

ST. JAMES ON TEMPTATION.

ST. JAMES i. 9, 10.

SECOND PART.

OUR first thought when we consider the persistency and infinite variety of the "temptations" and "trials" by which human life is infested, is to entreat God to give us strength to hold fast our Christian integrity. We may even think that what we want is nothing more than the stubborn endurance of a savage, who submits without a groan to mutilation and burning. James, with his keen practical sense, and as the result of his observation of the moral and religious life of the Church, insists on the necessity of asking God for "wisdom." It is not merely strength that we need, but a divinely illuminated intelligence.

The relations between Christian "wisdom" and righteousness are very intimate. Light and Life go together. It is not enough that we have an intense desire to do the will of God; or that we firmly resolve to do it; or that we try to do it. It is possible to mean well, and to do very badly; to put forth vigorous and painful and persevering effort to keep God's commandments, and yet to fail most miserably. If we are to meet and to overcome the "temptations" which assault our loyalty to God, to derive any profit from the "trials" which explore our weakness, and to find in defeat the secret of victory, we must have wisdom; if we lack wisdom we shall be certain to "be lacking" in many of the elements of Christian perfection.

The "wisdom" of which James is thinking is not an ability to discover the Divine reasons for permitting us to be environed by the special moral and religious difficulties by which our fidelity to Christ is tried; but the spiritual intelligence which gives us right practical guidance in the presence of these difficulties. It is not at all necessary for

us to understand the principles and aims which determine the Divine action; but it is very necessary that we should understand the principles and aims that should determine our own. Why God permitted us to invest the greater part of our fortune in a bank that happened to be in the hands of dishonest directors, so that we lost all we had entrusted to them; why He permitted us to be caught in a storm which brought on severe illness and left us in broken health for the rest of our life; why He has permitted us to achieve sudden and unexpected prosperity, although Christ has told us that it is hard for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven—are speculative inquiries with which it may be no part of our duty to worry ourselves. What we are bound to ask is, How are we to remain faithful to Him in our poverty, our sickness, our dangerous wealth?

The "wisdom" we need is that by which we shall have a clear apprehension of the principles and spirit of Christian righteousness, and which will enable us to discover how, in our own circumstances, with our own temperament, and our own resources, the ideal of Christian perfection is to be realized. It will give us a just sense of the proportion of things, and enable us to estimate at their true value the pleasant and the painful elements of human life—health and sickness, riches and poverty, social distinction, the energy for action, intellectual vigour, friendships, reputation, official position in the world or in the Church. It will enable us to form an accurate judgment of our own character, not merely in its large outlines, but in its details of strength and weakness. It will enable us to perceive how we have failed in past times, and how we are likely to fail in future. It will suggest the sources of moral vigour, and the true regimen of our own moral life.

This wisdom we are to "ask of God." We need Divine illumination to reveal "earthly things" as well as "heavenly things," to discover the secrets of our own life

as well as the secrets of the life of God, the Divine laws which should govern our present conduct as well as the hope of our high spiritual calling, and "the riches of the glory of [God's] inheritance in the saints."

Not that prayer alone is sufficient. The "wisdom that cometh down from above" does not descend upon us, like the sunlight, without any effort of our own; it does not come to us in supernatural voices or visions. The "Truth" is given us in the person and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ—in Himself as well as in his words, in the agony of Gethsemane and the passion on the Cross as well as in the Sermon on the Mount; and this "Truth" is given for the guidance of life. *Christ* is our "wisdom," as well as our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Inspiration enables us to perceive the true meaning of what God has revealed; and when inspiration comes to us we must use it in the attempt to master the "wisdom" that is in Christ. It does not render unnecessary—it renders possible—the cultivation of Christian intelligence. God gives "wisdom" as He gives the harvest, but we have to work for it.

He gives "liberally," or, rather, "simply." His giving is not the cover of any unavowed purposes; it conceals no secret policy; it is frank, open, genuine. He gives for the sake of giving, and because He delights in it. And He "upbraideth" not; meets us with no reproaches that we have so little wisdom of our own, or that we are so undeserving of receiving wisdom from Himself. The words which follow:—"Let him ask in faith, nothing doubting; for he that doubteth is like the surge of the sea, driven by the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord. A man of two minds, he is unstable in all his ways"—need not detain us. They are a vivid statement of a truth which recurs in many other parts of the New Testament, and have no special connection with

the subject of "temptations" and "trials," unless indeed we say that "temptations" and "trials" of all kinds make it hard to pray in faith.

And now we have reached the words which, as I said in the first of these two papers, have greatly perplexed the commentators: "*Let the brother of low degree glory in his high estate; and the rich in that he is made low.*"

The interpretation given by Mr. Punchard, in Dr. Elliott's "Commentary on the New Testament for English Readers," is extremely attractive. He reads the passage, and explains it thus: "*Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted* (or, better, *in his exaltation*). There is no praise from the plain St. James for the pride which apes humility, nor the affectation which loves to be despised. If it please God to 'exalt,' as of old, 'the humble and meek,' then anew should be sung a *magnificat* to Him. Willingness for Christ's service, whether it be great or little, is the right condition of mind for all disciples, and specially the young, with readiness, nay gladness for 'duty in that state of life unto which it *shall* please God to call them.' Pleasure will be naturally felt by most at the prospect of a rise in the world; but there are some finer spirits who would fain shrink from anything like exaltation; and to these the kindly Apostle writes that they may take heart, and not fear the greater dangers which of necessity accompany a higher call."

"*But the rich in that he is made low* (or, rather, *in his humiliation*). And, on the other hand, let a change of state be a cause of joy to the rich man, hard though the effort thereto must confessedly be."

This interpretation of the words is, I say, exceedingly attractive. It runs on the lines of all that has been said about "temptations" and "trials" in the earlier part of the Chapter. The vicissitudes of human life reveal our weaknesses and defects; they bring out and provoke into ener-

getic activity all the elements of our strength ; and so they discipline us to perfection. Virtues are exercised by wealth, by honour, by ease, which are latent in poverty and in obscurity. The poor man, therefore, ought not to be afraid of becoming rich. The change in his external circumstances will give him the advantage of a new kind of moral and religious training. His dangers may be increased. He will be surprised by the discovery of infirmities which had never been revealed to him before. But it is only by "manifold" trials—"trials" which test us at every point—that we can learn how great our need is of "the wisdom which cometh from above," and of the strength which God gives to those who trust Him perfectly. And it is only by "manifold" trials that we can be disciplined to a rich and varied righteousness. "The brother of low degree" should, therefore, "rejoice" when he is raised to wealth, to a higher social rank, to positions of public trust and honour. New "temptations" come to him ; but, with the new "temptations," new possibilities of loyalty to God and of Christian perfection.

This interpretation, I say, is exceedingly attractive. It is the direct application of the general principles which have been laid down earlier in the Chapter. But there is one fatal objection to it ; the words will not bear it.

In the Authorized Version the verse reads as this interpretation requires us to read it : "*Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted ;*" and this might mean that he is to rejoice when he ceases to be of "low degree," and passes from poverty to wealth, from obscurity to a place of distinction and honour. But the Revisers have made a necessary change in the translation—two necessary changes. Instead of, "Let the brother of low degree *rejoice in that he is exalted,*" they read, "Let the brother of low degree *glory in his high estate.*" What James is thinking of is not the change from poverty to

riches, in which a Christian man might be asked to "rejoice," because it would contribute to the more complete discipline of his Christian fidelity; but of the greatness, the honour, the "high estate," which belong to the "brother of low degree," notwithstanding his poverty, and in which he is to "glory."¹ No matter how poor he may be, he is "rich towards God;" no matter how mean may be his outward circumstances, he is already in the kingdom of heaven; no matter how obscure he may be, he is among the "children of God," and what he will be is not made manifest; he is to "glory" in his "high estate." He is not to be perpetually moaning over the contrast between the hardships of his own condition and the ease and comfort of his more prosperous brethren; he is not to be perpetually asking for pity and compassion; he is not to cherish a secret feeling of resentment against the Divine Providence which denies him many bright and pleasant things; he is not to become mean and servile in his spirit because of the meanness of his external condition. He is to live up to his true greatness; he is to have the magnanimity of a prince, even though he is in the position of a slave; he is to "glory in his high estate."

The second part of the verse has perplexed the commentators even more than the first. It is contended that by the "rich," James could not have meant a rich "brother." Elsewhere in the Epistle he speaks of the "rich" with indignant hostility: "Do not the rich oppress you, and themselves drag you before the judgment-seats? Do not they blaspheme the honourable name by the which

¹ Paul "glories" in "tribulation" (Rom. v. 3), "knowing that tribulation worketh patience, etc."; but there is a certain high defiant temper in his use of the word in connection with the discipline of calamity. The word would, I venture to think, be incongruous in connection with the discipline of wealth and ease. The "rejoice" in verse 9 of the Authorized Version naturally recalled the "count it all joy," of verse 2. The change to "glory," which, indeed, was inevitable, assists in destroying the attractive interpretation which I am sorry that I cannot accept.

ye are called?" (ii. 6, 7). "Go to now, ye rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver are rusted; and their rust shall be for a testimony against you, and shall eat your flesh like fire" (v. 1-3). Had the phrase been invented, James would have been charged with "setting class against class." There is a certain fierceness in his way of speaking of the "rich" which startles us in these days, when, if we were to listen to some people, we should believe that the great end of the Christian revelation is to train men to the virtues which enable them to create and accumulate material wealth.

How, then, are we to interpret these words on the assumption that James was not thinking of a Christian man at all, but of one of those "rich men," whom he denounces so vehemently in the latter part of the Epistle?

It has been suggested that they are ironical, and that James meant, "Let the brother of low degree glory in his high estate; and, as for the rich, let him glory in the ruin, the decay, the destruction, which is coming upon him and his wealth; he has nothing else to glory in; as the flower of the grass he shall pass away."

But there is something positively savage in the irony of this interpretation; and it has been proposed to change the *καυχᾶσθω* of the first clause into *καυχᾶται* in the second, and read: "Let the brother of low degree glory in his high estate; whereas the rich man glories in what is really his debasement and misery; for his wealth is not real wealth, nor will it endure; as the flower of the grass he shall pass away."

But if the first interpretation was too savage, this is too artificial. And, further, it is hard to believe that *ἀδελφός* does not belong to both clauses. The "rich," as a class, were hostile to Christ and to the Church; but there were

some of them who had received the Gospel, and who not only came occasionally into the Christian assemblies with "a gold ring, in fine clothing," but were frankly and heartily on the side of the new Faith.

And so while James tells the "brother of low degree" to "glory in his high estate," he tells the rich brother to "glory" in whatever humbles him, corrects the pride which is encouraged by wealth, makes him conscious of the frailty of all earthly possessions, lowers his high temper, and brings him in spirit into nearer fellowship with the poorest of his brethren. He is to "glory" in this; for by this discipline the truth of things is brought home to him. He is walking in a vain show while he has confidence in his riches, and while they separate him from his brethren who are in poverty.

But it is objected that the difficulties in the way of this interpretation are insuperable; that if the rich man is a Christian brother, it is not true that "as the flower of the grass he shall fade away."

But why not? We say of the poor—whether they are Christian men or not—that in times of public trouble and disaster they are the first to perish. They are swept away by famine and by plague. And the rich, whether they are Christian men or not, will also be overtaken by the universal doom. For them, too, human life is as frail as the grass; "the sun ariseth with the scorching wind and withereth the grass; and the flower thereof falleth and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth; so also shall the rich man fade away in his goings." Riches may enable and incline a man to forget that he shares the common destiny of the race; but wealth is uncertain, strength decays. The dark shadow of death moves on, and the same night falls upon prince and beggar, upon the greatest and the obscurest of mankind.

Let the rich "glory," therefore, in whatever lessens their

pride, and reveals to them the uncertainty of all earthly things. Let them "glory" in whatever makes more vivid to them the unreality of the pomp and greatness of this transitory world, and verifies their citizenship in that Divine kingdom which will never pass away.

For all of us life would be greatly changed if we frankly accepted this conception of its sorrows and its joys. They are all alike and in the same sense "temptations" and "trials." We are here for the discipline of Christian righteousness. For this end we are rich or poor, strong or sick, lonely or surrounded by troops of friends. It is well with us, whatever our external fortunes may be, as long as we are being disciplined to perfection. Sorrow is good: it reveals some hidden infirmity, and brings into action some latent force. Joy is good: for it fulfils the same purpose. Wealth is good, and poverty is good: for it may be necessary that we should pass through both in order that we may be "lacking in nothing." Never was this Christian Stoicism, this free and manly temper in the presence of the vicissitudes of life, more necessary than in these times. Even in the Church we have come to think that a man's life consisteth in the abundance of the things that he possesseth. We shall never fulfil the ethical ideal of the new Faith until we heartily believe that the true end of life is to be disciplined to a Divine perfection.

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