is the challenge of God. "We don't need to go to church, ma'am," said one of the London poor to a Queen's nurse; "we know already all that we are able to practise in our dull lives." And if preaching be merely a series of moral reflections, or a tissue of good advice, the speaker was right. But it is well worth our while to go to Church, if there we may hear the voice of God. In the word of our King there is power. The utterance of the Blessed One pierces to the dividing of soul and spirit, it searches the deep places of the heart.

If it should be that one who reads these words is dead in sins, the regenerating word of Christ is now speaking in the stillness of your spirit. Quietly His words move in the dim underworld of your desires. It is as when that voice first stirred the formless void, when light broke, and order declared itself, and life began to be. One reason why so many who begin to cherish a hope for eternity fall away is that we are, too often, satisfied with a form of conversion which does not have in it the mighty power of God. Let God speak, and the work is done.

A Jewish legend, suggested perhaps by the double action of prophecy as described in this chapter, relates that Ezekiel once raised a number of his countrymen from the dead, but the miracle was so far imperfect that the resuscitated men ever after retained the complexion of corpses, and their garments the smell of the sepulchre. It is not in such a fashion that our Lord does His mighty works. Those whom the Spirit quickens go forth as living men into full service for the kingdom of righteousness. All things have become new.

(b) Preaching must be accompanied by prayer: "Then said He unto me, Prophesy unto the Breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the Breath, Thus saith the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O Breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as He commanded me,

and the Breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army."

Prayer for revival runs through all the Scriptures—supplication fervent and tearful. Let us recall one or two instances out of many: "For Zion's sake will I not hold My peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth." "I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that are the Lord's remembrancers, take ye no rest, and give Him no rest, till He establish, and till He make Jerusalem a praise in the earth." "Oh, that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people." "Thou shalt say this word unto them, Let thine eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease; for the virgin daughter of my people is broken with a great breach, with a very grievous wound." "Arise, cry out in the night: in the beginning of the watches pour out thine heart like water before the face of the Lord: lift up thy hands toward Him for the life of thy young children, that faint for hunger in the top of every street." "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience bearing witness with me in the Holy Ghost, that I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart. For I could wish that myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake." Prayer is *labour*, like the toil of the husbandman in the field; it is *agonia*, like the striving of the gladiator in the ring; it is *melting of soul*, the pouring out of the life before the Lord. Prayer in the Holy Spirit is begotten by the intercession of the indwelling Comforter, who pleads, in our hearts and through our lips, with groanings that are unutterable. Thus our prayer is borne upward on the wings of our desire, by the grace of the Spirit, until it is merged in the intercession of Christ upon the throne. Intercessory prayer is a burden, too heavy to be borne, so that we are forced to cast it on Him who "day by day carrieth our burdens for us".

Part of the intensity of our intercession arises from our recognition that we are sharers in the guilt and distress of those for whom we make supplication. Daniel, in his memorable prayer recorded in the ninth chapter of his Prophecies, begins by making a personal confession: "O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love

Him, and to them that keep His commandments; we have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled. . . . O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto Thee, but unto us confusion of faces." And always, right through the prayer, he is conscious that he is bound in the same bundle of life with his people, that he mingles his sin with theirs and is partaker of their guilt. Until at the close of his impassioned entreaty we read: "And whiles I was speaking and praying, and confessing my sin, and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God for the holy mountain of my God"—the answer came. Daniel is one of those of whom it was recorded in heaven that he was a prince having power with God (Ezek. xiv. 14, 20); but prayer for revival brought him down into the dust and ashes of contrition.

The prayer that comes before God in sackcloth receives the investiture of the priesthood (Zech. iii. 3-5). It rises from the dust, to stand before the throne. Penitence is transformed into a triumphant assurance. The suppliant now begins to sing the Lord's song: "Unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."

II

The Church is composed of individuals, and fellowship with the Holy One is a personal experience. Revival must begin in the life of the members of the Church of God.

Life is a conflict, and the great concern of each of us ought to be that, having done all, we may stand. One does not speak now of the struggle that persists along the lower planes of existence, but of the elemental war between good and evil which tempests in the soul. And it is important to remember that the one thing which lies deepest in the mind of men, even of those who seem to be regardless of spiritual blessedness, is anxiety as to the issue of the fight. In the summer of 1870 Count von Moltke entertained a number of people at his country house. One afternoon a special message was handed to him. At the moment he was driving some of his visitors along a country road. He read the despatch gravely, then, without a word, crushed it into his pocket. His guests, who knew that

the times were critical, were eager to learn the contents of the message, but the great strategist gave no sign. Just as they reached the house, they noticed that their host turned the corner too sharply, grazing the wheel of the carriage against the kerb. From this slight evidence of pre-occupation they guessed, and guessed rightly, the contents of the message. It was an announcement of the precipitation of war with France.

At times we may judge that men are fully engaged with some trifling concern, some object of transient interest; then a mere hint opens to us unimagined depths, and we look into unsunned recesses with fear. It is *there*, after all, that the real interest of life lies. Beneath the lighter voices of earth there is always an undertone, like bells beneath the sea: "If a man die shall he live again?" "How shall a man be just with God, how shall he be clean that is born of a woman?" "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?"

Where shall I, frail man, be pleading,
Who for me be interceding,
When the just are mercy needing?

The battle is proceeding now, and the ranks are swaying hither and thither.

Once, during the wars of the Commonwealth, Richard Baxter was conducting a religious service. His sermon was punctuated by the rattle of the artillery at Edghill. The fate of England was being decided as he preached. And day after day, through the drift of our religious musings the battle of life is being lost or won. Chrysostom, the golden-mouthed preacher of Antioch, used to imagine that, as he preached, the chancel of the church was filled with ranks of listening angels. They were present as spectators of the great conflict, ready to rejoice in the victory of those to whom they were sent to minister, ready to grieve when the battle went against the feeble children of men. This imagination was, one may suppose, a suggestion caught from the figure contained in the twelfth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Therefore let us also, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus."

But the battle alluded to by the prophet is already lost.

There is a celebrated picture by the great Russian battle painter, which represents Napoleon watching the burning of the

Kremlin, Moscow. It marks the beginning of his downfall. As yet there is no outward sign of disaster; his armies are unconquered, his credit is untarnished. But all the tragedy of his later life may be read in the glancing flames which have begun to play on the walls of that vast fortress. The passage of the Borodino, the battle of Leipzig, banishment to Elba, the débâcle at Waterloo, St. Helena, were all foreshadowed on the pages of history by the fires which consumed the buildings in which the great commander had designed to shelter his army during the stress of winter. Similarly, one often finds that life's battle has actually been lost while all around appears to be prosperous. Everything still stands in good order. But suddenly, in a moment of self-revelation, the inner abysses open, and one gazes with affright into the open mouth of hell. In the comfort of prosperity, in the vigour of health, in the contentment of self-approval, the vision is given, and the soul, stricken, dizzied, blinded, awakes to know that it is lost.

So it appears, and so, if one continues in the course already traced, it will surely be. But there is a way of escape.

Some time ago, one of our most influential literary journals deliberately asserted that an evangelical conversion, as generally understood, is a sheer impossibility. The writer emphasized the power of habit, showing how both thought and action cut into the mind deep channels along which every natural process moves with ever-increasing facility, until at last a course of action opposed to such habitudes has become almost unthinkable. What of truth there is in such a view has often been confessed by evangelical preachers: it is strongly urged, for instance, by Saurin, in his sermons on "The Difficulty of Conversion". It is along such lines that one must look for the permanence of character in a future state, and anticipate the unending dominion of sin. Even in this life the soul may awake to find the virus of sin eating into the very nature and plunging the conscience into a fathomless despair.

For ever round the mercy-seat
 The guiding lights of Love shall burn;
 But what, if habit-bound, thy feet
 Shall lack the will to turn?

What if thine eye refuse to see,
 Thine ear of Heaven's free welcome fail,
 And thou a willing captive be,
 Thyself thy own dark jail?

This is one aspect of the case, the view which presents itself most naturally to our thought. But there is another aspect which is spiritual, and this is all-important—*there is deliverance in Christ*. He is stronger than any evil tendency. He will rend the prey from the mighty, and the captives of the terrible shall be delivered. The Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed to overcome.

Even though moral evil holds within itself a principle of persistence, it may be brought to an end through grace. Our lost years may be restored, and the entail of sin may be cut off. The change which grace effects is so momentous that no words can express it except those which go down to the very beginnings of life. “If any man be in Christ, there is a new creation: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new.” “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.” “Reckon ye also yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God, in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The thought that was impressed upon the mind of the prophet was that of a resurrection from the dead. This figure is developed by St. Paul, who has described the believer as one who died in the death of Jesus, and was raised in newness of life by the resurrection of Christ. “When I had wholly hazarded my life upon what I was doing,” one has said, “my whole spirit seemed to me suddenly to break through the gates of hell and to be taken up into the arms and the heart of God. I can compare it to nothing else but the resurrection at the last day. For then, with all reverence I say it, with the eyes of my spirit I saw God.”

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