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SERMON CCCCXCVII.

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THE MAGNANIMITY OF THE CHRISTIAN SPIRIT.

“And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus receive my spirit! And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.”—*Acts vii. 59, 60.*

THIS brief record of the death of the first martyr to Christianity, is a complete refutation of one objection, which its enemies have urged against it. They have asserted, and often with an air of triumph, not merely that its doctrines are absurd, but that its spirit is degrading to the dignity of human nature. In their estimation, the lofty aspirations of ambition, the indignant spirit which kindles at every affront or injury, and visit it with implacable resentment, and the sanguinary exploits of renowned conquerors, constitute the elements of true greatness. Hence the homage, which in all ages has been paid to the daring enterprizes of cupidity and ambition; the prompt and cheerful obedience which has been rendered to the laws of honor, falsely so called; the indignant infliction of evil for evil, and the valor and skill which have been displayed in waging sanguinary wars. Those who place these achievements, and the spirit which prompts them, among the characteristics of true greatness, in the temper and morality which the gospel inculcates see nothing to admire. Its devout, meek, patient, and forgiving spirit, they consider not adapted to elevate, but to depress men in the scale of true dignity and greatness. That this sentiment is false, and fraught with danger to the temporal and eternal interests of men, we hope to make evident.

We have not time to notice all the distinctive features of the Christian spirit. We shall confine our attention mainly to those which entitle it to the character of genuine magnanimity. We

SERMON CCCCXCVIII.

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THE INIQUITY OF GIBEAH.

"They have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah: therefore he will remember their iniquities, he will visit their sin."—HOSEA ix. 9.

As an aged inhabitant of Gibeah was returning, on a certain evening from his work in the field to his dwelling in the city, he found a group of travellers resting in one of the streets, as if they could find no place of shelter. The group was composed of a man and a woman and a man-servant with a couple of asses laden with provisions for the wayfarers; and with straw and provender for the beasts. The old citizen upon enquiring whence they came, and whither they were going, learned that their home was on the side of Mount Ephraim; that they were returning thither from Bethlehem, the residence of the women's father; that they had passed by Jerusalem, because it was still in possession of the Jebusites, and preferred to spend the night at Gibeah, among their own nation.

The whole truth of the case was, that the man was a Levite, who had taken the woman, whose husband he is called, from Bethlehem to his house in Ephraim; that she had deserted him there and returned to her father; that after four months her husband sent for her, was reconciled, and was now with her on his way homeward; that they had stopped at Gibeah to lodge, but no one had, as yet, offered them a place of shelter, though private hospitality was, in those days, the only dependence of travellers.

The old man no sooner heard so much of their story as they chose to communicate, than he insisted upon their lodging at his own house, being especially moved in their favour by the fact that he himself had come from Mount Ephraim, and was but a sojourner in Gibeah. His generous salutation was, "Peace be with thee; howsoever, let all thy wants lie upon me, only lodge not in the street. So he brought him into the house and gave provender unto the asses, and they washed their feet, and did eat and drink."

But whilst they were refreshing themselves at this friendly dwelling, the house was beset by a crowd of brutal men, whose outrages surpassed the enormity of common crimes, and terminated in leaving the woman a corpse at the door.

Whatever may have been her character, or that of her husband, the guilt of the ruffians could not be palliated. The Levite felt the case so aggravated that nothing less than an appeal to the whole nation could meet the enormity of the offence. Nothing indeed could repair his wrongs; but he felt as a Jew, that unparalleled disgrace had fallen upon the nation through the act of these Benjamites of Gibeah, and that the whole people were concerned in vindicating the demands of justice. "They have committed lewdness and folly IN ISRAEL," was the Levite's complaint; and adopting a method of appeal which the feelings of the age allowed, he sent to each of the tribes a bloody fragment of the woman's corpse, as at once evidence of the deed, and a call for their counsel. "And it was so that all that saw it, said: There was no such deed done nor seen from the days that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt, until this day; consider of it, take advice and speak your minds."

Four hundred thousand men soon assembled, from all the tribes in Mizpeh. The Levite told them his story, and called upon them as Israelites, for advice. The indignant multitude, as with one heart, resolved to proceed at once against the guilty town. They did so; but not wishing to involve the innocent, they first called upon the tribe of Benjamin (to which Gibeah belonged), to deliver up the persons guilty of the deed of violence and murder. But the tribe instead of yielding to so just and fraternal a demand, espoused the cause of the murderers and flocked to Gibeah, not only to resist, but to attack the army of Israel. Two battles were fought, in both of which the Benjamites prevailed, and with a dreadful slaughter of the other tribes. This surprising result was probably permitted to correct the feelings of revenge and the spirit of self-confidence with which the tribes had gone into the war. For after the two defeats, they humbled themselves before God with weeping, and fasting, and sacrifices. They were now more likely to feel that it was not as avengers of their own quarrel but as instruments of Divine justice—not by the might of their superior numbers, but by the strength of God, that they were to purge the land from the iniquity of Gibeah. The city was for the third time attacked. It was now taken and burned, and so small a remnant of the Benjamites escaped, that the tribes turned from the melancholy victory to weep before the tabernacle of God, and cry, "O Lord God of Israel why is this come to pass in Israel, that there should be to-day one tribe lacking in Israel!"

This is a specimen of the character of the people of Gibeah

who are referred to in the text; and again in the next chapter, where Hosea exclaims, "O Israel, thou hast sinned from the days of Gibeah: there they stood, the battle of Gibeah against the children of iniquity did not overtake them." I call it a specimen of their character, for it would be contrary to all history and analogy, to suppose that this occurrence was a sudden outbreak of crime in a community that had until that period been moral and peaceful. Fully set in them to do evil as the hearts of men are, their passions do not venture to burst through the restraints of decent concealment, until they have reason to know that the moral sense of the community will overlook or endure their crimes. The history in fact shows this to have been the case in Gibeah; and the prophet speaks of the "deep corruption" of those days, as if it were characteristic of the people, whom he calls "the children of iniquity." Their infamy had reached to the time of Hosea, a period of at least six hundred and fifty years from the occurrences, which have been related; it has come to our knowledge twenty-six years later; it is part of the record which is given by inspiration of God for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness, and therefore it behoves us to revive and apply its lessons for our own benefit. The times in which we live seem to make this example peculiarly appropriate; and I shall therefore occupy the remainder of this discourse in an attempt to secure this advantage.

I. It presents a general warning in reference to the corruption of public morals.

We can imagine what must have been the state of morals in Gibeah—a city of sufficient size to furnish seven hundred chosen men of war—when the dwelling of a citizen could be beset by a licentious mob with all the tumult of a riot, and the ruffians allowed to accomplish their purposes without a hand raised to punish them, or defend the helpless strangers. This is partly to be attributed to the absence of any civil authority; for, says the historian, "in those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes."—(Judges xxi. 25.) But had not the public mind been dead to the commonest sentiment of hospitality, honour and virtue, such an outrage could not have been plotted, or been suffered to be perpetrated through several hours of disorder, closing in murder.

All that is wanting in any community to open the gates of vice, is to withhold the penalty of justice from offenders, and to relax, the restraints of a pure public sentiment. Let intemperance, for instance, be connived at by the laws, let drunkenness be made a matter of sport, let the opportunities and means of intoxication be multiplied by legislators, or the public functionaries, and let the public themselves esteem intemperate habits as no disqualification for stations of trust and honour, or for the alliances of life—and

nothing more is wanting to secure the triumph of this corruption.

The same thing is true of all other forms of licentiousness—even of that which has given infamy to the name of Gibeah. We need not expunge the seventh commandment from the decalogue, in order to give a license, to these transgressions. Satan has more art than to suggest such a measure. But let the moral sense of the public allow, under the name of fashion or custom, manners from which even the modesty of nature would shrink; let our dwellings be open to receive publications which minister to an impure curiosity, pollute the mind, and accustom it to criminal recitals, let our children find this kind of entertainment in the newspapers we read and the books we buy; let us be careless as to the associates whom we encourage for ourselves or those within our control; and when great crimes occur let us treat the parties to them as heroes and heroines, attributing their vices to imprudence, or even to their very innocence—by such means as these the corruption of the public morals is sooner secured than if a reward were offered for vice.

If we in this country,—we who live in the large cities or on the great thoroughfares which make accessible to us all the sources of corruption, domestic and foreign, which our large cities attract—if we are in any such danger, let us take timely warning by examples like that of Gibeah. Who shall set bounds to the growth of corruption when it is once suffered to take root? How easy is prevention! how hard is reformation! The authors of the crime recorded in the history before us are called “Sons of Beial.” The race is not extinct; and the imagination of Milton, in depicting the fiend himself, has struck upon the most characteristic marks of these corrupters of society:—

“ A fairer person lost not Heav'n; he seem'd
For dignity compos'd and high exploit;
But all was false and hollow; though his tongue
Dropt manna, and could make the worse appear
The better reason, to perplex and dash
Maturest counsels: for his thoughts were low;
To vice industrious, but to noble deeds
Timorous and slothful; yet he pleased the ear.”

II. The example of Gibeah shows that a corrupt state of morals is adapted to produce the most flagrant crimes.

The prevailing licentiousness was not satisfied with the secret pursuit of its objects. When the general standard of morality discountenances corrupt manners, the wicked adopt obscure and silent means of accomplishing their ends. Darkness and secrecy veil their habits from observation. But when, as in Gibeah, vice has become to some extent common, and fears no disgrace, it will become bold, both in its excesses and in its publicity. The history of the world

is full of similar examples. We need not go far back, or far off, to find proof that this is the natural course of all sin. Licentiousness, assassination and suicide still hold intimate fellowship. A relaxation of moral principle cannot be confined to one particular. When the fear of God is thrown off as to one indulgence, what motive is left strong enough to restrain the corrupt heart from other crimes to which it is tempted. The bonds of religion and of society are rotted by such corruption, and can no longer serve either for union or restraint. Let the principles of common integrity, for example, become relaxed; let men adopt the idea that there is no obligation as to their contracts and debts, if their responsibility can be evaded by legal forms; let this idea be adopted by governments, and the contracts of a commonwealth be annulled by statute, and its creditors be defrauded by law, and a blow is struck at the very foundation of right and honesty, the result of which will soon be perceived in the general imbecility of moral principle in the community which sanctions or abides by such laws. Who can contemplate without amazement and shame the state of morals in our own country in this respect compared with what it was before the late financial revolution disclosed the corruption that had been secretly spreading throughout our whole community? And who is not conscious that the discovery has tended to encourage the evil, and blunt our sensibilities to its enormity?

III. The case of Gibeah furnishes a forcible illustration of the danger of giving any manner of countenance to iniquity.

The Benjamites, though the crime at Gibeah was so notorious, took no steps to punish the transgressors. When the other tribes appealed to Benjamin and asked, as by the polity and customs of the nation they had a right to do, that the offenders should be delivered to them for punishment, they refused; and not only refused either to bring them to punishment themselves or to yield them up as public criminals, but immediately took measures to oppose the army of the nation by force. Thus they avowed the cause of the authors of the iniquity, and practically sanctioned their conduct. Thus they afford another exemplification of the extent to which moral corruption will carry a community. First, the citizens of Gibeah allow the violence and riot to proceed throughout a whole night unchecked; then the crime is passed by with impunity; and finally the whole tribe to which Gibeah belonged espouse the part of the murderers, and commence a civil war for their protection.

The first step was wrong, and therefore all that followed was wrong. The admonition which we ought to receive is of the sin and danger of allowing protection to any iniquity. Communities may furnish this protection, not only by openly espousing the cause of the violators of law, and forcibly rescuing them from punishment, but also by approving their course, exciting a clamor in their behalf, and expressing such a sympathy for the criminal as absorbs the regard due to justice and to the whole interests of the community; and above all, due to the holiness of God and his condemnation of all sin.

Civil society is founded for the protection of all its members. The administration of justice is consigned by common consent to the public tribunals; and the laws which these tribunals administer are those which the society has adopted as their compact and bond of union. Now this bond is as nothing unless the community which have thus associated themselves, submit to the dominion of their own laws, and sustain their impartial execution, so long as they remain their laws. They may change them in a constitutional manner; but so long as they exist every member of the body politic is under the most sacred obligation to obey and uphold them. They are the laws—not of the judges and juries and executive—but the laws of the people, and these others are but their servants to apply them. He therefore cannot be a faithful citizen who attempts either to violate the law himself, or prevent its just administration towards others.

The laws under which we live are so humane that no exception from this principle is admissible on the ground that the circumstances of a crime often demand the exercise of mercy. This may be true. But the laws provide for such cases; and even mercy should be granted legally and not commanded or compelled by violence. The trial by jury, the gradation of punishment, the prerogative of pardon vested in the Executive, are the legal provision for the adjudication of the penalty of transgressions. If it is an outrage on all law and authority for individuals to redress their own wrongs, or those of the public, by violence, without the trial of the criminal, it is no less an offence to screen a criminal from the operation of the law, or to rejoice in his escape.

We are guilty of encouraging iniquity when we justify crimes on the ground of the temptations and provocations which led to them. No good law allows such grounds of justification; though they may be admitted to qualify the heinousness of the offence. The desperation of hunger may drive a man to robbery. The law will not hold him guiltless on this account; but it will mitigate his punishment, and vindicate its own purity, even if by no more than a nominal infliction. So the heat of passion may impel a man to take the life of another without previous deliberation. But though this characteristic of his offence may exempt him from the fate of the wilful murderer, it requires the severe punishment of the homicide in another form. For the law is established on the very ground that the injuries men may receive are not to be avenged by their own hands, but by the calm and just adjudication of the laws which they themselves framed or have voluntarily submitted to. If therefore a man is injured, in person or property or reputation, he may not retaliate, or use violence to recover his rights, or redress his injuries, but he must seek his rights or redress in the way which he solemnly agreed to employ when he entered into the social compact; and if it should happen that the law is defective in the particular point of his wrong, he must abide the consequences of the oversight—he is bound to abstain from any private force to obtain his end. Once admit the principle that temptations or provocations, however great and extraordinary, authorize a man to avenge his own wrongs,

and we take away the corner-stone of justice and of civilization; we dissolve the compact, and put the community into the disorganized condition of savage life, where every man is his own judge, and the only law is force.

If we should admit such a principle, where could we draw the line between what is criminal and what is justifiable? What great crimes are ever committed without temptation or provocation? Revenge, covetousness, jealousy, and lust, are the sources of nearly all the enormous crimes that bring men to the gibbet or to the prison. But are not all these founded in the strongest influences of temptation and provocation? How shall we distinguish between the degrees of strength with which these dispositions impel a man to sin? How can we feel safe in determining that the passion which urged one man to commit an enormous crime was not so strong or so natural as that which impelled another to avenge it!

No! we may sympathize with the injured, and have our indignation aroused against the wrong-doer; but we must say to the sufferer—Your hand is not the proper instrument to redress the wrong; the sin of another against you will not justify your sin against him, against the law of the land, and against God; and if as a Christian you will not forgive, and if as a good citizen you feel obliged to bring the offender to justice, you should take those steps which the laws prescribe for your guidance. We must sympathize with the laws, and with our families and society at large, which depend on their protection, as with the injured party. The Benjamites had great sympathy for the murderers whom justice demanded, but they had none for the man whose wife had been savagely destroyed, nor for the aged citizen who had showed them hospitality, and participated in their injuries.

It is to the withholding of public justice that we may in part attribute the growing disposition to seek revenge without invoking the arm of justice. Let the penalties of the law be withheld, and the temptation to acts of private retaliation become greatly increased. Had not the Levite placed so much confidence in his nation, he might naturally have preferred to become the incendiary of Gibeah, rather than submit his wrongs to the redress of a national council.

And if these principles are just as to the punishment of ordinary offences, they much more forcibly apply to those which aim at the life of one who had injured us. A man is deeply injured in his reputation or his feelings, by the misconduct of another. But upon what principle of right or morals that can claim the sanction of God's Word, or human legislation, is the injured man himself authorized to take the life of the offender by assassination, or required to meet him in combat with deadly weapons? And upon what ground shall we justify ourselves, if, by our approbation, we sanction this course, and seek to screen the self-avenger from punishment—or what is equivalent, desire and rejoice in his escape from it? The laws of God and our country coincide in these points—first, that no man in the social state is per-

mitted to avenge his wrongs ;—whoever wrongs another is amenable to the laws which provide the means of punishment and compensation, so far as any human power can afford them ;—and second, that no man has a right to take the life of another save through absolute necessity, in defence of himself, or those naturally committed to his care ; but that the prerogative of taking life, as a penalty for crime, is to be the deliberate and solemn act of public justice. When the taking of life is excused, it is where it is done to prevent the execution of a wicked purpose and not where it is done in vengeance for a crime already committed. From the rule of these principles no sane man is exempted. No provocation however strong, can justify in the view of Divine law, or any human law that profess to regard the Divine as supreme, the exercise of personal vengeance ; and the community that ventures to say of this or that duel or assassination it was right because one party had a great provocation, participates in the same kind of sin as that which brought destruction on the Benjamites.

The great mistake into which a community are apt to fall on such occasions, is in not distinguishing between what is really deserved by the wretch who has excited their indignation, and the lawful methods of inflicting what he deserves. We are apt to overlook the departure from justice in the mode of administering it, through the consciousness that the guilty person has received nothing but what his crimes merited. Thus when mobs have undertaken to expel gamblers from a village by force, or when notorious and savage offenders have been in that way seized and punished, even with death, the abhorrence which the unlawful acts of the mob ought to excite seems often to be displaced by the satisfaction that society has been, by any means, rid of such pests. So we are in danger of nullifying law and justice, in their only right and safe administration, when we are disposed to account a man blameless because he has stepped forth in advance of, and in place of the law, and by a summary act of his own private vengeance, ridden the world of a villain. But this is all wrong. It is a confounding of justice and revenge, and an apology for evil because it promises to be productive of good.

The effects of such sentiments in encouraging violence, in making a criminal the object of public sympathy, in degrading the laws and relaxing the securities of society, are too obvious to require detail. It is equally evident that they are sins against God, whose law is the foundation of ours ; who requires of us as a Christian duty, to submit to this authority as ordained by Him as a terror to the evil, and who forbids us to be partakers of other men's sins. The great question in every such case is, who is the authorized avenger of the wrong ? Do the law of God or of man say, that the next of kin or of friendship is entitled to redress the injury inflicted ? Does either of those laws say a man may take with his own hands the life of one who has done him an injury, however great that injury be ? If there be no such law in the Bible or in the statute-book, then no man can claim to be acquitted who exercises such an authority ; and the public sentiment

that sustains him must be wrong, though it may be benevolent. The provocation may have been great, and this should have its due weight in the gradation of his crime; but it cannot make him innocent. What provocation could be greater than that which Absalom had towards Ammon, whom he put to death in revenge of a wrong to his own sister? But for that offence he was banished from the presence of the king, his father; and though indulged, after several years, with a pardon, through the parental favor of the monarch, it was not long before a more impartial and higher hand exhibited the fratricide in the position of a murderer on the tree—as if God would compel men to enforce his precept, “who so sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.” I know that those who vindicate these opinions in our day, are sometimes denounced as sanguinary, and as exhibiting a spirit very opposite to that of the gospel. We are told that the world has grown wiser and more humane since the days in which God declared, “Ye shall take no satisfaction for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death;” and history records the act of a monarch who was bold enough to introduce an edict remitting the penalty of murder by a preamble stating his purpose to “moderate the rigor of the Divine law.”* But I tremble at this additional evidence of a perverted public sentiment, when it says in opposition to what God has said—this shall not be so. I of course include in these remarks those only who reject the divine statute on the grounds which I have mentioned, and not those who conscientiously, but as I believe erroneously, suppose that this was not intended to be a universal and perpetual requirement. And as to all that has been said under this head, lest it should be supposed that any particular cases are exclusively in view, I must add, that however reasonable such cases make this course of remark, reference is had to a state of public sentiment which has obviously been increasing for several years in our country, and the tendency of which is to excuse men, individually, or in mobs, in their resorts to violence to redress injuries for which the common processes of law are supposed to be too tardy and too uncertain, or their penalties too light.

IV. The fate of the Benjamites warns us of the sure consequences of iniquity. “They have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah; therefore he will remember their iniquity, he will visit their sins.”

The destruction of such a multitude of persons as were involved in the ruin of Gibeah, is, as we have seen, not to be attributed to the single crime against the stranger from Ephraim, but to the general corruption of the people which only developed itself in that act and in the protection which was given to it by the whole tribe.

If it were necessary to offer any suggestion in vindication of any of the Divine judgments, it might be asserted and proved from history, both sacred and common, that such corruption as was manifested

* See Blackstone’s Commentaries, iv : 194.

there, when it attains to this height, can only be removed by extirpation. The appeals of truth, the threatenings of the law of God or man, do not reach the hearts of men who, in opposition to all their knowledge and consciousness, sink themselves in pollution, and relax the commonest restraints of morality. It was mercy to the world that has exterminated, from time to time, a corruption which would have spread and perpetuated itself like a leprosy, and have brought the race to an end. It was mercy to mankind—mercy to us—that rolled the deluge over the earth, that sent fire from the clouds upon the cities of the plain, and that destroyed a tribe of Israel. Had not Benjamin been cut off, the whole nation might have perished in the same corruption. The New Testament repeatedly assures us that these events are recorded for “our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted,” nor “tempt Christ as some of them also tempted,” for “all these things happened unto them for ensamples, and they are written for our admonition; wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.” Again, referring to the fall of the angels, the flood, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Scriptures say that these judgments made them an “example unto those that after should live ungodly.” And it is worthy of our notice, that in this very passage, the apostle, after speaking of the filthy conversation of the wicked, and the unlawful deeds which vexed the soul of the righteous Lot, or called forth the rebukes of Noah, the “preacher of righteousness,” applies the admonition directly to all impenitent evil-doers, as sure to meet their retribution at the day of judgment—“*but chiefly* them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and *despise governments*; presumptuous are they, self-willed, they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities.” And another apostle, making precisely the same reference to history, thus characterizes those in his own day who were provoking the same judgments—“these dreamers defile the flesh, despise dominion, and speak evil of dignities.”

Let us beware, then, of the results of sin; whether committed by ourselves, or connived at in others. Let us be careful that in contributing a share to the formation of public opinion, we hold no sentiments that are at variance with the Divine standard of holiness and truth; and that we never countenance sin in our own practice or by the approbation of it in others. And if no better motive shall deter us, let us fear to provoke the wrath of Heaven on ourselves and on our country. “He will remember iniquities, and visit sins.” He is a God of grace and of love; of long-suffering and great patience, but He is a just and holy God. He will not endure iniquity; and if it is persisted in, encouraged and rejoiced in, He will, He must visit the offenders.

Although the tenor of this discourse is in some respects less evangelical than is usual, I cannot think that, if properly improved, its tendency can be otherwise than to make a deep impression on our minds of the corruption of our nature, the evil and danger of sin, and

the necessity of a Divine power to change our nature, rectify our errors, and furnish and apply a means of justification beyond our own capacity to provide. And it seems to me that I can, at the close of such a discourse, introduce the blessed name of Christ with peculiar appropriateness and emphasis. Turn from the scenes of violence and corruption that have been suggested to our minds by what has been said, and view the spotless Saviour, the holy, harmless, and undefiled Son of God! View Him in His love and mercy, as He came to live in such a world as this, and to die for such a race; to pardon such transgressions, and to provide the means of renewing and purifying such hearts! See the violence and blindness of our nature illustrated, in the conduct of those who nailed Him to a cross—but see in the streaming blood, and hear in His dying prayers, the means of atonement and intercession! Let the tendency of the world be what it may, let the days be approaching as fast as they may, when iniquity shall abound, and the love of many shall wax cold; when judgment is turned away backward and justice standeth afar off, because truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter—yes, let even the Divine forbearance cease and Heaven's judgments fall upon the earth; he that is in Christ shall fear no evil; in His righteousness shall he stand accepted, and His arm shall uphold him until he is safe beyond the reach of earthly corruption.

Make haste to secure this refuge. Come out, come out from among them, and be ye separate saith the Lord; and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.