

THE
FAMILY TREASURY

OF
SUNDAY READING.

EDITED BY THE
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THE ACCUSER AND THE ADVOCATE.

BY THE REV. CHARLES BRIDGES, M.A., RECTOR OF HINTON-MARTEL.

Zech. III. 1-7.

IF we could see what is passing in the invisible world, there would be much matter for fear and trembling; still more for rejoicing confidence. Here, then, is the vision in a miraculous way put before our eyes. It is the cause of Zion pleaded in heaven against most powerful opposition, and with a most triumphant issue. The angel Jehovah (called Jehovah in the next verse) is the great and glorious Advocate. Joshua stands before him as the representative of the people of God. Like him, they are all "*brands plucked out of the fire.*" Against them all the power of Satan is employed to *resist*. On their behalf the boundless grace of the Omnipotent Jehovah is called into exercise. Here, therefore, we have before us *the resistance and the victory.*

I. *The Resistance of Satan*—resistance from a quarter where we could not have expected it. Think of Satan standing in the accuser's place (see Ps. cix. 6, 7),—acting against us here even at the mercy-seat! Accused spirit! Well does every Christian know him to be his enemy! Through him evil first came into the world; through him it still holds its empire. All the hindrances in any good work, such as those which Joshua and Zerubbabel met with, we know from whence they come; and yet more, all the hindrances in our own hearts. There is the proof of his working still nearer and more painful.

But could we have thought that "the adversary" would have made heaven itself—the holy place, the dwelling of the holy God—the scene of his enmity? What! the very mercy-seat besieged with his ceaseless accusations? Yet so the Scripture represents it. God's throne is a throne of justice (Ps. lxxxix. 14); and justice requires that, ere the suitor can gain his cause, all that can be urged against him, as well as all that is in his favour, should be brought into court. Hence Satan's accusations must be heard; and they are always at

hand. His name is "the adversary" (1 Peter v. 8). His office is, "the accuser of the brethren" (Rev. xii. 10). In the earliest times, "when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, Satan came with them" (Job i. 6). His pleas were in readiness against the patriarch of Uz (i. 8-12; ii. 1-8). In the text he stands forth against Joshua, and still does he present himself against the children of God, with a malignity as fierce as ever to *resist* us, when we are pleading before heaven's mercy-seat, or labouring with energy and perseverance in our Master's cause.

1. What was the matter of accusation against Joshua and his fellows, we may gather from the history. We read of their early zeal when they returned from the captivity, and laid again the foundations of the Lord's house. But the opposition of their enemies slackened the good work. Lukewarmness became the prevailing habit. Worldliness crept in, and with it unbelief. "This people say"—while living themselves in cieled houses—"the time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built" (Hag. i. 2-4). In this low and heartless state, do not we see how much material the great enemy had for his accusing work? But let us search closely near at home.

2. What may he not have to say against us? We do not clothe him with the omniscience of God; yet proof enough have we of him as a spirit deeply conversant with our hearts, thoughts, and purposes. In our natural state, awful indeed is our connection with him. He dwells, works, and rules within us—"taking us captive at his will" (Eph. ii. 2; 2 Cor. iv. 4; 2 Tim. ii. 26). And even when One "stronger than he" has cast him out, yet will "he return to his house, from whence he came out" (Luke xi. 21-24), hoping to find entrance there.

Mark his continued assaults upon the children of God—how he follows them in their business and their pleasures, in solitude and in society, to the house of God

only consumed by God's anger, but troubled also by his wrath, and made to feel in their inmost apprehensions that he had set their iniquities before him, and that even their secret sins, their pride, and murmuring, and unbelief were in the light of his countenance. How well might they say then that all their days were passed away in God's wrath, that their days did he consume in vanity, and their years in trouble; that they spent their years as a tale that is told; and what an affecting view of their condition, during these years, is suggested by the following verse! We are to remember that those of them who were sentenced to die in the wilderness were such as were twenty years old and upwards at the time of their leaving Egypt. In so vast a multitude there must have been many of all ages, and as the period of their wandering was just forty years, many must have died in the ordinary course at sixty or under—the extreme term and limit of their life being seventy, or at furthest eighty years. It is affecting to think of these old men wearing out in the wilderness, seeing their equals and comrades, one after one, drop off, waiting all the days of their appointed time till their own change should come; for there, they knew, they must remain till the very last man should have passed away; and these were, therefore, not inappropriate, though plaintive strains in their song—a song which from these stillnesses and solitudes, may have often arisen audibly to heaven—"The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow: for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."

Yet their song had also a more cheerful strain. The picture is dark, and deeply shaded, but rays of light from heaven fall down upon it, for there are various considerations, which warrant us to hope that God's judgments were not sent on them in vain. There is, as already stated, the fact that they were spared so long. Why should this have been, but to give them an opportunity of repentance. Then, during all these years they enjoyed the ministry of Moses, the man of God. During these years also were observed the solemn services and sacrifices of the tabernacle, by which they were taught, that God, though justly angry with them, was willing to be propitiated, and in which they could see Christ's day afar off. It was then, too, that one of the most beautiful of all the Old Testament types of Christ was exhibited among them, the serpent lifted up by Moses, and through which, as they looked upon it, they not only received a bodily and temporal healing, but in which we cannot doubt many of them saw, however indistinctly, a more glorious salvation shadowed forth.

That they did profit by all these lessons and visitations, we may infer also from another circumstance—the piety of their children, of the generation which immediately succeeded them, and under Joshua entered the promised land. It is impossible at least thoughtfully to read this Psalm, without perceiving how entirely it

harmonizes with such a view. It is a Psalm for all time. But we cannot fix on any other period of the Old Testament history which could more naturally have given occasion for its being penned; and the very fact of such a Psalm having been composed for the Israelites then, casts, as already observed, a cheering light on that period, otherwise so dreary and dark. There is, as became it, an air of deep sadness pervading this Psalm, but in its tone submissive and reverential in the highest degree. The language is that of penitent and contrite hearts, weaned and broken off at length from well-nigh incurable guilt and folly, and brought to submit with a true resignation to God; and the prayers with which it concludes, that they might be taught to number their days aright, and satisfied early with God's mercy, are the prayers of men who hoped for a better life beyond the grave,—who believed that though they themselves must fall in the wilderness, the glory of God would appear to their children, when they should be brought into the pleasant land,—and who thus, in preparing their children for the glorious things which awaited them, and preparing themselves to leave the world, felt that they had "a work" to do—a work which redeemed the otherwise miserable remnant of their life from its utter vanity—a work which they could ask the Lord to establish and confirm. K.

(To be continued.)

TRUE PRAYERS NEVER LOST.

BY REV. THEODORE L. CUYLER.

It is hard to believe that the fervent prayer of the righteous man is ever lost. The answer may be long delayed. It may come in a manner wholly unlooked for. The return of the prayer may be such that it may not be recognised by the devout soul who uttered it. But it is not lost.

1. For example, there are some prayers which we cannot expect to see answered immediately. I was at a monthly concert last evening, where God's people were pleading with him for the conversion of the world. None of that praying company had any expectation of living to see the day when the last heathen nation should surrender to the victorious Jesus. Yet their petitions will never be forgotten. Those pleading disciples will yet behold the glorious fulfilment of their desires from the battlements of heaven. For in our own experience we have seen many a prayer manifestly answered long after the saint who breathed it into the ear of the Saviour has gone to lay his weary head on that Saviour's breast.

A dying mother commits her beloved boy to a covenant-keeping God. She has often borne that child on the arms of faith to the mercy seat. He has been the child of many prayers; and in the feeble utterances of her passing spirit another and a last petition is breathed forth that Christ would have mercy on his soul. Years

roll away. The sod has grown green, and the rank grass has long waved over that mother's tomb. In some distant land—mayhap hundreds of miles from that spot—a full-grown man, who has long been ripening in sin, is seen bowed in prayer. He is crying out of an agonized heart, *God be merciful to me a sinner!* Behold he prayeth, and *his* prayer is the answer of the fervent petitions which his dying mother uttered many long years before. Her requests were recorded in God's book of remembrance; and but for them we know not that the prayer of that penitent son would have ever ascended there. Let praying fathers and mothers never grow faint of heart. Let desponding Churches—long unvisited by revival blessings—only close up their ranks more compactly about the mercy-seat, and besiege heaven with new importunity. For above the dark cloud of their discouragement is written, as in the clear, upper sky, "He that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."

2. Other prayers are answered at the time of their utterance, but in a way so unlooked for that he who offered them is inclined to think that the very opposite of what he asked for has befallen him. One individual prays, for instance, that he may be enabled to glorify God. Ere he is aware, some tremendous calamity comes crashing down upon him, prostrating him to the dust. His fortune is swept away. Or his schemes of promotion are blasted. A favourite child is missed from the cradle or the hearthstone. His hopes are withered like grass. God has answered his prayer, but has answered it, as the Psalmist says, "by terrible things." From under the overwhelming pressure of affliction he flees to Jesus, his divine comforter, and oh, how his love is kindled by the contact! How his latent faith is called forth! How he glorifies God in the furnace of trial which is purging away the dross of selfishness and worldliness, and making his pure gold to shine with tenfold brightness!

We once saw an earnest inquirer who was praying most importunately for faith in Christ, and for peace to his troubled soul. But while he prayed a cloud of darkness gathered across his horizon. And against that cloud, which swung like a funeral pall before his vision, played the sharp lightnings of the Almighty's wrath. The thunders of God's law roared against him. Instead of peace came only the sword. Instead of the calm he sought came the fearful tempest; and, under the stress of its terrors, the poor baffled soul betakes himself to the "covert" which Christ has raised on Calvary. There he finds the peace he so earnestly prayed for. There the long-sought confidence in Jesus pours its fulness through the soul. His prayer was answered—first by terrible things, but at last by the very blessings which he desired. And without that storm the true calm would have never come. Had the sinner not been led to that frightful view of his own guilt and condemnation, he might never have gone to Christ, and thus could not

have known true abiding peace. As he looks back over the dark valley of sorrow through which the divine hand has wondrously led him, and sees that no other way would so surely bring him to the cross, he feels a renewed assurance that no true prayer is ever lost; he now *knows* that he that asketh aright will always receive, and he that seeketh will surely find. His experience is worth all it cost him.

3. Once more, let us remark that the petitions of believers are often answered according to their *intention*, and not according to the strict letter of the request. The utterer of the prayer sought only the glory of God, but, in his ignorance, asked for wrong things. God hears and answers him; but the blessing granted is something very *different* from what the believer expected. The case of Paul is a beautiful illustration of this. He is sorely afflicted by a "thorn in the flesh." What the precise nature of the affliction was, we know not. Perhaps it was a severe malady; perhaps a besetting sin; perhaps a mortifying deformity of body or of character. He beseeches God in three earnest petitions that this "thorn" might depart from him. His prayers are heard. They are answered. But, instead of the removal of the thorn comes the cheering assurance, "My grace is sufficient for thee." The Lord does not take away the trial, but gives him all that is needed to make it endurable; thus the divine glory and Paul's spiritual well-being were more certainly advanced than if the prayer had been answered strictly according to its letter.

The prayer was not lost. That God hears every sincere prayer, who can doubt? The sceptic must seal his vision, lest, coming to the light, he shall be persuaded against himself. He must mutilate or destroy the shining record of God's providential dealings with the children of faith. He must erase from the Bible the animating narrative of Jacob's midnight struggles, the thrilling scenes of Elijah's wrestlings at Carmel and at Zarephath, the "evening oblations" of Daniel, and the angelic deliverance of Peter from the prison cell. He must destroy many a leaf from the Christian's diary, on which devout gratitude has written, "This day I learned anew that my heavenly Father hears and answers prayer." He must give the lie to omniscient love, which has uttered in the ear of all the needy, sorrowing, guilty household of humanity, "Ask and ye shall receive; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you." "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

FRAGMENTS.

If God demanded less than the heart, it would argue that there was a good independent of himself.

Those who have life are conscious of the ebbs and flows of life.

The grace of God can enable the lame and the halt, the maimed and the blind, to go through the land and possess it.