

Why Great Hopes Are a Great Duty.

A Sermon delivered on Sunday morning, July 27th, 1902, at Union Chapel, Manchester, by

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"The God of peace that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant."—Hebrews 13: 20.

A great building needs a deep foundation; a leaping fountain needs a full spring. A very large and lofty prayer follows the words of my text, and these are the foundations on which it rests, the abundant source from which it soars heavenward. The writer asks for his readers nothing less than a complete, all-round, and thorough-going conformity to the will of God; and that should be our deepest desire and our conscious aim, that God may see his own image in us, for nothing less can be "well-pleasing in his sight." But does not such a dream of what we may be seem far too audacious when we peruse the stained volume of our own lives, and remember what we are? Should we not be content with very much more modest hopes for ourselves; but to look at ourselves is not the way to pray, or the way to hope, or the way to grow, or the way to dare. The logic of Christian petitions and Christian expectations starts with God as the premises, and thence argues the possibility of the impossible. It was because of all this great accumulation of facts piled up in my text that the writer found it in his heart to ask such great things for the humble people to whom he was writing, although he well knew that they were very far from perfect, and were even in danger of making shipwreck of the faith altogether. And so, dear friends, my purpose this morning is to let him lead us along the great array of reasons for his great prayer, that we too may learn to desire, and to expect, and to work for nothing short of this aim—the entire purging of ourselves from all evil and sin, and the complete assimilation to our Lord. There are three points here, the warrant for our highest expectations in the risen Shepherd; the warrant for our highest expectations in the everlasting covenant.

The warrant for our highest expectations in
I.—THE NAME OF GOD.

"The God of peace"—it comes like a benediction into our restless lives and distracted hearts, and carries us away up into lofty regions, above the mutations of circumstances and the perturbations and agitations of our earthly life. No doubt there may be some allusion here to the special circumstances of the recipients of this letter, for it is clear from the rest of the epistle that they had much need of the peace of God to calm their agitations in the prospect of the collapse of the venerable system in which they had lived so long, and it is obvious also that there were divisions of opinion amongst themselves, so that the invocation of the God of Peace may have had a special sanctity and sweetness to them, considering the circumstances in which they were placed. But it has chiefly a bearing not so much on the condition of the people to whom the words are spoken as upon the great substance of the grand prayer that follows it. It is because he is known to us as being "the God of Peace" that we may be quite sure that he will "make us perfect in every good work to do his will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in his sight."

And how does that great name, sweet and strong as it is, bear with it the weight of such an inference as that? Plainly enough the name speaks, first of all, of that which I may call an immanent characteristic of the Divine nature. He is the tranquil God, dwelling above all the disturbances which come from variableness, and all "the shadows cast by turning;" dwelling above all possibilities of irritation or agitation. And yet that great ocean is not stagnant, but through all its depths there flow currents of love, and in all its repose there is the intense energy. The highest activity coincides with the supremest rest. The wheel revolves so swiftly that it stands as if motionless.

Then, just because of that profound Divine repose, we may expect him, by his very nature, to impart his own peace to the soul that seeks him. Of course it can be but the faintest shadow of that Divine indisturbance which can never fall, like a dove's wing, upon our restless lives. But still in the tranquility of a quiet heart, in the harmonies of a spirit all concentrated on one purpose, in the independence of externals possible to a man who grasps God, in the victory over change which is granted to them who have pierced through the fleeting clouds, and have their home in the calm blue beyond, there may be a quiet of heart which does not altogether put to shame that wondrous promise: "My peace I give unto you." It is possible that they which have believed should enter into the rest of God.

But if the impartation of some faint but real echo of his own great repose is the delight of the Divine heart, how can it be done? There is only one way by which a man can be made peaceful, and that is by his being made good. Nothing else contributes to the true tranquility of a human spirit except its conformity to the divine will. It is submission to the divine commandments and appointments, it is the casting off of self, with all its aggregations and troubles, that secures our entering into rest. What a man needs for peace is, that his relations

with God should be set right, that his own nature should be drawn into one, and harmonized with itself, and that his relations with men should also be rectified. For the first of these, we know that it is "the Christ that died," that is the means by which the alienation and the enmity of heart between us and God can be swept away. For the second of them, we know that the only way by which this anarchic commonwealth within myself can be brought into harmony and order, and its elements prevented from drawing apart from one another, is that the whole man shall be bowed before God in submission to his will. The heart is like some stormy sea, tossed and running mountains high, and there is only one voice that can say to it, "Peace; be still," and that is the voice of God in Christ. There is only one power that, like the white moon in the nightly sky, can draw the heaped waters round the whole world after itself, and that is the power of Christ in His Cross and Spirit which brings the disobedient heart into submission, and unites the discordant powers in the liberty of a common service. So, brethren, if we are ever to have quiet hearts, they must come, not from favorable circumstances, nor from anything external. They can only come from the prayer being answered "Unite my heart to fear thy name," and then our inner lives will no longer be torn by contending passions—conscience pulling this way and desire that; a great voice saying within, "you ought!" and an insistent voice answering, "I will not;" but all within will be at one, and then there will be peace. "The God of peace sanctify you wholly," says one of the apostles, bringing out in the expression the same thought, that inasmuch as he who himself is supreme repose must be infinitely desirous that we, his children, should share in his rest, he will, as the only way by which that rest can ever be attained, sanctify us wholly. When—and not till, and as soon as—we are thus made holy, are we made at rest.

Nor let us forget that, on the other hand, the divine peace which is shed abroad in our hearts by the love of God, does itself largely contribute to perfect the holiness of a Christian soul. We read that "the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly," and we read that, "the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds," and we read that the peace of God will sit as umpire in our hearts, detecting the evil; judging the actions, awarding the prizes. For, indeed, when that peace lies like a summer morning's light upon our quiet hearts, there will be little in evil that will so attract us as to make us think it worth our while to break the blessed and charmed silence for the sake of any earthly influences or joys. They that dwell in the peace of God have little temptation to buy trouble, remorse perhaps, or agitation, by venturing out into the forbidden ground, so, brethren, the great name of the God of peace is itself a promise and entitles us to expect the completeness of character which alone brings peace.

Then, further, we have here the warrant for the loftiest expectations in

II.—THE RISEN SHEPHERD.

"The God of peace who brought again, or, perhaps, brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep." Now it is remarkable that this is the only reference in this Epistle to the Hebrews to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The book is full of references to that which pre-supposes the Resurrection, viz., the ascended life of Jesus as the great High Priest within the veil, and the fact that only this once is the act of Resurrection referred to, confirms the idea, that in the New Testament there is no division of thought between the point at which the line begins and the line itself, that the Ascension is but the prolongation of the Resurrection, and the Resurrection is but the beginning of the Ascension. But here the act rather than the state into which it led is dwelt upon as being more appropriate to the purpose in hand.

Then we may notice in a word, further, that in that phrase, "the great Shepherd of the sheep," there is a quotation from one of the prophets, where the words refer to Moses bringing up the people from the Red Sea. The writer of the epistle adds to Isaiah's phrase one significant word, and speaks of "that great Shepherd," to remind us of the comparison which he had been running in an earlier part of the letter, between the leader of Israel and Christ.

So, then, we have here brought before us Jesus who is risen and ascended as the great Shepherd of the sheep. Looking to him, what are we heartened to believe are the possibilities and the divine purposes for each of those that put their trust in him? Gazing in thought for a moment on that Lord risen from the grave, with the old love in his heart, and the old greetings upon his lips, we see there, of course, as everybody knows, the demonstration of the persistence of a human life through death, like some stream of fresh water holding on its course through a salt and stagnant sea, or plunging underground for a short space, to come up again, flashing into the sunshine. But we see more than that. We see the measure of the power, as the Apostle has it, that works in us, "according to the energy of the might of the power which he wrought in Christ when he raised him from the dead." As we gaze, we see what

may be called a type, but is a great deal more than a type, of the possibilities of the risen life, as it may be lived even here and now, by every poor and humble soul that puts its trust in him. The Resurrection of Jesus gives us the measure of the power that worketh in us.

But more than that, the risen Shepherd has risen as Shepherd for the very purpose of imparting to every poor soul that trusts in him his own life. And unless we grasp that, we shall not understand the place of the Resurrection in the Christian scheme, nor the ground on which the loftiest anticipations of our possibilities are not audacious for the poorest soul, but anything beneath the loftiest is for the poorest beneath what it ought and might aspire to. When the alabaster box was broken, the ointment was poured forth, and the house was filled with the odour. The risen Christ imparts his life to his people. And nothing short of their entire perfecting in all which is within the possibilities of human beauty and nobleness and purity, will be the adequate issue of that great Death and triumphant Resurrection, and of the mighty quickening power of a new life which he thereby breathed into the dying world. On his cross, and from his throne, he has set agoing processes which never can reach their goal,—and, blessed be God! never will stop their beneficent working until every soul of man, however stained and evil, that puts the humblest trust in him, and lives after his commandment, is become radiant with beauty, complete in holiness, victorious over self and sin, and is set for evermore at the right hand of God. Every anticipation, that falls short of that, and all effort that lags behind that anticipation, is an insult to the Christ, and a trampling under foot of the blood of the Covenant "wherewith ye are sanctified."

So, brother, open your mouth wide and it will be filled. Expect great things; believe that what Jesus Christ came into the world, and died to do, what Jesus Christ left the world and lives to carry on, will be done in you, and that you too will be made complete in him. For the Shepherd leads and the sheep follow—here afar off, often straying, and getting lost or torn by the brambles, and worried by the wolves. But he leads and they do follow, and the time comes when "they shall follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth," and be close at his heels in all the good pastures of the mountains of Israel. "We see not yet all things put under him," but we see Jesus, and that is enough.

Lastly, the warrant for our highest anticipations in

III.—THE EVERLASTING COVENANT.

Time will not allow of my entering upon the question as to the precise relation of these final words to the rest of the verse. But their relation to the great purpose for which I am dealing with the whole verse this morning is plain enough. It has come to be very unfashionable now-a-days to talk about the Covenant. People think that it is archaic, technically theological, far away from daily life, and so on, and so on. I believe that Christian people would be a great deal stronger if there were a more prominent place given in our Christian meditations to the great idea that underlies that metaphor. And it is just this, that God is under obligations, taken on him by himself, to fulfil to a poor trusting soul the great promises to which that soul has been drawn to cleave. He has, if I might use such a metaphor, like some monarch, given a constitution to his people. He has not left us to grope as to what his mind and purpose may be. Across the infinite ocean of possibilities, he has marked out on the chart, so to speak, the line which he will pursue. We have his word, and his word is this: "After those days, saith the Lord, I will make a new covenant. I will write my law on their inward parts. I will be their God and they shall be my people." So the definite, distinct promise, in black and white, so to speak, to every man and woman on the face of the earth, is "Come into the bonds of the covenant, by trusting me, and you will get all that I have promised."

And that covenant is, as my text says, sealed by "the blood." Which, being turned into less metaphorical English, is just this, that God's infinite propension of beneficence towards each of us, and desire to clothe us with all the radiance of white purity, is guaranteed as extended to, and working its effects on every man who trusts Jesus by the fact of Christ's death. And is it not? What does that death mean if it does not mean that? Why should he have died on the cross unless it were to take away sin?

But the blood of the covenant does not mean only the Death by which the covenant is ratified. We shall much misapprehend and narrow New Testament teaching, if we suppose that. The "blood is the life," is the basis of all the scriptural thinking about it. There is further suggested, then, by the expression, that the vital energy with which Jesus Christ came from the dead, as the Shepherd of the sheep, is the power by which God makes us "perfect in every good work to do his will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in his sight."

So, two practical counsels may close my words. See that you aspire as high as God's purpose concerning you, Christian men and women, and do not be content with anything short of the, at least, incipient and progressive accomplishment in your characters and lives, of that great prayer. Again, see that you use the forces which by the Cross and the Resurrection, and the Ascension, are set in motion to make that wondrous possibility a matter-of-fact reality for each of us, and whoever you are, and whatever you have been, be sure of this, that he can lift you from the mud and cleanse you from its stains, and set you at his own right hand in the heavenly places. For the Name, and the risen Shepherd, and the blood of the everlasting Covenant, make a threefold cord, not to be quickly broken, and able to bear the weight of the mightiest hopes and firmest confidence that we can hang upon it.—Baptist Times.