

*THREE MOTIVES TO REPENTANCE.*

LUKE XIII. 1-9.

“*THAT* very season,” to which the first verse of this passage refers, cannot be fixed chronologically, but it can be characterised spiritually if we look back to the previous chapter. It was a season in which our Lord, like His apostle afterwards, was pressed in the spirit; an ardour unusual, or unusually visible, even for Him, glowed in all His words; He spoke of the fire He had come to cast on the earth, and His intense longing to see it take hold; of the baptism of pain that awaited Him, and of the relentless grasp in which His soul was held till it should be accomplished; of the signs of coming storm in the sky, and of the wisdom of making peace with the adversary while there was yet time. We need to remember this spiritual tension, this awful feeling of urgency, if we would do justice to our Lord’s threefold summons to repentance.

(1) The circumstances under which the Galileans were massacred by Pilate in the temple are unknown, but can easily be guessed. The Galileans were the most patriotic of the Jews, and it is natural to suppose that a disturbance, to which a political colour could be given, was summarily quelled by the governor. To the Jews, the action of Pilate was a horror of impiety: the temple had been profaned, the nation insulted, the instincts of humanity and religion outraged. No doubt there was wild excitement in Jerusalem, and it is conceivable that the story was carried to Jesus, as a person who made Messianic claims of some sort, and who might be expected to show a practical interest in the honour of the country.

Jesus startled his informants, as He startles us when we read the story, by the abrupt diversion of interest. “Do

you think that these Galileans were sinners above all Galileans, because they have suffered such things? No, I tell you : but except you repent, you shall all in like manner perish." Jesus speaks out of that tension of spirit just referred to ; He has said to Himself, This one thing I do—I strive to create in men's souls the sense of God and of their state in His sight, and I must make *everything* minister to that. We can understand in this case how He does it. The Jews as a whole were in warm sympathy with the Galileans. The same blind patriotism burned in all their bosoms, and would eventually lead them as a nation to fatal conflict with Rome. Certainly their patriotism professed to be religious ; it appealed to God, and rallied round the temple and the law ; nay, it was the consciousness of being God's people, and of having Him on their side, which animated them for battle, even in despair. Yet Jesus knew that the path on which the nation had entered could only lead to ruin ; He knew that God was calling it in Him to enter on a different path, to which, as a whole, it showed little leaning ; and He saw in the death of these Galileans, with all its atrocity of circumstance, a picture and prophecy of the doom, which, within a single generation, should overtake the race.

The moral motive to repentance is plain here. When we see lives ruined by the inevitable operation of forces which are at work in ourselves, God is summoning us with awful earnestness to change our ways. The more signal the ruin, the more urgent and imperative is the summons. When a career is blighted, a life cut short, a soul slain before our eyes, by sins to which we ourselves are not strange—by pride, by anger, by lust, by falsehood, by cowardice—what is it for ? Is the tragic impression made upon us only to pass away ? Is it to be a nine days' wonder, a thing to talk about, or to preach about ? No, it is a voice from heaven, a voice with the emphasis of a blow,

meant to stagger and shock the careless, and to make them think seriously of God.

(2) The case of the men on whom the tower fell was different. It was exactly what we call an accident, and the use made of it by Jesus raises the question whether an accident has a moral. The question is very often and very confidently answered in the negative; or if a moral is admitted, it is limited, so to speak, to the physical sphere; the accident, so far as it has a purpose at all, fulfils that purpose when it compels men to examine the causes which led to it, and to take means to prevent its recurrence. If a train leaves the rails, or a ship goes out of her course, and runs ashore on an unlighted coast, "the moral" is seen in the Board of Trade inquiry; if there is an outbreak of diphtheria or typhus, it is found in the report of the medical officer. When anyone goes outside of these, and after an appalling accident, which cuts off many lives in a moment, speaks of it as a "warning," or ventures to hint repentance, he runs the risk of being set down as a heartless fool. Why then did our Lord utilize this pure "accident," which no doubt made an immense sensation in Jerusalem, so directly and vehemently in a moral interest? Why did He say to people, who had been shocked by it, and who had felt as keenly as any moderns could the pitiableness of it, and their own inability to render any real help, Except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish?

We must admit that in the lips of an unfeeling man, or of a man who had only an official interest in speaking about repentance, such language would be unpardonably offensive. It is the use of it by such men that has brought it to discredit. But Christ's interest in repentance was an absorbing passion; He lived and died to make men other than they are; He knew that the change described by this word was the one thing needful for their salvation; He knew its immense difficulty, and He grudged everything—

especially He grudged every great and solemn emotion—which might have contributed to it, and did not. Men, as a rule, have little feeling, and it is this which makes their conversion hard. They live, so to speak, on the surface of their nature. Their common interests and pre-occupations are sufficient to engage them, and even to absorb and excite them, but they are rarely sufficient to reveal to them the hidden depths of their being, and to let them see that life has possibilities, and may have a purpose, which they have never contemplated. A great accident may have this heart-shaking, heart-searching, heart-revealing power. In the sight or the imagination of what has happened; in pity for the dead, for the hopes that have died with them, for the living they have left behind them; in the dim sense which visits the most hardened and the most unreflecting, that the unseen is not far off, that after death comes judgment, and that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God; in all this solemn experience men get a new light upon their nature, were it but for a moment, and the preacher of repentance gets a moment for his work, which no arrogance and no flippancy of unspiritual criticism should induce him to throw away.

The earthquake helped to convert the Philippian jailer; the fall of a tower, a crash on the railway, an explosion in a mine, may help, and if we take Christ's example here as indicating a law, ought to help in the conversion of all who are awed and startled by them. Such emotions are the opening of the nature to greater depths, the rendering of it more accessible to God, more sensible to interests to which it has hitherto been indifferent. Our Lord, in this lesson on repentance, teaches us that the waste of emotion is a serious thing for man, a distressing thing for Him, and for all workers for God. To see men moved, and moved deeply, yet not permanently, and not to the point of changing their life to the bottom, and putting it right with God,

this it was which straitened His spirit, and moved Him to speak with such startling vehemence.

(3) It is hardly certain that the parable of the fig-tree in the vineyard was spoken in the same breath as these two passionate words: the connexion indicated by ἔλεγε δὲ (*v.* 6) is rather loose than stringent. But even if it were first spoken on another occasion, its insertion here is very apposite, and may serve as an illustration of that guidance of the evangelists by a higher wisdom in which their inspiration as historians is displayed. It rounds off the lessons of the passage on repentance; it presents the same appeal, with the same importunity, on what seems at first a totally different ground.

There is no denying that the urgency of *vv.* 1-5 is very easily evaded by most men. Massacres and appalling accidents do not happen every day nor at every door. "What happened to the Galileans," people say, "or to those eighteen, is *not* going to happen to us. I never was in a railway collision, I never knew anybody who was; I never knew a man killed suddenly, without warning; it is not a case that has to be considered, and it is absurd to make the bare supposition of it a motive in life. Such appeals miss the mark, and produce no effect, but impatient contempt."

The parable is Christ's answer to this sceptical mood. He seems to side with it, but does not allow it to evade His earnestness. All this is true, He says; the massacre and the sudden deaths *are* extraordinary resources of which God avails Himself; but His goodness also—that goodness, which by your own objection so completely makes up life that you decline to take anything else into your reckoning—that goodness also is designed to lead you to repentance. God tries every way, because men seek to evade Him by every way. He tries severity, sudden, exceptional, startling, because they take goodness for granted; He tries goodness, uniform, ever-renewed, inexhaustibly patient, because He

is good, and severity His strange work. But it would be a fatal error to presume on His goodness. The parable ends with the same inexorable refrain as the verses about the Galileans and the fall of the tower. "If it bear fruit thenceforth (Dr. Field renders *εις τὸ μέλλον*, on good grounds, *next year*, which is in entire keeping with the rigour of Christ's tone, as if He had said 'after *one* chance more), *well*; but if not, thou shalt *cut it down*.'" Not to repent is perdition, let men argue about it as they please; if severity does not startle them into it, if goodness does not subdue them to it, they are lost. The sternness and passion of these utterances do not deny, or even disguise, the love of Christ; they are as truly the expression of it as that cry from the depths of a divine despair with which the chapter closes, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathereth her brood under her wings, and ye would not." Even after this the inexorable note is struck once more: "*Behold, your house is left unto you desolate*." No one has ever spoken so severely and with such awful urgency as Jesus, because no one has ever loved like Him.

To connect the three appeals of this passage in this way does not interfere, of course, with the interpretation of details in the parable, nor with its primary application to the Jewish people; but it keeps uppermost what, I think, the evangelist intended to be uppermost—the soul-travail of Christ for the conversion of men. The three words which He speaks are three flashes from the fire burning in his heart, that passion for God and His kingdom which He found it so hard to kindle in the cold hearts of men.

JAMES DENNEY.