

## PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

## ESTHER AND RUTH.

There are two books in the Bible which bear women's names—Esther and Ruth. Different in their cast and their scenery, they possess in common one striking peculiarity, in teaching the most important religious lessons without any profession of doing so.

The peculiarity of the book of Esther in omitting all mention even of the name of God, has been suggested to my mind in looking over the map of North America. Wherever the Spaniards settled, we find such names as *Vera Cruz*, or *True Cross*, *Trinidad*, or *Trinity*, *Santa Fe*, or *Holy Faith*, *Santa Maria*, or "Holy Mary; and a multitude of saints names, as *San Francisco*, or "Saint Francis." Wherever the English settled, on the contrary, we find mostly only unconsecrated names, secular, or of heathen origin, only here and there a name like *Salem* or *Providence*. But when we look for religion, we do not find it chiefly where the religious names are found. The *thing*, as contrasted with the name, we find not in Spanish but in English America.

The Jews, for reasons of their own, hold the book of Esther in high esteem, according to an old saying of the rabbis, that when all their other sacred writings have perished the book of Esther will remain.

May we not also accord a high rank to this book in the sacred volume for its teaching a lesson so needful at all times, and still as needful as ever, against that tendency to be influenced by names more than things, which is the bane of religious life? It strikingly illustrates God's control of events without mention of His commandments, or even His name. It is held by theologians to be an inspired book, while looking precisely like any piece of secular history. In fact, Luther condemned it as full of "heathen unnaturalities." It carries none of those phrase-marks by which it would now-a-days get into the "religious department" of a denominational newspaper, rather than the "secular department." And yet it is a part of Holy Scripture.

Such a book reads us the lesson to depend less on labels and more on conscience; to read the lessons of religion in all history and all science as well as in manuals of devotion; to recognize religious truth outside of the catchwords of our own creed. . . .

In the light of this book the common distinction between "sacred" and "secular" is worth remarking on. This is a proper enough distinction, if properly used. "The law is good, if a man use it lawfully." But in the nature of things this distinction is accidental and temporary, serving merely to educate our thought to penetrate the profounder realities, where all secular things become sacred, as all controlled by God, working under His providence towards ends divine, and sanctified in the regard of religious souls. And yet how easy to forget the educational intent of this distinction, and to use it for a permanent mark between what is God's and what is not God's. So men give the name of "divine service" to stated exercises of worship, but not to their daily calling. They put religion apart from business and recreation, in a way that makes heathen through six days, and hypocrites on the seventh. They regard the church as consecrated by and for stated public worship only, and desecrated by the admission of any innocent and wholesome entertainment; making curious distinctions between the degrees of sacredness which belong respectively to the lecture-room and the main auditory, as formerly to the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies in the Jewish Temple. . . .

Against this false discrimination, against the human tendency to place the distinction between sacred and secular in forms, phrases and names, the book of Esther utters so strong a protest, that we might well pronounce it, on that account alone, worthy of its place in the Bible.

The main lesson of the book of Ruth chords well with this key-note of the book of Esther.

In Ruth we see the closest constancy of affection beautifying a relation against which the satirist often directs his bitterest jibes. We see the hardest times brightened by the flowers of the purest love. We see a virtuous self-help sensibly accepting a trying situation, and honestly winning its due recognition and reward. We see the providence which feeds the sparrows aiding the pious and industrious poor. This is just such a story of common life as would instruct a

rude people in some of the primary lessons of morals and religion; just such a story as a divinely guided prophet might have written for such a purpose. In the primitive age it was a lesson which the divine teaching of the race could hardly have failed to give in some form or other. Common as is the lesson now, it is not yet well learned. It is common life, domestic life, not among rude Hebrews merely, but in all times, that needs just such sanctifying as an example like Ruth's. This world, our homes, our daily work, make the circle where just such examples need to shine.

. . . The book of Ruth is a standing protest against the besetting error of putting religion only in doctrines, institutions, ceremonies. Ruth insists on its being put into the life, the home life, the work life, the social life, in all pure and sweet morality. In view of the fatal facility with which men forget this, we may well believe that our divine teacher, the Spirit of God, secured such a book its place in the glorious company of prophecy, gospels and revelation. For so we are taught that the sublime doctrines of an incarnate God and an opened heaven are of no avail except we embody the spirit of religion in the fitting form of moral beauty, amid whatever burdens and trials God calls us to glorify Him by well doing.

In such lessons these two books, however diverse in special colouring, blend in impressive harmony. We find their details in similar accord, in exhibiting the spirit of piety in practical and moral forms, rather than devotional and religious.

Compare, for instance, the dutifulness of Esther toward Mordecai, even after she became queen, and the dutifulness of Ruth toward Naomi. Compare again, the combined energy and prudence of each in her time of need, Esther employing all of woman's tact in conducting her perilous and delicate part with the king and with Haman, Ruth in concert with Naomi, declining the privilege of the law of inheritance until she had established her character by industry and final piety.

Compare each again in her relation to those unknown elements in the hands of providence which are the remnant of the righteous and the dread of the wicked. Of Ruth, as she went to glean, we read that "her *hap* was" to light on the field of Boaz. Concerning Esther we read, in combination, the singular postponement of the fatal day by her adversary's superstitious use of the lot, and the unexpected blasting of Haman by the sudden disclosure of the fact that his revenge had ignorantly struck at the queen.

Especially intense in colouring is the picture of providential control as it appears in Esther's record. Wrath fell on Haman as a thunderbolt from a clear sky, when Esther in her supreme moment simply said, "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman." The fact, to him before unknown, that the queen was of the race he had struck at, saved them and destroyed him. How striking this suggestion of the unknown elements by which providence operating through law destroys the wicked and delivers the Godly! The success of any selfish scheme depends on an indefinite number of particulars, some of which he cannot know, and any of which, when reckoned in, may change the whole result. Hence he is ever at the mercy of the unknown elements by which the omniscient disposer of events controls the issue. The unknown elements in human calculations! Never forget them. These are the avenging and recording angels by which every soul is made, sooner or later, to realize that the supreme power works for righteousness.

The very position which these books respectively occupy in the Bible between those which precede and follow carries the analogy between them still further. It is singular to find the book of Esther, so intensely secular in its form and its phraseology, inserted between books so intensely religious in external expression as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah preceding it, and the book of Job which follows. Equally singular, though in another point of view, is it to find that peaceful scene of rural innocence and piety, which the book of Ruth depicts, between the book of Judges and the books of Samuel, so full of bloodshed and mourning, and fierce struggles and wild cries of victory. It intervenes like the even-song of shepherds in a lull of battle-drums and trumpets. It teaches us the comforting belief that even in calamitous times earth's happiness has not all been spoiled. The world's past is not so dark as history pretends. Our thoughts may always turn from that record of strife and crime and

suffering, which it often seems the chief task of the daily newspaper to spread before us, to contemplate those unpublished ministries of virtue and goodness which are covered from the eye of the reporter to smile in the sight of the recording angel.

In exhibiting the analogy between these two books this feature ought not to be omitted, that each is the story of a good woman in a hard place. Less need be said of that here, because that seems to be a characteristic of most Bible biographies, stories of good people in hard places, the moral victories of constancy and faith amid sore trials. In this respect the account of Esther demands especial notice. She held only the rank of the best loved one in a polygamous household, whose arrangements were as repugnant to our moral sense as is the odious peculiarity of Mormonism. To Esther's moral sense confessedly noble as was her character it can hardly have been thus repugnant, with the polygamous precedents set in her own nation by sovereigns from David's time, and equally common in the foreign land of her birth. Such is the revelation of moral progress which the Bible history gives, by incorporating such usages of the best men and women of earlier times, in the same record with the teachings of Him who made known to later times the divine intention of the fact, that the first family consisted of a wedded pair.

To conclude, the lesson of *inclusiveness* which Esther gives by ignoring the outside distinction between "sacred" and "secular," Ruth gives in another way by ignoring the distinction elsewhere recognized between the chosen people and the heathen. Moses had pronounced a curse on the race of Moab, which after a thousand years Nehemiah kept in force. From this accursed race, and against the prohibition of intermarriage with them, came Ruth the Moabitess.

The Jewish Church, as narrow and exclusive as any church that ever existed, was obliged by the necessities of its position to be such. The feeble light amid fierce winds must be within a lantern. Something was needed to offset this, and to show that this was not the divine ideal, but a temporary arrangement for an exigency. Hence, in remarkable contrast with the exclusiveness of the people and their institutions, the repeated testimonies of the prophets to the truth which we find embodied here in the living example of this woman. The name of the foreigner from the accursed race is here inscribed in the national record beside the names of Moses and Samuel, as a silent testimony that God is the God of all mankind, and that all have an inheritance in Him. Thus, side by side with the exclusiveness of temporary religious forms, the Old Testament places the inclusiveness of the abiding spirit of religion. When the Moabite was debarred from the national sanctuary, the Moabitess is enrolled in the holy volume which that sanctuary enshrined. And so long as creeds and sects and religious forms estrange men's sympathies, so long will her story repeat the timely lesson, to seek in the religious spirit the inclusive bond, the essential unity.

It is not unworthy of notice that the two books of the Bible which bear women's names are wholly occupied with present duties, and things near at hand in a narrow range, while over all there plays the light that comes from afar and from above. Nowhere is the great consequence of some little things more impressively displayed than in the incidents of these books—the king's sleepless night saving Mordecai from the gallows; Ruth's casual entrance of Boaz's field conducting her to the place in history which is hers. Nowhere is the supreme worthiness of uprightly, dutifully, and bravely living the lot which providence assigns more persuasively set forth. What worthier lessons could women, or men, teach mankind than the lessons of these books, in which the distinction between royal Esther and humble Ruth is lost sight of amid the light that glows in the simple goodness of both?

"Honour and shame from no condition rise;  
Act well thy part; there all the honour lies."

"What shall I do to be forever known?  
Thy duty ever."

—Sunday Afternoon.

## FENCED CITIES FOR THE LITTLE ONES.

What will we do with the children? This was the question under consideration one day in the tribes of Reuben and Gad. These two tribes had decided to ask as their inheritance a portion of the country east of the Jordan. It had already been conquered, but before they could settle down in it for good, all of them