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→ SERMONS ←

FAITH AND FACT.

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And He said unto them, What things?—LUKE xxiv., 19.

THE earthly ministry of Christ was limited to three years, and the record of that ministry is largely composed of interviews with individuals. But each of these individuals represents a class ; and His procedure with each discloses a method ; and so, through individuals, in these brief months, He speaks directly to centuries and to generations. His words were none of them aimless or useless. His silences, the method, as well as the substance of His words, are worthy of our study.

We naturally inquire, why did He ask this question ? Not for His own sake, certainly. He not only knew, but was Himself the very subject of the narrative which He would obtain from their lips. Not for Himself, then, seeing He knew all things, and was familiar by experience specially with these things, but for their sakes. And why ? These two men—earnest, perplexed, disheartened—with the facts in their hands to settle all their doubt and give them joy, yet were sitting down in the Castle of Despair, ready to give over hope, when, lo ! upon these two words, as upon golden hinges, the door opens, that Christ may enter in and sup with them and they with Him.

“What things ?” He asks. Notice, first of all, the important circumstance that HE CALLS THEIR ATTENTION TO FACTS. It is an important cir-

→*A Baccalaureate Sermon*←

THE MATERIAL DECAYS—ONLY THE SPIRITUAL ABIDES.*

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The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the word of our God shall stand forever.—
ISAIAH xl., 8.

WITH this fortieth chapter of his prophecy Isaiah enters upon a new and hitherto unrivalled department of his prophetic work. Up to this point his ministry has been one of wrath. He has stood, like a prophet of evil, rehearsing the long catalogue of the nation's sins and denouncing the judgments of God as the penalty. But with the opening of this chapter a new era has dawned upon his inspired vision. To his far-reaching sight the Babylonian captivity appears as an already accomplished fact. The vials of the divine wrath have been poured out. The chosen people are groaning under their hard bondage to the Chaldeans. The pitiful cry of the "captive exile hastening to be loosed" has come across the desert waste; and now the prophet of wrath has been transformed into a minister of consolation. A divine voice has fallen upon his ear saying, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." The Boanerges of the earlier prophecies has been converted into a Barnabas. The stern face is illumined with the glow of hope, as, beyond the long weary night of the coming captivity, the "seer wrapt into future times" catches the radiance of the bright morning of the restoration.

The language of the context is in the highest degree poetic and figurative. The prophet stands in vision upon some height overlooking the wide waste of desert which stretches between Chaldea and the Promised Land. As he meditates upon the seemingly insuperable difficulties in the way of the restoration of the chosen people, he hears a voice, apparently addressed to unseen agencies around him, saying, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Then the same divine voice addresses him, saying, "Cry," that is, "utter your prophecy of the restoration." But the prophet does not know what to cry. He looks over and thinks of the might of Babylon, of the helplessness of God's people, and of the consequent strength of the chains of captivity. He sees no hope of release, and so, in his bewilderment, he exclaims, "What shall I cry?" What ground of hope is there that the enslaved people shall ever be free? What can I say that will be anything more than a mockery of their despair? The divine

*For the general plan of this sermon, as well as for many of its leading thoughts, the author is indebted to the torn fragment of a printed discourse which passed under his eye many years ago, the authorship of which he has never been able to ascertain.

answer to this despondent inquiry is found in the words of the text : " All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field : the grass withereth, the flower fadeth ; because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it : surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth ; but the word of our God shall stand forever."

Viewed in its immediate relations to the context, therefore, the " flesh," which is grass, is the vast population of the Babylonian empire. The " goodness thereof," which is the flower of the grass, is the pomp and pride of the Babylonian civilization. The " word of the Lord " is that prophetic word of the future glory of Israel and her Messiah-King which seems to have found a grave of oblivion beneath the rank, overshadowing growth of Babylonian empire.

Here then, in its primary and proximate signification, the text illustrates for us on a grand and imposing scale the two lessons which it will be my aim to-day to impress upon you: the decadence of all that is simply material and earthly ; the stability of that only which is spiritual and divine.

I. Let us look at the necessary decadence of all that is simply material and earthly. The world had never looked upon a more splendid civilization than that which greeted the eye of the prophet as he looked down in vision upon the great empire of Nebuchadnezzar. For a thousand years Babylon, the ancient and honorable, had been the seat of empire, but under her present sovereign she had risen to a glory and renown of which her founders had never dreamed. Nebuchadnezzar, following in the footsteps of Nabopolassar, his illustrious father, had extended his empire by conquest until he was in fact as well as in name " King of Men." Northward he held all Assyria in subjection, and reigned to the limits of the frozen zone. Southward he had subjugated Egypt with its vast empire, and reigned to the limits of the equatorial belt. Tyre, with all her world-wide commerce, was his vassal, and so his name and fame had been carried to the remotest borders of the great west. This vast empire it was now the ambition of Nebuchadnezzar to consolidate and unify. For this purpose he had opened long lines of communication between its remotest parts. Canals, one of which was five hundred miles in length; highways across the great deserts connecting with the hills of Arabia and the Mediterranean Sea, with caravansaries, fortified garrisons, wells of water, etc., at all needed points; walled cities along the great thoroughfares as storehouses and resting-places for man and beast—these were amongst the wise provisions for bringing the people of various nationalities and races into the cordial relations of mutual interchange and commerce. But the purposes of the great conqueror went further than this. To give stability to his empire he sought to bring about an amalgamation of all the races and a unification of all the religions within his realm. This was the significance of the image of gold which was set up in the plain of Dura, and which all were required to worship on penalty of being thrown into the furnace of fire. It was the symbol of a national religion, the representative of a state creed. Its aim was to bring the influence of a common religious

doctrine and worship to consolidate and strengthen the bonds of common nationality. Thus it was the aim of Nebuchadnezzar to lay deep and broad the foundations of his empire, and to perpetuate to remotest generations the splendid civilization that was flowering under his peaceful and prosperous reign. Who that looked upon great Babylon, "the golden city," "the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency," "the glory of the kingdoms," "the praise of the whole earth;" Babylon with "its glory of walls, of palaces, of temples, of hanging gardens, of canals, of quays, of tunnels, of bridges, of commerce, of treasures, of armies, of domains;" Babylon, with its sixty miles of circuit, with its triple enclosing walls, with its hundred gates of brass, and its invincible soldiery, could have believed that in a few short years all this might would be broken and all this glory laid in the dust. And when, in obedience to the divine voice, the prophet declared all this might and all this glory to be but as the evanescent and fading flower, you and I, if we had been present, would have looked upon him as some misanthropic churl. And when in sublime apostrophe he addressed the imperial city, saying, "Come thou and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter, Babylon; sit on the ground; there is no throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans, for thou shalt no more be called delicate. Sit thou silent, and get thee into darkness, O daughter of the Chaldeans, for thou shalt no more be called the lady of the kingdoms," we should have smiled at the absurdity of so baseless a prediction. And yet, what were the real facts in the case? Within less than forty years from the time to which the prophet alludes the city was captured and pillaged, the seat of government removed, and the empire distributed amongst the conquering allies. The glory of Babylon was as a fading flower, and to-day the virgin daughter has for ages been sitting in the dust. Only here and there a mound of rubbish remains to mark the spot where once stood the imperial city that bade defiance within its triple walls to the blight alike of change and time. Well might the prophet say, as he looked upon the melancholy spectacle of evanescence and decay, "All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof as the flower of the field."

We descend the stream of time for seven centuries and we find ourselves beneath the shadow of another great monarchy, that of another imperial city, which, securely enthroned upon its seven hills, has proclaimed itself the "Eternal City," and so proposes forever to rule the world. It has the elements of a still higher and apparently more durable civilization. Instead of massive walls of brick and stone it has for its protection its Roman *castra*, its movable walls of living soldiery, which in invincible legions forever guard the Eternal City. Instead of the image of gold, representative of a single religion of state, it has the Pantheon, the temple erected to all gods, the symbol of a religious toleration that is at once world-wide and indiscriminate. Instead of the rude but colossal statuary, and the inartistic though imposing hanging gardens of the earlier civilization, we have in Rome that wondrous wealth of art-creation which in sculpture and painting, in poetry and music, has been the admiration of all succeeding ages.

Here was an empire vaster even than that of Babylon. Here were principles of government far more liberal, looking far less to the autocratic power of the sovereign and far more to the individual liberties of the subject and the development in the citizen of the highest type of personal character. Here, therefore, the principles of solidarity of empire seemed to have found their fullest and freest expression. To one looking upon this Roman culture in the day of its highest efflorescence it would have seemed as if this must be the final, as it was unquestionably the dominant civilization of the world.

When, therefore, the apostle Peter, sitting under the shadow of this great empire, lifted up his voice, and applied to it the same words that Isaiah had applied to Babylon in the day of its might, comparing all this splendid civilization to the withering grass and the fading flower, you and I would have said, had we been present, "Vain prophecy! other things may perish; Rome must endure." This splendid civilization cannot be as "the grass, which to-day is and to-morrow is cast into the oven." And yet what was the sequel? A few brief years of fading glory, and Rome, with all her might and all her culture, lies prostrate in the dust. Hordes of northern barbarians have swept over her classic fields. Her invincible legions have been conquered. Her eternal city has been ravaged. Her noblest people have been carried into slavery. Her sceptre is departed. Her temples, her palaces, her halls of literature, of science and of art are all in the dust. Again the divine oracle has been vindicated. The flesh has been proven to be but grass and all the goodness thereof but as the flower of the grass. This second civilization, like the first, was of the earth earthy, and hence it has passed away.

Eighteen centuries have passed, and we find ourselves to-day in the midst of a civilization as much more splendid than that of Rome as the latter was superior to that of Chaldea. In all that constitutes true greatness; in all that is at once beneficent and beautiful; in liberty, in philanthropy, in literary and æsthetic culture, in adventure of science and perfection of art, there seems scarcely anything more to be desired. Humanity seems at last to have attained its goal. Culture is in its richest and most perfect flower. We are ready to say, "Surely this is the final and consummate civilization of our race. Surely it shall not wither like that of Babylon or Rome!"

And yet, as we sit to-day amidst these free institutions, in this land of untold wealth and resources, where every man is a freeman, and every freeman a king, the question spontaneously arises: Shall this splendid civilization of the nineteenth century endure or shall it pass away? A thousand years hence shall men sit amidst its ruins, and with the zeal of the antiquarian study its relics as they now do those of Babylon and Rome? Has it any elements of durability that its forerunners had not? The answer to these questions will be found in the answer to another, namely, whether this civilization shall root itself simply in that which is material and earthly, or whether it shall be permeated and transfused by that which is spiritual and divine? For amidst all the decadence and ruin of the past, there has been ever that which

could not perish, which was not subject to change, and which had the power of communicating its own permanence and stability to all that came under its influence.

II. This brings us to consider the second thought of the text, the stability of that which is spiritual and divine. "The Word of the Lord" is a comprehensive expression for that great system of inspired truth which has been given by revelation from God, and especially for that portion of this revealed truth which constitutes its germinal principle, namely, the revelation of the great method of redemption through Jesus Christ. This was the Word spoken by the ancient prophets, and this is the Word which, as Peter declares, is now by the Gospel preached unto us. It is this Word which the apostle by a beautiful figure characterizes as the "incorruptible seed which liveth and abideth forever." Other things undergo mutations and changes, but it abides ever the same. It has also this marvellous property, that it communicates the elements of its own stability and permanence to all that comes under its influence. It is thus like a seed cast into the soil, which takes up inert matter, incorporating it with itself, and thus imparting to it the life which is immanent in itself. Of this life-containing, life-imparting power of the Word of God we may find beautiful illustration in the history of the decline and fall of the empires to which we have already referred. Look first at Babylon. Is there anything that shall survive the wreck and ruin of the imperial city? Yes, there is a captive people, downtrodden and despised, toiling as slaves in the erection of the splendid architectural monuments of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. In the Assyrian paintings and sculpture that are now in the British Museum you may recognize them by the peculiar lappet and muff. There they are, drawing the splendid obelisks along the canals like draught-horses, or carrying the immense stones to the summit of the lofty walls. Few and feeble apparently they are, overshadowed by the countless hosts of Chaldea. But they are believers in the Word of the Lord. That Word has, as an incorruptible seed, found a lodgment in their hearts. It has imparted to them its own immortality. Babylon that rejects this Word shall perish, but Israel that believes it and lives upon it shall survive; and this day not only does that Jewish people that clung with unalterable devotion to "the Law and the Prophets" still exist in a distinct nationality all over the globe; but in a still higher sense the true Israel, that which was the kernel within the shell, still abides in Christianity. The outward husk has perished, but the inward and spiritual germ has entered upon a higher and more glorious stage of development. Of all the pomp and pride of Babylon only that survives to-day which allied itself with the ever living Word of God, the "incorruptible seed which liveth and abideth forever."

That which we have seen to be true in this respect of Babylon was equally true of Rome. The eternal city was "laid on heaps," but forth from the ruins came Christianity in all the beauty of undying youth. The Vandals that destroyed everything else, had no power over it. Nay, in the breasts of the very slaves whom they bore to their northern homes, they carried this incor-

ruptible seed. The religion of the slave conquered the master; and hence came that hardy type of Celtic and Saxon Christianity which made the north of Europe the seed-bed of the Reformation.

Here then is that miraculous power to which the apostle refers when he speaks of the believer as "being born, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God which liveth and abideth forever." Our Lord with marvellous power of illustration traces for us in three successive parables the process by which this life-imparting energy is exerted upon the world. First in the parable of the sower he shows us the Word as a seed sown in an individual heart, bringing all the soil of the heart into assimilation with itself, and thus springing into "the blade," and "the ear," and the "full corn in the ear," of a mature and healthful individual life. Then in the parable of the tares the individual heart, which was before the soil, becomes, as pervaded by the new and energizing life of the indwelling Word, itself a seed, sown in the Church as the soil, by its influence to mould and vitalize all the social elements about it. And then the community of believing hearts, thus vitalized and moulded, becomes itself, in the parable of the mustard-seed, a seed sown in the world as its soil, to draw into vital union with itself all that would otherwise be evanescent and transient.

There are preserving salts which, taken up into the pores of the frailest grass and the most delicate flower, do, as it were, transfigure them in their beauty and so preserve them forever from decay. And thus the religion of Christ has power to give immortality to that which is most fleeting and evanescent. It lays its wand upon that frail flower of physical beauty which lasts but for a day and it transforms it into the undecaying beauty of the resurrection. It enters into the pulses of youthful ardor and enthusiasm, and makes them beat high and warm in pursuits that can never be interrupted and from motives that never pall. It lifts ambition to a higher plane. It gives to all the activities of the soul their normal and healthful development. It brings the favor of God which is life, and His loving kindness which is better than life. It bestows upon the soul an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled and that fadeth not away. And what it does for individuals it does in a certain sense for nations also. It lies at the basis of all assured national life. When therefore we look at the tendency at the present time to exalt the material at the expense of the spiritual; when we see the tendency of the scientific world to drift away from the safe moorings of religious faith, it is time for every patriot as well as every Christian to be filled with anxiety and concern. Let me remind you, young gentlemen, that the foundations of this nation were laid in faith and prayer. All the prosperity to which it has attained it owes to those heroic men of a former generation, who drew the inspiration of their sagacity, their courage, and their endurance from the pages of inspired truth. So long as we imbibe the same spirit, and shape our lives by the same inspired ideals, this country with its splendid civilization will survive. Let the atheistic materialism, which is seeking to supplant Christianity, become the dominant influence in this

country, and Ichabod is written upon all our institutions. The fate of Babylon and of Rome will be ours. The nation and kingdom that will not serve God shall perish. It shall be "turned into hell with all the nations that forget God."

Allow me in conclusion to press some practical thoughts upon your attention. And first let me impress upon you the importance of that which is spiritual and permanent as distinguished from that which is material and must perish in the using. The wealth, the honors, the pleasures of this world are valuable in their place. They are amongst the good gifts of our Heavenly Father, which are not to be contemned; but they are always to be held in subordination to those higher gifts of His Spirit which enrich the soul for eternity as well as for time. Finally let me entreat you as you go forth from these walls to bear with you and maintain through life a reverent devotion to the Word of God. Be not moved by the sneer of the skeptic, or the cavil of the agnostic. The Bible has outlived a hundred generations of skeptics and cavillers. It will outlive a hundred more. Subject your lives to its sacred influence. Imbibe its sublime spirit. It will enable you to use the world as not abusing it. It will enable you to transmute the perishing wealth of this world into the pure gold of a treasure in the heavens that fadeth not away. It will irradiate and beautify your life; it will transfigure and glorify your death; it will "preserve your whole spirit and soul and body blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

THE PERISHING AND THE ENDURING (ISAIAH xl., 8).—The question for all of us is, "What is the object of my thoughts, my hopes, my affections, my conduct? Is it this perishing life which must soon have vanished like a dream, which is so perpetually changing? Or, is it the unchanging, the eternal Word which liveth and abideth for ever?" Let each ask himself, "Am I groping after shadows which dissolve under my very touch? or, am I grasping, or at least honestly trying to grasp, the alone imperishable? Am I laying up for myself, 'treasures upon the earth where moth and rust do corrupt and where thieves break through and steal?' Or, am I laying up for myself, through the atoning blood, through the mighty grace of the Redeemer, 'treasures in heaven where moth nor rust doth corrupt—where thieves do not break through nor steal?'" That great question, that question of questions between the temporal and the eternal—between the attractions of this world and the solid claims of the next—between the grass that withereth and the flower that fadeth, on the one hand, and the Word which shall stand for ever, on the other—must be answered. It can only be answered by every man in the sanctuary of his own heart and conscience as he makes his brief journey across the fields of time towards the gate of the eternal world.—*Canon H. P. Liddon, Episcopal.*