

X.

THE DISCIPLINE OF FAITH

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the proving of things not seen.”—HEB. xi. 1.

THE writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews devotes two chapters at the beginning of his treatise to insisting upon the dignity of man's nature, and its superiority to that of angels. We sometimes disguise the force of these chapters by ignoring the true sense of the quotations from the Psalms, which, although they find their final accomplishment in Jesus Christ, as the Epistle demonstrates, had yet their first significance for David and his descendants. And we further mistake by substituting the mediæval conception of angels, popularized in “Paradise Lost,” for the Jewish conception of them as the powers of nature: “Who maketh His angels *winds*, His *ministers a flame of fire*.”¹

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The tendency to the worship of angels is, in fact, a later form of that worship of the heavenly host censured by the prophets, to which Eastern nations were, from their climate, peculiarly liable.

And, indeed, even for Western and modern peoples, the calm of nature, its resistlessness, its lavish superabundance of means for its ends, are not without fascination for men, whose aims fall so far short, and whose lives are so fretful. The stars especially, which fulfil punctually their appointed seasons, have never ceased to be a rebuke and an aspiration since the days when, long ago, Isaac went into the fields to meditate at even.² And although, as regards habits, the contemplation of nature has not availed in Northern latitudes to quench effort and enthusiasm in acquiescence, in respect of opinions there has not been wanting what to-day is especially prominent—a tendency to picture the divine action as of a piece with the action of nature, almighty and serene, and not

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touched with a feeling for man's infirmity. Now, one great object of the writer of this Epistle is to insist that moral power, the power of willing rightly and strongly in face of temptation, is a higher thing than the most perfect service which is incapable of temptation; and another is to insist that the Ruler of the world is not incapable of sympathy, but One who Himself has suffered. A main thesis of the Epistle is that moral discipline is God's instrument for perfecting mankind. By means of this discipline He has raised, and is raising, men through slow stages into likeness with Himself. In the beginning He created man with certain impulses of looking forward and hoping and willing, to which we give various names, according to the object on which they are exercised, but which our author summarily describes as faith. The true and final object of this desire is God Himself. God, as S. Augustine said, “made us for Himself, and we cannot rest except in Him.” But God has drawn us towards Himself by many objects which share in His goodness, by promises which have called out our efforts, and helped us further and further on our road to Him.

The promises to the Jewish heroes, and the discipline they involved as enumerated in this chapter, were of very various kinds. To one it was, “Depart from thy country and thy kindred unto a land

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that I will show thee of, and I will make of thee a great nation," and Abraham's response was his life of a sojourner, hoping against hope for the child of promise; to another it was, "Go, and deliver this My people out of Egypt," and Moses' response was the forty years' wandering in the wilderness; to another it was, "Go in this thy might, and save Israel from the hands of the Midianites," and Gideon's response was the girding on his sword, and accepting the perilous office of patriot and conspirator. At length came the kingship and the promise to David, "Thou art My son; this day have I begotten thee;" "Sit thou on My right hand until I make thy enemies thy footstool;" and accordingly David ascended the throne, and wrought by his sword a kingdom of righteousness, and at last gave the people rest. Only David was not a perfect son of the Most High, nor was his kingdom a perfect kingdom, and so the peace of his people was not perfect. The promises, therefore, were continued to his descendants, and they, according to the proportion of their faith, laid hold upon them, and struggled towards them, and brought them more and more into actuality under the teaching of the prophets, until the perfect kingdom of God could be revealed in the Son Messiah. The whole history, that is to say, from Abraham to Christ, is regarded as a succession of ventures of faith, responding to

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divine promises, in the effort after which man's nature was disciplined, and raised to higher powers of righteousness. And when Christ came He was made subject to this same law of discipline. "It became Him," says the Epistle, "for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings." That is to say, God's creative method being one of perfecting through discipline, it became Him to respect His own laws even when the subject of them was such an one as the only begotten Son. As discipline had been the means by which the world had so far been helped forward, it was no wonder that the promised Head and Crown of the race, when at last He was revealed, should enter the scene as a Sufferer. "The Christ must have suffered." It became God to perfect our manhood by similar methods to those He had employed in order to bring it so far on its way; not by at last infusing into it angelic force and serenity, but by the attractive influence of a perfect obedience wrought out amidst human difficulties. "Though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered; and being made perfect, He became the Author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him."

Now, if Christ's discipline is the pattern of our own—if all mankind are to follow the example

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of His great humility—we must be clear as to what this discipline consisted in; and we may mark three stages as exhibited to us in the Gospels.

1. The obedience to parents. S. Luke notes that not only before, but after, our Lord's first Passover at Jerusalem, when He claimed God as His Father, He was "subject to His parents." This subjection is the first step in Christian discipline. Its importance will be readily seen. In the first place, only by obedience to parents can a man learn the moral law, and come at last to be a law to himself. It is impossible to give convincing reasons, perhaps at all, but certainly to a child, why bad actions are bad; he can only come to know they are bad by finding them strictly forbidden under penalties. This truth is one which has been generally recognized, and, except by weak parents, acted upon. Perhaps in these very last days it is less regarded, the

principle of liberty being pushed to extremes. I have heard pitiable discussions between parents and children as to the propriety of certain lines of conduct which would have been impossible a generation ago. I say "pitiable," because it is plain to every one but the parent that the child's questions are not at all dictated by an interest in the basis of morals, but simply by desire to postpone the evil moment of submission. And by such discussions two grave

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mischiefs are done. The moral law comes to possess no binding force on the child's mind, and the habit of prompt obedience is not created, which is the foundation of self-control.³

2. The second stage of discipline is the habit of industry. This also, no doubt, may be best begun in childhood as a part of obedience; a stigma being affixed to idleness, and the hands and eyes of children receiving what training is possible. But in an especial sense it forms the discipline of youth; obedience to authority gradually yielding place to discipleship; tasks being prescribed whose purpose is now partly understood, and less and less under penalties, more and more by persuasion and the force of example. This is the purpose in the schools of the well-to-do of all that machinery of prizes; hence, too, arises the blessing to so many of their fathers' small means, which supply a further stimulus to exertion. The purpose of this stage of discipline is to form such habits as attention, self-direction, patience; all the qualities by which ends are sought in means, and means carried into ends.

3. But these two habits—the habit of obedience and the habit of work—are only preparative to the final stage of discipline, in which faith discerns some object in life worth striving for, and sets its

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hope upon it, and is bent upon bringing it into evidence, though as yet not seen. This is the real discipline of life. Our Lord's subjection to His parents, His labour as a carpenter, were preparatory to His main object, the salvation of men, which was His main discipline. It was "for the hope set before Him that He endured the cross, despising the shame." And this shows clearly what a life of Christian discipline really is—that it is not, as some would have us think, a life of unquestioning obedience to authority, which is the discipline of childhood; nor, as others, a life of mere labour, which is the discipline of youth; but a life of self-control and of labour in pursuit of some worthy paramount object of desire. It is thus that, as S. Paul says, "hope saves us."

This hopefulness of mankind has often been remarked upon. To many it has seemed part of that natural endowment with which we are sent into the world; part of that instinct of self-preservation with which our mother Nature sends us forth to do our little work in her service—the salve with which she anoints our eyes, lest the sight of the evil should overwhelm us, and we should return to her arms over quickly, before we had fulfilled our mission. Hope in this view is just a natural force, growing stronger with our growth up to a certain point and then ebbing as other vital forces

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ebb. And so the Greek poet makes the Greek Saviour reckon among his gifts to men "blind hopes"—hopes which hide from us the true nature of things, and substitute some imaginings of our own, to make life tolerable for men who have to live it through no choice or fault of their own. Now, the Christian religion also takes account of this strange hopefulness of mankind, and imputes it not to nature, but to the grace of God. Instead of scorning or pitying it, the Christian

apostle sees in hope one of God's most saving gifts, and exhorts men, instead of banishing it with childish things, to cultivate it as a most reasonable and manly virtue.

Because, to repeat what we have been saying, God who made the world did not make it as we might imagine He ought to have made it, by one word suddenly perfect, whole without a flaw, like a statue cast at a jet; on the contrary, He put something into existence as unlike the result He intended as we can conceive possible—something shapeless, unformed, inert, only with just one spark in it of the divine, this spark of hope. God put us men on this earth with this wonderful faculty of hoping for what we cannot see, for something always better than is anywhere at any moment realized, in order that we might never rest contented in any state short of perfection, but might force things into ever closer resemblance to

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their divine idea. This hope, as S. Paul assures us, this earnest looking forward of the world, can never rest until men are manifestly the sons of God, until they are altogether freed from the bondage of corruption and made free and glorious. For that the world waits, for that it works. And if this hope of better things should die out, the whole upward movement of the world would collapse and subside on itself; men would sink gradually lower and lower till they reached once more the level of the beasts.

Such, then, is the discipline which our Epistle commends to us by the pattern of the old Jewish saints, and the example of Christ—work in hope and faith towards the new heaven and earth, by eager striving towards some object which our souls see to be good for ourselves and for others. It will be seen that such discipline necessarily involves self-denial. No man can work towards one object without putting others aside. By spending time and strength in one way, he cannot be spending them in another. His thoughts, by being occupied with one scheme, are necessarily withdrawn from others. But can such self-devotion to an object claim the high name of self-denial? I answer Yes, if the end for which we labour be not a selfish one; nay, it is the only Christian self-denial. There is a self-denial of an entirely different character, which consists in doing

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without things simply because they are pleasant;⁴ and this is, no doubt, good exercise in endurance, but it is not a Christian virtue. It is in origin heathen, and finds its culmination in such self-lacerations as are practised by the hook-swinging tribes of India. Christ did not practice self-mortification of this kind. His discipline met Him on the road of His work; it was caused by the intractableness of His material—by our sins; but He carried His purpose steadily through all obstacles, “for the joy set before Him” in the accomplishment of our redemption despising even the shame of the cross.

And when He bade us deny ourselves, it was with the same kind of self-denial. “*If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross.*” Self-denial, and probably the cross, would be found in the road a disciple must travel following after Christ. But to follow Christ was the only *commandment* given. “Follow Me,” He said; and it was little to those who loved Him that, in following Him, they necessarily forsook all—the sons of Jonah and Zebedee their fishery, Matthew his receipt of toll.

Christianity, then, is essentially a positive, not a

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negative religion; it consists in “following Christ,” not in “mortifying oneself”—mortification

comes by the way when the mind is set upon the work Christ gives it to do; it is a life of faith, compelling dreams to become realities, giving substance to things hoped for. As Christians, then, we must needs have such hopes; and such hopes you have, all of you, at least for the highest welfare of your own families. And even in that narrow circle there is scope for the exercise of Christian faith and Christian work. The hymn tells us in familiar words that “the trivial round, the common task, will furnish all we need to ask,” in the way of scope for our Christian virtues; only let us not regard our work in and for our households as “room to deny ourselves” so much as room to assert ourselves, our better, Christian selves, our faith and hope and charity.

And do not let our interest end with our own family circle. Faith and hope, no less than charity, must find a beginning there, but must not be there circumscribed. Let us feel our kinship in those larger circles of which we are just as really members; our town or village, our nation, our Church. In all these societies we have a part to play, and here also, if we will but allow ourselves to be interested, we shall find ourselves making surrenders for some hope set before us, for the recovery of the fallen, the awakening of the

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ignorant, the perseverance of the upright. If we will but listen, we shall hear the voice of God calling us as distinctly as Abraham heard it, or Moses, or Gideon, bidding us to some work of deliverance; yes, even though Christ has come, and has brought in the regeneration, He has not denied scope to our energies—nay, He calls us to a share in His redeeming work, bidding us drink of His cup, and be baptized with His baptism, that He also without us should not be made perfect.

¹ See Bishop Westcott’s commentary on this verse (i. 7), where he says, “Angels were supposed to live only as they ministered. In a remarkable passage of Shemoth R. the angels are represented as “new every morning.” “The angels are renewed every morning, and after they have praised God, they return to the stream of fire out of which they came” (Lam. iii. 23).

² Many poems of Mr. Matthew Arnold illustrate this use of nature, *e.g.* “Quiet Work,” and “Empedocles on Etna,” although he supplies the antidote in such a sonnet as “In Harmony with Nature.” Cf. also the saying of Emerson, “Nature does not like our benevolence or our learning much better than she likes our frauds and wars. When we come out of the caucus, or the bank, or the Abolition Convention, or the temperance meeting, or the Transcendental Club into the fields and woods, she says to us, ‘So hot, my little sir!’”

³ Every parent should read Miss C. M. Mason’s lectures on “Home Education” (Kegan Paul and Co.).

⁴ It is not intended here to disparage that true “asceticism” which, as the name implies, is a “training” of the soul. All training implies regimen, but then the regimen must be directed to an end in view, and be the best means of advancing that end (see pp. 30 and ff.).