FORGIVENESS BEFORE SUNDOWN

Nothing So Exhausting to Physical Health or Mental Faculty as Protracted Ill-Humor—Let Not the Sun Go Down on Your Wrath.

Washington report says: In this discourse, Dr. Talmage placates the world's revenges, and recommends more of the saccharine and less of the sour in human dispositions. Text: Ephesians iv., 26: "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath."

What a pillow, embroidered of all colors, hath the dying day! The cradle of clouds from which the sun rises is beautiful enough, but it is surpassed by the many-colored mausoleum in which, at evening, it is buried.

Sunset among the mountains! It almost takes one's breath away to recall the scene. The long shadows stretching over the plain make the glory of the departing light, on the tip-top crags, and struck aslant, through the foliage the more conspicuous. Saffron and gold, purple and crimson commingled. All the castles of cloud in conflagration. Burning Moscows on the sky. Hanging gardens of roses at their deepest blush. Banners of vapor, red as if from carnage, in the battle of the elements. The hunter among the Adirondacks, and the Swiss villager among the Alps, know what is a sunset among the mountains. After a storm at sea, the rolling grandeur into which the sun goes down to bathe at nightfall is something to make weird and splendid dreams out of for a lifetime. Alexander Smith, in his poem, compares the sunset to "the barren beach of hell," but this wonderful spectacle of nature makes me think of the burnished wall of heaven. Paul, in prison, writing my text, remembers some of the gorgeous sunsets among the mountains of Asia Minor, and how he had often seen the towers of Damascus blaze in the close of the Oriental days, and he flashes out that memory in the text when he says, "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath."

Sublime, all-suggestive, duty for people then and people now! Forgiveness before sundown! He who never feels the throb of indignation is imbecile. He who can walk among the injustices of the world inflicted upon himself and others, without flush of check, or flash of eye, or agitation of nature, is either in sympathy with wrong or semi-idiotic. When Ananias, the high priest, ordered the constables of the court-room to smite Paul on the mouth, Paul fired up and said: "God shall smite thee, thou whited wall." In the sentence immediately before my text, Paul commands the Ephesians: "Be ye angry and sin not." It all depends on what you are mad at and how long the feeling lasts, whether the anger is right or wrong. Life is full of exasperations. Saul after David, Succoth after Gideon, Korah after Moses, the Pasquins after Augustus, the Pharisees after Christ, and every one has had his pursuers, and we are swindled, or belied, or misrepresented, or persecuted, or in some way wronged, and the danger is that healthful indignation shall become baleful spite, and that our feelings settle down into a prolonged outpouring of temper displeasing to God and ruinous to ourselves, and hence the important injunction of the text: "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath."

Why that limitation to one's anger? Why that period of flaming vapor set to punctuate a flaming disposition? What has the sunset got to do with one's resentful emotions? Was it a haphazard sentiment written by Paul without special significance? No, no; I think of five reasons why we should not let the sun set before our temper.

First: Because twelve hours is long enough to be cross about any wrong inflicted upon us. Nothing is so exhausting to physical health or mental facuity as a protracted indulgence of ill-humor. It racks the nervous system. It hurts the digestion. It heats the blood in the brain and heart until the whole body is first overheated and then depressed. Besides that, it sours the disposition, turns one aside from his legitimate work, expends energies that ought to be better employed, and does us more harm than it does our antagonist. Paul gives up a good, wide allowance of time for legitimate denunciation, from six o'clock to six o'clock, but says: "Stop there!" Watch the descending orb of day, and when it reaches the horizon, take a reef in your disposition. Unloose your collar and cool off. Change the subject to something delightfully pleasant. Unroll your tight fist and shake hands with some one. Bank up the fires at the curfew bell. Drive the growling dog of enmity back to its kennel. The hours of this morning will pass by, and the afternoon will arrive, and the sun will begin to set, and I beg you, on its blazing hearth throw all your feuds, invectives and satires.

Other things being equal, the man who preserves good temper will come out ahead. An old writer says that the celebrated John Henderson, of Bristol, England, was at a dinner party when political excitement ran high and the debate got angry, and while Henderson was speaking, his opponent, unable to answer his argument, dashed a glass of wine in his face, when the speaker deliberately wiped the liquid from his face and said: "This, sir, is a digression; now, if you please, for the main argument." While worldly philosophy could help but very few to such equipoise of spirit, the grace of God could help any man to such a triumph. "Impossible," you say, "I would have either left the table in anger or have knocked the man down." But I have come to believe that nothing is impossible if God help.

Aye, you will not postpone till sundown forgiveness of enemies if you can realise that their behavior towards you may be put into the catalogue of the "all things" that "work together for good to those that love God." I have had multitudes of friends, but I have found in my own experience that God so arranged it that the greatest opportunities of usefulness that have been opened before me were opened by enemies. So you may harness your antagonists to your best interests, and compel them to draw you on to better work and higher character. Suppose, instead of waiting until thirty-two minutes after four this evening, when the sun will set, you transact this glorious work of forgiveness at meridian.

Again: We ought not to let the sun go down on our wrath, because we will sleep better if we are at peace with everybody. Insomnia is getting to be one of the most prevalent of disorders. How few people retire at ten o'clock at night and sleep clear through to six in the morning! To relieve this disorder all narcotics, and sedatives, and morphine, and chloral, and bromide of potassium, and cocaine, and intoxicants are used, but nothing is more important than a quiet spirit if we would win somnolence. How is a man going to sleep when he is in mind pursuing an enemy? With what nervous twitch he will start out of a dream? That new plan of cornering his foe will keep him wide awake while the clock strikes eleven, twelve, one, two. I give you an unfailing prescription for wakefulness: spend the evening hours rehearsing your wrongs and the best way of avenging them. Hold a convention of friends on this subject in your parlor or office at eight or nine o'clock. Close the evening by writing a bitter letter expressing your sentiments. Take from the desk or pigeonhole the papers in the case to refresh your mind with your enemy's meanness. Then lie down and wait for the coming of the day, and it will come before sleep comes, or your sleep will be worried quiescence, and, if you take the precaution to lie flat on your back, a frightful nightmare.

Why not put a bound to your animosity? Why let your foes come into the sanctities of your dormitory? Why let those slanderers who have already torn your reputation to pieces or injured your business, bend over your midnight pillow and drive from you one of the greatest blessings that God can offer—sweet, refreshing, all-invigorating sleep? Why not fence out your enemies by the golden bars of the sunset? Why not stand behind the barricade of evening cloud, and say to them: "Thus far and no further." Many a man and many a woman is having the health of body as well as the health of soul eaten away by a malevolent spirit. I have in time of religious awakening had persons night after night, come into the inquiry-room and get no peace of soul. After a while I have bluntly asked them: "Is there not some one against whom you have a hatred that you are not willing to give up?" After a little confusion they have slightly whispered, "Yes." Then I have said: "You will never find peace with God as long as you retain that virulence."

A boy in Sparta having stolen a fox kept him under his coat, and, though the fox was gnawing his vitals, he submitted to it rather than expose his disdeed. Many a man with a smiling face has under his jacket an animosity that is gnawing away the strength of his body and the integrity to his soul, better get rid of that hidden fox as soon as possible. There are hundreds of domestic circles where that which most is needed is the spirit of forgiveness. Brothers apart, and sisters apart, and parents and children apart. Solomon says a brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city. Are there not enough sacred memories of your childhood to bring you together? The rabbins recount how that Nebuchadnezzar's son had such a spite against his father that after he was dead he had his father burned to ashes, and then put the ashes into four sacks and tied them to four eagles' necks which flew away in opposite directions. And there are now domestic antipathies that seem forever to have scattered all parental members to the four winds of heaven. How far the eagles fly with those sacred ashes! The hour at sundown makes to that family no practical suggestion. Thomas Carlyle, in his biography of Frederick the Great, says the old king was told by the confessor he must be at peace with his enemies if he wanted to enter heaven. Then he said to his wife the queen, "Write to your brother after I am dead that I forgive him." Rooliff, the confessor, said, "Her majesty had better write him immediately." "No," said the king, "after I am dead; that will be safer." So he let the sun of his earthly existence go down upon his wrath.

Again: We ought not to allow the sun to set before forgiveness takes place, because we might not live to see another day. And what if we should be ushered into the presence of our Maker with a grudge upon our soul? The majority of people depart this life in the night. Between 11 o'clock p.m. and 3 o'clock a.m. there is something in the atmosphere which relaxes the grip which the body has on the soul, and most of the people enter the next world through the shadows of this world. Perhaps God may have arranged it in that way so as to make the contrast the more glorious. I have seen sunshiny days in this world that must have been almost like the radiance of heaven. But as most people leave the earth between sundown and sunrise, they quit this world at its darkest, and heaven, always bright, will be the brighter for that contrast. Out of darkness into irradiation.

Shall we then leap over the roseate bank of sunset into the favorite hunting ground of disease and death, carrying our animosities with us? Who would want to confront his God, against whom we have all done meaner things than anybody has ever done against us, carrying old grudges? How can we expect His forgiveness for the greater when we are not willing to forgive others for the less? Napoleon was encouraged to undertake the crossing of the Alps because Charlemagne had previously crossed them. And all this rugged path of forgiveness bears the bleeding footsteps of Him who conquered through suffering, and we ought to be willing to follow. On the night of our departure from this life into the next, our one plea will have to be for mercy, and it will have to be offered in the presence of Him who has said: "If you forgive not men their trespasses neither will your Heavenly Father forgive your trespasses." What a sorry plight if we stand there hating this one, and hating that one, and wishing that one a damage, and wishing some one else a calamity, and we ourselves needing forgiveness for ten thousand obliquities of heart and life. When our last hour comes, we want it to find us all right. Hardly anything affects me so much in the uncovering of Pompeii as the account of the soldier who, after the city had for many centuries been covered with the ashes and scoriae of Vesuvius, was found standing in his place on guard, hand on spear and helmet on head. Others fled at the awful submergement, but the explorer, seventeen hundred years after, found the body of that brave fellow in right position. And it will be a grand thing if, when our last moment comes, we are found in right position toward God, on guard and unaffrighted by the descending ashes from the mountain of death. I do not suppose that I am any more of a coward than most people, but I declare to you that I would not dare to sleep to-night if there were any being in all the earth with whom I would not gladly shake hands, lest during the night hours my spirit dismissed to other realms, I should, because of my unforgiving spirit, be denied Divine forgiveness.

"But," says some woman, "there is a horrid creature that has so injured me that rather than make up with her I would die first." Well, sister, you may take your choice, for one or the other it will be—your complete pardon of her, or God's eternal banishment of you. "But," says some man, "that fellow who cheated me out of those goods, or damaged my business credit, or started that lie about me in the newspapers, or by his perfidy broke up my domestic happiness, forgive him I cannot, forgive him I will not." Well, brother, take your choice. You will never be at peace with God till you are at peace with man. Feeling as you now do, you would not get so near the harbor of heaven as to see the lightship. Better leave that man with God who said: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." You may say: "I will make him sweat for that yet; I will make him squirm; I mean to pursue him to the death," but you are damaging yourself more than you damage him, and you are making heaven for your own soul an impossibility. If he will not be reconciled to you, be reconciled to him. In five or six hours it will be sundown. The dahlias will bloom against the western sky. Somewhere between this and that take a shovel and bury the old quarrel at least six feet deep. "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath."

"But," you say, "I have more than I can bear; too much is put upon me and I am not to blame if I am somewhat revengeful and unrelenting." Then I think of the little child at the moving of some goods from a store. The father was putting some rolls of goods on the child's arm, package after package, and someone said: "That child is being overloaded, and so much ought not to be put upon her," when the child responded: "Father knows how much I can carry;" and God our Father will not allow too much imposition on His children. In the day of eternity it will be found you had not one annoyance too many; not one exasperation too many; not one outrage too many. Your Heavenly Father knows how much you can carry.

Again: We ought not to allow the passage of the sunset hour before the dismissal of all our affronts, because we may associate the sublimest action of the soul, with the sublimest spectacle in nature. It is a most delightsome thing to have our personal experiences allied with certain subjects. There is a tree or river bank where God first answered your prayer. You will never pass that place or think of that place without thinking of the glorious communion. There was some gate or some room or some garden wall where you were affianced with the companion who has been your chief joy in life. You never speak of that place but with a smile. Some of you have pleasant memories connected with the evening star or the moon in its first quarter, or with the sunrise, because you saw it just as you were arriving at harbor after a tempestuous voyage. Forever and forever, O hearer, associate the sunset with your magnanimous, out and out, unlimited renunciation of all hatreds and forgiveness of all foes.

I admit it is the most difficult of all graces to practice, and at the start you may make a complete failure, but keep on in the attempt to practice it. Shakespeare wrote ten plays before he reached Hamlet, and seventeen plays before he reached Merchant of Venice, and twenty-eight plays before he reached Macbeth. And gradually you will come from the easier graces to the most difficult. Beside that, it is not a matter of personal determination so much as the laying hold of the almighty arm of God, who will help us to do anything we ought to do. Remember that in all personal controversies the one least to blame will have to take the first step at pacification, if it is ever effected. The contest between Aeschines and Aristippus resounds through history, but Aristippus, who was least to blame, went to Aeschines and said: "Shall we not agree to be friends before we make ourselves the laughing stock of the whole country?" And Aeschines said: "Thou art a far better man than I, for I began the quarrel, but thou hast been the first in healing the breach," and they were always friends afterwards. So let the one of you that is least to blame take the first step toward reconciliation. The one most in the wrong will never take it.

Oh, it makes one feel splendidly to be able by God's help to practice unlimited forgiveness. It improves one's body and soul. My brother, it will make you measure three or four more inches around the chest and improve your respiration so that you can take a deeper and longer breath. It improves the countenance by scattering the gloom and makes you somewhat like God Himself. He is omnipotent, and we cannot copy that. But He forgives with a broad sweep all faults, and all neglects, and all insults, and all wrong-doings, and in that we may copy Him with mighty success. Go harness that sublime action of your soul to the sunset—the hour when the gate of heaven opens to let the day pass into the eternities, and some of the glories escape this way through the brief opening. We talk about the Italian sunsets, and sunset amid the Appenines, and sunset amid the Cordilleras, but I will tell you how you may see a grander sunset than any mere lover of nature ever beheld; that is, by flinging into it all your hatreds and animosities, and let the horses of fire trample them, and the chariots of fire roll over them, and the spearmen of fire stab them, and the beach of fire consume them, and the billows of fire overwhelm them.

SUNDAY SCHOOL

INTERNATIONAL LESSON NO. XIV

DEC. 31, 1899.

Review.—Psalm 122.

Time.—B. C. 1045, 473, 458, 445, 444, 1000, 426, 400, 735-732.

Places—Jerusalem. Shushan. Canaan.

Persons—David, Israel, Ahasuerus, Haman, Mordecai, Ezra, Priests, Levites, Nehemiah, Hanani, Men of Judah, Artaxerxes, Sanballat, Tobiah, Arabians, Ammonites, Ashdodites, Men of Tyre, Malachi, Isaiah, Christ.

Commentary.—Lesson I. Joy in God's House. Though written by David, B. C. 1045, this Psalm appears to be among those collected by Ezra and Nehemiah after the captivity of Judah, and used by the people then, B. C. 536. If we conclude this to be the Psalm of the Jews upon their hearing the edict of Cyrus granting their reform to Jerusalem, it will show how faithfully they returned to the customs of their religion.

Lesson II. Haman's Plot Against the Jews. The history contained in the book of Esther belongs in the time between the dedication of the second temple and the coming of Ezra to Judea. "When the temple was finished there came a pause of nearly sixty years in the history of the Jews.

Lesson III. Esther Pleading for Her People. When Haman had fairly completed his plan and was waiting to execute it, God turned the balance and caused his plot to be fulfilled upon himself. He was disappointed, humbled, exposed and put to death. His position, honor, wealth and power were given to Mordecai.

Lesson IV. Ezra's Journey to Jerusalem. In this lesson we have Ezra's account of his mission to Jerusalem. He was a thorough student of the Bible, especially of the law of Moses (chapter vii. 6-10), and God had filled his heart with a desire to teach the law to the people.

Lesson V. Psalms of Deliverance. In Psalm eighty-five we have a prayer that the people might realize the full blessings of restoration. A portion of this Psalm implies that the people were in a state of great distress and weakness, such as is described in Ezra and Nehemiah.

Lesson VI. Nehemiah's Prayer. "Thirteen years of silence pass between Ezra's work and the beginning of Nehemiah's history. He was a noble example of Christian patriotism. He was a man of profound piety, connecting everything, great and small, with the will of God. He found his way to success through prevailing prayer."

Lesson VII. Rebuilding the Walls of Jerusalem. To-day we see the answer to Nehemiah's prayer. At the end of four months he returned to his duties as cupbearer.

Lesson VIII. Public reading of the Scriptures. The time of this lesson was the first day of the seventh month, Tishri, one week after the walls of Jerusalem were finished. In this month three great festivals were held: 1. The Feast of Trumpets, ushering in the new year and the new moon. 2. The great Day of Atonement, the 10th of the month; and (3) The Feast of Tabernacles, from the 15th to the 21st—the Jewish Thanksgiving.

Lesson IX. Woes of intemperance. Solomon, the author of the Proverbs, was endued with an unusual degree of wisdom. That we might behold the value of true wisdom God had preserved some of the wise sayings of His servant for our study. This lesson is called the drunkard's looking glass, set before those whose faces are toward the drunkard's habits, so that they may see what they will be if they go on.

Lesson X. Keeping the Sabbath. After Ezra's death, and during Nehemiah's absence from Jerusalem, the opposing enemies who had been silenced by Nehemiah took courage and opened the floodgates of evil, so that a deluge of sin rushed in upon the nation like an overwhelming torrent, carrying away the barriers of law and religion, and covenants and promises.

Lesson XI. Lessons in giving. Malachi appears to have been raised up to reprove the sins of the people; he prophesied the rejection of the Jews and the calling of the Gentiles. He prophesied of the coming of Christ. Malachi opens his prophecies by reminding the people of God's great and distinguished love toward them and their fathers; here he closes with a promise of the mission of Elijah the prophet.

Lesson XII. Fruits of Right and Wrong Doing. In this lesson Malachi tells of the reward of the faithful and the punishment of the wicked.

Lesson XIII. Christ's coming foretold. When Judah seemed to be an the verge of utter ruin God gave Isaiah a vision of the days of the Messiah.

PRACTICAL SURVEY.

I. Public worship was enjoined upon the people of God from the beginning. From the childhood of David we note his fervent devotion to God and his love for spiritual exercise. His musical soul found expression in Psalms suited to the public services at the temple. To him Jerusalem was the habitation of God. The gathering of the twelve tribes was a sight which filled his soul with reverence.

II. Vanity and revenge. Haman was a favorite with the king, yet the vice of his soul was vanity, and any disregard for his honor stirred his nature to seek revenge. His evil propensities were fed by the honors bestowed upon him by the king in promoting him to the highest office in his kingdom. Eager to enjoy all the honors allowed him in this position, Haman quickly noticed any neglect on the part of any under-officer to show him reverence. His vanity was therefore greatly mortified when Mordecai refused him this honor. Mordecai was a Jew. He respected the office of Haman, but he refused to reverence the man. While Haman was scheming to exterminate a race, God was using Mordecai to spare them, and at the same time see the end of the Agagite whose race God had said should be utterly destroyed.

III. Overruling Providence defeated the scheme of Haman, yet we see human instrumentality exercised on the part of Esther. There were momentous considerations which led her to plead before the king. There were personal, national and religious considerations. There were also great obstacles in her way. Her elevation to the position of queen had not changed the heart of Esther.

IV. Ezra's Mission—When duty became manifest Ezra was ready. Being a thorough student of the law of God, and filled with love for his people, and convinced that God was interested for them and ready to help, Ezra offered himself to go with a company to Jerusalem. He felt that his sufficiency was not in himself but in God. He weighed the treasures and placed them in the care of suitable men, giving them charge to look well to duty. On they went on a journey, perilous were it not that God guarded them. They reached Jerusalem in four months, with men, women and children and the gifts for the temple.

V. Prayer and praise were heard among the Jews on their return from captivity. There was praise and praise with thanksgiving in the hearts of all who found themselves in their dear home land. They could but declare that God had dealt graciously with them. Though much labor was required to re-build their cities and the temple, and great opposition must be overcome, there was still the feeling that there was no place like home. This increased the desire to have those still in the land of captivity join the little band in Jerusalem.

VI. Fervent Prayer—Nehemiah was deeply affected by the report which he received concerning his people. He wept, mourned, fasted and prayed. He sorrowed more for God's cause than they at Jerusalem did. God was fading out of their daily lives, while his heart was filled with a burning desire for a revival in Judah. Nehemiah was under service to a heathen king, yet he worshipped the king of kings.

VII. Successful Warfare. The king sent Nehemiah with letters of authority to build the walls of Jerusalem. His prayer to this end was answered, and he was soon among his people. Nehemiah's undertaking was no "play spell," but real genuine business for God. Did he go forth expecting success? Then he must also expect opposition. Was his effort to protect the people of God? Then he might expect interference from the enemies of God. Did he succeed in getting united effort in the work of building?

VIII. Bible Study. When the city was made secure and the people protected by the wall around Jerusalem Nehemiah turned their attention to the law of God. There was great ignorance among the people, and the result of this was seen in their sinful lives. They must know the law to obey it. Men, women and children were assembled to hear the law. Ezra was present with his assistants to read, explain and apply the word.

IX. Cause and Effect. Solomon enumerates certain symptoms, and asks who are possessed of these. They are summed up in these terms—woe, sorrow, contention, babbling, wounds, redness of eyes. These are effects of a certain cause. He proceeds to tell how these results were obtained. The steps of drunkenness explain. All who follow these steps are certain to experience the biting, stinging, dizziness, danger and death. It is a rule which has no exception.

X. Sabbath Observance. Only a short time passed, leaving the people at Jerusalem without a head; but during Nehemiah's stay in Persia and after Ezra's death, great inroads were made upon the order and piety of the Jews. Enemies reeked revenge. Mixed marriages, temple desecration, withholding of tithes and Sabbath-breaking met Nehemiah's eyes on his return. Heathen women were sent to their fathers; the temple was cleared of heathen occupants; Levites were summoned to duty; tithes were required; business on the Sabbath was stopped, and regular temple service was again observed.

XI. Open Rebuke. Nehemiah met the discouragements as a faithful servant, and did his utmost to show the people their sins and lead them to hearty repentance. The prophet Malachai utters emphatic rebuke, and frankly charges the people with the particular sins of which they are guilty. He declares the dreadful consequences that must come upon them unless they repent. They are called robbers, and pronounced under a curse.

XII. Sowing and Reaping. As though he would follow up the last sin of the people and show its hideousness to them, if therefore they might turn forever from it, Malachi closes his message with rebuke and warning. Yet he omits not to discover the remnant of God's faithful ones. He notices the course they take when evil surges all around them. "They that feared the Lord spake often one to another." They are in contrast with those whose "words were stout against God."

XIII. Prince of Peace. Sin in its destructive influence had blighted the nation. Records had been piled one upon another showing how depraved and unstable the Jews were. Even when Isaiah prophesied unto Judah he beheld them as those who walked in darkness, dwelling in the land of the shadow of death. They were diminished in numbers, losing in power, and disheartened for their future.