

*THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.*

XX. NOT OF THEM WHO DRAW BACK!

(CHAP. X. 25 TO XII. 29.)

“DRAW near,” the teacher had said, in a tone of cheerful emphasis. “Draw not back,” he now says in a tone of deep solemnity. “Draw not back” is virtually the burden of all that follows from this point onwards to the end of the twelfth chapter. The friend of the Hebrew Church fears the deprecated result, and puts forth a great final effort to avert it. In spite of his inward fear he assumes a tone of confidence, and says, “We (you and I) are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul” (chap. x. 39). But he means: “Be ye not, ye must not be, it is not to be thought of, such a disastrous issue is intolerable.” What he dreads is mean, ignoble, dastardly slinking from Christian standing and responsibility, through an abject desire for safety, which defeats itself, and brings on the moral coward the very evil he seeks to shun; what he commends is the heroic spirit of faith, which enables a man to live a true, just, godly life, preferring duty to safety: so, while willing to lose life, really gaining it, as Jesus had taught His disciples. In laconic phrase he offers as the watchword for times of trial, *ὄχι ὑποστολῆς, ἀλλὰ πίστεως*: “not men of shrinking, but men of faith.”

To insure that the Hebrews shall so behave as to merit this description the writer brings to bear on them a variety of stimulating influences: their own past memories (chap. x. 32-36), the heroic career of the men of faith of former times (chap. xi.), the example of Jesus (chap. xii. 2, 3), the uses of affliction (chap. xii. 5-13), the solemn responsibilities lying on the privileged recipients of a final revelation (chap. xii. 14-29). With reference to the first, he bids them

in effect conduct themselves at the end of their Christian life in a manner worthy of its beginning, when they both bravely endured hardships on account of the faith, and generously sympathised with brethren exposed to trial. Why should they cast away that old boldness, which, persevered in to the end (now not far off), must have worthy recompense? What a pity to lose heart, when patience only for a little longer will bring the promised reward!

The second line of thought is worked out with great elaboration. This magnificent discourse on faith may conceivably have been prepared for and used on other occasions, and afterwards embodied in our epistle as well fitted to serve the purpose in hand, to help waverers to be men of faith by showing them what faith had done for others. The opening sentence, containing what looks like a scholastic definition of faith, might suggest that the leading aim of the discourse had originally been to illustrate the nature of faith as there defined to be the substance or assurance of things hoped for, and the evidence or proof of things not seen, whether past, present, or future. The first example of faith's action taken from the creation of the world appears to bear out this view, as it serves merely to explain the nature of faith and the vast range of its action as a principle in the human mind. It is not an instance of the faith by which the elders obtained a good report, but only the first case in the Old Testament history in which an opportunity occurs for showing the psychological nature of faith as the evidence of things not seen; that by which we apprehend the visible world to be the product of an invisible creative word of God. The same desire to illustrate the abstract nature of faith and the range of its action seems to come out in ver. 6, where it is argued that pleasing God necessarily involves faith (and not merely good conduct), inasmuch as he who seeks to please God, *ipso facto*, believes that God is, and that He rewards well-doing, the

one act of faith exemplifying its nature as evidence of the unseen, the other as the assurance of things hoped for.

Whatever truth there may be in the foregoing conjecture, there can be no doubt that the main purpose of the discourse as it here stands is to show, not the abstract nature of faith, but its moral power: how it enables men to live noble lives and so gain a good report. The writer's interest in the psychology of faith lies chiefly in the fact that it furnishes the key to faith's wonderful practical virtue. The connexion of thought is to this effect: "Be ye men of faith, my Hebrew brethren, for faith is a mighty thing: it makes one as sure of the future as if it were present, and brings the invisible within view. Through these its marvellous properties the good men of olden time were enabled so to live as to deserve the testimony that they were 'righteous' (ver. 4), that they 'pleased God' (ver. 5), that they were men of whom God was not ashamed (ver. 16), and 'of whom the world was not worthy' (ver. 38). Such is the writer's argument, and in the sequel of his discourse he makes good his position. The examples cited are all relevant as instances of the action of faith as defined; in all faith was the working power. The actions specified are important, having a foremost place in the *memorabilia* of Old Testament story. The actors are all worthy of honourable mention. Their characters bear the heroic stamp due in every case to their faith, even the least worthy, *e.g.* "the harlot Rahab," rising above moral commonplace into the lofty region of heroism through the redeeming power of a faith that could rightly interpret past events and shrewdly forecast the future.

The eloquent preacher makes good his case, yet in the end of his discourse he is constrained to make an important admission. "These all being witnessed to (*μαρτυρηθέντες*) through faith, received not the promises." That is to say, faith, as the assurance of things hoped for and the proof of

things not seen, helped them to live well, so that God and discerning men could give them a certificate of nobility; but that of which faith assured them, the things hoped for, they did not obtain. They got their certificate of character, and—nothing more. Does this not look like saying that faith entices men into a heroic, arduous career that will win for them a barren renown, by promises of a future which in the form these assume to the imagination will never be realized? It does; and the fact is even so, and it is a great fact in human experience, this “illusiveness of life”—a bitter fact till it is understood and accepted as an essential element in the Divine discipline of character. The writer of our epistle would not conceal the truth from his readers, even though it might tend to defeat his purpose, to inspire them with the spirit of fortitude, by suggesting depressing, pessimistic thoughts and dark questions whether it was worth while living nobly if the end was to be disappointment. But he skilfully contrives, while admitting the fact, to put such a construction on the disappointing experience of Old Testament saints that it shall encourage rather than depress: “God providing something better concerning us, that they without us should not be made perfect” (ver. 40). That is to say: first, our experience is not to be as theirs, in our case the promise shall be fulfilled; second, even in their case the disappointment was not final and absolute, it was only a case of deferred fulfilment, that we and they might, by the fulfilment of our common hopes, be perfected together. The author conceives of the end of the world as at hand, and of the age of fulfilment as approaching, bringing with it the realization of all religious ideals—the perfect pardon of sin, the heavenly country, the city which hath the foundations, whose architect and builder is God: bringing these alike to the “elders” and to those on whom the ends of the world are come, doubled in value to all by common participation.

The witnessed or certificated ones (*μαρτυρηθέντες*, xi. 39) next become a great cloud of *witnesses* (*νέφος μαρτύρων*, xii. 1), gathered around the men now undergoing trial on earth, the spectators in imagination, if not in literal fact, of their behaviour, and bearing testimony by their recorded lives to the power of faith, and by their faithfulness even unto death encouraging their suffering brethren to play the man and to run their appointed race strenuously and persistently till they have reached the goal. It is a spirit-stirring scene that is thus by a few felicitous phrases brought before our view; but the eye is not allowed to rest on it. For among the cloud of witnesses that constitute the ideal spectatorship of the race One stands out conspicuous above all the rest—JESUS, the Captain and Perfecter of faith, the Man who first perfectly realized the idea of living by faith, and who thereby became the Model and Leader of all the faithful, to whom they look as their pattern, and from whose heroic behaviour they draw their inspiration. Therefore our author, having suggested the idea of a cloud of witnesses, consisting of all in past ages who have a fair and honourable record, hastens to point out the great central Personality, and ask his readers to fix their attention on Him, saying in effect: "Conscious of that imposing crowd, run your race; but before all, run it, if you would run well, looking unto Jesus." What will they see there? One who undauntedly endured the bitter suffering of the cross, and who despised the ignominy of it, sustained by a faith that so vividly realized coming joy and glory as to obliterate the consciousness of present pain and shame: One moreover in whose case it is clearly seen that faith is no deceiver, making promises that will never be fulfilled; for, behold, the crucified One is now set down on the right hand of the throne of God! "Consider Him," continues the preacher, with eloquent urgency. "Compare His experience with your own, and your own with His, and extract from the com-

parison consolatory lessons. Realize first of all that the experiences are comparable, that they belong to the same category of the trial and triumph of faith, that Jesus and you have been brothers in tribulation, and may be brothers in bliss. Then, having mastered the truth that the experiences of the Leader and the led are analogous,<sup>1</sup> note further that the experience of the Leader differs from that of the led, though not in kind, yet in degree. He was by far the greater sufferer. What humiliating contradiction of sinners,<sup>2</sup> by word and deed, in life and in death, He endured! what blasphemies against the Son of man, 'drunkard, glutton, boon companion of publicans and sinners'! what ribald indignities, before and during the crucifixion! Ye have not endured anything like that. Ye have not been crucified; ye know little of the hatred, contempt, and reviling, that are worse than violent death."

From this topic, the example of Jesus, fertile in consolation, the writer easily passes to another, also fruitful of instruction, the uses of affliction (xii. 5-13). Here the chief feature of didactic interest is the manner in which the writer brings the hard experiences of life under the viewpoint of man's filial relation to God. This mention of the fatherhood of God, just after referring to the earthly trials of Christ, suggests the thought that our author has present to his mind Christ's habit of calling God His Father, and the comfort and peace He derived from that name. He cites indeed, not the gospels, but the book of Proverbs; it is possible nevertheless that he draws his inspiration, not from Solomon, but from Jesus. One cannot help feeling that under such expressions as the "contradiction of sinners," "the Father of spirits," there lurks a familiar

<sup>1</sup> ἀναλογισασθε, ver. 3.

<sup>2</sup> The reading, "sinners against themselves" (εἰς ἑαυτοῦς), becomes credible if, with Bishop Westcott, we find in the phrase an allusion to the rebellion of Korah and his companions, who, in Num. xvi. 38, are described as "sinners against their own souls."

acquaintance with the evangelic tradition of the life of the Son of man, and with His doctrine of God and man and their mutual relations. The teacher of the Hebrews understands the filial consciousness of Jesus as it found expression in the prayer, "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth," and knows that it meant for Him loyal submission, perfect trust, intimate, joyful fellowship, and absolute independence in His attitude toward the world; and it is his desire that those to whom he writes may attain unto the same filial consciousness, with all its spiritual blessedness. It would have been gratifying had this part of his exhortation contained a single distinct allusion to the gospel records of Christ's sayings. But, alas! the Hebrew Christians were so far below the breezy, bracing heights of sonship in the dank, misty hollows of legalism, that their teacher is constrained to extract for their benefit the elements of the doctrine of a paternal providence from Old Testament texts; these truths, *viz.* that God does regard men as His children; that sorrowful experiences reveal His fatherly love, are the chastisement He administers to those He counts sons; that the aim of all His discipline is to make men partakers of His holiness—an end worthy of Him, and supremely important for them.

This end—holiness—next becomes the subject of discourse. That you should be truly holy is God's great purpose in all His dealings with you: make it your own great business to be God-consecrated men; guard sedulously against moral stains; remissness here may be fatal; holiness becometh Christians in view of their position and privileges—such is the drift of the following section (xii. 12-29). We notice here for the first time a distinct reference to evil conduct as a possible source of danger: "Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one meal sold his own birthright" (ver. 16). The word *πρόνος* is not to be spiritualized; we ought rather to find in it a hint

that in the Hebrew Church, besides defective insight into and appreciation of the Christian religion, and a timid, unheroic temper, there was a third evil influence at work exposing them to shipwreck, a tendency to vulgar immorality, sensualism in diverse forms—a base, ignoble, Esau-like preference of immediate enjoyment, present gratification of animal appetite, to the honourable vocation and destiny of sons of God, a state of mind well deserving to be stigmatized as “profane” (βέβηλος). To what extent this tendency prevailed we can only conjecture; but it may be assumed that a writer characterized by a delicate reserve would not have mentioned the topic at all, unless it had been urgent; and the emphasis and iteration of his admonition, “looking to it that there be no one falling from the grace of God, no root of bitterness springing up in gall,<sup>1</sup> no fornicator or profane person,” is very ominous. Then all history tells that a transition time in religion, when an old faith is passing away and a new one is coming in, is apt to be a time characterized by a dissolution of morals. Such an age presents startling contrasts: here, fanatical attachment to the past; there heroic devotion to the new revelation; in a third class, unsettlement in opinion, scepticism, licentiousness. This bad leaven of doubt accompanied by moral laxity seems to have been at work in the Hebrew Church, and in proportion as it was it made the chance of success in an effort to bring them to a better mind infinitesimally small. The profane person who prefers the mess of pottage to the heavenly calling is doomed. There is no place of repentance for him; he does not even, like Esau, desire

<sup>1</sup> Εποχλη, ver. 15, is the undisputed reading; but there is probability in the suggestion that the two letters οχ had been at an early date transposed in transcription, and that the original reading was ἐν χολη, as in Deuteronomy xxix. 18, which the writer has in his mind and here quotes. Rendall adopts this reading, and Westcott more cautiously simply alludes to it in a bracketed remark: “The strange coincidence of letters between ΕΝΟΧΛΗ and ΕΝΧΟΛΗ of Deut. xxix. 18 cannot escape notice.”



it: he habitually despises his birthright. And such a man is a curse to the community in which he lives. He is a plant whose root sucks poison from the soil, and which bears fruit death-bringing to all who partake of it.

But charity hopeth all things; therefore, in spite of the presence among them of the Esau-spirit, the friend of the Hebrew Christians persists in pressing on their attention their heavenly birthright, and in a passage of majestic eloquence brings before their minds all the august, sacred realities of the new dispensation, each and all enforcing the admonition, Be holy. To make the argument more impressive it is put in the form of a contrast between the awe-inspiring phenomena of the lawgiving and the still more solemn, while also more genial, surroundings of one whose lot is cast in the Christian era: "Ye have not come to Sinai; ye have come to Zion." The argument is *à fortiori*: Your fathers, when they approached the mount of lawgiving, had to prepare themselves and make themselves technically holy;<sup>1</sup> how much more ought ye to be holy "in all manner of conversation"—ye who are surrounded by things of a higher order: not sensible, but spiritual; not transient, but abiding; not inspiring mere abject terror, but the higher, godly fear of reverence!

For detailed exegesis this eloquent passage, forming the splendid finale to the exhortation to steadfastness commencing at chap. x. 19, presents a variety of difficult problems relating to the text,<sup>2</sup> the bearing of individual expressions,<sup>3</sup> and the scope of the whole. For a general survey like the present the last of these topics is alone of importance. It

<sup>1</sup> Exod. xix. 14-25.

<sup>2</sup> It is doubtful whether *ἕρπαι* belongs to the text in ver. 18. If it be omitted we get the sense, "Ye are not come unto a palpable and burning fire," or "a material and kindled fire," as Westcott renders it.

<sup>3</sup> It is disputed whether "the general assembly and Church of the first-born" refer to angels, or form a distinct class of citizens; *viz.* Christian men on earth, whose names are written in heaven.

has been disputed whether we are to find in the contrast between the two dispensations a single or a double antithesis : that between the sensible and supersensible, physical and spiritual alone ; or also one between the terrifying character of the earlier dispensation and the gracious, winsome character of the later. In favour of the former view are the facts that the immediate aim of the contrast is to present an incitement to holiness, that fear is regarded by the writer as an element in the New Testament religion not less than in the old (ver. 28), and that God is referred to, not as the Father, as one would expect in an attempt to describe the grace of the New Testament, but as the Judge (ver. 23), and is even declared in the sequel to be a consuming fire (ver. 29). In view of these facts, it might seem as if the gracious aspect of some of the things enumerated, as in the clauses referring to "Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant," and to "the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abel," were accidental to the aim of the writer, or not present to his view at all. But the holiness and the fear of the Christian are different from those of Israel at Sinai. They are such as are producible, not by material fire, but by association with the spiritual commonwealth of which God is the head. They are the holiness and the fear of those who are themselves citizens. The grace lies in admission to citizenship, and privilege is the source of obligation. The moral is : Be thankful for membership in such an august society, and strive to be worthy of it. In the writer's own words : "We, receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us be thankful,<sup>1</sup> and in the spirit of thankfulness serve God acceptably with godly fear and awe."

The designation "kingdom," here used for the good that

<sup>1</sup> Ἐχωμεν χάριν. Westcott remarks : "The use of the phrase *χάριν ἔχειν* elsewhere in the New Testament is strongly in favour of the sense, 'let us feel and show *thankfulness* to God.'"

came to the world through Jesus Christ, suggests that at this point, as in his doctrine of God's paternal providence, the writer may have had present to his mind the teaching of our Lord as recorded in the synoptical gospels. But here, as in the other instance, the express allusion is not to the evangelic tradition, but to the Hebrew Scriptures. The train of thought commencing with "see that ye refuse not Him that speaketh" (ver. 25), and ending with the words just quoted (ver. 28), is suggested, and in expression coloured, by an oracle of the prophet Haggai, intended to encourage the people of Israel, returned from exile, in the work of rebuilding the temple, by assuring them that the second house should be greater than the first, and that the kingdom of Judah should again be established, though it should be necessary to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overturn all other kingdoms, in order to achieve the result (Hag. ii.). This prophecy the writer regards as Messianic, and from it he takes occasion to draw what we may call a supplementary contrast between the Sinaitic and the Christian revelations, so as still further to deepen the sense of responsibility in those who are the recipients of the latter. In both cases God spoke to men; by what agents, whether angels, Moses, or Christ, is here left out of account. But in the earlier revelation he spake "on earth" (*ἐπι γῆς*, ver. 25), in the later "from heaven" (*ἀπ' οὐρανῶν*, ver. 25); earth meaning the place of shadows, heaven the place of realities. In the first case God's voice shook the earth, not the whole earth, but Mount Sinai and its environment: "the whole mount quaked greatly" (Exod. xix. 18); in the second, the Divine voice, according to the prophetic oracle, was to shake, "not the earth only, but also heaven" (ver. 26), the whole universe of being—a statement implying the universal character of Christianity: God's voice in Christ concerns the whole world. And the shaking produced by this voice, presumably, though the

fact is not expressly indicated, is of a different nature from that which took place at Sinai—a moral, not a physical earthquake. In the mind of the writer probably, as in our Lord's apocalyptic discourse, as recorded in the gospels, the material and the spiritual aspects are mixed up, the shaking affecting the frame of nature, the fortunes of nations, the minds of men, causing stars, thrones, city walls, temples, effete religions, to tumble down into one vast mass of ruin. Lastly, God's first voice, being a voice spoken on earth, like all things earthly, is transient; God's second voice, spoken from heaven, is final and, with all that it creates, eternal. The transiency of the first voice, with the system of things it belongs to, is implied in the prophetic expression, "yet once more" (ἐτι ἄπαξ, ver. 26). It implies that the order of things to which the first voice belonged was not satisfactory or fitted to abide. It implies further that the order of things to be ushered in by the second voice will remain. For God is to speak only this one time more—once for all. Thus the voice of God uttered in the end of the days through His Son signifies, on the one hand, the removal of all things capable of being shaken because "made," material, earthly; and, on the other, the establishment of an order that shall be permanent, unshakable, because not "made" after the fashion of the sensible world, spiritual, heavenly—the bringing in in power and glory of the kingdom of heaven.

With what sublime serenity the author of our epistle contemplates the destruction of the old world and the birth-pangs of the new, albeit the process involves much that is disastrous, tragic, awful to think of, for the people to which his readers belong! It is the calm of faith: of one who understands what is going on, who knows that, whatever may perish, there is always something of priceless worth that remains; that, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of

the sea, and the waters thereof roar and be troubled, there is a river of life, a strong refuge, a city of God, a "kingdom which cannot be moved." One who has this faith passes quietly and peacefully through the perils of a transition time, when the hearts of those who do not understand and believe fail them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth.

The long exhortation to Christian steadfastness is ended. What remains of the epistle, chap. xiii., is an epilogue, containing, in addition to sundry ethical precepts (vers. 1-6), a passage bearing on the main theme, which lets us see how difficult the writer found it to take final leave of his subject, doubtless due to a fear that, after all he had written, he had failed to accomplish his purpose (vers. 7-14). The drift of this postscript is: cleave to Christ and the Christian faith by all means and at all hazards. Be moved to do so by the memory of deceased apostolic teachers; contemplating the issue of their life, their death in faith, some of them in martyrdom, imitate these believing, faithful men. Be moved also and above all by the consideration that in the great Object of our faith we have One that can satisfy all spiritual needs. Jesus Christ is yesterday, and to-day, the same, and for ever. What He was to your departed instructors He can still be to you. Cling to Him as your sympathetic Brother, Captain, and High Priest. Be not carried away from Him by Judaistic teachings in reference to meats, etc., foreign to the genius of the Christian faith, and valueless to one whose heart is established with grace. Break finally with Judaism, forsake the synagogue, go forth "without the camp," bearing cheerfully any reproach in fidelity to Him who "suffered without the gate." Ye must make your choice between Christianity and Judaism. Ye cannot amalgamate the two. As the victim slain for sin on the Day of Atonement was not eaten by the priests, but

removed without the camp and burned, so those who cling to the Levitical system can have no part in the great Christian sacrifice which was offered up on Calvary outside the gate of Jerusalem. To share in the benefit of that sacrifice you also must go outside, no matter what it may cost. Here once more we note the affinity between the writer of our epistle and the Apostle Paul in pressing on half-hearted Christians prone to compromise the inexorable "either—or." "Either the law, or faith," said Paul; "Either the Levitical ritual, or the one sacrifice of Christ, offered through the eternal Spirit," says the unknown inspired man who wrote this marvellous book.

A. B. BRUCE.

*NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON THE FUTURE  
PUNISHMENT OF SIN.*

V. THE SYNOPTIST GOSPELS.

In the Synoptist Gospels, punishment by fire at the end of the world occupies a position much more conspicuous than it has in the Epistles of Paul and in the Fourth Gospel. This conspicuous element of New Testament teaching demands now our careful attention.

The Baptist, as recorded in Matthew iii. 10, Luke iii. 9, compares worthless men to barren fruit trees which are "cut down and cast into fire." Similarly, in Matthew iii. 12, Luke iii. 17: "He will gather His wheat into the garner, but the chaff He will burn up with fire unquenchable." This last word denotes evidently an irresistible destruction, from which there is no rescue. It is found again in a more terrible context in Mark ix. 43. The fate of the barren trees is re-echoed word for word by Christ in Matthew vii. 19. Similarly, chapter xiii. 30: "Collect first the tares, and bind them into bundles to burn them up,