

*GRAVE REVERSES A DECISIVE TEST OF
CHARACTER.*

“ Let the brother who is of low degree rejoice in that he is lifted up ; but the rich, in that he is brought low.”—JAMES i. 9, 10.

SIMPLE as these words sound, the wise have found them very difficult. And, indeed, most of us shrink from taking them in their plain, natural sense. Taken simply as they stand, they seem to teach that the poor man is to be very glad when he gets rich—not a very difficult duty perhaps ; and that the rich man is to be very glad when he becomes poor—a duty so difficult that no man can be sure that he would be equal to it. Even the commentators hesitate to demand so high a strain of virtue ; which, surely, is very disinterested of the commentators, since, as they are mostly poor men, one should have thought that *they* at least would have found this meaning to their mind, and would have been quite content to see rich men grow poor that poor men might grow rich.

But not the commentators alone, hardly any man ventures to take St. James as really meaning what he seems to mean ; *viz.* that the poor good man is to rejoice when he is lifted into wealth, and that the rich good man is to rejoice when he is pulled down into poverty. Most of us take him to mean that the exaltation in which the poor brother is to rejoice is a *spiritual* exaltation ; that he is to be glad because, though poor and low in this world's esteem, he stands high among the saints and is rich toward God. In like manner we assume that the abasement in which the rich brother should rejoice is a *spiritual* abasement ; *he* is to be glad that, despite his opulence, he is of a lowly and contrite heart. All which may be very true in itself, but is not the truth taught here. For observe what we must do to force this meaning on

St. James's words. We must take one half of each of his phrases in its natural, and the other half in a non-natural sense; one half literally, and the other half figuratively. When he says "brother of low degree," we must understand him to mean a poor man of no social mark, not a brother very deficient in the graces of the Spirit; but when he speaks of this poor brother as being "lifted up," we are not to understand him as meaning that the poor man is lifted out of his poverty, but that he is raised to a heavenly wealth. So, again, when he says, "rich brother," we are to take him as indicating a man opulent in this world's goods; but so soon as he speaks of the rich man's being brought low, we are to understand, not that the rich man is brought down to penury, but that his heart is humbled, his spirit abased.

Now to read the Bible in this double sense, to take one part of the same sentence in one way and another part in a different way, is to make it mean anything—*i.e.* nothing. It is to put *our* meanings into it, and to deny that it has any meaning of its own. If we read it thus, we can never be sure that we have "the mind of the Spirit"; we shall make every Scripture "of a private interpretation," and open the door for as many interpretations as there are interpreters. We can only read the Bible to profit as we seek *first* the plain, obvious meaning of its words, and follow that, however sharply it may cut our prejudices against the grain.

Read fairly and simply, the words of St. James cannot fail to carry this plain sense to our minds: that the Christian brother who is poor in this world's goods is to be glad when he gets rich in this world's goods; and that the Christian brother who is rich in these goods is to be glad when God takes them away from him, since God will only take them away when it is for his good. And if we sincerely believed, as we profess to believe, spiritual

good to be better than temporal good, and spiritual wealth to be far more precious than temporal wealth, I am persuaded that we should never think of taking these words in any other sense.

For St. James is the plainest, the most prosaic, the least subtle and mystical, of the New Testament writers. He uses words in the simplest sense, and shapes them into the most pithy, downright sentences. He means what he says, and says what he means, beyond almost any other writer. He is the Cobbett, or the Defoe, of the New Testament company. You need never misunderstand him. It is almost impossible to misunderstand him except by thrusting meanings into his words which never entered into his mind. And therefore, even if these verses stood alone, we might be quite sure that he meant just what we should mean if in our common talk we said, "A poor man is to be glad when he gets rich; and a rich man, when his riches use their wings and fly away."

But the verses do not stand alone. They are intimately connected both with the verses which go before and the verses which follow them. Directly he has uttered his opening salutation, the Apostle strikes his key-note. In the Salutation he had wished the Christians of the Hebrew Dispersion joy—"Joy to you." But what a wish was that for men whom their heathen neighbours hated because they were Jews, and their Jewish neighbours hated because they were Christians! How could men so miserable hope for joy? St. James teaches them: "Count it all joy, pure joy, nothing but joy, when ye fall into divers tribulations; and then surely you, whose whole life is a bitter trial, will never be at a loss for joy." But what was this strange art of extracting joy from sorrow, honour from shame, gain from loss? St. James teaches them this also. Trials beget that patient and constant temper of the faithful soul which makes a man sound, mature, complete in character,

so that he lacks nothing. If, then, they made perfection of Christian character their first aim, preferring it before all happy outward conditions, they would rejoice in any condition, and in any change of condition, which put their character to the test and helped to make it perfect. Constancy in trial makes a man perfect, as in other ways, so also in this: it fosters a single mind in him; it compels him to subordinate the lower cravings to the higher aspirations of the soul; it frees him from the distractions of a divided will, from that two-mindedness which cripples his energies and mars his service. Once possessed of the firm, constant temper which is bred by trials well endured, he is no longer a man of two minds, unstable in all his ways, and therefore excelling in none. But if trials have this happy effect on character, may he not well count it all joy when he falls into them? May he not well rejoice even in the largest and most trying reverses of fortune? If he be a rich man, and is suddenly brought down to poverty, there is in this reverse a searching and decisive test of character. Let him be patient now, amid his broken schemes and defeated hopes; let him sincerely rejoice in any change of condition which proves and fortifies his character: and is he not obviously the better for his trial, advancing even toward that perfection in which he will lack nothing? If, on the other hand, he be a poor man, and suddenly grow rich, there is in his reverse of fortune a trial equally searching, and perhaps more searching. And if, when this penetrating test is applied, he retain a constant loyalty to Christ, if he remain sober, modest, kindly, devout, will not this trial have helped to make him perfect? Should not we ourselves trust and honour each of these men, after he had borne his trial well, more than before the trial fell upon him?

Holding perfection of character to be the highest good, St. James could honestly bid men rejoice in whatever

change, or reverse, tested and matured their character; he could honestly pronounce those "blessed" who endured temptation, and rose, through many trials, to the crown of life.

So that these verses, taken quite simply and literally, fall in with the whole scope of the Apostle's argument. With that argument in view it becomes impossible to take them in any other than this plain sense. The poor man *is* to be glad when he is tried by riches, remembering, however, that for him they *are* a trial; and the rich man is to be glad when he is tried by poverty, and to take comfort in the conviction that it is a trial, and a trial by which God is seeking to make a man of him, a man rounded and complete in character, lacking nothing that he ought to have.

The ruling thought of these verses is, then, that great reverses of fortune are a test of Christian character, and a means of Christian perfection; and that we ought not simply to bear them patiently, but to rejoice in them because they so test our character as to mature and perfect it. Does not the world itself admire such an one as Hamlet describes in Horatio?

"Thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing;
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks: and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please."

And if Shakespeare, with the world's full assent, might pronounce such a man "blest," why should not St. James? why should not we?

Yet no one will deny that the reverses by which such a character is formed are very searching and stringent trials, very hard to meet in a manly, still harder to meet in a

Christian, spirit. When you see a poor good man suddenly made rich, are you not a little afraid for him, though, perhaps, in the same circumstances, you would have no fear for yourself? Do you not fear that he may lose in humility, in sobriety, in spirituality; that he will mind earthly things now that he has so much to mind; that he will indulge and pamper his senses with unaccustomed luxuries; that his devotion to Christ and the Church of Christ may grow weaker now that he is bound to the world by so many pleasant ties? Are not *these* your fears? and have you not grave reason for them in history and experience? On the other hand, when you see a "rich brother," who has been successful in business, and for many years has lived in luxury and ease, suddenly reduced to comparative penury, or even to absolute want: if he has to "begin life again" when the strength and sanguine hopefulfulness of youth are past, do you not fear for *him*? Do you not fear that his piety may prove to have been a mere adjunct of his prosperity; that his patience may fail him; that he may grow sour, irritable, suspicious; that he may fail to get any good from the evil which has befallen him; that he may confound misfortune with disgrace, lose his self-respect, and conclude that he has forfeited the respect of men because it has pleased God to bring him low?

The shoe does not always pinch where our neighbours think it does. The most searching test in these great reverses is often, not in their direct, but in their indirect, consequences. A man, without being a hero, may have so much of goodness and of good sense as that a sudden access of fortune would make little difference to him, none *in* him, if he stood alone in the world: and yet it may pierce and try him to the heart because others share it with him. He may have a vulgar wife, fond of show, or children who *will* give themselves airs, or friends who flatter or fawn upon

him, or servants whose solemn, formal deference gives him a sense of importance; and by all these indirect influences his own standard of thought and duty may be insensibly changed and lowered. And the other man, the rich man who has been smitten with poverty, may be affected in a similar manner. To a sensible good man outward changes are of little moment save as they affect character and usefulness. How many a good fellow have we all known to whom the hard work and comparative penury of a reduced income has been a positive relief, and who would have snapped his fingers at "Fortune and her wheel" had he had no one to care for but himself, or had those for whom he was bound to care been likeminded with himself! But if he has a wife who frets or storms, or children who sulk and wrangle; if those immediately dependent on him are too "stuck up" to work for their bread, and yet cannot eat their bread without a good deal of the best butter,—then his trial may become very penetrating and severe. Our worst troubles, our sharpest griefs, are not always where men place them. Many a man would be modest in good fortune or cheerful under ill fortune, if those who stand nearest to him were of as Christian a heart as he. But when those to whom we look for example or sympathy or co-operation fail us; if parents give us only blame when we need their pity, or children who ought to be a help become a burden, then we are poor and tried indeed.

Are we to rejoice in such trials as these? Yes, even in these; for these, too, test our character and may help to make us perfect. St. James, indeed, speaks only of poverty and riches; but of course he includes under these terms whatever other changes or reverses they involve. And if a man find his kind, pleasant wife changed into a "fine lady" by prosperity, or into a shrew by adversity; if a woman find her once kind and manly husband turned into a fretful poltroon by misfortune, or into a lazy sensualist

by wealth, these sorrowful changes are part of the reverses which have come upon them; they are among the consequences of having been "lifted up" or "brought low"; and in these also the Apostle bids us rejoice.

Now is it possible that any man should be honestly glad to find himself penniless, for example, with a wife and children about him whose prospects have been blighted, and whose tempers have been soured? Let us put the question in that plain, practical way; for when the Lord Jesus bids us rejoice and be exceeding glad in the day of tribulation, or His "brother" James bids us count it pure joy when we fall into divers trials, there is a stately roll about the words, and so many sacred associations cluster round them, that they sound remote from the real, pressing experiences of our daily life; and it is here, in our daily life, that we want to know our duty and get help to do it.

Well, conceive as miserable a case as you can. Suppose a man reduced at a blow from affluence to want when his best days are past. Plague him with a scolding wife, lazy, ne'er-do-well sons, ailing, uppish, peevish daughters. Let his work be hard, uncertain, ill-paid; his home squalid and bare; his food scanty and ill-dressed. Let him suspect his friends of turning from him, and his neighbours of whispering as he passes by. Let him find his opportunities of culture and his means of usefulness curtailed. Heap upon him, in short, whatever you yourself most dread. And when the full, dismal burden is upon him, could you go to him and say, "Be of good courage, sir, and let thine heart be glad; for blessed is the man who endureth trial, since, when he is proved, he shall receive the crown of life"? No; you or I could not say that. We should not have the heart, we should not have the faith, to say it; but St. James *can* say it, and does, says it honestly, heartily, cheerfully. And to the poor souls who *must* bear their burden, which is the better comforter, you or I, who can only be

sorry for them, or St. James, who is not one whit sorry for them, and can teach them not to be sorry for themselves? Surely St. James is, out of all comparison, the better comforter; for who can comfort the afflicted like the man who can show them how to extract from affliction itself a deep and abiding joy?

Before *we* can honestly give, or take, the Apostle's comfort, we must occupy his position, we must hold his convictions, we must rise to the full stature of men in Christ Jesus. St. James held that this world would soon pass away, and that we should still sooner pass out of it; but that there is another world in which we shall live for ever, and in which our conditions will be shaped by our character. In his view, therefore, the chief aim of every man was, or should be, to form in himself a character which would best fit him both for the life that now is, and for that which is to come. It mattered very little whether he was rich or poor in things which he must soon leave behind him; what did matter was that by the enjoyment or by the loss of these things he should be qualifying himself for, should be laying hold of, the life which is eternal. Whatever changes, whatever reverses, contributed to elevate, purify, complete the power and quality of his life, and stamp on it the characters of immortality, should therefore be welcome to him. If poverty would test, raise, mature his character, welcome poverty; if wealth, welcome wealth. The whole visible world, with all its kingdoms and treasures, was of worth to him in proportion as it served to form a strong, pure, and noble character in him. Knowledge, wisdom, faith, righteousness, hope, charity, were the chief things of life; all else was valuable as it fostered and developed these, and became worthless and pernicious the moment it impeded or thwarted them.

These were St. James's views of human life, views which the brother of the Lord had learned from the Lord Him-

self, as we too may learn them from Him if we study the Sermon on the Mount. And it is only when these views have become our personal convictions that we can attain that independence of outward conditions, that power of making every breath or blow of change subserve our true interests, which will enable the poor brother to rejoice wisely when he is tested by wealth, and the rich brother to rejoice manfully when he is tested by poverty. In fine, we can only do what James bids us do when our religion becomes a sacred reality, pervading our whole life, governing every thought, passion, and aspiration of the soul. To too many of us, alas! our religion is like a stop in an organ, which we can pull out and shut off at will. On Sunday morning we pull it out, and for a time it discourses sweet music to us; but on Sunday evening we push it in, and use it no more till the week has run out. Religion is only the *Sunday* stop in the organ of our life. We are not of those

“With whom the melodies *abide*
Of the everlasting chime;
Who carry music in their heart
Through dusky lane and wrangling mart,
Plying their daily task with busier feet
Because their secret souls a holy strain repeat.”

And till we rise into a higher life, into a religious life, more real and deep, we must not hope to attain that large freedom of spirit for which neither opulence nor penury has any bonds. We who are not masters of ourselves if markets fall, how can *we* rejoice when we are brought low? If we would be lords of ourselves and of our fate, if we would be independent of outward conditions, if we would compel all changes and reverses to serve us and minister to our welfare, we must learn to be in the world as Christ was in the world—in it, but not *of* it; we must seek *first* that kingdom of God which is within us; we must live as

those who can never die. Do we lack wisdom, or strength, for this high task and enterprise? Are we feeling at this moment how much we lack it? Let us ask it of God, then; and it shall be given us.

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THE ARAMAIC GOSPEL.

INDICATIONS OF TRANSLATION.

WE wish now to address ourselves definitely to the task of endeavouring to prove, as we have promised, that certain portions of the synoptic Gospels present indications of having been translated from a common Aramaic original. We have enumerated what seem to us the usual concomitants of translation work from a foreign source, when that source is known; and to guard ourselves from error we have illustrated each point from the two translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, as presented in the Septuagint and the New Testament quotations. But when we come to the converse case, of deciding whether the productions of some two or three men, which bear singular marks of resemblance, be really translation work, we find that the concomitants referred to are far from being equally useful. It would, for instance, be of very little value for our present undertaking were we to show that, in certain sections, the synoptists "agree in substance, but not in words"; for in describing an event in the life of our Lord, or reporting one of His discourses, that sort of agreement is precisely what we should expect if the Saviour spoke Greek, and the evangelists made no use of any common material. Similarly, if one were to endeavour to show that certain sections in the synoptists contain more Aramaisms than others, that might be serviceable in proving that the Gospels were