

CLOUDS WITH SILVER LININGS.

A SERMON.

BY THE REV. E. PAXTON JOOD.

"And now men see not the bright light which is in the clouds." — Job xxxv. 21.

CLOUDS, clouds. There are none of us who have not looked at them. Deep occasion have we had to look at them, all of us, if we have human hearts. We have regarded perhaps their strange features from many moods. Woods, mountains, sea—these have been reckoned to be Nature's three great poems; to them I will add clouds. Is it not very pleasant, when the time of reverie is on us, to lie down on the top of the hill, or in the shade of the old wood, or in the deep dingle, and look up at them sailing along, mysterious, portentous, majestic, various, ominous? How they shape themselves after the mood of your own mind! How you throw your own spirit upon the cloud, and see forms painted there in all the gorgeousness of amber, and gold, and sapphire, or black and lurid! Do not you think they are great books, clouds? Homes of the thunder, palaces of the lightning, conductors of the meteors, halls of the tempest; where all those uproars that we have so recently heard go on, in storm and hurry, and battle; where they discharge their artillery at one another, and shoot out their arrowy glances and their glittering spears, perhaps never heard of down here in this little mole-hill of a world. Yes, when we get among the clouds, we soon make a flying horse, and we racket away through the universe upon it. I think we have not much love for that which is suggestive if we do not find many pictures given to us out of the clouds.

Clouds have an interpreted force, and as I am to show you they have silver linings—grim, and dark, and gloomy as they are, they have gentle and bright teachings; they are capable of daguerreotyping upon our paths bright letters, if we will but stop to read them. Men see not the bright light which is in the dark cloud. Let us see whether we cannot detect some of the light.

In the first place in the character of God, the cloud has silver linings.

"Dark with excessive light his skirts appear"

So the great poet says. In nature God appears to us very much more as the God of mystery than as the God of mercy. I read it so. I am not going to give you other men's readings or impressions; I will only give you my own. I have said again and again here, and still expect to say it, that to me nature is no Gospel. To me nature never has been more than a very mysterious poem which I may with a very great deal of patience spell something merciful out of, but which so thwarts my conceptions of the loveliness, and lustre, and beauty of him who is called here the God of love, that I scarce know how to read the page as natural theologians would have me read it. The character of God is a great, strange, dark cloudland; but it has its silver lining. The old writer said, "The light of Thy countenance maketh me afraid"; and it is because of the light of that countenance that God covers it with a cloud, that he holdeth back his face and spreadeth a cloud upon it. He dwelleth in incommunicable, inaccessible light. No man hath seen him, nor can see him; and yet on the fringes of that cloud which vests him and passes before his throne, we see indications and traces of the benignity and beauty of his character. You may see in the fringe of the cloud before the throne of God, what he is. And this book, as I shall have occasion to say presently, is only something like a cloud before the throne of God. Perfect revelation you cannot bear, perfect revelation you could not have—I mean the revelation of God as he is; I do not expect that any angel ever has had it. I meet with some conceited old brethren sometimes, who fancy that when they die they are to be let into the mystery of the Divine character all at once, that God will show them himself, so that he will have nothing further to reveal. I can only pat them on the back, and let them go along their own way. I would not disturb their ideas; let them live on in them, and when they come into the next world they will be none the less nappy because they find heaven has more mysteries than they supposed on earth. All we know is, that he holds back the splendour of his own being, for we could not bear it. You have heard of the man who went to look at the sun, and was blinded by it, and arrived at last at the conclusion, that if the sun was so bril-

liant, God, who made the sun and rolled up all the lightnings, and all the beams, and all the grandeur which blaze and burn and brighten there, must be far brighter himself. Blessings, therefore, on his name, for giving us intimations of what he is; blessings on his name for showing to us weak, frail children something of his character, for showing to us how that which is terrible in him is tempered and toned down, so that we are able to adore, and not be dismayed; for that is how we ought to come to God. Never be it yours or mine, dear friends, to come to God with impudent haste; never be it yours or mine to come to God with sandalled feet; never be it yours or mine to bow down in his presence as if he were altogether such a one as ourselves. We must always come with adoration, but we must look up, and although the cloud is so strangely thick, look, look! A bright light fringes it round, shining on our pathway, and telling that "God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." God is constantly encouraging us thus, and saying to us while we come, especially to tottering and trembling people, "Fear not. I am indeed God, and thou art man; I am indeed the Creator of all the earth; all things have had their being from me; there is no lightning that blazes, there is no meteoric fire that shoots across your midnight heavens, there is no star that rolls its wonderful and awful way, there is no sea that roars, there is no wind that beats the sea into a tempest upon the distant ocean, or that blows upon the top of the tall hill that has not had its being from me. But, poor child of clay, fear not for I am with thee; be not dismayed, for I am thy God." There is light thus, you see, behind the cloud; there is a silvery lining to the thick darkness in which God invests himself.

Again, in the pathway of providence the clouds have a silvery lining. The providence in which he moves is frequently as cloudy as even the vesture that robes round his own being and character. And how unreasonable, dear friends, it is to suppose that all providential arrangements are to be known and seen by us. It is as much as I can do, and I think I have got a little way towards doing it—it is as much as I can do to put the two ends of my life so far together. I have recently been thinking during the last two or three years, that God has been nearer to me than I used to think he was. There was a time since I have been a professed believer in Christian truth, when I used to take up these ideas as the appropriate ideas for religious men, that God did not intermingle and intermeddle much with us, that he let our affairs go on, as he lets the stars go on, that he rolled worlds into being and men and races into being, and governed all indeed by his great power, weighed all in great and infinite balances, but did not meddle much with personal human affairs. I have quite got out of that way of thinking; I am a long way from that. I think God is very nigh to those who profess to be his, if they are his indeed. I am never weary of thinking—I could weep to think of it—how near he is to us, and that the ways and walks of our life, what we may call in our way the high-streets of our existence, as well as the bye-lanes, have been all marked out by him, and all have relation to his Divine knowledge, to his Divine mind. If that is not the true character of God, then I do not see that I have very much to choose between Christianity, as it might be called, and Deism or Atheism. If God be merely the Lawgiver dwelling at a great distance, far off from his creatures, far off from me, I do not see that I gain much. I come before him, then, as he reigns in the dreadful temple of immensity. I veil my brow and bow myself before the great, awful, shadowy darkness, and feel that there, far beyond the Milky Way, far beyond the burning, blazing galaxies, far off from solar heavens, myriads of miles away from solar influences, he dwells; it is nothing to me; no, there is no consolation in that. And while I ignore that idea with my feelings, my reason ignores it too, and teaches me that if he be God, the least thing to him must be equal to the greatest, and that he knows my affairs as truly as he knows the pathway of a planet; that he knows the little birth, the little life, and the little death in my family as much as he knows the ranks of those nodding, and plumed, and elevated intelligences that burst constantly into the grandeur of consecutive song—Holy, holy, Lord, in strains of fire from their seraphic lips. Yes, there is a bright light in the dark path of providence marking our world. God's justice is terrible, but it is lined with mercy; God's terror is terrible, but it is lined with love; God's power is terrible, but it is lined with wisdom. The first is a cloudy grandeur; the last throws tenderness over that attribute and light over my path.