

THE GODLY SON OF AN UNGODLY FATHER.

Hezekiah . . . did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done. Thus did Hezekiah . . . and wrought that which was good and right and truth before the Lord his God. And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, and in the law, and in the commandments, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart, and prospered." — 2 CHRON. xxix. 1, 2, xxxi. 20, 21.

ONE human life illustrates the whole government of God. We live under such overshadowings of God's purposes, that at every turn we come upon something which shows forth principles which are eternal. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction. Romance cannot equal the grandeur which every human life, if read aright, discloses. Hence it is that the Bible is made up so largely of fragments of biography.

1. Studying the life and reign of Hezekiah, we discover, among other things, that *he is an illustration of the sovereignty of God in conversion*. He was one of the model princes of Judah. Yet early in his life his conversion was one of the most improbable of events. He was the son of one of the most impious monarchs that ever sat on the throne of Israel. Bad blood was in his veins. His youth

was cursed by a most polluted parental example. The abominations of Oriental idolatry were the atmosphere of his childhood. Not in the retirement of a private home, surrounded by better homes, did he live, but among the splendid corruptions of a court which set the current of popular opinion, and defiled the whole kingdom. No other spot on earth is so fatal to youthful innocence as a corrupt court. Yet there this heir to the throne was born and bred. Parental and royal example combined to make him a bad man and a worse king.

It is the mysterious lot of many other men, to be born and educated under circumstances which render their conversion to God intrinsically improbable. They seem born to vice. They are trained to immorality. Childish and even infantile lips are taught to profane God's name. This is not always the lot of the poor and the ignorant only. It was the favorite pastime of one of the statesmen of the first period of our Republic, to teach his beautiful little motherless daughter at four years of age to prattle the oaths with which his own conversation was polluted. It is one of the unsolved mysteries of God's government, that such enormities are permitted. Humming-birds seem to have a more blessed existence than the children of such impious fathers and mothers.

Yet God often enters such homes with his saving grace. He speaks the word, "Thou art mine,"

and a child of immortality is saved. Christ is swift to take such a little one in his arms, and bless it; and it becomes an heir of glory. It is like God to do sovereign things. Therefore it is like God to do things which to human view seem to border on the impossible.

2. *The conversion of Hezekiah, therefore, should give encouragement to the children of unchristian parents.* So much is often said, and justly, of the covenant of God with Christian parents, that sometimes in the contrast a cloud seems to rest over the destiny of those who do not share that blessing. Said one child of vice, "My father was a drunkard, and my grandfather was a drunkard before him; I shall be a drunkard too; we belong to a race of drunkards. I may as well accept my lot first as last: it is my fate." Said another, a man of high culture, but notorious for his ungoverned passions, "My father was just so: his boys are all so. We can't live in peace together: we never did. We are all possessed of the devil: I can't help it."

Not so does God reason. "*All souls are mine,*" he declares. "The son shall *not* bear the iniquity of the father," is his law. "If he beget a son that seeth all his father's sins, and doeth *not* such like, he shall *not* die for the iniquity of his father: he shall surely live. The soul that sinneth, *it* shall die." The principle of individual responsibility is most sacredly built into the foundations

of God's government. He never swerves from it the breadth of a hair. In this respect, every man, woman, and child on the globe stands alone before God, as if no other man, woman, child, had stood before them. Each one of us stands alone, — alone here, alone at the judgment, alone forever. Each sins alone, is judged alone, is saved or lost alone. The solitude in which every man dies is an emblem of the individuality of his being forever.

It is also the *way* of God to save men when to human view their salvation is incredible. He delights in miracles of grace. The early disciples could not believe that Saul of Tarsus was converted. It is not recorded that they had ever prayed for his conversion. That was the quickest way of putting an end to his persecution of them; but it does not appear that they ever thought of it. But God was beforehand with them. Saul, before they knew it, was praying for them. God loves such paradoxes of grace. Unwritten biography is full of them.

True, it is a great blessing to have been born in the line of a godly ancestry. But it is a greater blessing to have been born at all, under the grace of God, in a Christian land, amidst sabbaths, Bibles, churches, and under the gracious providences of God. Some of the best of men have been illustrations of divine grace to the worst. What of heathen converts to Christianity? Heaven is already becoming populous with the

children of idolaters, liars, drunkards, thieves, adulterers, murderers. Go back far enough in the ancestral line of any of us, and we come to a generation of cannibals. What but the love of God *first* took off that ancestral curse?

3. The upright character of Hezekiah illustrates also *that the conversion of men is often assisted by their natural recoil from extreme wickedness*. The young monarch must have come to the throne in a state of disgust with his father's crimes. He must have felt the dishonor of them to the royal name. He must have seen the wretched condition of the kingdom on account of them. His subsequent life shows that as a young man he must have been thoughtful and of tender conscience. He was just the man to blush for his father's disgrace, and to recoil with a young man's pride from his country's shame. This class of influences, under the grace of God, may have been the means of his salvation. It is noticeable that his reform was begun instantly on his accession to the kingdom. He lost no time. He was evidently prepared for his work by previous thought and resolution.

This is one of the benevolent devices of God for the defeat of sin. Sin is often so used as to defeat itself. One of the reasons why it is permitted to run its course, and come to a head, is that men may see it in its hideous maturity. Only thus can we know it as it is. The delay of God in its punishment may be often due to this law. And it often works to the salvation of souls.

Even irreligious men are shocked by wickedness which exceeds their own. A young man's first knowledge of the world, when he goes out from the innocence of his childhood's home, often produces a recoil from the world's depravity. He did not know before that sin was so vile a thing. He starts back from it, and begins to feel his need of prayer. Not long ago a young man who had just entered college wrote home to his father, saying, "I did not know how wicked young men could be till I came here. I shall not get through without a wreck unless I commit myself as a follower of Christ." From that time he consecrated his life to God. God used the very enormities of sin to save him from sin.

So the child of vicious parents is often saved from vice by his early knowledge of vice. Many a drunkard's child has never tasted a drop of intoxicating drink. The Holy Spirit is ingenious in devising ways of alluring men to heaven. He draws men in backward in their recoil from hell. He uses sin to defeat sin. When a prairie is on fire, and the traveller is in danger of being surrounded and suffocated by the roaring flame, he has a way of fighting fire with fire. So the Spirit of God sets guilt against guilt. Temptation is checkmated by the very ghastliness of the crime which it proposes.

The young should cherish, then, as for dear life, their first revolt of conscience from abounding sin.

The sensitiveness of a soul not yet inured to vice is the guard which God has given for its protection. The backward spring from mature depravity is a token of moral health: it may be the prelude to the soul's conversion.

Charles IX. of France, in his youth, had humane and tender sensibilities. The fiend who tempted him was the mother who had nursed him. When she first proposed to him the massacre of the Huguenots, he shrunk from it with horror: "No, no, madam! they are my loving subjects." *Then* was the critical hour of his life. Had he cherished that natural sensitiveness to bloodshed, St. Bartholomew's Eve would never have disgraced the history of his kingdom, and he himself would have escaped the fearful remorse which crazed him on his death-bed. To his physician he said in his last hours, "Asleep or awake, I see the mangled forms of the Huguenots passing before me. They drip with blood. They make hideous faces at me. They point to their open wounds, and mock me. Oh that I had spared at least the little infants at the breast!" Then he broke out in agonizing cries and screams. Bloody sweat oozed from the pores of his skin. He was one of the very few cases in history which confirm the possibility of the phenomenon which attended our Lord's anguish in Gethsemane. That was the fruit of resisting, years before, the recoil of his youthful conscience from the extreme of guilt.

Our English word "remorse" comes from a Latin word which means "to bite back." Tender sensibilities trampled on in our youth grow rabid, like canine madness, and "bite back" upon the offender with a malignant venom which has no remedy.

4. The narrative before us illustrates the fact *that when God converts men from amidst surroundings of great depravity, he often has some great and signal service for them to do for him.* Such was the case with King Hezekiah. God summoned him to the reformation of a kingdom. He trained him for it by permitting him to see the guilt and the ruin of his father's reign. When the critical time came, he lifted him out of the slough of iniquity, and made him one of the signal examples of a godly prince, whose name should give lustre to the Jewish throne forever after.

Thus God often works in humbler life. One of the most successful clergymen in the history of the New-England pulpit was the son of a drunkard and a thief. His youth was spent in extreme poverty and disgrace. The family name was a by-word. When he resolved to work his way to college and to the pulpit, his father overwhelmed him with parental curses. In that man's boyhood, his ruin for this world and the next seemed to human view well-nigh certain. "Like father, like son," said his neighbors. But God had other plans for the unfortunate youth. That masterly pulpit

was preparing for him, and he preparing for it. The earthly father's curses and the heavenly Father's blessing were pitted against each other. God brought him safely through those fires of Moloch. He called him to stand in a place more honorable than the courts of kings. He became greatly successful in revivals of religion. Before his death, more than twelve hundred persons were known to him who attributed their conversion to his ministry.

God knows where to find his chosen ones. He sees them from afar. They may be born in dens of vice, and nurtured in almshouses and attics and cellars. But He who was born in a manger has his eye upon them; and he brings their feet out into a large place. They stand at last before kings. Their usefulness in the end is proportioned to the lowliness and the peril of their beginning. A popular writer of our own day says that it takes three generations to create a gentleman. It takes not half of one to create a king who shall reign with Christ a thousand years.

5. The work of King Hezekiah illustrates *the moral power of one man in effecting a great work to which God has called him.* From the narrative in the lesson it appears that the reformation of the kingdom was at first the idea of Hezekiah alone. "It is in my heart," he says, "to make a covenant with the Lord." Nobody seems to have put him up to it. No prophet came to warn or to stimulate

him. The movement grew up silently in his own heart. God and he planned it alone. Probably he had been brooding over it and praying over it for years. Men do not spring into such honor at a bound. At last he was the soul of the reform. The idea was his; the measures were his; the execution was his.

So it often is in other great works of God. Some one man heads it; puts his soul into it; gives his life to it; rouses other men, and energizes them in it. There is almost no limit to the power of a live man called of God to a great life's work. Other men fall back to the right and to the left, and let such a man go up the highway of the King, while they fall in at the rear, and acknowledge his lead.

In almost every group of Christian workers, some one such man is the confessed leader; not the man that seeks leadership, but the man whom leadership seeks. Not great men and kings alone are thus exalted. God calls them from lowly places rather. Not many noble are called. The lives of such men as William Carey and Harlan Page are immortal witnesses to what one man can do, if he is roused by great ideas, filled with a great faith, endowed with a great soul, inspired by a great hope, and sets himself to work at God's bidding and in God's way. The secret leading of such men by the teachings of the Holy Spirit is akin to inspiration. They never lie in their proposals, and never fail in their achievements.

6. The work of King Hezekiah illustrates also the *suddenness with which God often achieves by the hand of such men great changes in the progress of his kingdom*. Following the story of this ancient reformation, we learn at the end of the narrative that "Hezekiah rejoiced, and all the people, that God had prepared the people, *for the thing was done suddenly*." It was an instance of a very rapid work of grace. Although the king had originated the movement, and set others to work out the idea over which he had long brooded, he found things ready to his hand. God had "prepared the people for it." They had been reading God's providence, as well as he. Secret currents of feeling were swelling in their hearts. All that they needed was a leader. When, therefore, the leader appeared in the person of their youthful prince, events moved quickly. Results ripened fast. Before they had time to dally over it, the thing was done. The kingdom was righted, and brought once more into line in the service of the living God.

This is another of the common laws of God's working. He prepares different agencies in different channels secretly. Each is quietly fitted to another by unseen strategy. The leader is fashioned for the people, and the people trained for the leader. Unknown to each other, men are set to thinking of the same thing. The same fire is kindled in many hearts; the same resolves are

created, the same hopes cherished. Perhaps no man knows the heart of his neighbor in the thing. Each man may think he is alone in it. But by and by the time comes when things are ripe for a disclosure of God's plans. The leader appears, and unexpectedly finds that he has a large following. The people rise, and suddenly find that they have a born leader. Organization is easy. Everybody seems to have a mind for the work. The result is a great and sudden *growth* of Christ's kingdom. Revivals of religion have illustrated this law over and over again. The history of Christian missions is full of it. The abolition of American slavery illustrated it. How we used to talk and pray on that subject twenty years ago! We thought it one of the far-distant events in our coming history. Centuries hence, in some golden age, we dreamed that some happy generation of our successors would arise, who would devise some way of putting an end to the atrocious system. Nobody conceived it possible that the end was so near, and would come so suddenly. But God was fitting events to events, and men to men. Had our spiritual senses been more alert, we should have heard the chariot-wheels and the tramping of steeds. At last, when he was ready, the end came in the twinkling of an eye. Such phenomena suggest the possibility that the conversion of the world may be nearer than we think.

Who knows? It would not be stranger than some things which God *has* done, if men now living should see this world consecrated to Jesus Christ.