

## THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.

### X. THE TEACHER'S COMPLAINT (CHAPS. v. 11-14, vi. 1-8).

“OF whom,” *i.e.* Melchisedec, continues the writer, taking up the second part of his programme first, “we have many things to say.” Yet he does not say these things; he refrains from entering on ample discourse (*πολὸς λόγος*) on the Melchisedec priesthood, because his spirit is disturbed by the recollection that he writes to persons dull of apprehension, at once ignorant, indolent, and prejudiced, unable and unwilling to take in new ideas, and, like horses with blinders on, capable of seeing only straight before them in the direction of use and wont, and therefore certain to find the thoughts he is about to express hard to understand. The haunting consciousness of this painful fact obscures the subject of discourse as a cloud hides the glory of the sun on an April day; and even as our Lord was not able to proceed with His farewell address to His disciples till He had rid Himself of the presence of the traitor, so this man of philosophic mind and eloquent pen cannot proceed with his argument till he has given expression to the vexation and disappointment caused by the inaptitude of his scholars. This he does with very great plainness of speech, for which all Christian teachers have reason to thank him; for what he has written may be regarded as an assertion of the right of the Church to be something more than an infant school, and a defence of the liberty of prophesying on all themes pertaining to Christ as their centre against the intolerance always manifested by ignorance, stupidity, indolence, and prejudice towards everything that is not old, familiar, and perfectly elementary.

The teacher's complaint is severe—too severe, if the

things to be said concerned some curious point in theology on which the complainer had some pet notions. A man may be a good Christian, and yet be ignorant or indifferent in reference to the mysteries of predestination and free will and their reconciliation. Might not the Hebrews be sufficiently good Christians, and yet remain ignorant of, or incapable of understanding, the transcendental doctrine of the Melchisedec priesthood? No; because the question at issue is not a mere curious point in theology. It is rather the fundamental question whether Christ was really a priest. The priesthood of Christ in its reality and ideal worth is not understood, unless it is seen to be of the Melchisedec type. Therefore the incapacity complained of, if not fatal, is at least serious.

The account given of the spiritual state of the Hebrew Christians is not flattering. In effect, they are represented as in their dotage. They have *become* dull of hearing, have *become* children having need of milk, and not able to receive the solid food of full grown men. They are not merely children, but in their second childhood; in which respect it is interesting to compare the Hebrew Church with the Corinthian as described in Paul's first epistle. The members of the Corinthian Church were in their first childhood spiritually; hence they were unruly, quarrelsome, and had an indiscriminate appetite for all sorts of food, without possessing the capacity to discern between what was wholesome and what unwholesome, or the self-control to choose the good and reject the evil. The members of the Hebrew Church, on the other hand, were in that state of dotage so affectingly described by Barzillai with reference to the physical powers: "I am this day fourscore years old; and can I discern between good and evil? can thy servant taste what I eat or what I drink? can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women? wherefore then should thy servant be yet a burden unto my lord the

king?" The Hebrew Christians had once had a certain capacity of discernment, but they had lost it. Their senses had become blunted by the hebetude of old age: they had, so to say, no teeth to eat solid food, no taste to discern the excellency of new, strong meat, but simply enough taste to detect that the meat was new; no ear to appreciate the new songs of the Christian era, but just enough hearing left to tell them that the sounds they heard dimly were strange, not the familiar melodies of the synagogue; no eyes to see the glory of Christ's self-sacrifice, but simply vision enough to perceive as through a haze the gorgeous robes of the high priest as he moved about the temple precincts performing his sacerdotal duties. All the symptoms of senility were upon them as described by the preacher; decay was present and death near. Melancholy end of a Christian profession that had lasted some forty years! Dotage at an advanced age, in the physical sphere, is natural and blameless, exciting only tender pity; in the spiritual sphere it is unnatural and blameworthy. What ought to be is steady progress towards moral and religious maturity (*τελειότητα*), characterized by practised skill to discern between good and evil, and settled preference for the good, a wise, enlightened mind, and a sanctified will.<sup>1</sup> That so few reach the goal, that healthy growth in the spiritual life is so rare, is for all earnest souls a wonder and a deep disappointment.

Having uttered these sharp words of reproof, the writer proceeds (vi. 1) to exhort his readers to aspire to that state

<sup>1</sup> The words *τέλειος* and *τελειότης* (v. 14, vi. 1) are used here in a sense distinct from that in which Christ is said to have been perfected by suffering, and from that in which men are said to have been perfected by His one offering of Himself. To be perfect is always to be in the position of having reached the end; but the end in the present instance is not training for an office, or purgation of the conscience from the guilt of sin, but the attainment of manhood, with the characteristics named above. Of the two characteristics only the wise mind, or experienced judgment, is referred to, because defective spiritual intelligence is the thing complained of.

of Christian maturity which is capable of digesting solid food, and not to remain always at the beginnings of the Christian life. Perhaps we should rather say, that the writer intimates his own purpose to go on in his discourse from the milk of elementary truth that suits babes to the solid food of advanced doctrine that suits men. The commentators are divided in opinion as to which of these two interpretations is the more correct; but it is scarcely worth while to discuss the question, as the one view implies the other. The writer does not wish merely to express his own thoughts concerning Christ's priestly office, but to communicate them to others. He desires to *teach*; but he can teach only in so far as there is receptivity in his scholars. Teaching and learning are correlative, and teacher and scholar must keep pace with each other. No man can teach unless his pupils let him. Therefore this Christian doctor, minded to discourse not of the *principia* of Christianity—"the beginning of Christ"—but of its higher truths, appropriately says, "Let us go on," expressing at once a purpose and an exhortation.

In declining to make the Christian elements his exclusive theme, the writer takes occasion to indicate what these were. We scan with eager interest the list of fundamentals setting forth what, in the view of our author, and we may assume also of the Church in his time, a man was required to do and believe when he became a Christian. What first strikes one in this primitive "sum of saving knowledge" is how little that is specifically Christian it contains. There is no express reference to Christ, not even in connexion with faith, where it might have been expected. In his address to the elders at Miletus, Paul claimed to have testified to Jews and Greeks "repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ." Here, on the other hand, mention is made of "repentance from dead works, and faith towards God," as if it were a question of theism as

against polytheism, rather than of Christian belief.<sup>1</sup> It is superfluous to remark that the priesthood of Christ finds no place in the list; that topic evidently is regarded as belonging to the advanced doctrine. To us, who have been accustomed to regard faith in the atoning death of Christ, and even in a particular theory of the atonement, as essential to salvation, all this must appear surprising. Yet the meagre account here given of the catechumen's creed is no isolated phenomenon in the New Testament. It is in entire accord with what we learn from Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians, which may be said to show the style of his instructions to young converts during the period of missionary activity antecedent to the rise of the great controversy concerning the law. Paul's purpose in that epistle seems to be to remind the Thessalonian Christians, for their encouragement and strengthening, of the things he had taught them at the time of their conversion, such phrases as "ye remember," "ye know," being of frequent occurrence. Yet throughout the epistle we can find no trace of the doctrine of justification in the specifically Pauline sense, or of the doctrine of Christ's atoning death. Christ's death is indeed referred to, but in such a way as to suggest that the fact of vital importance to faith was not that He died, but that He rose again. "If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him."<sup>2</sup>

The apparently non-Christian character of the Christian *principia* is not the only perplexing feature in the list of fundamentals. It is not easy to determine how the various matters mentioned are related to each other. Judging from the rhythmical structure of the sentence, one's first thought

<sup>1</sup> A few commentators have actually maintained that the reference is not to the Christian elements but to the leading points in the Old Testament religion, faith in the true God, and the rites of purification and laying on of hands on the sacrificial victims, of typical significance for the Christian religion.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Thess. iv. 14.

is that the list contains six co-ordinate articles, grouped in pairs: first, repentance and faith; second, the doctrines of baptism and laying on of hands; third, the doctrines of resurrection and eternal judgment; the members of each pair being of kindred nature, and the whole six forming together the foundation of the Christian religion. But doubt arises when it is observed that in this view things are mixed together which belong to different categories; repentance and faith, which are spiritual states, with *doctrines* about other matters of greater or less importance. If there are six articles in the list of fundamentals, why not say, "Not laying again a foundation in doctrine concerning repentance, faith, baptisms," etc.? And so we are tempted to take up with another hypothesis; *viz.* that the last four are to be regarded as the foundation of the first two, conceived not as belonging to the foundation, but rather as the superstructure. On this view we should have to render, "Not laying again a foundation for repentance and faith, consisting in instruction concerning baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection, and judgment." In favour of this construction is the reading *διδαχῆν* (ver. 2, clause 1) found in B, and adopted by Westcott and Hort, which being in apposition with *θεμέλιον* (ver. 1) suggests that the four things following form the foundation of repentance and faith.

It is possible that the mixing up of states and doctrines in the list is due to the double attitude of the writer, as partly exhorting his readers, partly expressing his own purpose. "Not laying again a foundation, you by renewed repentance and faith, by repetition of elementary instructions." But I cannot help thinking that there is discernible in this passage, notwithstanding its graceful rhythmical structure, on which Bengel and others have remarked, a slight touch of that rhetorical carelessness which recurs in much more pronounced form in chapter ix. 10, where the writer, referring to the ineffectual ordinances

of Levitical worship, characterizes them in language difficult to construe as "only, with their meats and drinks and diverse washings, ordinances of the flesh imposed until a time of reformation." In that place the loose construction of the sentence is an oratorical device to express a feeling of impatience with the bare idea that Levitical rites could possibly cleanse the consciences of worshippers. Of course the writer has no thought of putting the elementary truths of Christianity on a level with these rites. But the feeling of impatience with never getting beyond the elements seems to influence his manner of referring to them, giving rise to an elliptical abruptness of style which leaves room for many questions as to the construction that cannot with certainty be answered.

On the whole, our first thought as to the connexion is probably the correct one, according to which the passage is to be paraphrased thus: "Leaving discourse on the beginning of Christ, let us go on unto maturity, and unto the doctrine that suits it, not laying again a foundation in reiterated exhortations to repentance and faith, and in instructions about such matters as baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment."

The only points calling for explanation in this summary of elements are those included in the middle pair. Repentance and faith, the resurrection and the judgment, are obviously suitable subjects of instruction for persons beginning the Christian life. Repentance and faith are the cardinal conditions of entrance into the kingdom of God,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mark i. 15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe the gospel." I reserve for consideration in another place (chap. ix. 14) the meaning of the words ἀπὸ νεκρῶν ἔργων attached to μεταβολάς. I will merely say here, that it is by no means so clear as most commentators assume it to be that "dead works" are synonymous with "sinful works," and that there is no reference to the religious works of an artificial legalism, which first our Lord and then Paul declared to be worthless and pernicious. Of such works, in a transition time, when an old religion is dying and a new religion is coming in, there are always plenty; and converts from

and though resurrection and judgment, as events, come at the end of the Christian's career, the doctrine concerning them comes appropriately at the beginning, as fitted to inspire an awe and a hope which are most powerful motives to holiness.

But what is the doctrine of baptisms? If instruction as to Christian baptism be mainly referred to, its appropriateness at the commencement is beyond question. But why baptisms and not baptism? Commentators generally concur in replying, because the writer has in view, not merely Christian baptism, but all the baptisms or washings with which Jewish converts were familiar. Where symbolic use of water in various forms was known, comparison would be natural, and might be useful as a means of conveying instruction as to the distinctive significance of Christian baptism. Against the reference to baptism in the specifically Christian sense it has been urged that it is never, in the New Testament, denoted by *βαπτισμός*, the word used here, but always by *βάπτισμα*. To this however it seems a sufficient answer that the former word is employed because Christian baptism is included in a more comprehensive category along with Levitical purifications.

The "laying on of hands" is to be understood in the light of the apostolic practice of imposing hands on the heads of baptized persons, as a sign of the communication of the Holy Ghost. This symbolic action was often followed by the bestowal of miraculous gifts. The doctrine probably consisted largely in explanations concerning these

the old to the new feel that they are what most need to be repented of, and that in deliverance from them Christ's redemptive power is most signally displayed. They constitute the "vain conversation received by tradition from the fathers" of which St. Peter speaks. The phrase "dead works" as used by our author seems to be a current expression rather than a coinage of his own, and we can easily imagine its origin in circles familiar with Christ's moral criticism of Pharisaism. Bleek is of opinion that "dead works" mean legal religious works.



gifts—tongues, prophesyings, etc.—just such instruction as we find in Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians on the subject of spiritual gifts. The doctrine of the laying on of hands has ceased to hold a place among the Christian *principia*, because miraculous charisms have passed away.

Such are the fundamentals.<sup>1</sup> What now is meant by leaving them? Not of course ceasing to believe in them, or to think and speak of them, or to set importance on them; for the things enumerated, though elementary, are fundamental, as the term *θεμέλιον* implies. They are to be left in the sense in which a builder leaves the foundation of a house, by erecting an edifice thereon. They are not to be treated as if they were everything, building as well as foundation; as if all were done when the foundation was laid, and the builder might then fold his hands. Yet there has always been a Christianity of this sort, stationary, unprogressive, never getting beyond the initial stage, always concerned about repentance, pardon, peace, justification. With reference to Christian teachers the meaning is, that they are not to confine themselves to the elementary truths of the faith, but to go on to higher doctrine, teaching wisdom to the "perfect," the mature in spiritual understanding, not forgetful of their peculiar needs, though the number of them in the Church be small. Even for the sake of the

<sup>1</sup> In an interesting article in *THE EXPOSITOR* for December, 1888, by Rev. R. G. Balfour, M.A., a third way of connecting the six articles is proposed: that the second pair is to be regarded as a parenthetical remark concerning the first, to the effect that repentance was symbolically taught by washings, *i.e.* Levitical purifications, and faith by the laying on of hands (on the head of the victim in the great day of atonement). Mr. Balfour renders, "Not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and faith exercised upon God (the things taught by washings, also by laying on of hands), also, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment." Readers are referred to the article for his argument; but I may notice here his contention that *βαπτισμῶν διδαχῆς* can only mean the doctrine which washings teach, and that had the writer meant the doctrine concerning washings he would have written *περὶ β.δ.* But the genitive *βαπτισμῶν* may be either subjective or objective. For instances of the objective genitive see Winer's *Grammar of New Testament Greek*.

immature it is well not to tarry too long by the elements, lest they imagine they have nothing more to learn, when in truth they are in the state of the disciples to whom Jesus said, "I have yet many things to say to you, but ye cannot bear them now."

What he has just declared to be desirable the writer intimates his own purpose to do, cherishing the desire, if not the hope, that he may carry his readers along with him. "And this will we do," you and I, "if, that is,<sup>1</sup> God permit." This "if God permit" is an ominous hint at the more than possibility of the Hebrews having become so spiritually hidebound that they will prove totally incapable of receiving new truth. And so it forms a suitable introduction to the solemn passage which follows. And yet, though when a grave, earnest man makes reference to God's sovereign will, we feel that he must have some serious thought in his mind, we are hardly prepared for the very sombre picture of the apostate which this passage contains. Nor is it quite easy to see how it is connected with what goes before. Does the writer mean, "It is useless to keep insisting on foundation truths relating to repentance, faith, and the like topics; for if any one have fallen away you cannot bring him to repentance by any amount of preaching on the old trite themes"? or is his meaning rather, "I do trust you and I will go on together to manhood and its proper food, though I have my fears concerning you, fears lest you be in the position of men who have lapsed from a bright initial experience, whose outlook for the future is necessarily very gloomy"? Possibly both of those thoughts were passing through his mind when he wrote.

In these verses (4-6) there is a vivid description of a happy past, a supposition made regarding those whose past experience is portrayed, and a strong assertion hazarded regarding any in whom that supposition is realized.

<sup>1</sup> ἐάνπερ, the περ intensifying the force of the ἐάν.

The description of initial Christian *experience* is a companion picture to the preceding account of initial Christian *instruction*. It points to an intense religious life, full of enthusiasm, joy, and spiritual elevation, not however to be regarded as the exceptional privilege of the few, but rather as the common inheritance of the Church in the apostolic age. The picture is painted in high colours, but the outlines are not very distinct; and the spectator, while powerfully impressed, fails to carry away a clear idea of the scene. The writer's purpose is not to give information to us, but to awaken in the breasts of his first readers sacred memories, and breed godly sorrow over a dead past. Hence he expresses himself in emotional terms such as might be used by recent converts rather than in the colder but more exact style of the historian. "The heavenly gift"—precious doubtless, but what is it? "The good word of God"—ineffably sweet, but what precise word gave such rare enjoyment? Five distinct elements in the initial Christian experience of converts seem to be specified, yet on further analysis they appear to be reducible to three: the *illumination* conveyed by elementary Christian instruction (*φωτισθέντας*), the *enjoyment* connected with that illumination (*γευσσάμενους*, ver. 4, repeated in ver. 5);<sup>1</sup> and the spiritual *power* communicated by the Holy Ghost, and manifesting itself in the miraculous charisms whereof we read in Acts and in Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians (*δυνάμεις*

<sup>1</sup> The repetition of *γευσσάμενους* suggests that the clause in which the participle occurs for the second time may be explanatory of that in which it occurs for the first time. In that case the "heavenly gift" would be practically identical with the "word of God," which the convert finds good to his taste—the gospel of grace; and the "Holy Spirit" in which the convert participates would be synonymous with the "powers of the world to come." That is to say, the Holy Spirit would be referred to, not as the indwelling source of Christian sanctity, but as the source of spiritual gifts or miraculous charisms. The change in the construction (the genitive after the participle in the first case, the accusative in the second) may suggest slightly differing shades of meaning: sharing, having part in the heavenly gift, appreciating the quality of the Divine word, receiving the truth, feeling its value.

μέλλοντος αἰῶνος, ver. 5). The cardinal fact is the illumination. The light of heaven breaking in on the soul awakens strong emotions, which find vent in speaking with tongues and prophesying—the powers and signs of the Messianic age. That illumination is the epoch-making event of the Christian life. It takes place once for all (ἅπαξ); there ought to be no need for its repetition, nay, it cannot be repeated. It comes like a revelation, and produces mighty effects; and woe to the man who lets the light go out!

“If they fall away” (καὶ παραπεσόντες), such is the supposition made with reference to persons who have gone through experiences so remarkable. The case put is that of persons who once knew, believed, and loved Christian truth, did wonderful works in Christ’s name and by the power of His Spirit, lapsing into ignorance, unbelief, indifference, or even dislike of what they once found sweet to their taste—God’s word and the gift of grace to which it bears witness. The very putting of such a case seems a rude contradiction of the dogma of perseverance, and hence this passage has been a famous battlefield between Arminians and Calvinists. The expositor who is more concerned about the correct interpretation of Scripture than about the defence of any system of theology will not find himself able to go altogether with either side in the controversy. The Bible is an excellent book for the purposes of practical religion, but rather a tantalising book for the scholastic theologian. Its writers know nothing of the caution and reserve of the system maker, but express themselves in strong, unqualified terms which are the torment of the dogmatist and the despair of the controversialist. The author of this epistle in particular writes, not as a theorist, but as an observer of facts. Cases of the kind described have actually come under his eye. He has seen many bearing all the marks of true believers fall away, and

he has observed that such men do not usually return to the faith from which they have lapsed. He speaks as his experience prompts. He does not call in question the reality of the faith and gracious affections of *quondam* Christians, but describes these after their fall, as he would have described them before it, admitting them to have been blossoms, though they were blighted by frost, or leaf-bearing branches, though they afterwards became dead and rotten.

As little, on the other hand, does he hesitate to affirm that recovery in such cases is impossible, reasoning again from past observation, and also doubtless in part from the nature of the case, apostates appearing to him like a fire whose fuel has been completely consumed so that nothing remains but *ashes*. This brings us to the third point in the passage before us,—the strong assertion made regarding those who lapse: “It is impossible to renew them again unto repentance.” Two questions suggest themselves. Is the assertion to be taken strictly? and, so taken, is it true? That the writer uses the word “impossible” strictly may be inferred from the reason he gives for his assertion. When men have got the length of crucifying Christ to themselves, and putting Him to an open shame before others, their case is hopeless.<sup>1</sup> But possibly he puts too severe a construction on the facts. There may be a lapse from the bright life of a former time, serious and perilous,

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Edwards takes the participles *ἀνασταυρούντας* and *παραδειγματίζοντας*, not as explanatory of *παραπεσόντας*, but as putting a hypothetical case, and renders, “they cannot be renewed after falling away if they persist in crucifying.” The change from the aorist to the present may be in favour of this view, yet one cannot help feeling that the writer means to say something more serious than that falling away is fatal *when* it amounts to crucifying Christ. Mr. Rendall has another way of softening the severity of the dictum; *viz.* to take *ἀνακαινίζειν* as expressing continuous action, and render “it is impossible to keep renewing”=the process of falling and renewing cannot go on indefinitely: the power of impression grows weaker, and at length becomes exhausted by repetition. This view is certainly in keeping with the spirit of the whole passage (v. 11–14, vi. 1–8).

but not amounting to a crucifying of Christ, or so hardening the heart as to make repentance impossible.

Now two things may be admitted here. First, there are phases of the spiritual life liable to be mistaken for symptoms of apostasy, which are truly interpreted only when looked at in the light of the great law of gradual growth enunciated by our Lord in the parable of the blade, the green ear, and the full corn in the ear.<sup>1</sup> The difficult problem of Christian experience cannot be mastered unless we grasp the truth taught in that parable, and know the characteristics of each stage, and especially of the second, which are most liable to be misunderstood. For lack of such knowledge many a Christian, destined to reach a splendid spiritual manhood, has seemed to himself and others to have fallen away utterly from grace, faith, and goodness, while he was simply passing through the stage of the green fruit, with all its unwelcome yet wholesome experiences. In this crude stage of his religious history Bunyan thought he had committed the sin against the Holy Ghost, and "an ancient Christian," supposed to be wise in counsel, whom he consulted, told him he thought so too. Yet he was on the way to Beulah through the valley of the shadow of death; and few reach that blessed land without passing along the same dark, dreary road. How far the writer of our epistle, or indeed any of the New Testament writers, understood the law of growth by broadly discriminated stages, enunciated by Christ, does not appear. It is certain that nowhere else in the New Testament can there be found a statement approaching in scientific clearness and distinctness to that contained in the parable referred to.<sup>2</sup> In absence of a

<sup>1</sup> Mark iv. 26-29. On this parable see *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*.

<sup>2</sup> It has been disputed whether there be any distinct doctrine of growth or gradual sanctification in Paul's epistles. Pfeiderer maintains the affirmative. Reuss, a more orthodox theologian, denies, maintaining that Paul conceives the new life as perfect from the first. There is a noticeable difference between Paul and our Lord in their respective manner of dealing with the defects of young

theory of sanctification to guide them, however, their spiritual sagacity might be trusted to keep them from confounding a case like Bunyan's with that of an apostate.

Second. Bible writers often state in unqualified terms as an absolute truth what is in reality only an affair of tendency. Translated into a statement of tendency, the doctrine taught is this. Every fall involves a risk of apostasy, and the higher the experience fallen from the greater the risk. The deeper religion has gone into a man at the commencement of his Christian course, the less hopeful his condition if he lapse. The nearer the initial stage to a thorough conversion the less likely is a second change, if the first turn out abortive; and so on, in ever-increasing degrees of improbability as lapses increase in number. The brighter the light in the soul, the deeper the darkness when the light is put out. The sweeter the manna of God's word to the taste, the more loathsome it becomes when it has lost its relish. The fiercer the fire in the hearth while the fuel lasts, the more certain it is that when the fire goes out there will remain nothing but ashes. The livelier the hope of glory, the greater the aversion to all thoughts of the world to come when once a Christian has, like Atheist in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, turned his back on the heavenly Jerusalem. Action and reaction are equal. The more forcibly you throw an elastic ball against a wall the greater the rebound; in like manner the more powerfully the human spirit is brought under celestial influences, the greater the recoil from all good, if there be a recoil at all. The gushing enthusiasts of to-day are the cynical sceptics of to-morrow. Have promoters of "revivals" laid these things duly to heart?

Christians. Paul blames, as if they were full grown men; Christ corrects, as one who knows that nothing else is to be looked for in children, and that the future will bring wisdom: "I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now."

But the wise teacher whose complaint of his dull scholars we are considering has something more serious in view, when he speaks of falling away, than the coldness and languor, or even the moral lapses, which are apt to overtake converts after a period of great excitement. It is not a question of loss of feeling, or of unstable, inconsistent conduct, or of falls through infirmity, but of deep alienation of heart. He thinks of such as are capable of cherishing towards Christ the feelings of hatred which animated the men who crucified Him, and of openly renouncing the Christian faith. This was the crime the Hebrew Christians were tempted to commit. A fatal step it must be when taken; for men who left the Christian Church and went back to the synagogue became companions of persons who thought they did God service in cursing the name of Jesus.

The writer proceeds (vers. 7, 8), by a comparison drawn from agriculture, to illustrate the danger to which those are exposed who, having had a pronounced spiritual experience, afterwards fall away from the faith and life of the gospel. The parable does not really afford us much help to the understanding of the matter; as it is rendered in the Authorized Version it affords no help at all. As the case is put there, a contrast seems to be drawn between two kinds of soil, one of which is well watered, and therefore fertile, while the other is unwatered, and therefore sterile or productive only of thorns and thistles. Such a contrast would bring out the difference between those who have and those who have not enjoyed gospel privileges, not the difference between two classes of Christians who have both equally enjoyed such privileges, or the two possible alternatives in the case of every professing Christian. It is a contrast fitted to serve the latter purpose that really is made. Exactly rendered it runs thus: "For land which, after drinking in the rain that cometh oft upon it, bringeth forth herbage meet for those for whose benefit it is tilled,



receiveth blessing from God; but if *it* (the same land well watered) bear thorns and thistles, it is worthless, and nigh unto a curse, whose end is unto burning.”

When we compare this parable with any of our Lord's, there is a great falling off in point of felicity and instructiveness. One purpose it doubtless serves, to make clear the matter of fact, that the same Christian privileges and experiences may issue in widely different ultimate results. The soil is supposed in either case to be well watered, not only rained upon, but often saturated with water, having drunk up the blessing of the clouds, and moreover to be carefully tilled; for though that point is left in the background, it is alluded to in the words *δι' οὗς καὶ γεωργεῖται*. Yet in one case it yields a useful crop, in the other only a useless crop of thorns and thistles. But why? On this important question the parable throws no light. The land which bears the useless crop is not a barren rock; for it drinks in the rain, and it is considered worth ploughing. Nay, it is doubtful if the case supposed in the second alternative can occur in the natural world. Was there ever a land well tilled and watered that produced nothing but thorns and thistles? It seems as if the natural and the spiritual were mixed up here, and that were said of the one which is strictly true only with reference to the other. The writer describes a case in the natural world which can hardly happen to represent a case which may happen in the spiritual world, that, *viz.*, of men whose hearts have been sown with the seed of truth and watered with the rain of grace becoming so utterly degenerate and reprobate, as in the end to produce nothing but the thorns and thistles of unbelief and ungodliness.<sup>1</sup> Mixture of metaphor and

<sup>1</sup> Natural improbability occurs in some of our Lord's parables; *e.g.*, in the parable of the great supper. Such a thing as all the guests invited to a feast with one consent refusing to come does not happen in society. The truth is, it is impossible to describe the essentially unreasonable behaviour of men in regard to the kingdom of God in parabolic language, without violating natural

literal sense is indeed manifest throughout, the phrases "receiveth blessing," "reprobate" (*ἀδικίμος*), "nigh to a curse," "whose end is unto burning," expressing moral ideas rather than physical facts. This is particularly evident in the case of the last phrase. It plainly points to a judicial visitation of the severest kind, the appointed penalty of spiritual unfruitfulness. But in the natural sphere burning is remedial rather than punitive, to burn land which has become foul being a good method of restoring it to fertility.

In yet another respect the comparison fails us. Supposing there were such a thing as burning unprofitable land by way of judicial visitation, as the land of Sodom was destroyed by fire and brimstone—an event which may have been present to the writer's thoughts,—the fact might serve to symbolize the Divine judgment on apostasy. But the matter on which we most of all need light is the asserted impossibility of renewal. That the finally impenitent should be punished we understand, but what we want to know is, how men get into that state: what is the psychological history of irreconcilable apostasy? To refer to Divine agency in hardening human hearts does not help us, for God hardens by means naturally fitted and intended to soften and win. Neither can we take refuge in the supposition of insufficient initial grace, at least from the point of view of the writer of our epistle; for he assumes that the fruitful and the unfruitful have been equally favoured. The rain falls not less liberally on the land that bears thorns and thistles than on the land that brings forth an abundant crop of grass or grain; and the rain represents the enlightenment, enjoyment, and power previously mentioned.

In the parable of the sower the diversity in the results is traced to the nature of the soil. In each case the issue is probability. On the other hand, the parables which describe Christ's own conduct, much assailed by His contemporaries, are all thoroughly true to nature; *e.g.*, those in the fifteenth chapter of Luke. I have remarked on this contrast in *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*.

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exactly such as we should expect from the character of the ground. In the parable before us opposite results are supposed to be possible in the same soil. That is to say, the effect is conceived to depend on the will of each individual, on the use one makes of his privileges. The Hebrew Christians might have been teachers, instead of childish learners, had they chosen to take the necessary pains; they might have been full grown men, had they only properly exercised their spiritual senses in discerning between good and evil.

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