



THE BALANCE STRUCK: A NEW YEAR'S SERMON.

BY THOMAS GUTHRIE, D.D.

"I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do."—Eccles. ii. 11.

OUR Lord pronounced the children of this world wise in their generation; and who can doubt that thousands who are lost would be saved, did they bring the same prudence, and diligence, and energy to their eternal, as they do to their temporal interests? In how many people do we see consummate wisdom joined to the greatest folly! They are wise enough to gain the world, and fools enough to lose their souls.

Convince a man that the only way to save his life is to lose his limb, and he does not hesitate an instant between living with one limb and being buried with two. Borne in, pale, yet resolute, he bares the diseased member to the knife—and how does that bleeding, fainting, groaning sufferer teach us to part with our sins rather than with our Saviour. If a life is better than a limb, how much better is heaven than a sin!

Two years ago a man was called to decide between his life and the gains of his lifetime. He stood on the deck of a ship that, coming from Australian gold fields, had—as some all but reach heaven—all but reached home and her harbour in safety. The exiles had coasted along their native shores; to-morrow, husbands would embrace their wives, children their parents, and not a few would realize their dream of returning to pass the calm evening of their days, envied, and happy amid the loved scenes of their youth. It was never more true, that there is much between the cup and the lip. Night came lowering down; and with the night the storm which wrecked ship, and hopes, and fortunes all together. The dawning light but showed them death staring them in the face. The sea ran mountains high—no boat could live in her. One chance remained. Pale women, weeping children, feeble and timid men, must die; but a stout, brave swimmer, with trust in God, and disencumbered of all impediments, might reach the

shore—where hundreds stood ready to dash into the surf, and, seizing, save him. One man was observed to go below. He bound around him a heavy belt, filled with gold, the hard gains of his life, and returned to the deck. One after another, he saw his fellows leap overboard; a brief struggle, and head after head went down—sunk by the gold they had fought hard to gain, and were loath to lose. Slowly he was seen to unbuckle his belt. His hopes had been bound up in it. It was to buy him land; it was the reward of long years of labour and weary exile. What he had endured for it! The sweat of his brow, the hopes of day and the dreams of night, were there. If he parts with it, he is a beggar; but if he keeps it he dies. He poised it in his grasp. Balancing it for a while, his fate trembling in the balance, with one strong desperate effort he flings it into the sea. It sinks with a sullen plunge; and now he follows it—not to sink, but, disencumbered of its weight, to swim, to beat the billows manfully, and, riding on the foaming surge, to reach the shore. Well done! Ay, well done, well chosen; but if a man, as the devil said, who for once spoke God's truth, will give all that he hath for his life, how much more should he give all he hath for his soul. Better to part with gold than with God; to bear a heavy cross than miss a heavenly crown.

Such lessons the children of this world teach the children of the kingdom, and among these, not the least important lesson, the duty of careful self-examination. Was there ever a successful merchant who did not balance his books year by year? I have often noticed, in reading the details of Courts of Bankruptcy, that fortunes are as surely wrecked by carelessness as by wild speculations, or by boundless extravagance. Here is an honest trader bankrupt. Sober, industrious,

elling the machine in the way of God's testimonies. It has happened to many men when witnessing the worldliness of Lowland religion, its shallow views, and neutral tints, and vague doctrine, and light feelings, and commingling of things that differ, to long earnestly for the intensity and depth of the solemn Gaelic faith. And as often has it happened to such to be glad again to escape from that which they had unwisely sought—from the asphyxia of an atmosphere of theology inadequately ventilated by the breath of life; from high experiences and deep feelings, too partially represented in honourable practice; from a fear of God which was not a fountain of life, to escape from the snares of death. And then they find that, in both cases alike, they have been seeking the living among the dead; that the mass of men have only a false religion, fixed in the imagination in one case, and playing lightly over the life in the other; that the God of truth is not a God of the hills or of the valleys, but that he works in all the earth a "salvation manifold," for whosoever from all kindreds and people will come unto him. Yet, while we are persuaded that this is the way to view any opposition of Gaelic and Lowland religion in Scotland, it must be added that if we are to lean in favour of either, it should be in favour of the former. We have said already that the Celtic is a naturally religious race; and this, if it means anything, means that they are peculiarly fitted for displaying the heights and depths, the trials and progress of Christian experience. Their harp is more finely strung; it responds to the Spirit's breath with a prompter and more touching melody; its notes of sorrow are deeper, and its tones of triumph louder than that of other lands can utter. And, one thing more—it is a language that is passing away, and a race that is mingling with others.

And this brings us to another subject—the complaint that in the Highlands spiritual life is passing away; that it is not now as it was in the fathers' days. We are disposed at present to accept the complaint as true; though it is perhaps difficult to ascertain how far it means that true religion is passing away, and how far merely that the Highland form of true religion is passing away. Yet, let us take it as true in its largest and saddest sense. There comes for us then the urgent question, "Men and brethren, what must we do?" Now, whatever other answers may be given to a question so great, this at least has to be said, *We should not look back to the past.* There is no help for us there.

The habitual *laudator temporis acti* has always been held to do an evil work in his generation; not the less when the burden of his song is true than when it is false.* For even in temporal matters, God will have us not to live a second-hand life; and it is the surest sign of a nation's decay when it begins to live only in

* "Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? For thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this."

the past, and to count itself unworthy of greatness in the present. And how much more is this the case in spiritual life! God is not the God of the dead, but of the living; and because "all live unto him," they are bound to live in a solemn and infinite hopefulness. True, there is much cause for sorrow. "The fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever?" But when this is made the first and the last word in a publication addressed to living and immortal men, we are driven to the question, with which a child once startled a bereaved mother from her languor, "*Mother, is God dead?*"

We believe it has never once been the case in the history of the Church of God, that a generation which has fallen into a state of declension and decay, has been revived through means of being pointed to former and better days. The fact, if it be a fact, is a very striking one, and not according to our first ideas of what would be the wisest thing to do in the circumstances. Yet the reasons are not far to seek. If we asked the philosophers, they might tell us that human nature, like the soil of the earth, needs a certain rotation; that human experience never exactly repeats itself; that the soul cannot live on stale bread;—and all this may not be utterly false. But the higher reasons are the safer and the true ones. It is God's prerogative to give life, and he is jealous for his own prerogative. No prophets' bones may share the glory of the gift. It has ever been the tendency of the Church to lean on the past; and it has been the practice of God, age after age, to break it off from the past, even rudely and violently. Yet it was all in vain; and the generation that rejected the Son of God were building the tombs of the prophets, and garnishing the sepulchres of their righteous. He came to that generation, and they received him not. So he comes to every generation, in the majesty of his mercy; dealing with them, not as the sons of evil fathers, nor as the sons of fathers who trusted in his name, but as human sinners, standing between the eternity past and the eternity that is to come.

We have been forced into this line of reflection by feeling how necessary it is for us, in recalling the memory of the blessed dead, carefully to think of them as saved by the grace and to the glory of God, with whom we also have to do. Unless we do so, we shall perhaps be unable to avoid positive injury to ourselves from the retrospect; and only by doing so can we connect the saints of a former generation with the preachers of the present, and make the days of the fathers fruitful for the children.

THE GREATNESS OF SMALL THINGS.

BY REV. THEODORE L. CUTLER.

A YOUNG reader—fired, we trust, with a true spiritual ambition—writes to us for a few practical counsels on "attaining the greatest measure of success in the reli-

gious life." As this friend may represent many other readers, we will reply to him in the same columns that meet their eyes also. Growth in godliness should be the chief aim of every renewed heart.

Your friend, you state that you are already hopefully converted. You have already attained a certain measure of piety; the question now is, how to *attain the highest and the best*. With much distrust of our own judgment, we would commend to you the very simple principle laid down by our Saviour, that whosoever shall do and teach one of the least commandments, "the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." The principle is, that success and eminence only can be reached by the closest attention to **SMALL THINGS**. This principle is as true in religious as in secular affairs. Napoleon was the most effective man of modern times. "The secret of his greatness was, that while his plans were more vast and various than other men's, he had the talent to fill them up with promptness and precision in every minute particular of execution. Numbers, times, spaces were all distinct to his eye. He knew them all. The wheeling of every legion was mentally present to him. The tramp of every foot was in his ear. The numbers of troops were all supplied; the spaces were passed over; the times were met; and so the work was done."

Equally applicable is this principle to the vital business of serving the Lord. Success depends upon details. You have, perhaps, a vague idea of some wonderful and splendid achievement in godliness that shall come upon you in a way that you can scarcely tell how. You are quite mistaken in your day-dreams of sudden and supernatural attainments. Your growth, your usefulness, your eminence in godliness will be measured by your obedience to the very least and humblest commandments of your crucified Master. In this you have his divine example; for the life of Jesus on earth was a patient carrying out of heavenly religion into the minutest actions and events. His startling overpowering displays were few. Only once he took on an appearance of dazzling glory, but every day and every hour his countenance beamed forth the lustre of a spotless holiness. It was only upon a single occasion that we hear of his treading the waves of the sea; but how often did he walk on long journeys to teach poor fishermen—to visit a humble family of Bethany—to relieve a Canaanitish woman—and to restore the child of a heart-broken ruler. The gentle reproof of Martha for her excessive absorption in household affairs, the payment of a few pence in taxes, and the message to impulsive Peter after his resurrection, all show that Christ overlooked nothing and neglected nothing that his divine wisdom deemed worthy of his notice. *Holiness in all things* is the beautiful and blessed epitome of our Saviour's life and character.

Great principles of godliness carried out in details is the apostolic conception of practical religion. Paul gives as minute directions in his letters as your good mother

used to give you when you were a student in M— university. Peter presents the only sure method of spiritual growth when he says, "Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to your virtue knowledge," &c. This implies growth by daily addition—by joining one attainment to another. It is the construction of a great spiritual temple by laying stone upon stone. A vast and imposing edifice, made up of small commandments faithfully kept—or rather of great commandments kept in the smallest particulars—is the life of every eminent saint who ever adorned and blessed the world. How do trees grow? How did that imperial elm by your father's gateway attain its colossal dimensions? By *keeping all the commandments*. It obeyed the laws of vegetable growth, it never despised the smallest accretion from the soil beneath, or from the reservoir of air that surrounds it. So must you grow in grace. Despise not the day of small things. Count nothing a trifle that bears on your Christian character. Excellence in the kingdom of Christ is only attainable by constant, patient, prayerful progress. This progress is to be made by conscientious attention to the least particulars of your daily life. Healthy piety overlooks no command of God; slights none; twists none out of its due place and proportion. Your mistake is that you are looking for growth by sudden leaps, by occasional tremendous efforts on extraordinary occasions. It is very probable that you will go to your grave without ever encountering a single "extraordinary occasion;" for God may never call you to such. But he will give you innumerable small everyday occasions in which to glorify him; and if you do not serve him in "that which is least," neither would your graces be found equal to great emergencies.

You are shocked when you read of the stupendous defalcations in public offices. But are you just as scrupulous about cheating the Government out of a postage-stamp as you would be of robbing a half million from the "Department of the Interior?" You are horrified when you read of exactions under the lash on a cotton plantation. But the harsh blow given to your little boy in a fit of passion, or the sharp bargains made with your poor seamstress, are sins of the same kind and colour in the sight of Christ. You loathe cowardice in high places. So do I. But your Master also loathes our time-serving spirit when we connive at fashionable wickedness, or keep our lips closed when we ought to "stand up for Jesus." You applaud the heroism of those missionaries who stood their ground during the late bloody scenes in the East. The same spirit in *kind*, if not in degree, is demanded of you, when you are called on to walk two miles every Sabbath, and teach a ragged class of unwashed boys in the mission school. Peter did not deny his Master on a grand, premeditated occasion. It was when suddenly assailed by a small person with a small taunt, that his heedless lips bolted out the contemptible falsehood. Look out for sudden temptations of Satan to commit "small sins;" they will be the little leaks to sink the ship, the little foxes to

spoil the vine of your Christian character. Look out for the first neglects of your closet under the pressure of business, or of personal fatigue. Religious declension begins at a neglected closet-floor.

But why go over the whole field of practical Christianity in one brief letter? We write you in order to enforce this one precept, that success in the Christian life depends upon obedience to "the least of the commandments." You are right in aiming high. Your ambition is noble. Do not be satisfied with a meagre, half-developed, compromising piety. The world has had quite enough of such. Everything that ought to be done at all ought to be done well. Never take hold of anything without determining to be in that thing successful; if possible, to be eminent. In religion, success and eminence both depend on numberless details of duty faithfully and conscientiously carried out in the strength of God. The Master whom you serve has said, "Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." May your strength be equal to your day!

"BUSY HERE AND THERE."

ABSORBED in inferior matters, the confession has fallen from many lips, "*As thy servant was busy here and there he was gone*" (1 Kings xx. 40).

The Holy Spirit, kind and gracious, powerful to change the inner man and impart a meetness for heaven, has gone. The day in which to secure the great end of life has gone. The period of youth when the heart, though depraved, is not yet hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, and the conscience, though defiled, is not seared as with a hot iron, has gone. That sermon adapted to my case, worthy of being remembered and reduced to practice, has gone. Those kind words, prompted by Christian affection, exerting for the time a softening effect, have gone. Those serious impressions, pungent convictions, often the precursors of hope, have gone.

Sad has been the acknowledgment from *many a disciple*, "*As thy servant was busy here and there,*" engrossed with topics remote from present duty, losing sight of covenant engagements, "*he was gone.*" That neighbour, acquaintance, unbelieving friend, for whose eternal welfare I ought to have made direct exertions, has passed for ever beyond my reach. That opportunity of benefiting such a family or neighbourhood, of prevailing on such a neglecter of the public ordinances to frequent the sanctuary, has glided away unimproved. That season of hopeful indication for Zion, betokening the dawn of a better day, has disappeared, and no mercy drops descended.

Nor has this confession been a stranger to *the Christian parent*. "*As thy servant was busy here and there,*"

not duly mindful of the home vineyard, the work there required, my child has gone, perhaps, to the grave and to the world of retribution, no more to hear the teachings of maternal affection, nor those lessons which a father's position and experience qualify him to give. Or if living, he has gone from the atmosphere, the example, the influence of home. Not as I might and should, have I taken advantage of that forming season when the heart is most susceptible, and the voice of God is heard. "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth." My child has gone, passed through the different stages of early life—gone not fortified to meet the temptations of an ensnaring world. Owing to my neglect, he may become a victim of vice, a wretched wanderer in some of the avenues of crime.

And so the child favoured with a pious parentage, taught betimes by a *devoted mother* to rest his hope on the blessed Saviour. Wrung with anguish, not a few have confessed, "*As thy servant was busy here and there,*" little appreciating a mother's advice, with the pencil of the imagination drawing delusive pictures of the future, sketching scenes and paths of earthly bliss, she has gone. Her lovely form has receded from my view. Those lips, accustomed with all gentleness to give line upon line, and precept upon precept, will do so no more. Henceforth, near the throne they will be occupied in praising redeeming love.

Many a *Sabbath school-teacher*, entrusted with a bright, active class, has been obliged to exclaim, "*As thy servant was busy here and there,*" explaining the truths of the Bible from Sabbath to Sabbath, conversing of Christ and religion, anticipating many similar opportunities, not dreaming about the arrows of disease, the coming of the pale, silent messenger, he or she, a promising lad, an amiable girl, was gone. Their seat is vacant. Whether faithful or unfaithful, my work for that scholar's good is ended.

Many a *young man*, having left the beaten track, the great highway of truth for one of the by-paths of error, has said when too late, "*As thy servant was busy here and there,*" now devouring the contents of this infidel book, pamphlet, newspaper; now hearing this sceptical lecturer or preacher; now mingling in circles which calumniate the gospel, its ministers, and disciples:—thus "*busy here and there,*" the principles of truth, early and faithfully inculcated, are gone; gone from my bosom is that hallowed influence which leads the soul earnestly to inquire and seek after salvation.

Surprised by their last sickness, without adequate preparation, many a wasted, emaciated one, hardly able to speak, is saying at this moment, "*As thy servant was busy here and there,*" intent on pleasure, honour, wealth, life with its opportunities has vanished, probation with its means and influences has terminated. "*The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and I am not saved.*"

"The night cometh, in which no man can work." Work while it is called to-day.