

OPERA FORIS.

MATERIALS FOR THE PREACHER.

VI.

1 THESS. v. 8:—*Putting on the breastplate* (or rather, *the coat of mail*) *of faith and love.*

Faith and love are the coat of mail. They cannot be protected by anything external to themselves. Trust in God is its own defence in an age of doubt and temptation. Love to men carries with it an invincible power which is of its itself sufficient to overcome harshness and cynicism. All that faith and love require is to be *put on*. Their vitality depends upon their exercise. If worn daily, they will protect the believing man against indifference to the claims of God and men; they will produce a sensitiveness to God and an alertness to the needs of others which safeguard the soul against the deadly wounds of apathy. To exercise a vigilant faith in God, to practise consideration, unselfish help, and self-sacrifice, these, Paul would suggest, are the one safe attitude for a Christian to assume. Occupied with these, he cannot be surprised or overthrown.

Faith is, in fact, its own security, if it is a living faith. It may and does gain support from the fellowship of those who are like-minded. That is one reason why Paul combines here as elsewhere *faith and love*. But this brotherhood or fellowship is in its turn an expression of vital faith in God, so that in the last resort it holds true that "faith is not to be saved by anything that would supersede faith, but only by its faithfulness" (T. H. Green) to the tasks which God reveals to its inner vision. Paul freely recognizes the immense help afforded to Christian faith and love by reliable historical tradition, organization, and definite statements. But he proposes no coat-of-mail *for* faith.

He has absolute confidence in its inherent power of maintaining itself, furnishing its own evidence, and supplying its own vital energy. The worst thing that can happen to it is to be left unused and rusting. Its sorest foe is not the man who assails it from without but the man who, when entrusted and honoured with it, suffers it to fall out of touch with actual life.

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1 Tim. v. 24, 25:—

Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment ;

and some men they follow after.

Likewise also the good works of some are manifest before hand ;

and they that are otherwise cannot be hid.

Most editors take these verses in connexion with what precedes, as a reminder to Timothy that human character is not easy to read, and that the outward life of men requires careful scrutiny before it is passed or rejected by any one who has to make appointments or administer affairs within the society. Men are not always what they seem. They may be either worse or better than a superficial reading of their actions might suggest.

Wohlenberg, in his edition of the epistles (Zahn's *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, xiii. pp. 187f.), ingeniously proposes on the other hand to connect these verses with the following injunction to Christian slaves (vi. 1-2):—
Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and of his doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren. The connexion is as follows, according to Wohlenberg. "Slaves occupy a position in which their misdeeds become quickly known and receive immediate punishment, whereas

their good actions are usually allowed to pass unnoticed. On the other hand, when their masters sin, the wrongdoing gets hushed up and palliated, while any praiseworthy action on the part of masters is at once made public and honoured, thanks to their conspicuous position."

This exegesis makes the apostle side with the slaves rather than with their masters, or at least dwell more on the faults of the latter. The former must not bring discredit on the Gospel by impertinence or laziness, nor must they presume on the kindness of such masters as happen to be Christians themselves, by insubordination. Let them not fear that their own virtues will go for nothing. And let them not imagine that their masters' injustice and cruelty will escape the judgment of God.

With the general sentiment we may compare Mr. Yorke's method (in *Shirley*, chap. iv.), when he got vexed with successful evil in this world. He "believed fully that there was such a thing as judgment to come. If it were otherwise, it would be difficult to imagine how all the scoundrels who seemed triumphant in this world, who broke innocent hearts with impunity, abused unmerited privileges, were a scandal to honourable callings, took the bread out of the mouths of the poor, browbeat the humble, and truckled meanly to the rich and proud—were to be properly paid off, in such coin as they had earned. But," he added, "whenever he got low-spirited about such like goings-on and their seeming success in this mucky lump [of a planet, he just reached down t'owd book" (pointing to a great Bible in the book-case), "opened it like at a chance, and he was sure to light of a verse blazing wi' a blue brimstone glow that set all straight. He knew," he said, "where some folk was bound for, just as weel as if an angel wi' great white wings had come in ower t' door-stone and told him."

Lamentations i. 4: *She is in bitterness.*

The threefold cause of Judah's bitter experience after the exile. Her sense of humiliation was due to (a) the bitterness of weakness. She was unable to help herself or to secure assistance from other people (ver. 7):—

*Her people fell into the hand of the adversary,
and none did help her.*

Even those allies and neighbours on whom she might have counted, have failed her at the emergency,¹ and proved but fair-weather friends (ver. 2):—

*Among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her;
All her friends have dealt treacherously with her.*

To the humiliation of this impotence must be added (b) the bitterness of memory. "Sorrow's crown of sorrow" for the captive nation is "remembering happier things" and times (ver. 7):—

*Jerusalem remembereth in the days of her affliction and of her
miseries*

all the pleasant things that she had in the days of old.

The comparison between the bright past and the grey present is part of the nation's anguish. Then finally, (c) there is the bitterness of confession. She has but herself to blame, after all, for the disaster (ver. 8):—

*Jerusalem hath grievously sinned;
Therefore she is become as an unclean thing.*

She has been the victim of her own folly: that is the reflection which adds poignancy to her sense of shame and defeat and loneliness. In the last resort, she cannot honestly blame any one except herself for what has happened. She had brought it on herself.

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¹ Compare Swift's remark to Stella: "I have many friends and many enemies, and the last are more constant in their nature."