

Pastor and People.

FOR THE CANADA PRESBYTERIAN.

STRENGTH ACCORDING TO OUR DAYS.

A NEW YEAR'S PROMISE.

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Moses, the man of God, having received instructions to ascend Mount Nebo and die, instead of entering the land of Canaan, predicts in simple yet striking language the future history of the tribes, in that good land which the Lord had given them. Of Asher he says, "Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days so shall thy strength be."

The name itself, and other circumstances in the history of the tribe, throw considerable light upon the meaning of these words. When Zilpah, Leah's hand-maid, gave birth to the child, Leah expressed her joy by saying, "Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed;" and then it was that she gave him the name of Asher, indicating the gladness of her heart. The blessing pronounced upon him, by the dying patriarch Jacob, also intimates the good easy fortune that was to follow him through life. "Out of Asher, his bread shall be fat, and he shall yield royal dainties." Accordingly we find him inheriting a fruitful soil—the lowlands of Carmel—which abounded in olive oil, and wheat, and bread, and fatness. His proximity to Tyre enabled him to bring royal luxuries and distribute them to the tribes; the hills were planted with the olive tree, and gave forth iron and copper in abundance; while protected by his strong barred fortresses or warrior's shoes, he enjoyed immunity from war and devastation, and led an easy and contented life.

It may be said of each of God's spiritual Israel, "Happy art thou; thy shoes shall be iron and brass, and as thy days so shall thy strength be." Happy in the consciousness of pardoned sin and purchased peace; happy in the possession of God's favour here and His presence hereafter; happy amid the ever changing scenes of life, and happy in the hour of death. Who would not be an Asherite? Your bread is fatness; you are blessed above angels, your brethren. Dip your foot in oil and fear no change, for thy walls and bulwarks are salvation, better than the warrior shoes or the strongest bars of the mountain fortress, and your rest shall continue endless as eternity?

All God's promises are alike precious. They are yea and amen in Christ Jesus. They may not, however, all be equally serviceable. Some promises are adapted to particular seasons and special emergencies, others are suited to every condition of existence. They constitute the staple of the Christian's higher life. To this class belongs the promise under consideration. It is one of those precious, practical promises which can be turned to account on every occasion, and relied upon in every strait. Strip the believer of all his worldly possessions, take from him the nearest and the dearest friends, yet God remains the unfailing strength and consolation of his life. The assurance that as his day so his strength shall be, can make the saddest heart sing songs in the night, rejoice in the most poignant sorrow, and bear up under the pressure of the severest trials.

Such a promise should be equally comforting to Christians of the present day, as it was to Old Testament saints. Our experiences are the same, the source of supply is the same, God's ability and willingness to strengthen is the same, and the reason why such precious promises fail to afford us help in our times of need, is because we fail to realize their personal application. Like the hieroglyphics and inscriptions of a by-gone age, which become illegible through neglect, and the accumulation of moss that hides their meaning, so many of these Old Testament promises are as little used by Christians as if they were written in an unknown tongue. If at times in the cursory perusal of Scripture they stumble upon them, it is but to call forth a momentary admiration, as of some venerable ruin, that tells us of the long past but is of no practical value at the present day. Men lean upon tangible objects in our age, while the saints of old grasped spiritual verities, and rested confidently upon unfailing grace.

What then is implied in such a promise? First and negatively, it does not militate against present exertion. We must look forward and act prudently. We are not foolishly to forget our troubles. It is natural and wise to have concern for coming days. It is one of the strongest evidences of the soul's immortality, that we live beyond the present and provide against contingencies. "We cannot repress the soarings of the spirit, its mysterious wanderings and gazing at far off probabilities." The soul's wings cannot be confined, nor her vision limited. But we need not look anxiously into the future, nor paint it in sombre colours, nor endeavour by merely human sagacity to provide against unseen and unknown calamities. On the contrary, we ought to rest firmly upon the promise that God will

help us to overcome every temptation, and accomplish every lawful and praiseworthy desire of the heart.

Secondly, we are not taught that in every time of perplexity God will work a special miracle for our deliverance. Our whole existence is one continued miracle. The constancy of those laws, that sustain life in all its forms, is just as wonderful as the exercise of creative power, or the interjection of supernatural action. Every act of God is miraculous, when looked at from a human standpoint with the eye of faith. What such a promise implies is that in times of extraordinary pressure, whether it be from worldly cares, or painful affliction, or acute bereavement, when everything seems dark and unpromising, we are assured of almighty help. "Hast thou not known; hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth fainteth not, neither is weary? There is no searching of His understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength."

Mainly and primarily the strength promised is spiritual. Physical strength and intellectual vigour, we are never to forget, are also the gifts of God. That we are continued in health from day to day, and capacitated for the duties of life, is due to the mercy of God. The renewal of our flagging energies, and the restoration of enfeebled and overburdened powers is the work of Him who made us. By His blessing these frail and delicate organisms, so liable to disease and death, are enabled to bear the strain of sixty and seventy years. "Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour, until the evening," because sustained by an ever-watchful Providence. Apart from this, life would become

"A galling load
Along a rough and weary road."

Thus strengthened, the brief day of toil is often lengthened far on into the shadows, while the heart continues young and hopeful, realizing the poet's words.

"Thy thoughts and feelings shall not die,
Nor leave thee when grey hairs are nigh,
A melancholy slave;
But an old age, serene and bright,
And lovely as a Lapland night,
Shall lead thee to thy grave."

More particularly we remark, first, that this promise is unfolded and fulfilled by degrees. As the sun rises gradually upon the world, so does God reveal himself to the believer's soul, and execute His gracious purposes. Not according to our wants, but as they are seen by God, are we dealt with. He provides for our constant necessities, as he did for the Israelites in the wilderness, as He did for Hagar, as He did for the widow of Sarepta, whose barrel of meal wasted not, nor cruise of oil failed, until the Lord sent rain upon the earth. God's plan often seems hard. We want not simply daily provision, but grace in advance. We would like to have our entire life sketched out before us, with the special grace set over against the special emergency. We would like to foresee all our trials and anticipate all our victories. But God's arrangement is different. The promise goes no further than each day. The grace comes at the moment needed, but not before. Provision is made for our immediate spiritual necessities. More than this we have no right to expect; more than this would hinder the exercise of faith and dependence upon God's unfailing bounty.

That mariner would be considered a fool, and but ill adapted to brave the perils of the deep, who before leaving the harbour sought to know all the storms and dangers to which he might be exposed on the voyage. Here, says the commander, is the chart and vander is the compass. Certain well-known reefs and rocks are indicated, and a certain course marked out for you to follow, but for the ten thousand mishaps and dangers of the ocean you must trust to Providence, using the life-boats and life-preservers when an emergency arises. So it is with the Christian in the voyage of life. There are certain common and necessary trials in the experience of every child of God; but over against the innumerable evils that make up the sum of human existence, there is placed the promise: "As thy days, so shall thy strength be."

Secondly. This promise covers the whole of existence. From the cradle to the grave; in prosperity and in adversity; in health and in sickness; in life and in death; in all the manifold and intricate relations of human society. Are you a merchant actively engaged in the business of life, worried by cares and anxieties, and ever-dreading the misfortunes and reverses that end in bankruptcy? To you the promise is invaluable: "As thy days, so shall thy strength be." God does not promise you success apart from honest industry, but having provided as far as possible against contingencies, instead of brooding over imaginary disasters, leave the future in the hand of God, who can give counsel and light in every time of perplexity and darkness. In temporal as well as in spiritual matters, we are equally dependent upon God. He who was sufficient from day to day, is in reality as secure as the man who boasts of his uncounted millions. It is just as easy for a man to make shipwreck of his business, by over anxiety and undue hastening to be rich, as by indolence or prodigality. Or are you a young Christian, hesitating and timid on

the brink of a religious profession? You are convinced of your duty, and have made the matter a subject of earnest prayer for guidance, but you fear the consequences. You are afraid that you may not hold on to the end, and maintain your consistency and integrity before the world. Human nature is so weak, and the temptations of youthful years so enticing, that you tremble lest your profession of faith may result in damage to the interests involved. To all such objections the promise is sufficient, "As thy days, so shall thy strength be." Duty is ours, results are God's. What we are able to do and resist depends upon the nearness of our spiritual life to heaven, and the frequent exercise of prevailing prayer. He who begins the work of grace, can make the weakest saint equal to every emergency. Or, are you a father or mother looking with fond interest to the future of your children? The question, how shall they be provided for and protected, when your eye no longer follows them, oppresses you. Perhaps, after all your anxiety, they may stray from the paths of virtue and bring dishonour upon your name and home. Such feelings, not uncommon, are unwise. So long as our children walk circumspectly, we have no right to anticipate such results. Nay, we have good grounds for believing that they will continue to adorn the religion of Christ, and pass into the Kingdom. "Jehovah-Jireh"—God will provide, when parents are no more. Or, finally, are you anticipating trials, in the form of sudden bereavements? The mother looking upon her child, shudders at the thought that possibly death may rob her of all that she holds dear on earth. But is it wise to harbour such forebodings? Now it seems as if such a trial would surpass human endurance, but when God sees fit to bereave you, he will prepare you for the sacrifice. To spend hours of mental torture, imagining how you should feel in such a crisis, is foolish. In that hour of sorrow, faith sustains the sinking soul, and points the tear dimmed eye heavenward, where our treasures are with Christ. The blow may be severe, but the consolations of the gospel are ample to enable the heart to bear submissively. In the solitude of suffering, holy thoughts arise, that moderate grief and seal up the flowing fountain of our tears.

And so it will be, when, O faint-hearted Christian, death comes to call you home. Now you are possessed with a fearful dread of dying. The thought of dissolution blanches the cheek and pales the lustre of the eye. The stormy passage of the Jordan, even with Canaan beyond, has nothing in it that is attractive. You cannot bring yourself to think of leaving behind beloved friends and all the sweet endearments of life. Sometimes you imagine that the fear of death is evidence of unpreparedness for the change, but it is not so in many cases. When God intends you to pass on to immortality he will give dying grace. What is now needed is strength for active duty. Untiring perseverance from day to day, in secular as well as sacred duties, is the best preparation for a dying hour. If necessary premonitions will come in advance of death there will be a long twilight ere the darkness settles down. Gently and gradually God will wean you from the world and make the hour of release coveted and joyful. "As thy days, so shall thy strength be."

The author of this promise is God. There is good security behind it. His knowledge of the future is as perfect as of the past. All that happens between the cradle and the grave, are His appointments. We need not, then, anticipate trials; many of them exist only in the imagination. Human life has been compared to a road, that presents insuperable obstacles to the weary traveller. Standing upon a hill top, and looking across the valley, another and steeper comes into view. Tired and faint with the road traversed, we sit down and almost resolve to attempt nothing more. But as we travel on the difficulties vanish, and the hill that seemed in the distance so steep and high is but a gentle ascent as we approach it, and so, our troubles when we face them in God's strength, manfully, often become insignificant and trifling. But even supposing that agonizing troubles and trials are certain in the future, we cannot by anticipating them remove them, and just in proportion as we brood over them, do we distrust God's power, and impeach the veracity of his promise. Oliver Cromwell's Secretary was once despatched on some important business to the continent. He stayed over night at a seaport town, but tossed upon his bed unable to rest. At last he awoke his servant, who slept in his room. The man asked his master why he could not rest? "I am so afraid anything should go wrong with the embassy," was the reply. "Master," said the valet, "did God rule the world before we were born?" "Most assuredly He did." "And will He rule it after we are dead?" "Certainly He will." "Then, master, why not let Him rule the present, too?" The Secretary's faith was stirred, and in a few moments he and his servant were in a sound slumber. And so we say to distracted, burdened saints, leave both present and future cares to Him who careth for you.

"Child of sorrow, born afflicted,
Whom the world hath long oppressed,
Though by Misery's storm o'ertaken,
Calm the tumult of thy breast.
Why this anguish?
Hither come and sweetly rest."