

Chapter 8

FIDELITY TO THE RELIGION OF A GODLY ANCESTRY.

And the Lord was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the ways of his father David, and sought not unto Baalim; but sought to the Lord God of his father, and walked in his commandments. . . . Therefore the Lord stablished the kingdom in his hand; . . . and he had riches and honor in abundance. — 2 CHRON. xvii. 3-5.

KING JEHOSHAPHAT was the son of a pious father. The chief fact about him which the Bible emphasizes is, that he was faithful to that father's instructions, and followed his example. "He sought to the Lord God of his father, and walked in his commandments." He was also the child of other godly ancestors, going far back to the beginning of the royal line. "God was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the first ways of his father David."

In the religion of the Old Testament, much is made of family descent. A favorite title, by which God declared himself to his ancient people, was, "The God of thy fathers." Moses at the Red Sea sang, "The Lord is my father's God, and I will exalt him." King Hezekiah made it his plea for the pardon of his people: "The good

Lord pardon every one that prepareth his heart to seek the Lord God of his fathers." Daniel prays, "I thank thee, O thou God of my fathers." Solomon at the dedication of the temple prays, "The Lord our God be with us as he was with our fathers." Moses, predicting the calamities which should come upon the nation in the distant future, imagines the lookers-on as asking, "What meaneth the heat of this great anger?" And he replies, "Men shall say, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord God of their fathers."

Yes, in the theory of religion and its blessings in the Old Testament, the glory of the children is their fathers. One topic suggested by the present lesson is that of *fidelity to the faith and example of a pious ancestry*. Observe:—

1. *It is an unspeakable blessing to have been born in the line of a Christian parentage.* What language can express the thanksgivings of thousands of us for our Christian mothers? Do not many of us owe as much to the firmness and the prayers of Christian fathers? How many of us could have borne, without a wreck of character, the temptations of early youth, but for the hallowed restraints of a Christian home? The voice of family prayer is that of a guardian angel in a multitude of homes.

Much more than godly instruction and example is involved in the blessing. By a mysterious

law of God's government, tendencies to character spring from the line of natural descent. Qualities of mind, natural sensibilities, the fineness of conscience, the very make of the soul, in which the elements of voluntary character germinate, come to us by no choice of ours. It is a great thing to have had that fountain of our moral being purified and vitalized by the grace of God.

The purest *blood* this world has ever known is that of a Christian ancestry. It outranks all other aristocracies. Descent from kings and emperors bears no comparison with it. Yes, William Cowper, thou art right: —

“My boast is not that I deduce my birth
From loins enthroned, the rulers of the earth;
But higher far my proud pretensions rise, —
The son of parents passed into the skies.”

The *length* of the line of Christian inheritance is in many cases a reduplication of the blessing. Blessed above princes of the blood royal is a fellow-townsmen of mine, who is the descendant, in the eighth generation, from a well-known English martyr, and the golden cord of whose godly heritage has never once in all that time been broken.

It is an impressive thought, what an accumulation of *prayer* surrounds an infant at its birth in such a line! It was a favorite habit of the Pilgrim Fathers, to pray for their posterity to the end

of time. If "their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven," a convoy of angels must herald the advent of such an infant upon its earthly career. What a different thing is the *probation* of such a child from that of one who bears in his very blood the virus of a dozen generations of vice and pollution!

Probably in no other nation on the globe are there so many as in our own of such Christian families, who trace back their lineage through centuries of prayer and godly living. Says a historian of the early settlement of this country, "God sifted three kingdoms, that he might send choice spirits to people this continent." Many of us are living in *grooves* of spiritual blessing, fixed by answered prayer a thousand years before we were born. An eminent Christian of my acquaintance used to thank God daily for *concealed* blessings. Chief among such secret gifts is the shadowy hand of godly ancestors, stretched forth across the ages in benediction on our heads.

2. *The religion of our fathers, because it is such, has a strong presumptive claim upon our faith.* The presumption may be balanced by opposing evidence; but, till it is thus neutralized, it exists in the case of every man. It is no dishonor to a young man to believe in the religion of his father. It shows no want of independence to be a Christian because one's father was a Christian. To believe as my father believed, to trust the faith

which my mother sang to me, to cling to the Christian hopes which first bloomed at the fireside of my childhood's home, to rest in my *inherited* religion, and follow the example of my godly parents, is no unmanly thing. God forbid that I should glory in breaking loose from such sacred ties! Said a clergyman of my acquaintance, "I have been young, and now am old, and I have spent my life in the study of the religions of the world; but I have yet to find a stronger proof of the truth of the Christian Scriptures than I discovered forty years ago in the character and life of my father and mother."

That pride of intellect which a young man sometimes feels, which makes him think that nothing in religious faith can be *settled* by the past, that he must therefore inquire *de novo*, as if no experience had taught his ancestry any thing, is a very weak and narrow affection of the brain. No generation exists, in God's plan, for nothing. Every generation of Christian believers adds something to the reasonable faith of the world in Christ, as truly as every generation of astronomers furnishes data for the calculations of astronomers who follow them. I have no more reason for rejecting the Christian faith of my father because I have not investigated every thing about it, than I have for going back to the Ptolemaic theory of the stars because I am not an expert in the Copernican astronomy.

3. *It is one of the divine laws of the increase of the Church, that the children of Christian parents should themselves be Christians.* The conversion of this world to Christ is not to be brought about by revivals of religion alone. There are laws of grace as well as laws of nature. There is a law of Christian *nurture*, by which, through the grace of God, every Christian family becomes a nursery of the Church of Christ. Such is God's obvious design. *Character* is not transferable from father to son, but the *elements* out of which character grows are so. Religion once rooted in a Christian family should achieve so much *conservation* of Christian forces. A moral dike is thus built up against the floods of depravity, behind which children may be safe, as Holland is from the inroads of the sea.

There is no good reason why our children should not *grow up* into Christian faith, instead of being wrenched into it by moral convulsions after years of riot in depravity. Plant an acorn anywhere, and anyhow, in good soil, and it will grow upward, and not downward. By the law of its being it seeks the sun. So a child set in the groundwork of a Christian household, and nurtured in its holy light and atmosphere, should by the very conditions of his existence grow up towards God and heaven.

Many do thus grow up Christians. Many Christian men and women cannot remember the day

when they did not love God and trust in Christ. A Christian childhood may be reasonably expected to be free from flagrant vices. The very birth-hour may be the hour of holy regeneration. Christian training may be the medium of sanctifying grace. By this law of religious nurture, as well as by that of great awakenings from a godless life, it is God's design that the Church shall grow, till it covers all the families of the redeemed. One such family is in God's plan the fountain of a pure stream which is to widen and deepen till it flows in holy majesty into eternity.

4. *The imitation of a godly ancestry is peculiarly pleasing to God.* It is everywhere so represented in the Scriptures. Says St. Paul to Timothy, "I thank God when I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois and thy mother Eunice." The transmission of godliness to the third generation is here the theme of thanksgiving.

God is pleased with honor paid to his own laws. When he has given to a young man the inestimable blessing of a Christian parentage, he looks to see the blessing recognized. It is a joy to Christ to see a youth treading in the steps of a Christian father, and praying to old age the prayers taught by a Christian mother. Such a life honors God's mode of procedure. It is the supreme form of obedience to parents, with which God is well pleased. When Christian living follows a long

line of godly progenitors running back through centuries of grace, there is an accumulation of glory to the gracious plans of God which cannot but be a joy to him.

5. *It is an act of signal and relentless guilt, to break the line of a pious heritage by a godless life.* It involves a terrific contest with God for the damnation of the soul. Tough is the task which such a young man sets himself, to destroy his soul. He must do it fighting against the most potent devices of God for his salvation. Father's counsels, mother's prayers, godly example, the indefinable atmosphere, like to none other, of a Christian home, the holy momentum from a long procession of Christian forefathers, going back, it may be, into unknown history, must be persistently, in dead earnest, insolently, contended with and defied.

That is a conflict more sanguinary, and of more woful issue, than any ever fought with sword or cannon on sea or land. A tripled and quadrupled cordon of spiritual influences must be charged and broken through. Such forces are never overcome but by the aid of opposing forces from the powers of darkness. Such a one must achieve his destruction by inviting Satan into alliance. He must throw himself into the embrace of malignant auxiliaries. It is as if he cried out from within the reserved enclosure in which God has sought to protect him, "Come and help me to withstand God!" Oh! it is the saddest sight that angels ever look upon,

when the child of a godly ancestry forces his way to hell over trampled prayers, and mangled forms of fathers and mothers extending back in the shadowy past perhaps a thousand years.

Of the eminent men in American history, no one has come to the close of life under a darker cloud of reprobation from God and man than Aaron Burr. He was the son of parents eminent for piety. His father was the venerable president of a Christian college. His mother was the daughter of the Rev. President Edwards, a most godly man, and herself also a woman renowned for her rare Christian culture. The family extended far back in a luminous pathway of Christian faith and prayer. What an accumulation of holy forces was concentrated upon Aaron Burr's boyhood and early manhood! They surrounded him in no hard, repellent forms, but in the genial graces and beautiful adornments of educated Christian society. The piety of his father was lighted up by a mirthful humor. No happier men ever lived than the clergy of that age. The best education of the times, too, was his. Thus directed, so far as home and inheritance and circumstance could do it, thus directed toward heaven, he entered on his active manhood.

When approaching his twentieth year, he became interested in the salvation of his soul. The Spirit of God then clearly set before him the great alternative, and pressed his decision on the side of

virtue and religion. He retired for some weeks to a rural town in Connecticut, for the sake of settling once for all the question of his religious character. Nobody knows what was the history of those critical weeks, — through what conflicts he passed, how near he may have approached to the God of his fathers, nor what fatal influences turned him back. But he came home resolved, as he said, “never again to trouble himself about his soul’s salvation.”

To all appearance he kept that resolution to the last. The die was cast, as he meant it should be, “once for all.” It is not known that he was ever again seriously disturbed by religious convictions. He entered on what promised to be a brilliant public career, without God and without hope. He passed through it a godless man. He ended it disappointed in his ambitions, and soured against all the world. He died in obscurity, abandoned by old friends for years before, unsaluted by them as they passed him in the street, with the guilt of murder on his soul, and the brand of Cain on his brow. So far as man can know, he went speechless into eternity, with a seared conscience and a hardened heart. God suffered him, as he generally does suffer such men, to die as he had lived.

His was a representative history, — representative of those who *break the line* of ancestral piety, and force their way to an irreligious life and death, in defiance of God’s protective plans for their sal-

vation. It is an appalling question — do not angels pause, and “lean on their harps” to catch the answer? — “Who are the Aaron Burrs now living in Christian families?”