

Contributors & Correspondents.

SACRED STUDY.

THE NUMBER OF THE STARS.*

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In the account of creation contained in the Book of Genesis, we are told that God made two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night. Then it is added, "He made the stars." To the unassisted eye, these twinkling stars seem small and insignificant, contrasted with the sun and moon, that flood our earth with light and beauty. And in order to counteract that feeling in the human mind, which refers to God's care and interest, only the more grand and glorious objects in creation, the inspired penman would have us remember, that in God's eyes, there is nothing which has sprung from his hands, unworthy of his sustaining power. The smallest star, dimly recognisable by the telescope on the very verge of the horizon is the product of Almighty power, as much as the mightier orbs and planets, that revolve in space. And in order still further, to deepen our sense of God's omniscience and perfect knowledge of the host of heaven, the Psalmist David says, "He telleth the number of the stars, He calleth them all by their names."

Another thought that rises simultaneously in the mind, on a survey of the heavenly bodies, is the vastness of creation and the comparative insignificance of this earth and man. The Psalmist, living in an age when astronomy had but begun her discoveries, was struck by this solemn thought. "When I consider the heavens the work of thy fingers, the moon and stars which thou hast ordained, what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" Such language was not produced by any feeling of skepticism as to God's providential care over man and His love for the human family, but when he looked upward to these stars—beheld their number and splendour, and thought of the vast array of worlds stretching into space—all moving harmoniously in their appointed orbits, and constituting part of the domain over which the Almighty maintains a constant government:—He felt how infinite must be the guardianship which embraces man within its sphere of exercise, and how unworthy man is to share in such regard of heaven!

Such thoughts cannot but recur to many minds at the present day, when the knowledge of other worlds and planets has been so greatly enlarged, and their number so indefinitely increased. It need hardly be stated, that the sun and moon and planets which circulate around the sun and constitute the solar system, are but a small portion of the Creator's handiwork. Beyond these, are stars and systems of stars, not like our earth deriving light from the central sun, but shining in unborrowed splendour, and revolving round other suns equally grand and glorious as our own. To the naked eye, these appear but specks of light upon the brow of night,—many of them at such a vast distance, hundreds of millions of miles—that even to the most powerful telescopes they remain but shining points, though in reality much larger than our earth, and it may be larger than our sun. Nor is this the end of our researches in the starry world. Beyond these myriads of telescopic stars, are patches of light which do not at first sight seem stars at all. Like the finest dust or sand of oceans shore, they seem but a golden band of light encircling the extremities of space. But on further investigation, we find that these are separate stars, and central suns, around which whole planetary systems revolve. And when we still further reflect, that stars may have been created thousands of years since, whose light has not yet reached us, and that stars may have been extinguished thousands of years since, though still visible by their light which has not altogether died away; surely with the Psalmist we are forced to say, "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth, who hast set thy glory above the heavens. . . . What is man that thou art mindful of him or the son of man, that thou visitest him."

If once more, leaving the solid parts of astronomical discovery, we give play to our imagination, the paltry insignificance of this lower world, will appear all the more conspicuous. That amid such a multiplicity of worlds we should receive so much attention is wonderful, that God should so constantly provide for our welfare and supply our wants seems marvellous—still more so, that His Son should die to redeem from sin and recover from ruin. Yet all this we can believe, on the supposition, that this world though smaller in size, is vastly more important than other worlds—"the summit and crown of God's material workmanship." But what if this world of ours, be but one of an infinite number, the centres of animal and rational existence? what if these other worlds are peopled by intelligent creatures, possessed of reason and will? what if their inhabitants belong to a higher order of

existence than man—pure and perfect as when first they came from their creator's hands? Can we in such circumstances believe ourselves of so much importance, that the Almighty should single us out for a special display of his long-suffering, and should make this little corner of the universe, the theatre of such a glorious display of love. Again with the Psalmist, we are forced to say, "what is man that thou art mindful of him?"

Although overwhelmed by such speculations, which have for ages filled the mind of man, no christian who gazes with reverential wonder on the starry heavens, can fail to mark God's power and guardianship as displayed in the continued harmony and order of the heavenly host. "He telleth the number of the stars, and calleth them all by their names." "Where wast thou" said the Almighty to Job, "when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? who hath stretched the line upon it? whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? Or who laid the corner stone thereof; when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God chanted for joy." "Lift up your eyes on high, says the prophet Isaiah, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number, he calleth them all by their names." It does not demand an extensive acquaintance with the science of astronomy, to be filled with wonder and admiration at the power, the wisdom and the goodness of God. None but an atheist can contemplate the majestic order of the heavenly bodies, and the wise adaptation of means to ends that reigns throughout, without feeling impressed with a sense of the infinite knowledge that is everywhere evident. To reason as to the necessity of a great first cause, and the continued service of almighty care seems madness. For granted as the Philosopher tells us, there are laws and combinations of laws, in virtue of which our earth and the other myriad stars and planets revolve, what are these laws but a new evidence of a master mind, and a supreme directing power, that keeps watchful guard over the creatures of his hand? and what but a Divine mind could at first fashion and arrange the order of the universe, and continue its silent harmony unbroken to this hour!

"He counts the number of the stars"—"he calleth them all by their names." His power was not expended at creation. His wisdom was not exhausted in the mere constitution and arrangement of the heavenly bodies. Before a single atom of matter had been resolved into star and planet, its orbit was appointed, and its circuit measured. As a general upon the battle field, marshals his battalions and directs their movements, so are the elements of unconscious matter in their maker's hands. The sunbeam that shines upon the monarch's crown, and streams in upon the darkened chamber of the mourning widow, and the star that directs the pathway of the mariner over tempestuous waters, all alike receive their commission from his hands. In all these we see

"The signature and stamp of power divine"
"Stars countless, each in his appointed place,
Fast anchored in the deep abyss of space—
These are thy glorious works, thou source of good
How dimly seen, how faintly understood!
Absorbed in that immensity of space,
I stand amazed, and yet aspire to thee."

* Psalm 147 and 148. "He counteth the number of the stars."

CONSISTENCY.

In "Sunday Abroad" Rev. Dr. Guthrie relates this incident, which occurred while he was visiting a brother minister in the North Highlands:

I said to my host, as I retired to my bedroom on Saturday night. "I may ring for hot water in the morning?" On this he instantly raised his hands, saying, "Hush, hush!" Astonished, and taken quite aback, and fancying, from his deprecatory manner and look, that he had greatly misunderstood my question, I repented it. But this only called forth a more startling and emphatic warning, followed by this explanation *sotto voce*: "Speak of shaving on the Lord's day, and you need never preach more in—shire. However much I might disapprove of customs that required a tradesman to open shop on Sunday for such purpose, I could not see the difference between a man shaving his beard and washing his face on that day. This want of logic, however, was a small matter compared with a want of consistency I could not reflect on without a little grief and much astonishment,—this, namely, that in hundreds of houses where you could not get, for love or money, one drop of water to shave on the Lord's day, you would get plenty wherewith to brew whiskey-toddy,—as if whiskey was not the bane of the country, the present and eternal ruin of thousands, as well as the main cause both of our poverty and crime."

Selected Articles.

THE SONG OF A SUMMER.

I plucked an apple from off a tree,
Golden and rosy, and fair to see—
The sunshine has fed it with warmth and light—
The dew had refreshed it in night.
And high on the topmost bough it grew,
Where the winds of heaven about it blew,
And while the mornings were soft and young,
The wild-birds circled, and soared, and sung—
There in the storm, and calm, and shine,
It ripened and brightened, this apple of mine,
Till the day I plucked it from off the tree,
Golden, and rosy, and fair to see.

How could I guess, 'neath the daintiest rind,
That the core of sweetness I hoped to find,—
The innermost, hidden heart of the bliss
Which dews and winds and the sunshine's kiss
Had tended and fostered day and night,—
Was black with mildew and bitter with blight
Golden and rosy, and fair of skin,
Nothing but ruin and ashes within?
Ah! I never again with toil or pain
Will I strive the topmost bough to gain—
Though the wind-sown apples are fair to see,
On a lower branch is the fruit for me
—LOUIS CHANDLER MORTON. in Scribner's

THE MINISTER'S CRITICS.

I was seated in a railway carriage not long ago, when two of my fellow travellers commenced a conversation on the ministers of the district through which we were passing. They had entered at the last station, and were evidently full of their subject; they spoke without reserve, and in a tone so loud that I could not help hearing. There was the most comfortable self-satisfaction in their criticisms; they discovered faults of manner in one preacher, faults of education in another, excellencies in a third, and weighed each man with a confident nicety, as if they knew his worth within half an ounce. Probably every neighbourhood has its critics as superficial. There was intelligence in their remarks, but no sympathy, and therefore only a narrow judgement. They set me thinking as we rolled along of the seventy-five thousand sermons which according to Dean Ramsey, are preached every Sunday in Great Britain, (nearly four millions during the year,) and of the curious diversities of criticism with which they are received.

There is the criticism which judges all preachers by one standard of mind, and is never satisfied unless it finds the highest ability. It can be serenely scornful in its condemnation, and has no mercy on mediocrity—witness the letters it sends to the *Times* every autumn. It expects all ministers to be of one stature and equal strength, though every Philistine is not a Goliath, neither can every captain of the chosen people be a Saul among the brethren, or a David with invincible sling.

There is the criticism which judges all preachers by one man, substituting for an intellectual ideal some familiar embodiment of excellence. All honor to the power of a faithful minister by which he lives in the hearts of the people; there is no bond of union more worthy of respect. A true man will be always the first to condemn any comparison with himself, by which another suffers, yet there is no habit more common than this prejudiced criticism. I have known a stranger enter the pulpit, and preach an excellent sermon, nothing wanting in all essential qualities and yet seen many in the congregation seem restless under the unaccustomed voice, and listeners usually attentive turning to look at the clock. There are people too, who are "wrapped up" in their minister with an indiscriminate affection that narrows the mind and takes the manhood out of their pity. There are others who recall the days when they sat under some great luminary, whose light shone into the darkest corner, of their hearts with an overwhelming radiance, and now it seems as if the glory had departed and the skies would never brighten again. Ah, well, it is worth the thankfulness of a lifetime to have heard some few words of penetrating wisdom, and to have felt the thickening throb of that Divine life which a master-spirit inspires. But it is a base and pitiful use of past privileges to go about carping at the stars because the sun has set, and to refuse the servicable earthly lights that common hands may kindle. The prophets die, but the truth of God lives. Opportunities vary, but it is the proof of a wise ministry that it teaches us to profit in adverse circumstances, and to use the lesser opportunities of life as well as the greater.

There is the criticism that judges all preachers by one style. Many hearers—and may their number multiply!—like a "Scriptural" sermon, though some times the ideas of what is scriptural are very superficial; or they like, as we all should, what is devotional and experimental; but why do some of them speak so disparagingly of intellectual preaching? There is, indeed, a cold intellectualism that has more of human pride in it than of Divine wisdom, but let them not forget that God designs to satisfy our own nature, that mind and heart alike may rest in Him. There are great heights of truth to which only the strong intellect can climb—awful depth, into which it alone may travel down; and it is well if this strong travelled intellect can make

us feel on our common level that there are things to which we have not yet reached. Other people have an open ear for argument, in which they exercise their ingenuity to find a flaw; or, give them a subtle metaphysician, and they are content. Some prefer what is "practical"—religion in common life, and are intolerant of doctrine. Many sneer at poetry as "flowery"—unable to distinguish between the artificial flowers of borrowed language, strung for mere ornaments sake, and the fresh natural growth of a poet mind. Others, again, are delighted when some strange appeal bows down their attention, or an earnest rhetoric stirs their feeling, but cannot appreciate the perfect culture and exact thought which are often expressed in quiet simplicity. "Every man to his taste" is but a poor bigotry of opinion. Frederick Robertson never spoke more wisely than when he urged upon young men to "cultivate catholic tastes." There are diversities of gifts suited to all the varieties of spiritual need; let us welcome them all, without undue depreciation of any. Let us have many styles in the pulpit—a greater freedom, I for one would say, that as yet rules; but let all styles be good, each in its kind. There are many forests, and many trees, and grasses that no man can number, and many-coloured flowers in richly various beauty; but when the wind of God blows, what music among all the branches! how gracefully the slender stalks bow at its touch every where over the fields! and how sweet the fragrance dispersed in the air! And when the sun shines, does not God look down and still pronounce every thing that He has made "very good?" O, for some such Divine blast sweeping through the manifold life of the Church!

Again, there is the criticism which judges all by the same external conditions, and which expects a man always to be at his best. It takes no account of physical depression; of the shades of feeling that must sometimes darken the mind; of the sense of weakness under which, like other men, a preacher must often bend; of the temptations with which he must strive; of the toilsome work with which he toils. Such critics are prompt with their disparagements, and decisive in all circumstances alike. They, perhaps, are no "regular hearers," but they make a chapel a sort of "casual ward;" and it would do them good if they could be locked into the vestry till they had themselves broken a knotty text into its several sermonic parts. One likes to think, however, of sermons that have been preached—and with powerful effect—under great disadvantages; of Edward Irving, for example, standing up with the pale sweat of the cholera still upon him, or of "Theophilus Trimal" discoursing calmly with the death-grip at his heart.

There is the criticism also which judges a sermon solely by its own wants or its own special interests. For instance, a young man gets entangled in the controversies of the day—he is troubled in spirit as he finds the old foundation shaken beneath him, and he longs for a preacher who shall take hold of his difficulties with living sympathy, and lead him back to "the Rock which is higher" than us all. Weeks pass, and he wears with chapel-going, for not once has the preacher really grappled with one of his questions, though sometimes there has been condemnatory allusion to them, and he is apt to become caustic over the sermons he hears, and to complain at last with bitterness. I give the heartiest sympathy to any one so circumstanced; but may he not be looking in the wrong quarter for an answer to his doubts? Might not a preacher do irreparable harm by opening these grave questions of debate before a mixed audience, of various ages and different degrees of education?—could he speak with freedom, or hope to be understood by an average congregation? Let a minister provide opportunities by which the troubled spirits of his congregation may be helped in their inquiries; but he would be a rash man who entered the lists of skeptical controversy with women and children standing by, and an untutored crowd breathing his lance. In like manner, other people ask for novelty, even on subjects where it is impossible. It must often be the trial of a preacher to speak to those who are richer in experience and knowledge than himself. The longer a man lives, the more he reads, the more he thinks, the less likely is he to hear anything startlingly "new," and it often happens that many thinkers are best pleased when the preacher deals with the oldest truths and in simplest words. Churches do not live upon the luxuries of thought, or the exhilarating wine, but upon the homely bread.

In conclusion, there is a criticism which sees with clear eyes, and speaks with clear words, which does not say "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," but has a kindly heart for all God's servants. We cannot have too much of this criticism—it purifies, it elevates, it teaches. The pulpit need never be afraid of it. On the contrary, a strong preacher, skilful to divide the word of life, and anxious only for the truth, will delight in a discerning audience. And

I am persuaded—this was the result of my moralizing in that railway carriage, and prompted me to write the present paper—that ministers are as much hindered by the false criticisms of their hearers as they might be helped by a truer judgment. I cannot accept on their behalf pious George Horbert's consolation—

"If all want sense,
God takes a text, and preacheth patience."

We laymen are honestly of opinion that the pulpit often fails, and might attain a higher standard. . . . But questions apart, when a thoughtful organ of public opinion wrote the other day on "the Commonplaceness of the Pulpit," the clerical correspondent was justified who replied with illustrations of "the Commonplaceness of people," and their restrictive judgment.

Dr. Bushnell somewhere speaks of "preaching with the preacher." The churches want more of this preaching. If the people glow with devotion the preacher feels the influence, and speaks with holier fervor. If they are open-minded, eager to be taught, and ready to apply the truth, he will have peculiar zest in his preparation for the pulpit, and a pleasure in preaching that will act as a spiritual tonic. If they think, he will be thoughtful.

A coldly critical temper is like a frost upon the pulpit; a genial sympathy is like the south wind that makes the streams flow and the birds sing. Looking at the spiritual aspects of the subject, John Foster, in one of his essays, alludes to the many causes operating injuriously through the week on the characters of those who form a congregation, and the invading melancholy felt by a thoughtful man in his addresses "from the reflection that he is making a feeble effort against a powerful evil, a single effort against a combination of evils, a temporary and transient effort against evils of almost continual operation, and a purely intellectual effort against evils, many of which act on the senses." Such a thought should change our criticisms into prayers.

There is a passage in the "Life of Krummacher" that I may be pardoned for quoting here, and with it I will end. He says in his autobiography respecting his experience at Elberfeld:

"Of the manner in which we preachers were here borne up by the spiritual animation of the congregation, elevated and continually carried forward in our work, there was no experience in any other corner of the Church of our fatherland. O, those grand imposing assemblages, gathered together in the church every Sabbath day—a great ocean of faces, and the men not fewer in number than the women! How overpowering their full-toned choral singing! It echoed far out into the streets, rendering the liturgical choruses and responses altogether superfluous. How earnest was the attention of the thousands as they listened to the words of the preacher! The lively evidences of the deep impressions they produced on their minds were mirrored in their countenances! And what shall I say of the grand solemn communions, over which, instead of light from the altar, the fire of a true devotion and of genuine worship diffused the radiance of a higher glory! And then the responsive echo of the sermons listened to on the Sabbath, sounding all through the week in the homes of the congregation; the hearty joy with which the pastor was welcomed whenever he visited them; the animated and truly fruitful conversations on biblical or ecclesiastical subjects, or on practical Christianity, which were wont to season such visits; and, above all, the faith strengthening evidences of the purifying and comforting power of the word of the Cross, which was able to overcome the world, and to raise above the trials of poverty and the fear of death, of which one heard in so many of the houses of the poor and the sorrowing, and beside the triumphant deathbeds of so many of the dying, both among the humbler and the higher ranks of society! What a powerful stimulus!—what encouragements and incentives to offer his very best to such a congregation, could not the minister fail to experience from all these things!"—*English Congregationalist*.

DANGER OF PROSPERITY.

Strolling along the bank of a pond, Gotthold observed a pike basking in the sun, and so pleased with the sweet soothing rays as to forget itself and the danger to which it was exposed. Thereupon, a boy approached, and with a snare formed of a horsehair and fastened the end of a rod, which he skilfully cast over his head, pulled it in an instant out of the water.

"Ah me!" said Gotthold, with a deep sigh, "how evidently do I here behold shadowed forth the danger of my poor soul! When the beams of temporal prosperity play upon us to our heart's content, so grateful are they to corrupt flesh and blood that, immersed in sordid pleasure, luxury, and security, we lose all sense of spiritual danger, and all thought of eternity. In this state many are suddenly snatched away, to the eternal ruin of their souls."