

Messenger and Visitor

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Divine Impossibility.

One does not have to proceed far on his earthly pilgrimage before discovering that it is much easier to ask questions than to answer them. There is a great deal here that mystifies and perplexes us, but before we permit ourselves to lose courage and hope in the presence of the mystery which life presents we would perhaps do well to reflect whether, if the universe had been constructed on a plan that should have left no mystery for our minds to wrestle with, we should have been happier and the world a better abode for men. Probably if we can have patience to wait a little we shall be fully convinced that the wisdom which determined the conditions of our lives and the character of that Universe in which we have our being is higher than our wisdom as the heavens are higher than the earth.

Among the questions which the Christian finds most perplexing are those which have reference to his own experience and to that of others making life's pilgrimage with him. There are so many things, he says, which seem mysterious on the supposition of an almighty, infinitely pitiful and constant providence exercised over the lives of God's children. If the Lord is watching over us, and caring for us always, why in our sore need is His help sometimes so strangely denied us? Why do these crushing sorrows, these heart-breaking troubles, come upon us? Why is one Christian's lot so full of bitterness and pain, while to another there seems to come only peace and prosperity? Why is prayer for life or health or deliverance sometimes so graciously answered and sometimes again so strangely denied?

These questions cannot be fully answered now. Often the disciple knoweth not what his Lord doeth. But what he knows not now he shall know hereafter.

Such mystery there has always been in the history of God's people. An angel is sent to bring Peter out of prison while James and Stephen die at the hands of the persecutors. The apostles experience many a deliverance, but at the last, if we may believe tradition, they all but one die the death of martyrs. Could not the Lord, who delivered Peter, have saved James and Stephen also. Could not he who preserved John from martyrdom have kept the others also? Doubtless in one sense He could have done so, but it may well be that he could not do so consistently with the highest welfare of His servants and of the cause which they delighted to serve. Could not He who opened the eyes of the blind have caused that this man should not have died? asked the skeptical Jews when Lazarus was laid in the grave. "Lord, if thou hadst been here my brother had not died" was the sorrowful, half reproachful, cry of Martha and of Mary. The Lord could have been there. He could have kept back Lazarus from death. He chose rather that His dear friend should die. Was it that he loved Lazarus and his sisters less than he did the Centurion and others whose sick he had saved with a word? No. He held back His hand from this miracle of healing in order that there might be another greater miracle, an infinitely richer revelation of Himself to that afflicted family of Bethany, and through them to all believers. "Could not Christ have saved Lazarus from dying, could not Christ save you or me from perplexity, from temptation or from doubt? Surely," says Phillips Brooks, "these are questions which have their lower and their higher answers. He could, because the power of life and death was in Him. But the power to use the power depended upon other things. It depended on the necessity which lay back of all things in Jesus to do the absolutely best thing,—not the

second best but the absolutely best thing of all. This is a sublime incapacity, to stand with the gift of life in the all powerful hands, to see the cry for life in the eager eyes, to hear it in the dumb appeal of the terrified lips and yet to say, 'No, not life but death is best,' and so to be unable to give life,—that is a sublime, a divine incapacity! Could not Christ have answered your prayer? No. He could not; not because the thing you asked for was not in His treasury, but because, behind the question of his giving or refusing it, there lay the fundamental necessity of His nature and His love that He should do for you only the absolutely best, the thing you asked was not absolutely best, therefore He could not give it. Back of how many unanswered prayers lies that divine impossibility."

The Disciples Dispersed.

The laying waste of the church in Jerusalem and the dispersion of the disciples meant the scattering of seed, which was to be widely and gloriously fruitful for the kingdom. The disciples went everywhere, not in silence and in fear but "preaching the word" which was the power of God in their souls and must find utterance. Philip, the Evangelist—like Stephen, one of the Seven—went down into Samaria, and through his word the power of God was graciously manifested to the Samaritans. What Philip did in Samaria others doubtless were doing with greater or less effect in other places, and so by the dispersion of the disciples the Word of God was multiplied and increased in far greater degree than would have been the case if the peace of the Jerusalem church had remained unbroken. What the church as well as the individual Christian has always most reason to dread, is not the open opposition of enemies, but the failure of that spiritual life within which is essential to endurance whether in prosperity or in persecution.

The meeting of the Evangelist and Simon the sorcerer, is instructive and suggestive. Just what this man was, what arts he practiced, whether or not his power was more than the skill of a cunning conjurer, the narrative does not explain. One thing is clear: he had worked strongly upon the imagination of the people and had won great reputation among them. Amazed and mystified by his "sorceries," they had come to regard him as possessed of some supernatural power. But whatever was the source or character of Simon's influence, it seems evident enough that there was nothing wholesome in it. It was wholly different from the healthful spirit of God's grace that came with Philip—very different from the gospel of Jesus Christ, with its enlightening, healing and liberating power. Simon's arts caused amazement. Philip's preaching brought light. Simon exalted himself. Philip proclaimed Jesus Christ. What the world forever needs is not sorcery, but a saving power. Not the man who goes about giving it out that he himself is some great one, but the man who preaches Christ Jesus as Lord and himself as the servant of men for Jesus' sake, is the man who ministers to the world's need. What took place in Samaria shows that the people recognize this when it is fairly demonstrated to them. Yet it must be confessed that even in the midst of the boasted civilization of this great century, men and women exhibit a large capacity for being amazed and humbugged, so that Simon the sorcerer, whenever he appears, is pretty sure of having a very considerable following.

In the midst of the persecution which laid waste the church, the apostles were so far sheltered from the storm that they were able to remain in Jerusalem. The reasons for this remarkable fact are not stated, but it seems evident that the wrath of the persecutors was directed particularly against the Hellenists, or Grecian Jews, who, after the example of Stephen, were preaching the gospel on somewhat broader lines than the apostles had yet conceived it, and were thus in a measure anticipating the position and the preaching of Paul. How bitterly Paul's doctrine was opposed even by Hebrew Christians, is made evident in his epistles, and how hateful to those Jews who had no experience of the bond of common fellowship in Christ, must have seemed the

breaking down of the distinction between Jew and Gentile, which Christianity really involved, is easily understood. The Hebrew disciples were very little disposed to carry the gospel to the Gentiles. It is the Grecian Philip, and not one of the apostles, who is found preaching the gospel to the Samaritans. A part of the preparation of the world for the gospel is seen in a condition of things which made possible such men as Stephen, Philip, Paul, Apollos, men who, while they still remained true to their ancestral faith, nevertheless, through Grecian culture and a larger intercourse with the world, had come to have a broader sympathy with mankind, and to interpret their own sacred scriptures in a larger way than was possible in the case of the Palestinian Jews. To Philip was given the honor of gathering the first-fruits of the great world beyond the pale of Judaism. The Kingdom of Christ is to be enriched by the forces of the Gentiles, and those forces are not material merely—their silver and gold—but the forces of national genius and character, the power to interpret and realize the spirit of Christianity. How much has Christianity gained on its western march, subduing the peoples successively to its way, and adding to itself the forces of their national life and character. It "sucks the milk of the nations." Every race subdued to Christ adds to His glory and His power. In the nations still unconquered great potential forces remain to be incorporated in Christianity, and as the West is now carrying the saving health of the gospel to the East, so, in the ages to come, the East shall doubtless send back its riches to the West.

Affairs in Crete.

From the information furnished by European despatches no very definite conclusions can be reached as to the real attitude of the several European powers towards the question of Turkish or Grecian supremacy in Crete. One thing appears to be certain,—that Greece, unwayed by the protests of the powers, has taken active measures to settle the question by force of arms. Collisions in several places are reported between the Cretan Christians and the Turkish soldiery. In some instances it is stated the insurgents have been supported by the Greek troops. The insurgents are represented as having the best of the fighting, and as the Christian population in Crete largely out-numbers the Moslems this is probable. Excitement runs high in Greece. The King and his Government appear determined to disregard the protest of the Powers and to proceed with the occupation of Crete unless and until prevented by the combined forces of Europe. It has been represented that Greece has been secretly encouraged and abetted by Russia, but according to later despatches Russia is assuming a hostile attitude and is ready to oppose by force Greece's project of annexing Crete. Germany also is represented as opposing vigorously the Grecian occupation of the island and proposing to the Powers to unite in blockading the Piræus, the port of Athens. In England sympathy is strongly with Greece and public opinion will vigorously condemn any forcible interference with Greece in reference to her designs in Crete. It is stated that Lord Salisbury has addressed a circular note to the powers favoring the autonomy of Crete, with one of the Greek princes as Governor of the island. The conditions of matters on the border between Greek and Turkish territory is said to be so threatening that a serious collision may at any time be reported. If this should occur no one can foresee what the ultimate result would be.

—It is not to be denied that a grand test of the value of a system of belief, or a course of action is found in the fruits it produces in those who accept or follow it. Mr. Moody took a strong position in defence of practical Christianity, when he said at his meeting in Tremont Temple, on Thursday last: "I throw out this challenge to the infidels, I defy them to find a man or a woman who has obeyed the commandments of God, and on whom the blessing of God has not fallen."

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