

or the apocalyptic side of His beliefs is no doubt a matter as to which various opinions may be held. I am altogether on the side of those who regard the apocalyptic side as comparatively unessential, though I am aware that much may be

urged to the contrary. But to assert, as does Dr. Schweitzer, that it is a question of *either—or*, and that the apocalyptic side of the teaching is the only side, seems to me a quite unmaintainable theory in the face of St. Paul's Epistles.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF THE PSALMS.

PSALM I. 3.

'And he shall be like a tree planted by the streams of water,
That bringeth forth its fruit in its season,
Whose leaf also doth not wither;
And whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.'

THE subject of the First Psalm is the advantage of being good. And that in this life. In the First Psalm, as in all the Old Testament, God is a rewarder, even here, of them that diligently seek Him. It is well with the righteous, it is ill with the wicked, now, in this life. The evidence was not always on the surface. A superficial view of the world told against the doctrine rather than in its favour. And the Psalmists were not always superior to the temptation of counting the proud happy. Yet it was experience that originally taught them that the lot of the righteous was better than the lot of the wicked; and an enlarged experience, confirmed by faith in God, always brought them back to that conviction. The First Psalm is a good introduction to the whole Psalter.

The Psalm is divided into two parts, each of three verses. The first part describes the righteous man and his lot; the second, the character and lot of the wicked man. The good man is first described negatively, in contrast to the bad man. He does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of the scornful. In the second verse he is described positively, and by himself. He is one who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates in it day and night. Then, in the third verse, the writer rises to the height of his great argument, and in a passage of singular beauty describes what God has laid up in store for him that loves Him and keeps His commandments. *First*, he shall

reach the perfection of his being, the completeness of that life which is his—'he shall be like a tree planted by the streams of water.' *Next*, he shall accomplish the service for which he has been prepared, using appropriately and beneficently the gifts which God has given him—'that bringeth forth its fruit in its season.' *Thirdly*, he shall enjoy a perpetual freshness and interest in life—'whose leaf also doth not wither.' And *fourthly*, all his actions will be crowned with success—'whatsoever he doeth shall prosper'; or if we take the marginal reading, 'in whatsoever he doeth he shall prosper,' everything will work together for his good. The meaning is really the same.

I.

FULNESS OF LIFE.

'He shall be like a tree planted by the streams of water.'

To the Psalmist the life of devotion to the good was in no wise a thing of gloom; it was the only life that was rich and full as life could be. To delight in the law of the Lord did not mean that the nature was starved, deprived of its heritage, despoiled of the bloom and beauty whereby it ought to be adorned: consecration to holy things brought no emptiness, no dulling of life's brightness, no toning down of its joy: the man of spirituality was not left standing like some worn and scarred tree whose day of fruitfulness and grace was for ever gone by; he possessed, rather, the secret of perpetual youth and unfailing strength and undying gladness. He should be like a tree planted by the streams of water, that bringeth forth its fruit in its season: upon him there should descend no barrenness of winter; but in him, and upon

him, there should always rest the sweetness and beauty of spring.¹

It is one of the charges frequently cast against religion that it belittles human nature too much, and makes man feel that in this world he is hardly of any account at all; and religion treats man, they say, as if he were a rotten bough which deserves to be lopped off, and is only spared by the forbearance of the husbandman, rather than as a tree which brings forth its fruit in its season. And that in the truly consecrated life there will be, and must be, a consciousness of failure and a shamed realization that often and often the husbandman has come seeking fruit and finding none, is, of course, one of the elementary common-places of religious truth. But there is another side which is not to be ignored; and if in the consecrated life there comes first of all the sense that we are worth nothing, there should come next the sense that we are worth something, because through our consecration we become witnesses to and influences on behalf of the supreme thing, the best thing, in all the world. Delighting ourselves in the law of the Lord, we stand now for that which is dearest to God; and to do that is to make life great and to give life a worthy place.²

Among the many images under which the good man is described in Holy Scripture, perhaps there is none more vivid, says Newman, more beautiful, and more touching than that which represents him as some favoured and thriving tree in the garden of God's planting. Our original birthplace and home was a garden; and the trees which Adam had to dress and keep, both in themselves and by the sort of attention they demanded, reminded him of the peaceful happy duties and the innocent enjoyments which were the business of his life. A garden in its perennial freshness and its soothing calm is the best type of heaven, and its separate plants and flowers are the exactest types of its blessed inhabitants. Accordingly it is introduced into the last page of Scripture as well as into the first; it makes its appearance at the conclusion of man's eventful history as in the record of its opening. As in the beginning we read of the Paradise of pleasure, with the great river and its four separate streams, with all manner of trees, fair to behold and pleasant to eat of, and, above all, the Tree of Life—so, in the last chapter of the Apocalypse, we are told of the river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb, which he that thirsteth may drink freely; and of the Tree of Life, bearing twelve fruits, the leaves of which were for the healing of the nations.³

The reference is clearly to the date-palm, one of the most important and valuable fruit-trees of these regions. It has frequently been suggested that it is the lovely oleander, 'the willows by the watercourses,' which screen, with their perennial shade, every river and brooklet in the land, and for weeks, in the early summer, shed a glowing sheet of pink over the fringe of every watercourse. But the oleander does not meet the conditions of this comparison; it is not planted, but indigenous, and it bears no fruit. The date-palm alone meets all requirements. Though it will grow in almost any soil, it will never bear fruit unless within reach of water; and as it is a dioecious tree, with the stamens and pistils on different plants, it very rarely yields fruit except under human care. It is true, one often sees palm groves where there is no apparent sign of water, in the most barren deserts. But the wandering Arab knows well that, wherever he sees a palm tree, he has but to probe deep enough to find water below.⁴

In order that the palm tree may attain the perfection of a palm tree, it has to be planted by the streams of water. In order that a man may reach the height of his manhood, he must surrender himself to God, who will appoint him his place and bring him his nourishment.

I. A TREE PLANTED.—It did not plant itself. It surrendered itself wholly and utterly to the husbandman. He took it in hand and dealt with it, and that was the beginning of its prosperity. This utter and whole-hearted surrender of ourselves is the first step in the blessed life. The Husbandman must have possession before he can do any planting. Let us see this very plainly. The difference between those who are the Lord's and those who are not, is not that some are born religious; it is not that some have been brought up in the midst of religious influences; it is not that some people believe certain theories and creeds, and others either do not understand them or do not think about them. It is not a matter of understanding. The religious life is a matter of *will, of choice, of surrender to God.*⁵

It is not the tree, but the planting and the place, that constitute the blessedness. So, then, do not let us think that we are the wrong sort. I have seen, in old-fashioned gardens, trees that have been cut and hacked and twisted into all sorts of fantastic shapes: peacocks and pagodas, and I know not what else. Alas for the trees that think they must be turned into peacocks before they can prosper! There are two kinds of religious people in the world: there are those who always want to be somebody else, and there are those who want everybody else to be exactly like themselves. Now, the woods need all the kinds of trees that

¹ H. W. Clark, *Laws of the Inner Kingdom*, 44.

² H. W. Clark, *ibid.* 49.

³ J. H. Newman, *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, 243.

⁴ H. B. Tristram, in *S.S. Times*, 19th March 1892, p. 185.

⁵ M. G. Pearse, *The God of our Pleasures*, 71.

God has made; and the world wants all the kinds of people that God has sent into it. Some people are, perhaps, very different from what God made them, but He wants us to be every one after his kind. As I walked through the woods the other day, I thought within myself how it would spoil everything if there sprang up a quarrel as to which was the *right* kind of tree. If the poplar contended proudly that everybody should stand upright, and make the most of himself; and the birch said it was a sign of grace to bend one's self on the earth, and told the poplar not to be so stiff! If the hawthorn sneered at the holly because it had its winter suit still; and the holly put up all its prickles and said, 'If I remembered rightly, the hawthorn had no winter suit to boast of. No, no; they mingle together, and each lends the other a new beauty, and the variety is the charm and play of the whole. The Heavenly Father made them all, and ministers to them all, and has a purpose for them all.'¹

'Those that are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God.' It is the triumph of faith when we are brought to see how God not only provides but applies everything necessary for the perfection of man's salvation; and when, looking out of ourselves, we can discern a covenant 'well ordered and sure,' to the terms of which He has bound Himself. He 'cannot lie'; and the believer feels that, accepting salvation on His terms, he is not only reclining in the arms of boundless love, but is firmly resting on the Rock of eternal truth. It is well that God does all; it is our 'strong consolation.'

I was looking the other day at a tree that stood tall and flourishing, a perfect picture, and my friend told me that he had stuck a piece of stick in the ground and looked after it. 'And now,' he said, 'it has come to that.'²

Dr. John Paton, speaking of Namakei, his first convert on the island of Aniwa, says: 'He went in and out with intense joy. When he heard of the prosperity of the Lord's work, and how island after island was learning to sing the praise of Jesus, his heart glowed, and he said, "Missi, I am lifting up my head like a tree; I am growing tall with joy."'

2. BY THE STREAMS.—There is not only the rock to hold on to, but there is the river to refresh it. Rock and river, river and rock, this is what the law of God becomes. They who do not know think the law of God is hard and stern as the voice of thunder, with its *Thou shalt*. But they who do know cry, 'Great peace have they that keep Thy law.' It is rivers of water, sweet, refreshing, quickening. We think of the law as a command, but we come to find it a promise. 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart.' The word awes me, frightens me, withers me. But lo!

¹ M. G. Pearse, *The God of our Pleasures*, 67.

² M. G. Pearse, *ibid.* 70.

as the Blessed Lord comes on His way He speaks: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart.' It is not a command, but a promise, a pledge, and the very word brings the fulfilment.

There is a celebrated vine at Hampton Court that for many years disappointed the gardener's hopes. It was quite healthy, but there were few grapes. One year, however, it was unexpectedly laden with clusters of the finest fruit. Seeking to discover the cause of this, the gardener laid bare its roots, traced their ramifications, and found that they had suddenly gone through the banks into the Thames. It had 'sent forth its roots to the river,' and thenceforth ceased not from yielding fruit in richest abundance.

II.

SEASONABLE FRUITFULNESS.

'That bringeth forth its fruit in its season.'

This tree planted by the streams of water does not stand there for naught: it brings forth fruit in its season. Not only does it realize itself: it fulfils a worthy use.³

Every righteous life must end in fruit. The greenness and the beauty are but a form of promise. The inexorable condition on which life is given is that it should reach forward to fruit-bearing. He bore His fruit—in due season God fixed, and He still fixes, the season. The long tarrying in Nazareth, the brief ministry, the early and cruel death, the short sleep in the grave—all of them were timed and planned by the Eternal Wisdom and Love.⁴

If we would really bring before us what is both the highest blessedness in God's service, and also, in fact, the ordinary portion of good men, we shall find it to consist in what from its very nature cannot make much show in history,—in a life barren of great events, and rich in small ones; in a life of routine duties, of happy obscurity and inward peace, of an orderly dispensing of good to others who come within their influence, morning and evening, of a growth and blossoming and bearing fruit in the house of God, and of a blessed death in the presence of their brethren. Such has been the round of days of many a pastor up and down Christendom, as even history has recorded, of many a missionary, of many a monk, of many a religious woman, of many a father or mother of a family, of many a student in sacred or profane

³ H. W. Clark, *Laws of the Inner Kingdom*, 49.

⁴ W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Garden of Nuts*, 119.

literature,—each the centre of his own circle, and the teacher of his own people, though more or less unknown to the world.¹

I live for those who love me,
For those who know me true;
For the heaven that smiles above me,
And awaits my spirit, too;
For the cause that lacks assistance,
For the wrong that needs resistance,
For the future in the distance,
And the good that I can do.

III.

PERPETUAL FRESHNESS.

'Whose leaf also doth not wither.'

The leaf is the thing of the spring-time. It is the first thing that comes. How soon it loses its delightful freshness! How soon the sweet greenness passes into the darker shades of summer, and becomes sere and yellow in the older days of autumn! But my text speaks of a religious life whose leaf shall retain its freshness through all the changing days. The spring glory shall not wither as the years roll away. The beauties of the spring-time shall continue through all the seventy years. The characteristic charms of childhood shall never be destroyed. Life shall grow. It shall increase in knowledge. It shall broaden in experience. It shall open out large capacities and powers. But amid all the many and varied developments the beauties of childhood shall remain. **'His leaf shall not wither.'**²

It is an evergreen, in which, while the leaves do fade and fall away, according to the universal law of life, they do so without being marked; in which there is no long interval of winter desolation, but a constant succession of foliage, keeping the tree always fresh and green. The leaf of the tree belongs to the tree itself. It is the part that is peculiar to its individual life. By it the tree breathes and forms its wood from air and sunshine. It is its strength, it is *itself*; for the whole tree is simply a modification and development of the leaf, as it is most certainly the creation of the leaf. The leaf, therefore, represents the righteous man's own life. Not only does he do good to others by self-sacrificing labours, and thus keep up the general blessedness of the world, but he gets good to

himself. His own life is blessed. Nothing can keep the heart fresh and young and joyful amid the cares and changes of life like the godliness which is to a man's nature what sunlight is to a plant.³

What are the leaves which make childhood so beautiful? They are these—hope and sympathy. These are the fresh green adornments of the spring-time of life. How many of us lose them as life passes forward into its prime. That is a wonderful word in the Apocalypse, wherein we are told that 'the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.' If ever the wounds and sorrows of the world are to be healed, it will have to be by the leaves of the tree of life, the green leaves of the spring-time, the leaves of hope and sympathy. It is the child-like disposition which is to heal the world's broken heart.⁴

There are some who by their pursuit of holy things seem to be made the most crabbed and unlovely people on the face of the earth. And still the Psalmist's doctrine may stand. If our professed delight in the law of the Lord does not make us like trees planted by the streams of water, we had better look to see whether there be not something wrong with our professed delight. Take it as a truth—devotion to goodness keeps the heart young. Consecration brings the joy of constant freshness upon heart and life.⁵

There are four seasons in thy spiritual year—the winter of desolation; the buds of spring, which tell of hope; the warmth of summer, which speaks the fulness of the heart; and the ingathering of autumn, which is the time for life's practical fruits. Each season has its fruit, and the fruit is in its turn golden. Do not seek to change the order of God's spiritual year; do not seek to put the fruits of one season into the lap of another. Thou must not expect the buds of spring from the desolation of winter, for desolation is the fruit of winter; thou, like Nicodemus, must begin thy journey in the sense of night—night without a star. Thou must not expect the warmth of summer from the buds of spring, for the fruit of spring is not fruition but hope; thou, like Peter, must be content for a time to live on aspiration alone. Thou must not expect the practical ingathering of autumn from the warmth of summer, for the fruit of summer is not action but emotion;

¹ J. H. Newman, *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, 246.

² J. H. Jowett, *Meditations for Quiet Moments*, 120.

³ H. Macmillan, *Two Worlds are Ours*, 207.

⁴ J. H. Jowett, *ibid.* 121.

⁵ H. W. Clark, *Laws of the Inner Kingdom*, 48.

thou, like John, must be content to lie on the Master's bosom until thy time to work for Him shall come.¹

A few days ago I called to see an old Christian who, too, is waiting for her translation, having nearly reached her ninetieth year. To her, life, as seen from the hilltop in the glory of the setting sun, seems a wondrous and beautiful thing, as indeed it is when it has been lived in loving service for God and man; and she has no word of complaint, but only of praise and thanksgiving to God. Across every page of her life-story she says there is written in letters of light, 'goodness and mercy.' Trials, yes, she has had them, but these have made the longing for the homeland deeper. Pain, yes, the old body suffers sometimes, day and night, but she can still sing 'Rock of Ages,' and 'I know that my Redeemer lives,' and it helps her when the hours are long and the nights are dreary. Like Billy Bray, the Lord has given her vinegar with a spoon, and honey with a ladle. And just when she was mourning that she could *do* nothing more for her Lord but just *be* a Christian in thought and deed, He graciously gave her something to fill up the measure of her days. A little grandchild came into her life, and in all this city there is no more beautiful sight than the old white-haired saint and the golden-haired child bending over the big Bible and looking at the pictures, while the grandmother tells stories which never lose their charm—of Joseph and Moses, and Daniel, and the Christ-Child, for whom the world had no better cradle than a manger. And her cup of joy is full to the brim, and all she can say is, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul.'²

'Whose leaf doth not wither.'

Never a heart, O God,
Grown sere and old,
Its streams of passion and of pain all spent,
Its tale all told;
Never an empty heart,
All ivied o'er,—
But one made wise to love and to be loved
More and yet more.
No withered winter tree,
Sapless and bare,
Lifting its leafless arms from the lone moor
To the bleak air,—
But planted, Lord, within
Thy Holy Place,
To strike new roots each day in the rich soil,
And grow in grace.

IV.

UNFAILING PROSPERITY.

'And whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.'

The Jewish doctrine of retribution expressed in

¹ G. Matheson, *Moments on the Mount*, 79.

² S. Horton, *Christian World Pulpit*, lxx. 116.

the psalm is, according to our ideas, too superficial: we cannot believe that piety and external welfare always go together. Yet this doctrine is founded on a fundamental conviction of all higher religion—the conviction that piety must bear fruit, and that religion is not merely a subjective experience—rather that the pious man receives God's blessing and guidance.³

1. If we judge human life fairly and according to our best convictions, we shall probably come to a conclusion similar to that of the Psalmist, and even identical with it, though we may not express it in so absolute and unqualified a form. We see many exceptions, or many apparent exceptions, to the rule, but still we do hold it for a rule of life, that goodness thrives and reaches a good end, while badness languishes, tends to, and actually comes to, a bad end. By neither path, perhaps, do men reach their end *at once*, or soon. The ungodly, the sinner, and the scorner may swagger by us, and, with the world, the flesh, and the devil to help them, they may make a brave show for a time; but if we watch them carefully, we shall see their 'way' perishing behind and even under their feet, so that they cannot hark back even when they see the place of their torment before them, and can only with great labour and peril climb up into some better way. And, for a time, the good man, as he sits meditating on the law of the Lord, or delights to do His will with busy hand and eager foot, may see the world go by him, or hear its laugh of contempt, and feel lonely, hurt, forsaken. But has he lost so very much in losing the company, the smile and approval, of the world? Others grow rich, he keeps poor; others win reputation, he remains unknown; but if his character has been really formed by the Law in which he studies and delights, if in these brief hours of time he has really laid hold on eternal life, if he can smile at Fortune and her wheel because all changes, whether adverse or prosperous, bring him nearer to God, is he very much to be pitied for his loss? *What* has he lost after all? He has lost 'the chaff,' which is the sport of every wind, and which at last the wind of death must carry away. *What* has he gained? He has gained a place by that stream of living waters which carries life, fertility, fruitfulness, wherever it flows. The man who is sincerely

³ H. Gunkel, in *The Biblical World*, February 1903, p. 123.

good grows ever better, while the man who is really bad grows ever worse. Goodness tends to *life* in its highest sense; and badness to *death* in its saddest sense.¹

God does *actually*, though not completely, *make men blessed here*. Our text sums up the experience of all the devout hearts and lives whose emotions are expressed in the Psalms. He who wrote this Psalm would preface the whole by words into which the spirit of the book is distilled. It will have much to say of sorrow and pain. It will touch many a low note of wailing and of grief. There will be complaints and penitence, and sighs almost of despair before it closes. But this which he puts first is the keynote of the whole. So it is in our histories. They will run through many a dark and desert place. We shall have bitterness and trials in abundance, there will be many an hour of sadness caused by our own evil, and many a hard struggle with it. But high above all these mists and clouds will rise the hope that seeks the skies, and deep beneath all the surface agitations of storms and currents there will be the unmoved stillness of the central ocean of peace in our hearts. In the 'valley of weeping' we may still be 'blessed' if 'the ways' are in our hearts, and if we make of the very tears 'a well,' drawing refreshment from the very trials. With all its sorrows and pains, its fightings and fears, its tribulations in the world, and its chastenings from a father's hand, the life of a Christian is a happy life, and the joy of the Lord remains with His servants.²

2. Take the marginal reading, and you get at the essence of the idea. 'In whatsoever he doeth he shall prosper'—whatever may be the precise external result of his doing, *he himself* shall get something out of it, and be the more prosperous in soul. Not that to the man who delights in the law of the Lord the failures and distresses of other men do not come—not that they are for the devoted man magically changed somehow, so that failures and distresses are in themselves something different for him from what they are for anybody else, though that is sometimes made out to be God's promise, which it is not—but that through all the failures and distresses, his fate, because he

has linked it with holiness, remains unaffected and untouched. He prospers in all he does, because in truth he does but one thing. His life, being wrapped up in that which is good, goes on its way deeper and deeper into the good whatever may betide. The interest in which he is bound up is not to be touched by the things which happen in the outward world. He is safe, because temporal loss cannot diminish spiritual treasure. In whatsoever he doeth he shall prosper.³

A man is worth what he is, not what he has; and that is true both of this world, and of that which is to come. While he lives, he may win and lose everything but one—his own personality. That is always his; ultimately it is all that is his. In that lies his worth, if he have any; not in the abundance of the things which he possesses and can lose. And when he dies he loses what he has, but he remains what he is. He who is unjust will be unjust still; he who is holy will be holy still; but he who is wealthy, will be wealthy no more. It is a painful tribute to the commercialism of our age that a rich man is said to be worth so much when he dies. If he is worth no more than what he left, he is worth nothing; and in the other world, which, with all his foresight, he has forgotten or ignored, he will start a bankrupt if he start at all.⁴

Of all the sermons that I ever heard, says the Rev. Samuel Chadwick, the one which made the profoundest impression on me I heard when I was not more than ten years of age. Samuel Coley was the preacher. I was a little chap in a big chapel at the back of the gallery. He quoted the First Psalm. When he came to the sentence, 'And whatsoever he doeth shall prosper,' he said, 'It is not what he thinks he will do, not what he hopes, and is going to do, not what he half does, not what he does ten minutes too late, but whatsoever he doeth promptly and thoroughly and heartily, and with both hands, to the Lord, it shall prosper.'

The wind that blows can never kill
The tree God plants;
It bloweth east, it bloweth west,
The tender leaves have little rest,
But any wind that blows is best.

The tree God plants
Strikes deeper root, grows higher still,
Spreads wider boughs, for God's goodwill
Meets all its wants.

¹ S. Cox, in *The Expositor*, 2nd ser. i. 95.

² A. Maclaren, *Sermons Preached in Manchester*, 3rd ser. 232.

³ H. W. Clark, *Laws of the Inner Kingdom*, 55.

⁴ J. E. McFadyen, *The Divine Pursuit*, 41.