

ST. JAMES ON TEMPTATION.

JAMES i. 9, 10.

FIRST PART.

THESE words have given commentators a great deal of trouble. I am not quite sure that the context throws any very clear and decisive light upon them; indeed the context is rather favourable to an interpretation which the words repel: but, however this may be, the context must be considered, and it is worth considering for its own sake.

In the first twelve verses of his Epistle—perhaps I ought to say in the first seventeen or eighteen—James is illustrating the Christian idea of the moral and religious difficulties of human life. They are “temptations”—for sometimes they make it very hard to be loyal to God; sometimes they make us distrust his love; sometimes they provoke us to impatience and resentment; sometimes they lead us to surrender almost unconsciously the diviner ideals of life; sometimes they break our courage and we consciously, under the plea of necessity, decline from the path of duty because it appears too steep, too rugged, and too perilous. They might, perhaps, be described still more accurately as “trials;” for they test our moral and religious fidelity, and determine for us the measure of our strength; they reveal weakness where we had not suspected it; and sometimes they give us the proof and assurance of a constancy and firmness which we feared that we did not possess.

But they are more than “temptations;” they are more than “trials.” Else, why should we “count it all joy” when we fall into them? If they were only “tempta-

tions"—opportunities and inducements to sin—we might meet them with firmness and courage as being among the inevitable evils incident to the moral disorder of the world and our own imperfection, but to find any "joy" in them would be impossible. To an upright and truthful man the bare suggestion, however it comes to him, that he should act dishonestly, or tell a lie, is an insult and an injury. A kindly and generous man is conscious of a sharp pain if the mere thought of committing an act of cruelty enters his mind and finds a momentary lodgment there. To a pure man a temptation to any sensual sin taints the air; it inspires disgust and loathing; when it has passed away, it leaves something like a stain on his memory, although he made no movement in response to it, but repelled it and recoiled from it as soon as it approached. Mere "temptations" can never be a reason for joy even if we overcome them, any more than an epidemic of small-pox or typhoid though we escape infection.

Nor can "trials"—if they are "trials" and nothing more—give us any great reason for thanksgiving and delight. It is a satisfaction, perhaps, to know that we are strong, but the strain upon our strength by which we learn it may be a heavy price to pay for the knowledge; and, too often, the "trials" discover weakness instead of strength. We want another word to describe the moral difficulties of our condition which are sometimes called "trials" and sometimes "temptations;" and the fit word, so far as I know, has never been created. It will not be created until the idea which it would express has taken more complete possession of the mind and heart of the Church. An iron railway-bridge is no stronger after its strength has been tried by running a dozen heavy trains over it than it was before. A gun-barrel is no stronger when it comes from the proof-house, and has had its strength tried by being fired with four or five times its proper charge, than it was

before. But, according to James, the "trials" which test our faith strengthen it; the temptations which assault our integrity confirm it. If we master the "temptation," we do not merely escape from the sin to which we were tempted, we obtain a positive increase of righteousness. If we bear the strain which the "trial" brings upon our strength, we are the stronger for it. "*The proof of our faith worked patience;*" and patience is not a merely passive virtue; it is an energetic persistence in Christian righteousness. If this "patience" has its "perfect work," if it never gives away, if every temptation is resisted, if every strain of trial is borne without yielding, then the Christian character becomes complete at every point; we are "*perfect and entire, lacking in nothing.*" As Robert Browning says, the "stumbling block" is a "stepping-stone" to a higher perfection.

But if there is to be this completeness of Christian life and character, the "temptations," the "trials," must be "*manifold.*" The more varied are the moral difficulties of life, the more complete is the discipline. The strain must come upon one muscle after another if there is to be a perfect development of moral vigour—if, as James puts it, we are to be "*lacking in nothing.*" The strength of every separate element of Christian righteousness must be tried, and tried by various tests. The courage which is unmoved by one form of danger may be daunted by another. The patience which submits without a murmur to familiar suffering may be changed by a new sorrow into angry resentment. The Christian charity which has kept its sweetness through many cruel persecutions may at last be suddenly embittered by some fresh outrage; if it is to reach the perfection which "beareth all things" and "endureth all things," it must shew to those who are guilty of the last offence the same gentleness and forbearance that it had shewn to all who had wronged it before.

This is the Christian explanation of the vicissitudes of

human life. With the changing years there are changes in the moral environment which is the discipline of our perfection ; and every change brings with it some new " trial," some new " temptation "—the possibility of some discovery of moral weakness which had not been suspected before, and of some development of moral energy which had before been latent. The successive transitions from the nursery to the larger life of the family, from the family to the school, from the school to business or to the University, are successive and varied " trials " of the character and temper of the child, the boy, the young man. The spirit of obedience is tried by the authority of parents and teachers. Self-reliance and our individual loyalty to conscience and to God are tried by the gradual relaxation of the restraints of our early years and the personal freedom which is the perilous inheritance of manhood. We are tried by the loving devotion of those who are about us—perhaps we discover that we are destitute of that nice sense of honour which ought to prevent us from abusing their lavish and unmeasured affection, and that we are permitting them to sacrifice all their own pleasures and interests to ours. We are tried by their coldness—perhaps we learn that we are unlike God, and that we cannot give love unless we receive it. We are tried by their sweetness and gentleness—perhaps we detect a certain reckless indifference to the comfort and wishes of those who never assert their own claims. We are tried by their self-assertion—perhaps it provokes us to a self-assertion as ungracious and un-Christian as that which, in their conduct, we justly condemn.

With the gradual expansion of our intellectual life, the growth of new intellectual interests, the increasing concentration of our force on the great objects of life, changes of which we are almost unconscious pass upon our character, spirit, and temper ; and these involve new trials, which are

sometimes of a very painful kind. We seem estranged from old friends for whom we still retain a strong affection. They become less interesting to us. *We* seem to become less interesting to *them*. Once they used to pass freely from one province of our thought to another without hindrance; they were at home in every region of our mind; all our interests were theirs; all our sorrows and all our joys. But we discover by slight indications, which their affection tries in vain to conceal, that there is now a large part of our life which is as strange to them as a foreign country; they are ill at ease when they are with us unless our conversation is confined to topics for which we have almost ceased to care; and when we speak of these they see that our heart is far away. Or changes of this kind have passed upon *them*, and it is we who make the discovery that our friends are not what they once were. Or the change has been both in them and us. We have parted like ships at the mouth of the river; in youth we had sailed down the stream together and vowed eternal fidelity; but now that we have reached the ocean our courses divide; they sail towards the north star, and we strike for the tropics. Then comes a sense of injury; and then there is mutual resentment; there are unspoken recriminations, breaking out at last into pathetic and angry complaints. To each of the severed friends it seems that all the loss and suffering are on his own side, and all the wrong on the other; but the loss and the suffering are on both sides, and perhaps there is wrong on neither. It is only in natures of rare wealth that all the past can remain side by side with all the new acquisitions and interests of later years; and even when this takes place, earlier friendships are not always happy and secure. For we are hardly content to share only a part of the life of our friend whose whole life was once our own. That the old rooms in the house with their homely furniture are still open to us does not content us,

we know that the galleries which he has enriched with treasures of art, with rare pictures and costly gems, the libraries which he has filled with the learning of many ages and many lands, are necessarily closed to us because we are unable to appreciate them. In these days when in town after town the means of attaining a liberal education are being extended to all classes of the people, when in great public libraries the poorest have access to the most splendid monuments of genius, this severance of the intimacies of early friendship is becoming more and more frequent. It is one of the "trials," one of the "temptations," incident to the new conditions of our social life. It tries the strength of some of the most generous forms of goodness, and whoever passes through the trial successfully rises to a new height of magnanimity.

But the illustrations of this principle are endless. Reverses of fortune which result in the loss of the luxuries, perhaps of the comforts, to which we had been long accustomed, to which perhaps we were born, are among the sharpest "trials" of faith, and are, therefore, among those severe but kindly elements of discipline by which Christian righteousness is perfected. Sickness and pain, whether suffered by ourselves or by those whom we love; the death of children, of parents, of husbands, of wives, of friends, are "trials" of another kind. The follies and sins of those whose shame is our shame and whose guilt seems to cloud our own conscience, are also "trials"—not troubles merely, but tests of our likeness to Christ, who not only bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, but was "wounded for our transgressions," "bruised for our iniquities," and on whom the Lord "laid the iniquity of us all." If in that supreme agony our faith does not faint, if even then patience has its perfect work, we may hope to be "*perfect and entire, lacking in nothing.*"

We may be "tried" by riches as well as by poverty; by

health and strength prolonged through many years as well as by sickness ; by public honour as well as by slander and unmerited censure ; by appointment to an office of high responsibility and carrying with it public distinction as well as by unmerited dismissal from it ; by the fulfilment of our brightest hopes as well as by the catastrophes which quench them ; by the ease of our life as well as its hardships ; by its unbroken peace and untroubled security as well as by the perils which shake the heart with fear. Many a man who has nobly stood the test of sorrow and loss has failed when the dark and evil days have passed by and his life is bright with joy. We are not accustomed to describe our successes, our prosperous fortunes, the sources of our flowing happiness, as " trials " ; but by these, too, God may " prove thee, to know what is in thine heart," and whether thou wilt keep his commandments or no. These, too, may bring us discoveries of moral weakness and defect with which we had never charged ourselves. These, too, may be necessary to provoke into activity elements of righteousness which are wanting in alertness and vigour. They are among the " manifold " trials which contribute to Christian perfection. That we never think of them as trials may suggest to us the exceptional danger to which they expose us. They do not alarm us, and therefore do not excite us to vigilance and compel us to invoke that Divine defence and support which, even in times apparently most free from peril, can alone give us perfect safety. Happy are those who can see the eternal stars in the sunlight as well as in the darkness ; to whom all that is fairest in this visible world is the revelation of the glory of divine and eternal things ; to whom the common gifts of God's providence are the symbols and sacraments of the better gifts of his grace ; to whom a life unvexed by care and illuminated with gladness is the discipline for an endless life in God.

Our "trials" in the sense in which James uses the word never cease on this side of death. Or, rather, perhaps I should say that they never cease unless the growth of our moral and spiritual life is arrested. There are some Christian people who seem to live their life without effort. In past years they may have had their perplexities, their conflicts, their endeavours to rise to a loftier righteousness; but now the necessity for fresh and active energy has passed by; they are moving along a path which lies high up on the mountain-side, but the path seems a level one and they make no ascent. Their habits are fixed. Their conceptions of the ideal of Christian perfection are no larger, no loftier, this year than last. The "commandment" though "exceeding broad," is no broader this year than last. The measures of their actual righteousness are the same, or apparently the same, this year as last. I say "apparently," for it may be doubted whether a stationary condition is really possible. The habits which were formed when their life was all a-glow may remain; but the invisible fires may be gradually sinking. It may seem to them that the path along which they are travelling, though it does not bring them nearer to the summit of the mountain, is a level one; but, perhaps, there is reason to fear a gradual descent.

In any case, it has been justly observed, that "Habit is not necessarily *Christian* goodness. . . . Habit is merely the tendency to remain what we are, to go on doing what we have done, to acquire a facility of operation in given circumstances. Unless a living germ of progress is in you, all that Habit will do for you is to enable you to keep your present *status* with less effort—that is, to become more and more mechanical."¹ For real growth in goodness there must be incessant effort. Day after day we must be reaching forward to something we have not yet attained.

¹ See a profoundly suggestive sermon on Self-Denial, in the remarkable volume by John Hamilton Thom, "Laws of Life after the Mind of Christ."

The degree of righteousness which we achieved with difficulty a year ago, is achieved with ease to-day; but this imposes on us the obligation to attempt what a year ago was impossible to us.

Life, from first to last, is a perpetual "trial," and the "trial" is perpetually varied. In the school of God there are no vacations. His "mercies are new every morning;" on our part there should be a new depth of trust and a new rapture of praise. We have more to thank Him for to-day than we had yesterday; our thankfulness should be inspired with more intense passion. We are nearer heaven to-day than we were yesterday; our hope should rise to diviner heights, and there should be a more exulting joy in the prospect of going to the blessed home of God. If our environment remains the same, we ourselves have changed; and, with the change in ourselves, our environment becomes a new test of our fidelity to God. We should, therefore, be thankful for long life, and for the discipline—painful as it must sometimes be—which extends from youth to manhood, and from manhood to old age. We should count it all joy that the "temptations," the "trials" of life are "manifold"; for every one of them may add to us some new element of force, some new touch of grace and beauty. The development of Christian righteousness is the Divine end of human life; when we accept that end, its sorrows and its joys alike will have a new aspect and a new meaning. The transitory delights and the transitory sufferings of this mortal condition, will then alike contribute to the wealth of our eternal blessedness, and the splendour of our eternal glory.

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