

## THE LOST SON OF A GODLY FATHER.

The Lord brought Judah low because of Ahaz king of Israel. And in the time of his distress did he trespass yet more against the Lord. This is that king Ahaz. . . . He said, Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, therefore will I sacrifice to them, that they may help me. But they were the ruin of him. . . . And in every several city of Judah he made high places to burn incense unto other gods, and provoked to anger the Lord God of his fathers. — 2 CHRON. xxviii. 19, 22, 23, 25.

“WHEREFORE do the wicked live?” Some wicked men are among the most useful of mankind. Certain poisons medical science uses to fight certain diseases which yield to no other remedy. So certain examples of iniquity may be transformed by the grace of God into remedial forces, by the contrast they furnish to the virtues, and the wisdom they teach to observers.

King Ahaz is one of the stupendous monuments of guilt in Israelitish history. He is one of the few men in any history of whom not one good thing is recorded. His career was one uniform and unmitigated stream of iniquity from beginning to end. Not one virtue or virtuous act is thought worthy of mention in his whole life. So black and disgraceful was his reign, that when he

died, the indignant and revolted conscience of the nation refused him burial in the royal sepulchre.

Let us inquire what lessons may be learned from the life of such a supreme model of depravity.

1. His career illustrates *that law of character by which the wickedness of a man is proportioned to the amount of holy influence which he has conquered.* We find a reason for his extreme depravity in the extreme facilities which he had for being a saint. He was the son of a godly father. His youth was passed under the restraints of holy example. He was one in a royal line which had been distinguished for examples of illustrious piety. He had good blood. He came from good stock. He knew that he alone, of all the monarchs of the world, held his crown and kingdom by divine right as king of God's chosen people. He knew that a splendid history lay behind him, and that a more splendid future was before him. In the line of regal descent, in which he was a connecting link, One was to appear in whom all the nations of the world were to be blessed. That ancient promise of God to Abraham spanned like a rainbow the royal family of Judah. Mysterious as its meaning was, it must have been a power of moral restraint and moral stimulus to a man called of God to sit on the throne of Judah.

Said a French monarch, when once solicited to consent to a dishonorable treaty, "The blood of Charlemagne is in my veins; and who dares to

propose this thing to me?" The sense of honorable inheritance must have been a moral power of immense significance to a monarch who stood in a line of theocratic princes. And it was not frittered away and lost in the mere sense of chivalry: it was a direct and potent help to holy living before God. Such a combination of holy influence this Judæan king broke through; and *therefore* he became the man he was. The depth of his fall was proportioned to the momentum acquired in bursting the bonds which held him.

Such is the natural working of things in the experience of sin. It is a fundamental law of character. As virtue is proportioned in vigor to the temptations resisted, so depravity is proportioned to the forces of conscience and inheritance and education and example and persuasion, and the Spirit of God, which have been fought with and conquered. This must always be reckoned in forecasting a man's future in a career of sin. The best things perverted are the worst. Christian birth abused becomes a curse. Religious education trampled on becomes a fountain of moral disease. Sabbaths broken become an opportunity to vice. Natural sensibilities to religion, indurated by transgression, become a foundation for towering iniquity. Convictions of sin resisted are often transformed into beliefs of falsehood. The strivings of the Holy Spirit quenched become the basis of satanic conquest. Devils fill the place from which the Spirit of God has been ejected.

It used to be proverbial in the days of American slavery, that the most ferocious overseers were Northern men who had to override the convictions of their youth and their inherited faith in order to become slave-drivers. This was one variety of the universal law which governs the *degree* of character, good or bad. Tell me what good influence a man has defied and scorned in becoming what he is, and I will give you the gauge of his depravity. The worst of men are apostates from the best of faiths.

2. The career of this apostate prince illustrates also *the faithfulness of God in chastising wicked men for their good*. "The Lord brought Judah low because of Ahaz." From the beginning to the end of his reign, he experienced the truth that the way of transgressors is hard. In war he was whipped all around. In alliances he was cheated and checkmated. His people were made captives by thousands. Nothing went well with him. His public life was one long career of defying God, yet of God's persistent efforts to save him by chastising him.

This is repeated over and over again in the experience of wicked men. Such men often think it a great mystery that they suffer so much. They do not understand why it is that misfortune pursues them so. "Just my luck," says one, when ill success attends his business. Yet often the secret reason is that God is trying to save the man. He

is contending with God in one way, and God is contending with him in another. There is no luck about it. It is God's faithfulness to the soul, at the expense of the pocket.

"It is a great mystery; I do not understand it: it is unjust," says an ungodly man whom disease lays low, perhaps just on the eve of splendid successes. The cup is dashed from his lips, just when he is best able to enjoy it. Ill health follows him perhaps till he is glad to find such rest as he can in the grave. Often it is no mystery. It is God's striving to save the man. It is God's faithfulness to his soul, at the cost of his body. Somebody's prayers are answered in his afflictions.

In one of the works of a popular author of fiction, a wicked man, engaged in a wicked business, is represented as scolding and swearing at and beating his Christian wife, because she persists — poor soul! — in praying for him. He protests that she shall stop praying, or he must stop his business. Both cannot go on together: one or the other must give way. He thinks he has tried it, and found it so. The fancy is often true to fact. Often prayer cannot be answered except by chastising a man. He must be whipped out of his sins, or he never can be a happy man. This is the secret of the misfortunes of many an ungodly man.

The sufferings of this world are not in the strict sense retributive. They are disciplinary. The world of retribution lies farther on. In love, God

holds the rod over many a bad man. He strikes him here, and he strikes him there. God's flail threshes him like wheat. He surrounds him with trouble. He heaps up misfortunes. They come thick and fast. Life is one long disappointment. "Few and evil have my days been," is his lament as he looks backward: "all is vanity and vexation of spirit." Is not this the general feeling with which men reach old age without the consolations of religion? "Oh that I had never been born!" exclaimed Voltaire in his old age. But in this experience of the wicked, God is never vindictive. This is his way of striving to save men from eternal death. Sometimes he pursues it to the very last, till the grave closes over the incorrigible sinner, and he passes on to a world where the retributive decisions of eternity displace the benign discipline of time.

3. The life of this depraved prince illustrates further *the extreme which sin reaches when men fight successfully against God's chastisements*. "In the time of his distress did he trespass yet more against the Lord." This is the fearful phenomenon sometimes witnessed in the developments of sin in this world. Some men are not subdued by suffering. They refuse to bow to chastisement. The more they suffer, the more they sin. Trouble angers them against God. They indicate their growing fitness for the world of woe in this induration of heart by which susceptibility to the softening

effect of sorrow is destroyed. Sometimes this phenomenon is witnessed on a large scale. Times of pestilence are proverbially times of unusual wickedness in great cities. The plague in London developed the vices of the metropolis frightfully. Men patrolled the streets singing ribald songs beside the dead-cart. In the peril of shipwreck, two classes of sufferers are often observed, — those whom the peril subdues to prayer, and those whom it drives to the rum-bottle.

When the Pemberton Factory fell, two classes of sufferers were crushed under the ruins, and two sets of voices came forth from the smoke and flame. The favorite hymns of the Methodist Church from the one drowned the curses and imprecations from the other. Thus the two went up on those wings of fire to meet God. How like to the contrast of the two crucified thieves! “Lord, remember me;” and, “If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us.”

Few things are so truthful a touchstone to the character of men as the way in which they treat the suffering which God sends as chastisement. One man turns at its bidding, and becomes an heir of glory: another defies it, and becomes a monument of perdition. Lord, who maketh us to differ?

4. The reign of this wicked monarch illustrates *the disappointments which wicked men experience in their hopes of happiness in sin.* The historian

relates of him : " He said, Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, therefore will I sacrifice to them, that they may help me. But *they were the ruin of him.*" True to the life, every word of it ! In no more truthful figure can we express the experience of many young men who enter on a career of worldliness. They see other men living for this world alone, as it seems to a looker-on, on the top of the wave of human felicity. A rich man seems to them a supremely happy man. A successful statesman appears to have all that an aspiring man can ask for. A man who has gained the summit of social rank and splendor becomes, to many who are below him, the model of earthly bliss. Any man at the top of the ladder seems very high up to a man at the bottom. So a young man is apt to look on the world to which he proposes to devote his being. " The world makes these men happy," he says ; " and I will try it, that it may make me happy too." This is the secret experience, probably, of all who give themselves deliberately to a life of irreligion. They are allured by the glamour of irreligious prosperity.

But, when they try the experiment for themselves, " it is the ruin of them." The fruit turns to ashes. No such young man ever finds the world to be what it looked to be when he surveyed it from afar. It is a beautiful mirage. The testimony of experience is proverbial, that the richest men are not the happiest men. The most success-

ful ambitious men are not the happiest men. The pleasure-seekers who seem to have their fill of all they planned for in life are not the happiest men. One word expresses the issue of all such experiments,—disappointment. This world is full of soured and disappointed men. The more irreligious men are, the more profoundly they experience this inward consciousness of *failure* in their life's plans. They have "hewed out to themselves broken cisterns that can hold no water."

In one of Hawthorne's thrillingly fearful fictions, he represents a wretched man going about with a serpent in his bosom. Every now and then he clutches at his breast with his fingers, crying, "It gnaws me; it gnaws me!" As he walks the streets among his kind, he thinks he finds that every man he meets is cursed with the same snaky guest in his bosom. Each man at intervals seems to thrust his hand up to throttle the reptile. All alike are doomed to the hideous companionship. "It gnaws me; it gnaws me!" is the universal confession. The whole world seems to his crazed fancy to be at the mercy of vipers, each man warming and cherishing his own.

Such a world is *any* world of beings given over to seeking happiness in itself. Such is this world, except as its fearful consciousness is relieved by the grace of God. Such is *self* in any man or woman, when turned away from God and turned *inward*. No flagrant crimes like those of the

Judæan king are necessary to reduce a man to this condition of inward and conscious *curse*. Perjury, arson, murder, are not the only nor the most common precursors of such a doom. A man has only to abandon God, and live to himself, and he is as sure of it as Judas. Such a man may sit on the throne of the Cæsars, or revel in the wealth of "farthest Ind;" yet he carries the snake in his bosom. In his honest hours, when he confesses the truth to his own soul, his ghastly soliloquy is, "It gnaws me; it gnaws me!"

5. The career of this wretched prince illustrates *the distinction which it is possible for a man to gain in this world as a monument of guilt*. "He did trespass more against the Lord. *This is that king Ahaz!*" Such is the reflection of the annalist, after enumerating the monarch's crimes. "This is that king Ahaz. Look at him; mark him! let him stand in history as a monster of iniquity; let the world stand aghast at him." Such seems to be the spirit of the inspired recorder. We all naturally crave distinction,—one man for one thing, another for another: all hanker for it in something. Any thing to lift us up and out of the common herd! This is the temper of a world without God. It is possible for a man of reckless impiety to become illustrious for guilt, and that only. Some such names stand out in history, and will stand thus forever. Where all are sinners, some become guilty above their fellows,—princes in depravity;

royal dukes in iniquity; men so like to Satan in character, that he dwells with and takes possession of them before the time.

This, I repeat, is possible to any man. It requires no great genius or invention. A man need not travel far and explore distant seas to gain the means of this hideous renown. It requires only a strong, persistent, and selfish *will*, determined to fight God. This is the natural drift of sin. What a scaffold is among human punishments, what hydrophobia is among deadly diseases, such may a man become among his fellow-sinners, by simply giving himself *to himself*, and defying the rights of God.

This is the legitimate ending of a long career of alternate chastisement and sin without repentance. A Cornish proverb says, "He that will not be ruled by the rudder must be ruled by the rock." This is the rock on which haughty and defiant guilt is wrecked. It is simply *left to itself*, to become what it has chosen to be, — such a demon of iniquity as to be abhorred of God and man. God save us from ourselves! We carry within us the elements of hell, if we but choose to make them such. Ahaz, Judas, Nero, Borgia, Alva, — all were once prattling infants in happy mothers' arms. The first babe of our race — a marvel of joy to the first mother — was the first murderer. Who shall dare to encounter the possibilities of human guilt, without the grace of God?