

MIRACLE AND LAW.

The miracles of Jesus Christ profess to be supernatural interpositions for the accomplishment of an immediate benevolent purpose, while in combination they afford a body of evidence testifying to the power and benevolent mission of a divine Saviour of the sinful. Their directly benevolent aim is conspicuous throughout. Jesus never performs any wonderful work for display of power; when a desire is indicated for signs in the heavens these are refused; when His own wants are concerned there is no exercise of power to deliver Himself from suffering, but when a poor sufferer appeals for deliverance, He is ready to act; or when the feeble, oppressed condition of one who has been a long time in this case comes under His eye, He is moved to compassion and gives unexpected deliverance, even without intervention of request. All this is done, not as if it were any part of the divine purpose to keep men exempt from suffering, nor as if it were inconsistent with the divine benevolence to allow its return and continuance, for He is at pains to warn that even a worse thing may come; but as if deliverance from suffering were in harmony with the mission, and peculiarly appropriate, as illustrative of a Saviour's design as well as of His divine power. By way of sign, He would rescue from disease, in order thereby to point to a grander deliverance, even from sin, which causes all the world's sorrow.

The question here calling for attention is, "How do these miracles stand related to the laws of nature which we now recognize as fixed and unchangeable?" The first portion of the answer must be that they are incapable of explanation under these laws. They are veritable examples of results incapable of being attained under the operation of natural law. The effects secured were indeed only such as would have been attained had medical science been able to accomplish the result, for the great majority of them belong to the region in which the grand healing art works out its beneficent contribution to human well being. But in respect to the mode of execution, they were in no sense analogous to what is achieved by unexpected advance in scientific knowledge and skill. There was nothing in the whole course of our Lord's life bearing resemblance to the work of him who laboriously ponders the varied aspects of some selected form of disease, and ultimately finds the cure in a new mode of treatment, or a dangerous form of operation. The word spoken to the leper or paralytic: the anointing of eyes with clay, and sending the blind man with clay-covered eyes to wash in a pool; the command to Jairus' daughter, "Maid, arise;" and the call to the man of Bethany, "Lazarus, come forth," present no likeness to the conduct of one merely exercising a deeper knowledge of the remedial measures which are constantly being employed in some mode or other for the relief of suffering. What we witness in the varied form of His works is supernatural exercises of divine power. There is no competent vindication of the sacred narrative by reduction of our Lord's works to the level of those forms of knowledge and skill which are within the reach of human discovery. The sacred writings offer no suggestions pointing in this direction; Christian faith in the defence it offers for its recognition of the miracles in Christ's life, does not shelter itself behind such a poor breast-work as that which is gained by eliminating the supernatural, seeking to defend itself by surrendering all that is distinctive of the God-man, who not only spake as never man spake, but who, with profuse liberality performed works of healing that made the ears of the nation to tingle, compelling reluctant witnesses to testify that it was never so seen in Israel. The

supernatural works of Jesus belong to the same place in history as that which records the supernatural attributes belonging to His personality.

The record of Scripture presenting the narrative of Christ's miracles, does not in any sense represent our Saviour as interposing to stay, for a brief period, the action of fixed law, or to prevent the application of such law in the history of a particular individual. In all these wonders of healing nothing more happened as to actual result, having a general bearing on procedure in the physical world, than does happen when a cure of a particular phase of disease is accomplished by means of some newly discovered appliance at command of medical art. These two cases are essentially different as to modes of action, but they are strictly identical as to result, and this identity amounts to a demonstration of harmony with scientific requirements, as these actually guide men to the discovery of new methods. That there is identity of result only in some cases does not affect the argument, but arises from the essential features of the comparison, as a product of supernatural invention is not an interference with the laws of nature, such as would be involved in suspension or subversion. There is a great difference between recovery from suspended animation and resurrection from the dead as in the case of Lazarus, but the fixed order of the universe is no more disturbed in the latter case than in the former.

A further consideration bearing on the miracles of Christ needs to be stated, though it comes more directly into relation with philosophy than with science properly so called. Every one of these miracles was performed avowedly for moral ends, and under applications of moral conditions, while for immediate physical effects. There is moral law as well as physical law, and our Saviour subordinates the latter to the former in determining the use He makes of supernatural agency. The evidence of this is interwoven through the very texture of the narrative, so that an attempt to sever His miracles from their moral purpose can result only in tearing the narrative into fragments—mutilating the record which must be studied and interpreted as it has been put into our hands. Moral law is as unchangeable as physical law, though the character and form of its sway differ from those of physical law, and it is easier for a man wilfully to violate the higher law of life than to violate the lower. Yet so closely are the higher and lower connected in human history, that the easy violation of moral law is followed by painful consequences under the reign of the physical law. It lay within the purpose of Jesus to deliver from both, and it is only in recognition of this combined or complex purpose that we discover the rational basis on which supernatural deliverance from disease becomes a natural vehicle for presenting to rational beings requisite evidence of divine intervention in their behalf as they are entangled in the disastrous consequences of violating unchangeable moral law. If, on other grounds, it be apparent that supernatural interference for restoration of health or life does not involve interference with physical law by which the government of the Universe could be in any degree affected; on the grounds now contemplated we come to recognize a harmony of a higher and lower order of fixed law bearing on the history of the human race, and for this harmony of law our Saviour manifested a deep concern.—Prof. H. Calderwood, in *Science and Religion*.

—Preserve your conscience always soft and sensitive. If but one sin force its way into the tender part of the soul and is suffered to dwell there, the road is paved with a thousand more iniquities.

INTERNATIONAL S. S. LESSON.

Sunday, July 31

Moses and the Magicians, Ex. vii. 8-17.
B. C. 1491.

GOLDEN TEXT, Ps. cvi. 27.—They showed his signs among them, and wonders in the land of Ham.

Commit vs. 15-17.

INTRODUCTION AND CONNECTION.

Our last lesson ended with Pharaoh's insolent and positive refusal to let the people of Israel go. This was immediately followed by a cruel edict of oppression, more grievous than any that had preceded it. The Hebrew officers, whom the Egyptian taskmasters had set over their brethren and beaten for not seeing that their tasks were performed, remonstrated, but the king only drove them from his presence with reproaches and threats. Then, in their distress, the Israelites revolted against Moses, whom they accused of having made their position worse instead of better; and Moses, having appealed to the Lord, was encouraged to persist in his demands, but, at the same time, forewarned that Pharaoh would not comply until many and severe judgments had been visited upon him.

LESSON NOTES.

(Chap. vii. 8, 9.) *And the Lord spake.* In what way God expressed His will to Moses—whether by an audible voice or a spiritual communication—we are not told. It seems reasonable, however, that it was the former. *When Pharaoh shall speak unto you, saying, Show a miracle for you,—that is, in proof of your being divinely sent then shall thou say unto Aaron, &c.* In v. 1 we are told that God said unto Moses, *See, I have made (set or appointed) thee a god (God's representative), and Aaron shall be thy prophet (one acting in the name of another, a speaker, a wonder-worker).* Aaron, then, at Moses' command, was to wield the rod by means of which signs were to be wrought. It is always reasonable that one claiming to have a divine commission should be able to satisfy others of the authority under which he acts. *It shall become a serpent—not appear to be a serpent, but become a serpent.*

(10.) *And it became a serpent.* This was a real miracle. Nothing but the direct putting forth of God's power could cause a dry piece of wood to become a living, animated creature. *Aaron cast down his rod, &c.* This was a long, slender piece of wood, varying from three to six feet in length. Rods, in Egypt, were not only emblematic of authority, but were often the means of enforcing it. God armed Moses with this well-known symbol. *His rod—not Aaron's, but Moses' rod which Aaron wielded at Moses' command.*

(11.) *Then Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers—those who resorted to secret arts, incantations, charms, &c.* Of these magicians Dr. Jamieson says:—"The magicians of Egypt in modern times have long been celebrated adepts in charming serpents; and particularly by pressing the nape of the neck they throw them into a kind of catalepsy, which renders them stiff and immovable, thus seeming to change them into a rod. They conceal the serpent about their persons, and by acts of legerdemain produce it from their dress, stiff and straight as a rod. Just the same trick was played off by their ancient predecessors, the most renowned of whom, Jannes and Jambres, were called in on this occasion (2 Tim. ii. 8)." Again, in speaking of this art, he says: "It is a secret which has been transmitted from father to son for centuries. . . . It is probable, therefore, since the work of the magicians in the presence of Pharaoh is expressly said to be the result of their enchantments, that it was analogous to, and perhaps not more remarkable than the wonders still performed by the jugglers of modern Egypt, India, and China."

(12.) *But Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods.* Whether (as some think) the serpents of the magicians were produced by demonic agency permitted by God for a special purpose, or, as is suggested above, real serpents under the spell of jugglery, their being truly serpents is unquestionable; and their being overcome and swallowed up by the serpent of Aaron's rod, was ample proof that he was acting under a power infinitely superior to any they had as yet conceived of.

(13.) *And he hardened Pharaoh's heart.* We are not to suppose from this language that God infused into Pharaoh any hardening element, for the hardness of man's na-

ture is always in him as the result of sin. But when God sets before men evidences of His being and power, by refusing to yield their minds to those evidences, they become hardened against them. When the sunshine, which only softens the surface of the snow-drift, is withdrawn, the surface becomes the harder for having been temporarily softened. It was his own innate hardness asserting and re-asserting itself against the temporary effect of God's light upon it. *He hearkened not unto them as the Lord had said (chap. iv. 2).*

(14.) *Pharaoh's heart is hardened.* God, who knows what passes in the human soul, had seen all the working of Pharaoh's thoughts, and the mental comparisons he had been making between Himself and the gods of the Egyptians. Pharaoh must have recognized the superior power of Moses' God as seen in the destruction of the serpents of the magicians; but he probably discerned in Him no special difference of nature; and as for His power, he had made up his mind to defy it. This was the first effect of resisting conviction, and each act of resistance made the hardening process more complete.

(15.) *Get thee into Pharaoh in the morning . . . and the rod which was turned to a serpent shalt thou take in thy hand.* A whole night was given to Pharaoh for reflection; and in the morning, when he went out to the water (probably to sacrifice to the river-god), Moses was to present himself again; and, by the rod which had prevailed over the serpents of the magicians, he was to prevail in a most signal manner over the sacred river, turning its waters—held in such reverence by all Egyptians into blood, and thus rendering them loathsome.

(16.) *Say unto him, the Lord God of the Hebrews hath sent me unto thee, saying, Let my people go, &c.* It is as though he had said:—I came to you with a message from my God; I delivered it to you in His name; I gave you the signs you demanded; but behold hitherto thou wouldst not hear. Moses does not say, *You could not hear, but you would not.* It was Pharaoh's will opposing itself, not only against God's will, but against the evidences of His power, that had prevented him from hearing (paying attention to) God.

(17.) *Thus saith the Lord,—in this thou shalt know that I am the Lord: behold I will smite with the rod that is in my hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood.* Observe (vs. 19-21) this plague was against the waters of the Nile, whether they were in vessels for domestic use, in the streams into which the river was divided, either by natural or artificial means, and in the tanks or reservoirs into which they had been drawn off. This was more than a sign—it was a direct attack upon the false religion of the Egyptians through one of their most revered divinities—the Nile. It was equivalent to asking them, *Will you not now fear Him who is able to turn this water, deemed so sacred into blood—to make it so loathsome that, the innocent creatures that inhabit it shall die of its horrible impurity? and, more than that, cause that what you have put aside of it for domestic uses shall become blood in the vessels that contain it?* It was probably the water obtained by digging (v. 24) upon which the magicians expended their skill, as all the Nile-water appears to have been turned to blood at once. Their apparent success sufficed, however, to satisfy Pharaoh, and again his heart was hardened against God.

SUGGESTED THOUGHTS.

The hardest men are, as a rule, those who have resisted most persistently the power of God's Spirit. The conscience that resists much and often becomes seared as with a hot iron.

God's dealings with Pharaoh, although special and peculiar, were the same in design with those with which He visits impenitent men at all times. Their object was to make Himself known, in order that He might be feared, honoured, and obeyed.

The hardness of Pharaoh's heart was there before God began with him. There were periods of momentary softening before God, but as soon as the pressure was removed the old will asserted itself again, and he became harder than ever. The self-same processes are still going on. Thousands of wicked men, although striven with often and long by God's Spirit, like Pharaoh, are growing harder continually.

The solemn lesson of all this is, that God will not always strive with man. "Ho that, being often reproved, hardeneth his neck, shall be suddenly destroyed, and that without remedy."