

“AN ELECT RACE.”

(1 PETER II. 9.)

THESE words complete that account of the ideal sanctity and blessedness of all that are in Christ which is contained in the fourth and fifth verses of the chapter. Before attempting to develop their meaning, it may be well to say something about the quotation from the Old Testament which occurs in the intervening verses.

Peter has described Christ as “a living stone” on which, “as living stones,” all Christian men “are built up—a spiritual house.” The metaphor was probably suggested by a memorable passage in the 16th verse of the 28th chapter of the prophecies of Isaiah. He quotes it with some freedom, as far as the form is concerned; partly as it appears in the Hebrew, partly as it appears in the Septuagint version.

“Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious : and he that believeth on him (or it) shall not be put to shame.”

The prophecy was delivered at a time when the Jewish nation was in peril of an Assyrian invasion; the rulers were arranging for a treaty with Egypt; their policy is denounced by the prophet in the fiercest and most menacing terms, and they are told that their strength and safety were not to be found in alliances with any heathen powers. The true rock on which they were to build was in Zion itself; they were to trust in God’s eternal fidelity to the race which He had chosen: this was the precious corner stone and the solid foundation on which they were to construct all their national policy; and if their faith rested on this, they would not be put to shame. *Christ*, according to Peter, is the foundation on which the human race is now to build. He is the true foundation, the true corner stone, elect, precious or honoured. And those who build on Him share the preciousness or honour.

As for those who refuse to believe, he reminds them that "*The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner,*"—a quotation from the 118th Psalm with which I have already dealt.

And that quotation suggests another from the early part of Isaiah (viii. 14). God would be a sacred stone like that at Bethel—a sanctuary for those who trusted in Him and honoured Him; but for those who refused to trust He would be "*a rock of offence,*"—a stone over which they should stumble as they fled from their enemies; and, stumbling, their limbs would be broken.

The language is the language of the imagination, and of the imagination under strong excitement. But its meaning is not obscure. To those who trust in God He will give safety and peace, but those who refuse to trust in Him He will sharply punish. How men bear themselves to Him is the critical question: in Him, if they are loyal, they are to find safety; in Him, if they are disloyal, they are to find trouble, and sorrow, and punishment. It is what the moralist says in another form. Those great moral laws which are supreme over human conduct give safety, and peace, and honour to men and nations that obey them, and inflict shame and ruin on men and nations that defy them. They are a sanctuary to good men; they are "*a rock of offence and a stone of stumbling*" to bad men. And to that stumbling they are "*appointed*"; if they are disobedient, they are destined to come to harm. Peter does not mean that they are destined to disobedience, but that being disobedient they are destined to stumble. A very natural misconception of his thought has arisen from the unusual meaning of the word "*stumble*" in this passage. Elsewhere, to "*stumble*" usually means to commit sin, to fall under temptation, but here the meaning is quite different; it means to come to harm through committing sin. Peter is speaking of the disobedient; they are running recklessly

in the wrong way, and they stumble over the great stone, and by stumbling their limbs are broken. That is what they are destined to. God means those to suffer who disobey Him. Their suffering is not accidental, it is of Divine appointment.

And now we come to the noble words with which this movement of thought closes. It completes the illustration showing how the ancient Judaism had been transfigured to the mind of the apostle. He had been born a Jew, but had become a Christian, and yet he had not broken with his past. How could he? The memories, the hopes, the institutions of Judaism had been wrought into the very substance of his religious life. He had not lost any of them; they were glorified. It had been his joy and pride to belong to a “race elect” of God; now all Christian men are the true, elect race. The election of the Jewish people was the symbol of an election far more sacred and glorious. In a very true sense the Jewish people had been a “priesthood”; they had been destined to this sanctity. But Christian men are the true priesthood,—the royal priesthood,—because consecrated to the service of the Divine King. And Christian men are the “holy nation”—citizens of the true kingdom of God. Israel had once been God’s “*peculiar possession*,” He had separated it from all other countries and peoples to be in a wonderful sense His own, but now this blessedness and honour belong to all Christians. The phrase “*peculiar possession*” is a curious and suggestive one. It is not quite easy to give its full force in English. But let me illustrate it. In each of the Australian colonies there are extensive grounds surrounding the house in which the Governor lives. These are called the “domain”; the Governor has authority over the whole country, but the “domain” is his “*peculiar possession*.” An ingenious commentator has given one or two other illustrations of what the words mean: the money a slave

had earned by working over hours, or the money a wife may have apart from her husband,—this might be described as their "*peculiar possession*." Or to use a still more familiar illustration, the word means exactly what children mean when they speak of something as being their *very own*. The whole world belongs to God; Christian men belong to Him in a very special and exceptional sense.

And their blessedness and honour are not for themselves alone: they are elect of God, they are a royal priesthood, they are a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that they "*may shew forth the excellence of Him that called them out of darkness into His marvellous light*." That, too, is a reminiscence of another passage in Isaiah (xliii. 21), in which the Jewish nation is described as "The people which I formed for Myself, that they might set forth My praise." The privileges bestowed on the Jewish race were not for themselves merely, but for all mankind. They were to bear witness to all nations concerning the greatness, the righteousness, the mercy of God. Hence in the 105th Psalm (*vv.* 14, 15), in which the great deeds of God for the Jewish people are celebrated, it is said that "He reprov'd kings for their sakes; saying, Touch not mine anointed ones, and do My prophets no harm." All the people were consecrated to God: all had to deliver their testimony to the glory of the Eternal.

The great place which was appointed to the Jewish nation in the order of the world, and the great purpose which it failed to fulfil, belong now to Christian people scattered over all countries, who in the natural order did not constitute a people, but who are now through God's great mercy drawn into one great community consecrated to His service and glory.

It is to this conception of the Church that I wish to call attention. The blessings of the Christian redemption are *ours*, and through Christ we have come into the light of

God. The heavy darkness which concealed God from us has passed away. We know Him for ourselves. We know that He has forgiven us, that we have received eternal life, that we dwell in God and God in us.

But there is a noble and generous element in the ideal life of the Church, which we cannot ignore without defeating one of the great ends for which the redemption came to us. The whole Church is to tell out—to proclaim—the excellencies of God. Peter is not thinking so much of the worship we have to offer to God as of the testimony which we have to deliver to men,—and to deliver in order that men may be brought into the same light as ourselves. He is thinking of that conception of the Jewish nation which is contained in the verses of the Psalm, which I have already quoted.

All were prophets. Every Jew, layman or priest, that was in Egypt when the plagues descended on the Egyptians, could speak of the great deeds of God by which the spirit of their oppressors was broken, and the way prepared for their emancipation. Every Jew, layman or priest, that crossed the dry bed of the Red Sea, and so escaped from the armies of Pharaoh, could speak of the strong wind of God which beat back the waters, and gave the nation of fugitives a dry path to the desert. And the wonderful deliverances which in later times were achieved for the Jewish race—it needed no genius, no exceptional sanctity, no official authority to speak of them; the whole nation witnessed them, shared in them, and could speak of them: it was a nation of prophets.

We too—all Christian men—as we are a race of priests, are also a race of prophets, and we have to speak to men of greater deliverances which reveal "*excellencies*" of God more wonderful and glorious than those which were revealed in the national deliverances of the Jewish people. We have to declare to men that we have been "*called out*

*of darkness into God's marvellous light.*" And by this is meant not merely that our conduct and character should bear a silent testimony to our redemption; Peter speaks later on of the "*good works*" which are to confirm the testimony. Here he is speaking of the testimony itself: we are a race of prophets, and have to speak for God. And we have to speak of our great transition out of darkness into the marvellous light of God.

It is the manner of New Testament writers to speak of light as the element in which God dwells and in which He reveals His power, His righteousness and His love; and our present salvation, though incomplete, is a passing out of darkness into light.

We have found God, because God has found us. He has a real and effective place in our life. We may not obey Him perfectly, but His will is the law of our conduct; and though we may be turned aside into inferior paths, the main direction of our effort is towards pleasing Him. His love, even where it does not create a joy which is never clouded, is a solace, a support; it sometimes fills the heart with the light of heaven; it is a constraining and an animating force. We know that He has forgiven our sins. We know that we have received strength from Him for righteous living, and that, although we may come far short of perfection, we are different men from what we should have been but for the Christian redemption. Life is less lonely to us because God is near; it is less terrible, less menacing, because we know that He is supreme. Without Him, the world would now be very dark to us, although as yet we do not see His great glory. He is on our side; we are on His side. Our remembrance of His presence, our trust in His righteousness and love give us courage, and hope, and endurance, as well as guidance. Many of us are conscious that we are really His children,—that we share His life as well as His love. To some the light may have

come with all the suddenness of a tropical sunrise; to others, so gradually that they could hardly tell when the night ended and the first rays of dawn shot across the eastern sky. But if we try to imagine what life and the world and the universe would be to us if all that we know of God and have experienced of His grace were suddenly to disappear, we discover that we are really living a life to which God has become necessary, and which would lose its dignity, and peace, and power, and hope if God were lost.

We have been called into God's "*marvellous light*": both the call and the answer illustrate His excellencies,—His infinite abhorrence of the evil life from which He has delivered us,—His infinite love of the righteous life to which He has called us,—His love for us and His mercy,—His power to change the direction of the main currents of life; to give energy to our desire to keep the law, to add depth and fervour to our love for Himself. We are amazed that He should have loved us; for apart from Himself there is nothing in us to love. We are amazed that He should be able to make righteousness possible to us; for in ourselves there seems an unmeasured and invincible tendency to sin. We are amazed that even here we should have access to Him. How wonderful it is that creatures with powers so limited—powers too, which, apart from His inspiration, are never earnestly and persistently put forth either in the endeavour to do His will, or in the endeavour to find Him—how wonderful it is, with the sin that is in us as well as the infirmity, that we should receive the very life of God, and should know that He is indeed and of a truth our Father! We bear testimony to the excellencies of Him who hath called us out of darkness into His marvellous light.

As really as the ancient prophets were destined to tell men of the great discoveries of the thought and will of God which they had received by the Spirit, we are destined to tell men of our own great transition from darkness into

marvellous light through God's infinite love and power. We cannot bear testimony at first hand to miracles wrought by Christ during His earthly life. But we can bear testimony at first hand to miracles still more wonderful, and with a larger meaning,—can make our own the memorable words, "Whereas I was blind, now I see." We are not original witnesses of Christ's resurrection, but we can tell men of our own. We have passed out of darkness and death into the light and life of God.

Do you say, It is hard to be sure of it? Let me ask you whether you have tried to be sure; whether you have taken pains to be sure; whether you have made it a great and serious object to be sure?

There are several causes which, under God, account for the immense success of the great Wesleyan movement of the last century: one of them is the earnestness with which John Wesley and the early Methodist preachers insisted on the duty of obtaining what they called *assurance*. I am not quite clear that they were always right in their terminology; but I am quite clear that they were right in the substance of their meaning. A Christian man ought to have as certain a knowledge that he has come out of darkness into the light of God as Lazarus had that he had come back out of the grave into the streets of Bethany, and was sitting once more in the house of Mary and Martha. And until we have this knowledge—which the Methodists called "*assurance*"—we cannot show forth His praise.

Can we have it? Can we all have it? I see no reason why we may not all have it. The immense majority, I imagine, of the Methodist converts in the last century had it; they had it because they wanted it, believed that it was possible, prayed for it earnestly and persistently, prayed for it till they had it.

And so there was a great army of men eager to preach.



Many of them knew very little, but they knew the great thing which it is necessary for a witness to know. They knew their facts, and were hot and eager to bear testimony to them. And it was not the preachers alone who bore the testimony; every man, every woman that had found God, and was sure of it, was also hot and eager to bear testimony. Brother spoke to brother, sister to sister, friend to friend, and the fire spread, and soon a great part of England and then of Wales and Scotland and America was aflame. It was an age in which the fortunes of the Christian faith seemed lost. Cool, speculative, learned men thought that they had wholly discredited the testimony of the four Evangelists to the power and glory of Christ; but instead of the four, here were hundreds of fresh witnesses, original witnesses; and the hundreds grew to thousands, and the thousands to tens of thousands, and faith, which seemed beaten to the ground, rose exulting, and won most splendid victories.

Shall we not ask God to give to all of us this sure assurance of our redemption? Shall we not seek it for others as well as for ourselves?

*This* is the Divine method of creating faith: not by the examination of ancient records, but by the utterance of living men who know for themselves.

And if we know, God deliver us from the shame and guilt of refusing to bear our testimony.

R. W. DALE.