

PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

FAMILY RELIGION.

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"If it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served, that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land ye dwell; but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord."—JOSHUA xxiv. 15.

Heart and hope, heaven and home, are all associated words. They are the visible signs of all that is dear and enduring, pure and persuasive, sacred and supporting. Home is earth's sanctuary and heaven's foretaste; a well-spring of pure affection and true life; a place for the highest fellowship, and a shelter for the troubled spirit; a temple for character not made with hands.

Joshua has led this people into the land of which "the Lord had said I will give it thee." The purpose of God from first to last was that they should serve Him truly and only. To this end He called their father Abraham from the growing idolatry on the other side of the flood, led him throughout all the land of Canaan, gave him Isaac according to the promise, and multiplied his seed. This purpose was being carried out in the deliverance of Israel from the bondage and corruption of Egypt. All the solemn lessons of the wilderness, and all the manifest victories in entering the land, were in themselves well fitted to confirm them in allegiance to Jehovah their Redeemer. There had been a growing apostasy from the true God. It had been going on in Chaldaea, out of which Israel and his family had come; it was dominant in Egypt, from whose hand God delivered His people, it was rooted in Canaan, which had just been conquered. Thus Israel was compassed about with competing religions and objects of worship, and there was great danger that the true Jehovah would be forgotten. Decision earnest and true, decision prompt and powerful, decision in a family capacity was demanded.

To this Joshua incites and encourages the people by family resolution and consecration. "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord."

Let us first of all turn over in our minds what place family religion holds in our life, and how we regard it. To what extent does the name, the claims, the presence and the power of God influence the plans of work, and the hour of duty, in the daily arrangements of our homes? What place does worship receive—worship in the family—in praise and prayer and instruction from God's Word? Is the altar in the midst of the house, or is it in a dark corner? Is there offered the sacrifice of a broken and a contrite heart? Is the Lord Jesus in His special work, His love and His life, and His claim on the heart kept conspicuous before the heart and conscience? Does the Church of God on the earth, and its relation to the cause of His kingdom, occupy a place in our teaching adapted to the strengthening mind, and the opening affection of our children? Does the line of eternal difference and essential opposition between the spirit and the flesh—between what is helpful to cherish the light and love of God in the home, and what must confuse the conscience and blur the perception—is this daily kept in view, or does vacillation weaken the whole nature and leave the home a pantheon of all claimants for regard? "The lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life; which are not of the Father but of the world." We have the ancient problem in its modern form.

What would be the inevitable result if all the true elements of home-life were having full scope, ministered in fidelity and directed in wisdom? Would it not be that our children would manifest a high appreciation of spiritual things; a prompt readiness to endorse that appreciation by an open and honest profession of faith in the Lord Jesus, avowing the God of their fathers to be their God. "Thou art our God, and we will praise Thee; our fathers God, and we will exalt Thee." Would we not be cheered by seeing the members of the home and the school incite one another by saying "Come, let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant which shall never be broken" Zion's God and Zion's cause would be a joy of the life, and a subject of anxious care. There would be less difficulty in securing earnest, hearty workers in the spiritual and temporal interests of the Church, instead of the department of school instruction being assigned apathetically to little children.

We would have the adult study of God's Word, church life and literature, building up men and women in the stature and fulness of Christ; the ranks of mere pleasure-seekers, Sabbath-breakers, and candidates for dissipation would be greatly diminished. These things are painfully borne in upon the heart. Where is the difficulty? Whence the cause of this almost universal disregard of spiritual things in our young people? We are strongly inclined to regard the fountain cause as in the character of the home-life—there is little of the spirit and purpose of Joshua: "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord." We have put our own condition foremost, that we may carry the personal element along with us in our consideration of family religion and family worship. Observe—

First.—The loss experienced in the neglect of family religion is in proportion to the importance God has put on the family for securing a godly seed.

The life of the family is as old as Eden; it is set down in the very nature of things; it has survived the fall; honouring it in the Lord secures the richest blessings; dishonouring it brings to us the deepest penalties and the most bitter misery. The sweetest pictures of the Word of God are those of family life, the loving and unquestioned authority of parents, the ready and hearty obedience of children, and the Lord and His law as the source of wisdom and fellowship. "These words shalt thou teach diligently to thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down and when thou risest up." Who can patiently read this book of the law without feeling that the Hebrew people desired children from God; not only because of that promise that throbbed with life in their midst, that among them should be born one who would be their Lord and Redeemer, but also that their principles and the God of their fathers might have a high place in the earth, and that the knowledge of his name might be supreme.

The ordinance which was earliest in the history of the race was to perpetuate in a worthy seed mind of the highest type, and principles of the truest value, and life of the highest order; therefore all despite done to this ordinance, physically, mentally, morally and spiritually, will swiftly reap the due penalty. God has a universe of means at His disposal, and that which is highly valued is swiftly rewarded in obedience or disobedience.

The character of a people will invariably be the character of their homes. Church life and national life, no less than individual, takes its tone and strength or weakness of character from the home. It is the basis or fountain of life, and society in any of its forms is its expression. To suppose that these considerations apply exclusively to Old Testament life and Scriptures is to entertain a radical mistake. No progress, no development in mind or modes of living, can ever abrogate the central importance of family life. The unity and influence of the family is carried over into the New Testament. The promise of the Old Testament receives its enlargement of blessing in the New. Parents and their children are still within the enclosure of the covenant, "I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee." Parents are to train up their children in the nurture and schooling of the Lord. Full and experimental acquaintance with the Word is traced to home training. "From a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation, through faith that is in Christ Jesus." The possession of piety from parental "fidelity" is looked for and rejoiced in. "I thank God for the unfeigned faith, which dwelt, first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice, and I am persuaded also in thee." The households of Lydia and the Philippian jailer, were added to the Lord. And as homes are animated by piety, so is the Church "strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might." When the idea prevails, or settles into a practical fact, that the family is common ground, as compared with the Church—acknowledged to be sacred—then apostasy of both Church and home is already commenced. The Church goes beyond its legitimate sphere when it usurps home authority, or loosens home ties, or tampers with home duties. "Romanism is largely a religion of the Church—Protestantism mainly of the home." And when importance is being laid on what is ecclesiastical, to the neglect of what is domestic, the evangelical life of the Gospel is being imperiled.

This craving for public enjoyment in amusement, and

often low at that, is carried into Church means and measures, is one of the signs of the times; indicating that rigorous thought and healthy sentiment are at a low ebb in the home. It is not unworthy of notice in this connection, that ancient writers, even the poets, but rarely refer, even in a passing way, to their early days. Whereas there is scarcely a modern writer who has not lingered with undisguised pleasure over the memories of his childhood. The emphatic utterances concerning home and childhood are wholly biblical, or due to Bible influence.

The importance attached to childhood by the Word of God, and through this to the home, has hallowed all family exercises, and been to young life a time of sweetness and joy. Why was it that the Puritans of England, whether in their own unwelcome land, or as represented in the Pilgrim Fathers, who carried their convictions to this far off untrodden continent, were for generations distinguished for their strength of character, simplicity and purity of life, and courage in endurance? Was it not because of the circumstances in which they were placed, and the necessities to which they were pressed, they gave pre-eminent attention to family life. The same chapter of history was written in the lives of our covenanting forefathers. This was an article of their covenant, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord." Observe—

Second.—Some of the elements of strength that are needed to carry out Joshua's resolution and covenant.

1. We do need to be deeply impressed with this fact: that the key to all success in family life is *personal, parental piety.*

The first conception a child forms of religion must be in what they see in the character, what they hear in the language, what they unconsciously inhale in the moral atmosphere of the home. Children ordinarily do not aim above this. What is done by those whom we love so affects us, and children especially, that we early conclude it to be the very best thing to do. This implicit trust in our children is a bond for good, a means of great moral power, an instrumentality for the good of the soul and the honour of God. How solemn the parents position. How important that you strike the right key-note of the destiny of your child for time and eternity. You have the "Look here" of life in your hand, you can repeat the Master's message, "Follow Me." Surely we cannot leave the formation of the character of our children to be a matter of accident. With the lower orders of creation their chief end seems to be accomplished when they have given birth to their successors; they provide offspring and die. With mankind the birth of offspring is only preliminary to their chief work, the training of their children to a higher type of excellence in character than themselves, to a life spiritual and eternal in Christ Jesus. If this high destiny were made a motive of personal life in the home—if we habitually felt that, as from us our children take on the type and tone of their natural life, so they must, to a large extent, be conformed in their moral and spiritual life—this ever present and working fact in home life, ought to lead us earnestly to inquire, What manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness? It was this personal faith, and parental devotedness, in Abraham, that led God to declare His assurance of the ultimate end of His promise being accomplished. "I know Abraham, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment, that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him." It is in the footsteps of this friend of God Joshua is treading. "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

2. The next element of God honouring family life is:—

A lively sense of responsibility in the work, and for the results of the work.

This is needful as an essential part of our discipline and training, and by this securing the nurture and schooling of the Lord for our children.

It enters into the very nature of things that the parents become *thought and conscience, law and will*, to their children, until they gradually grow up into a less dependent position, and gradually they, in turn, assume all the responsibilities of life. But the training and discipline of life does not cease on our reaching this position of majority; it only passes into another and higher stage, fitting for higher work and greater efficiency. Our schooling is carried on as children, and, in becoming parents, our discipline is