

SUNDAY
SCHOOL

The Quiet Hour

YOUNG
PEOPLE

THE TRIAL AND TRIUMPH OF FAITH.*

(By Alexander McLaren, D.D.)

The chronicler's account of Sennacherib's invasion and defeat is much briefer than the parallels in 2 Kings and Isaiah, but it has a distinct character, in that it looks at the whole incident mainly as the trial and triumph of faith, and as the victory of Jehovah over false gods and their worshippers. The verses before the lesson bring out two points: Hezekiah's superb confidence in Jehovah's help, and the people's faith caught from the king's. He and they armed themselves against "all the multitude that is with Sennacherib," not with swords and spears, but with the shield of faith. On the one side was arrayed a host with all arms and appliances of war; on the other a little handful, all but defenseless except for God, whom they believed to be with them. The field was cleared, and our lesson tells how the battle was joined and fought. The stages of it are clearly marked.

Sennacherib's message. From his point of view he was speaking common sense, and putting plain truth in a not unkindly fashion. No doubt he seemed to himself to be remonstrating condescendingly with a feeble antagonist who was rushing on destruction. It was perfectly true that he and his predecessors had swept, like a forest fire, over the earth and conquered. It was perfectly true that Judah and its king had no more chances against him than a sheep against a wolf. And his first question by his messengers (v. 10) expressed his astonishment, which was no doubt quite sincere, at their insanity: "Whereon do ye trust, that ye abide the siege of Jerusalem?" The man whose vision is bounded by things seen by sense can never understand the conduct of him whose faith pierces through the shows of time to grapple itself to the throne of the unseen Jehovah. It cannot but appear madness to him. And faith has always to make an effort to sustain itself, and to stop its ears to the whispers of fears within as well as to the voice of foes without, which seem to be speaking plain common sense, and can quote many experiences to back up their contentions.

Trust in God does not often seem to our faint hearts quixotic, and there are never wanting Sennacheribs to say to us: "Who are you that you should be able to resist where so many have been overcome? Look at facts and recognize your weakness, and save yourselves from a worse fate by giving up this unequal struggle." In regard to our own ottava of the higher life of unworldliness, and in regard to the warfare that all noble souls must wage against social evils, and for the spread of righteousness and religion in the world, we are ever being tempted to save our own skins by a base conformity and surrender. Our own calculations of available forces too often coincide with Sennacherib's godless estimate. It is depressing work counting our resources unless we set down God as the first of them. But it is animating to say with another king of Judah: "We have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do; but our eyes are upon thee."

We can but point out the striking contrast between Hezekiah's and his people's distrust of themselves and trust in Jehovah, and Sennacherib's arrogant self-confidence and contempt for the gods of

the defeated nations whom he acknowledged to be gods. "My hand" was stronger, in his estimate, than the "god of any nation or kingdom." True, in his boasting inscriptions he pretended to owe his victories to his own gods, but under the thin veil of such conventional humility a godless self-confidence strutted and swelled. And there are a good many people nowadays whose religion is as mere a mask for an equally godless reliance on their own "hands."

The counter-stroke of faith. When Sennacherib threatens and taunts, what can Hezekiah do but pray? The consciousness that Sennacherib was quite right in asserting his own superiority in power must have driven Hezekiah to one of two things,—despair or prayer. He "caught at God's skirts and prayed." The chronicler associates Isaiah with him in the prayer, while the other accounts in 2 Kings and Isaiah represent the king as praying and the prophet as bringing God's answer. The two accounts are not contradictory, and the lesson that they teach is very useful. The prophet must be a petitioner first if he is ever to be God's messenger. He must kneel with empty, open hands and feel his own impotence before he comes out from the sanctuary the bearer of God's gifts to men. The king and the prophet must pray together if the prophet is ever to have a message of cheer for the king.

The chronicler does not give the prayer, but the other account does so. And very instructive is it. It begins, as tried faith always should begin, with tightening its grip on God. It is not conventional adoration, but faith heartening itself by the remembrance of what God is in himself and to it that speaks in Hezekiah's invocation of "the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel," and recalls his universal sway over all the kingdoms of the earth.

The boast of the Assyrian king had been that "all these kingdoms and the glory of them" were his, and for a moment Hezekiah had almost been carried away to believe the boast, but in the presence of God his tottering faith rights itself, and he sees reality once more. If we "go into the sanctuary of God," we shall not only understand the end of godless power, but its limits while it lasts, and when we think of the omnipotence of the God whom we unpresumptuously call "our God," then all the Sennacheribs in the world are, as Jeremiah called one Pharaoh, "but a noise." The struggle seemed almost ludicrously unequal between the invader with his legions and these two defenseless men; but their prayer was the whisper that loosed the avalanche. Our prayers have the same power if they are the prayers of faith.

The collapse of godless self-confidence. The chronicler brings together, as cause and effect, the apparently small matter of two helpless men praying, and the annihilation of a great army. Hezekiah and Isaiah "prayed because of this. . . and Jehovah sent an angel, who cut off all the mighty men of valor." There are hydraulic machines in which a jug full of water poured in at one end brings into action power that can crush iron masses or beat them out into thin sheets.

One poor man in distress has told his experience in the eighteenth psalm. "I called upon the Lord," and the cry brought Jehovah riding on a cherub and wrapped in thick darkness, and laying bare the foundations of the world. And what was all the majesty and terror of that theophany for? Only this: "He took me; he drew me out of many waters." A manifestation of God that shook creation was brought about by one man's prayer, and had for its adequate purpose

one man's deliverance. So was it with Hezekiah in his distress. So it may be with us. Sennacherib's inscriptions say nothing about the failure of his campaign and the destruction of his army, which silence is very intelligible, and is paralleled in the proverbially mendacious bulletins of many modern military nations.

But there are traces, in what they do not say, of some concealed disaster; and they reveal that he never ventured to attack Judah again, though he reigned and fought for twenty years after the destruction of his host. The great lesson of that destruction is pointed by the chronicler in verse 22, where he evidently refers to Sennacherib's boast that Jehovah could not "deliver you out of mine hand," in his triumphant declaration: "Thus the Lord saved Hezekiah. . . . from the hand of Sennacherib, king of Assyria (what irony in giving the defeated boaster his title!); and from the hand of all others." Jehovah had been defiled, and had smitten the defiler to the dust with a touch of his finger. Hezekiah had trusted and been taunted, and his faith is vindicated. The man that felt he could do nothing stands erect and triumphant; the man that thought he could do everything is in full flight, and stripped of all the force in which he trusted.

But that was not all. Twenty years after, Sennacherib was worshipping his God, as Hezekiah had been doing when the answer came to him, but Sennacherib's prayers were addressed to one who could not hear or help, and even when they were being spoken, "they that came forth from his own bowels slew him there with the sword." That is the end of godless self-confidence, or of prayers and hopes turned to or fastened on false gods who cannot deliver either themselves or their votaries.

A DAILY PRAYER.

O Lord, I have a busy world around me; eye, ear and thought will be needed for all my work to be done in this busy world. Now, ere I enter on it, I would commit eye and ear and thought to thee. Do thou bless them, and keep their work thine, that as through thy natural laws my heart beats and my blood flows without any thought of mine, so my spiritual life may hold on its course at these times, when my mind can not conspicuously turn to thee to commit each particular thought to thy service. Here my prayer, for my dear Redeemer's sake. Amen.—Dr. Thomas Arnold, of Rugby.

PRAYER AND PEACE.

It is small things that, just because of their smallness, distress and overset us. I mean the weight of daily care, which is the small details of personal expenditure and in the careful routine of a household, and in the rearing of children, and in the society of friends, and in the outside duty, and in private affairs, singly and separately, is sufficiently burdensome; but altogether, and on one set of shoulders, is sometimes felt to be more than the strength can bear. Those most anxious lives, tempted to be fretful, and hasty, and self-important, and fumed with their incessant activities, may, if rightly interpreted and manfully grasped, settle down into round and sunny centres of regular, and peaceful, and fruitful activities. Where there is prayer there is peace; and God, who makes every duty possible, knows, helps and cares.—Dr. Thorold.

*S. S. Lesson 1, July 2.—2 Chron. 32: 9-23. (Study the chapter. Read Isa., chaps. 36, 37.) Golden Text: With us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles.—2 Chron. 32:8.