

The Pulpit.

No. 43.

Abundant Life.

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TEXT:—"I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."—John x: 10.

To any one who is a close observer of religious phenomena and knows a little of history there can be few things more striking than the way in which the form of presenting the Gospel changes. The substance of the Gospel of course, does not change, but the form of presenting it is always undergoing modification. The mind of the public changes, and the way in which the Gospel is presented to it must change, too. Fifty years ago there were noble evangelical preachers in the pulpits of this land, and noble sermons were preached. Some of you are old enough to remember them, and you never can forget them. But I should like to ask that, if the same sermons, without modification, were preached now, would they make



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the same impression? It is more than doubtful. Just as on the Day of Pentecost every one heard the mighty works of God in the language in which he was born, so, too, every generation requires to have the Gospel presented in a different form. Every great religious revival has its own watchword. The watchword of the Reformation was "Justification by Faith," and those words showed quite clearly on what the thoughts of men were bent. They were fixed on God, whose favor was their all in all. But in the great evangelical revival of last century the point of view was totally different. The spiritual awakening was not turned directly to God, but rather to man, and the text which came home with power to men's minds were, "Ye must be born again;" "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" and the like. Now it looks as if we have reached a new bend in the journey of humanity, when a new aspect of the Gospel will have to be presented under a new name. And what is to be the new watchword? I daresay a good many would say that it is to be the Kingdom of God. Those of you who read theology at all are aware how frequently this phrase has been turning up of late in the best theological writings. It denotes the social aspect of Christianity, and what those who make use of it mean is that, whereas in the last generation the spiritual awakening thought more about the salvation of their own individual souls and their own eternal destiny; in the coming generation men will rather be awakened by the fear of the evil they may do by a wicked life, and they will come to Christ for the power to live a life beneficial to the community. Well, I am quite aware that a very great deal might be said for that view; and yet it seems to me that there is a more penetrating word, that comes still closer to the heart of this generation. I question if the aspirations of any age have ever been more accurately expressed than the aspirations of the present age in the well known words:

It's life of which your veins are scant,
Oh, life, not death, for which we pant!
More life, and fuller, than I want.

That seems to me to be the longing of young and thoughtful minds at the present time, the longing for life, more life, full and abundant life. Now, the astonishing thing is, how the Word of God is able to meet all such demands as they arrive. Humanity travels forward from point to point, and at every new turn the Word of God is there waiting its coming, ready to accompany it on the next stage of its progress. When the German thinker

Novalis said about Shakespear is far truer of the Bible—that in it the last and deepest observers will still find new harmonies with the infinite structure of the universe, affinities with latent ideas, concurrences with the higher powers and senses of men; for example, the longing of the present generation is for life, and look what the response is in our text: "I am come that they might have life, and they might have it more abundantly."

There is one sense in which life may be said to be obviously the most universally and ardently desired of all things—that is, in the sense of its prolongation. "Skin for skin, all that a man hath will he give for his life." When an hotel is on fire, or a ship is going down, will not the richest man give all his wealth for a single chance of escape, and offer up to heaven ten thousand thanks if he does escape, even on these hard conditions? But still more significant is the conduct of those at the opposite end of the scale of fortune. Even those whose whole life is a struggle and a defeat are just as anxious to live as the wealthy; the old cling to life as much as the young; in fact, the shorter the fraction of life that is to be lived, the more does it seem to be prized. This being the universal sentiment, it might have been expected that Christ would respond to it by prolonging the life of those who believed in Him. It might have been part of the Gospel that all who believed in Jesus should live, say, twice as long as the average—that they might live for 150 years. But this is no part of the Gospel. I do not indeed, say that Christianity had no influence on the prolongation of life. I daresay if true Christians could be accurately separated from the rest of the world, perhaps their lives might be insured at a lower premium than the average, because their careful habits and happy dispositions give them the chance of living longer than the average. And yet Christians are unable any more than others to boast themselves of to-morrow, for they cannot tell what any day may bring forth, and there are innumerable instances in which the finest Christian spirits are at first taken away, so that we still repeat the old heathen saying, that whom the gods love die young. It is not, then, by prolonging life in this world that Christ fulfills the promise of this text.

But, surely, there are other ways of increasing the value of anything besides by its prolongation. If you have a bar of gold and want to double its value, you may do so, no doubt, by doubling its length, but you may also do so by doubling its thickness, and in certain circumstances this may be more serviceable. Now life, in the same way, may be increased in value, not by being prolonged, but by being deepened. If two men live a year, but one of them puts into every day twice as much work and enjoyment and usefulness as the other, his life is, of course, far more valuable than the other. This is what Christ does. He deepens our lives. I well remember a friend of my own who had gone a great length, living what is called a fast life and exploring, as he thought at the time, all the heights and depths of existence, but on whom God had mercy. I remember him saying to me with great earnestness, on one occasion, that he would not give one day of his changed life for all the years of pleasure that he had previously enjoyed. And that is the tone in which all true Christians are disposed to talk when they are contrasting their old lives with the new. Among men of the world it is a common enough question whether life is worth living, but among true and hearty Christians there is no such question possible—God makes their life golden, He deepens it, and that is what He means when in our text He says, I am come to give life, and to give it more abundantly.

There is another way in which the promise of the text may be understood—that they are given a higher kind of life. Natural science, in classifying the multitudinous objects of the world, distinguishes different kinds of life in nature. The simplest and lowest kind of vegetable life, which has many interesting and impressive characteristics; then higher up the scale there is animal life. It may be somewhat difficult to distinguish it from vegetable life at its incipient stages, but in its more developed stages it has perfectly well-known characteristics, the chief of which is voluntary motion; and then, higher up still, there is the life of man, whose distinguishing characteristic is perhaps self-consciousness. These are the three types of life which natural science recognizes. But is there a fourth kind above these three? The Bible always says that there is—it is spiritual life, the life of the spirit. The spirit is the highest and noblest thing in man. It is what connects him with God and eternity, just as other powers and faculties connect him with this world and with time. Sometimes the Bible speaks as if the spirit were non-existent in the natural man; but in other

(Concluded next week.)