

THE PRODIGAL SON OF GODLY PARENTS.

And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed unto him; and he was entreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God.—2 CHRON. xxxiii. 12, 13.

Few principles of the divine government are more vital to religion than those which govern the *transmission* of tendencies to good and to evil in the line of family descent. In previous studies we have seen some varieties of them. We have observed a son faithful to the example of a godly father, in the case of Jehoshaphat; a son defying that example to the death, in the case of Ahaz; and the son of a most impious father recoiling to the service of God, in the person of Hezekiah.

The life of King Manasseh illustrates another phase of the working of those principles. The remarkable distinction of his career is, that he is the only case clearly recorded in the Scriptures, of a youth breaking away from the restraints and example of a religious parentage, who was recovered by the grace of God, and brought to repentance.

His life is the old story, — sin, chastisement, repentance, and forgiveness. “He did evil in the sight of the Lord; he made Judah to do worse than the heathen;” “Wherefore the Lord brought upon him the host of Assyria, which bound him in fetters, and carried him to Babylon;” “And when he was in affliction, he humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers;” “And he was entreated of him, and heard his supplication;” “Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God.” Guilt, suffering, penitence, pardon. The story of Judah’s prince is the story of to-day. Twenty-five hundred years have not changed its tenor, nor relaxed the principles of God’s government which it illustrates.

1. It deserves to be noticed, that the *fall of Manasseh was an exception to the general law respecting the history of children of a godly parentage.* The charge has been exultingly used against the credit of religion, that the sons of Christian fathers are *generally* worse than others. The sons of bishops and clergymen and deacons and elders are often said to be proverbially wicked. The restraints of a religious home are sometimes criticised as tending by re-action to the extremes of vice. This assertion is not true historically. Statistics disprove it.

In a certain New-England town of some thousands of people, the records of the Christian families were once examined thoroughly to test this

question. I am unable to recall the exact numbers; but the proportion of the children of such families who became religious men and women, as related to those who did not, was more than five to one. Three or four such investigations have come within my knowledge, all ending in a similar result. In the Theological Seminary at Andover, some years ago, it was found, on inquiry, that out of its hundred and twenty students preparing for the ministry of the gospel, more than the hundred were from Christian homes, and more than twelve were sons of Christian ministers. A similar inquiry, with similar results, was once instituted in Amherst College. Had the common proverb on the subject been true, no such proportions as these would have been at all probable. The reverse should be the law: the Church should look for her clergy to families in which children have not the misfortune of religious restraints to lay the foundation for profane re-actions.

The design of God in the constitution of the Christian family is to make it the fountain of all virtues, the very citadel of religion, and the nursery of the Church. The Church itself is but the family on an extended scale. In the long-run, and as a general rule, it works as God intended that it should work. The covenant of God with faithful parents is not dishonored. The Church owes to it a very large portion of her membership, and many of the most brilliant ornaments of her

pulpits. It is a fact which children in Christian households should ponder seriously, that, if they do break loose from the restraints of their religious training, they become *exceptional cases* of sin against exceptional privilege.

2. This is confirmed by the fact, which the early manhood of Manasseh also illustrates, *that, when the children of the good become vicious, they do become worse than the average of wicked men.* The brief records of Manasseh's reign clearly hint this. He fell back to the disgraceful level of his grandfather Ahaz. The catalogue of his crimes is fearful. "He made Judah to do worse than the heathen," says the historian. He practised sorcery and necromancy, and restored the furnace to Tophet. He worshipped the stars. He sacrificed his own children to pagan deities. He named his son Amon after an Egyptian idol. He was the first persecutor in Judah of the true religion. He removed the ark out of the holy of holies. Tradition says that the name of Jehovah was erased from all public documents and inscriptions. His reign was a "reign of terror" to the prophets of the Most High. The secular historian says that "day by day a fresh batch of the prophetic order were ordered to execution. From end to end of Jerusalem were to be seen traces of their blood." Tradition says that the prophet Isaiah, nearly ninety years of age, perished by Manasseh's order. Yet the same tradition declares that his mother

was Isaiah's daughter. He was one of the three kings who in Jewish story had no part in the life to come,—Jeroboam, Ahab, Manasseh. His name became in Jewish annals the synonyme of infamy.

This is an obviously natural working of things. A steel spring will recoil one way with a force proportioned to the power with which it has been bent the other way. A cannon-ball dropped from the summit of a shot-tower reduplicates its velocity as it descends, and it strikes the earth with a concussion proportioned to the height of the tower. Similar is the law of character. Both virtue and depravity are in exact ratio to the resistance overcome.

The child of godly parentage therefore, if he becomes an outcast, does fall lower than the average of outcasts. In the natural course of things he becomes a more hardened sinner in the sight of God. His conscience suffers a more fatal violence. His subsequent conversion is less probable. Such is the law of natural progress in the evolution of character. This doubtless is the foundation of the proverb that the sons of ministers and elders and deacons generally become monuments of superlative vice. When they do so, they attract the attention of observers by the very extreme of their wickedness and its contrast to the homes of their childhood. The child of godly progenitors cannot tamper with temptation without incurring

greater peril of the loss of the soul than that incurred by other men. Exalted to heaven in privilege, — thrust down to hell in guilt: such is the contrast as the Bible paints it.

3. The fall of Manasseh illustrates a mysterious but undoubted fact respecting the law of hereditary descent as affecting character. It is *that the virus of an evil parentage, when arrested in one generation, may pass over, and re-appear in the generation following.* This youthful prince was the son of Hezekiah, one of the best of Judæan monarchs, but the grandson of Ahaz, one of the worst.

Physicians tell us that there are certain hereditary diseases of which the inheritance is often intermittent. One generation may escape their fatal fangs, but they may appear in all their virulence in the generation next succeeding. Similar is the mystery of spiritual inheritance. The unwritten history of families discloses the fact that sometimes the Christian son of an ungodly father had a most devout grandmother, whose prayers seem to be answered in his conversion. Her godly virtues seem to hold over, and re-appear in the persons of her grandchildren.

By the same law, a vicious son of a Christian father will sometimes be found to have sprung from a more vicious grandfather. The evil blood descends, like a subterranean rivulet, through the person of his own son, and comes to the surface again in the evil tendencies of the grandson. I

would not probe irreverently nor to fanciful results the mysteries of God's procedures. But these are *facts* sometimes seen in the character of the linked generations. God has deemed the principle they involve of sufficient importance to be affirmed imperatively in the third commandment of the Decalogue. King Manasseh's fall, therefore, is to the point. Evil is tenacious of life. It intertwines itself around the roots of character. Tendencies to it, once created, run in the blood. We all suffer the curse of it from the fall of Adam. Not to the destruction or the lessening of individual responsibility — no, not by a hairbreadth. But it affects visibly the conditions of probation.

The old English preachers used to make much of this law of the divine government. Moral inheritance was to them a most stupendous and practical fact. Jeremy Taylor has somewhere recorded a prayer that God will purify the inherited fountain of evil in the soul, and turn back the current from rolling downward from the father to the son. To a thoughtful man, not unobservant of the ways of God, this is a most appropriate theme of secret prayer. If I am conscious of corrupt tendencies which have been a temptation to me all my life, and which I know to have been felt and lamented, or perhaps not lamented, in the lives of my progenitors, why should I not pray, with the fervor of a father's solicitude for

the salvation of his offspring, that the accursed current may stop with me? that by the grace of God it may not pass on, and deluge with temptation the lives and souls of my children?

There are rivers which come down from the summit of Oriental mountains swollen with freshets, and destructive to the tillage and pasturage of the valleys; but, as they approach the sea, they are absorbed and lost in the sands of the desert. So may we pray that inherited proclivities to sin, to vice it may be, may be arrested in their cursed flow, and be lost forever from the line of the family in which we form a link, and are appointed to work out other destinies than our own. Every Christian parent may well pray, "Lord, visit not my sins and the sins of my fathers upon the children of the third and the fourth generations!"

4. The fall of this young monarch illustrates *the power of high station and worldly prosperity to counteract the influence of a religious education.* Manasseh had all that youthful ambition could desire, to make him in love with the world. His childhood was spent in anticipation of the most splendid position in the kingdom. He was heir to wealth and dignity and the alliances of kings. Courtiers flattered him. Young men felt themselves honored by his friendship. Old men did him reverence as their future sovereign. The temptation overwhelmed him, and he fell before it.

When the sons of godly parents go astray, it is found, more frequently than otherwise, that they fall before the enticements created by their fathers' wealth, and the ease and luxury with which wealth surrounds them. I ask the principal of a large academy, what is the chief cause of the ruin of boys from religious homes; and he answers without a moment's hesitation, "Too much money." I ask the president of one of the largest colleges in New England, what is the surest protection to young men against the perils of college life; and he responds, "Poverty."

We know not what we ask when we pray for riches and worldly eminence for our children. Such prayers, answered as we wish, might just nullify our care for their religious culture, and make them the sorrow of our old age. Many a Christian father goes down to the grave, gray before his time, mourning over the vices of children whose fall is due to the riches he has hoarded for them, and the social companionship to which it has been the ambition of his life to lift them. Many of us have yet to learn to live for our children on principles which recognize our own faith in the littleness of time and the magnitude of eternity.

5. The misfortunes which followed the apostasy of Manasseh illustrate *the faithfulness of God to his covenant with godly parents*. It is noticeable that the chastisements inflicted upon the young

king were very severe. A tremendous downfall is that which precipitates a king from his throne to the dungeon of a foreign enemy. Few of the princes of Judah suffered that. But this one had been exceptionally wicked: it must needs be, therefore, that he be exceptionally chastised.

We are told, too, that in his captivity "he humbled himself *greatly*." A certain *proportion* runs through his history. A great sinner, a great sufferer, a great penitent. God works thoroughly. He is faithful in adjusting the discipline to the exigency. Whom he loves, he chastens proportionately to his necessities. He spares not the rod at the expense of the child's soul. He plans for eternity, not for time. So would we have it—would we not?—in the experience of our children.

Often is this experience repeated in common life, whether our weak souls would so have it or not. God is faithful beyond our desires. Like other wise fathers, he adjusts his dealings to the *future* judgment and desires of his children. He trusts to eternity for his justification in our sight. The prayers of the Christian father and mother for the wayward son are answered in waves and billows of affliction often, till the prodigal comes back, and humbles himself *greatly*, and says, "I have sinned against my father and my father's God."

If a star in our evening sky should stray from its orbit, it could not go beyond the reach of those

laws of matter and motion which have governed it from its birth. Gravitation would still hold it, as in grooves of iron which the ages could not wear away. Such a wandering star is a wayward and ungodly son of godly parents. An outcast though he be, the subject of scalding tears and despairing prayers, yet from those prayers he can never get loose. For years and years they will hold him within the circuit of salvation. They will follow him beyond the seas. Into the most loathsome dens of vice they will pursue and surround him as with a wall of fire. To the demons of temptation they are a voice of defiance and of challenge, saying, "Ye shall not have this child of mine: so help me God!"

And often God is in the voice. I have heard a Christian mother of an outcast son say, "I *know* that my boy will yet be converted to Jesus Christ. It has been told to me in my hours of agonizing prayer. I have given him to God. He is no longer mine. I may not live to see it; but God will take care of the treasure I have committed to his keeping. I shall see my son in heaven." Who shall dare to say nay to such a trusting woman? It is just like God to do such sovereign things.

6. The salvation of this penitent prince *should be both an encouragement and a warning to those sons of Christian parents who have lost the paths of virtue.* Often is it said of the penitent thief on the cross, that *one* such case is recorded in the Scriptures,

that none may despair of repentance on a death-bed ; and *but* one, that none may presume.

Similar is the twofold lesson to be learned from the recovery of this fallen monarch. He tried the fearful experiment of abandoning the God of his fathers, and becoming a monument of illustrious guilt. Through bitter disappointment and humiliating sorrow, he was saved. The Scriptures expressly contradict the Jewish tradition. But he was one of a thousand. No other such is clearly declared in the Scriptures to have run that risk with safety at the last. God *can* save a soul in such an extremity of sin ; but it is like lifting to its place again a fallen star. Fallen stars generally go out in darkness.

That is an exceptional hazard which a young man incurs in such an experience. It is like crossing Niagara over the rapids, on a tight-rope. *One* Blondin out of forty millions may have done it, and reached the hither shore in safety ; but would you or I risk it for that? The *general* law of God's dealings with men is that strange and unnatural wickedness shall be left to itself to work out its own penalties. This it did in the case of King Ahaz.

Place these two royal sinners side by side. Both had the example and teachings and prayers of godly parents. Both broke loose from these restraints, and ran a career of wild and defiant crime. One was saved, the other lost ; one taken,

the other left. Why the difference we know not. It is the way of God to do autocratic things. But woe to him who presumes upon God's regal mercy, to defy his laws and trample on his grace! The probabilities are incalculably great that he will be left to his own chosen way, and to mourn at last, —

“The thorns which I have reaped are of the tree I planted.”