

pronounce it, on that account alone, worthy of its place in the Bible.

The main lesson of the book of Ruth chords well with this key-note of the book of Esther.

In Ruth we see the closest constancy of affection beautifying a relation against which the satirist often directs his bitterest jibes. We see the hardest times brightened by the flowers of the purest love. We see a virtuous self help sensibly accepting a trying situation, and honestly winning its due recognition and reward. We see the providence which feeds the sparrows aiding the pious and industrious poor. This is just such a story of common life as would instruct a rude people in some of the primary lessons of morals and religion; just such a story as a divinely guided prophet might have written for such a purpose. In the primitive age it was a lesson which the divine teaching of the rare could hardly have failed to give in some form or other. Common as is the lesson now, it is not yet well learned. It is common life, domestic life, not among rude Hebrews merely, but in all times, that needs just such sanctifying as an example like Ruth's. This world, our homes, our daily work, make the circle where just such examples need to shine.

The book of Ruth is a standing protest against the besetting error of putting religion only in doctrines, institutions, ceremonies. Ruth insists on its being put into the life, the home life, the work life, the social life, in all pure and sweet morality. In view of the fatal facility with which men forget this, we may well believe that our divine teacher, the Spirit of God, secured such a book its place in the glorious company of prophecy, gospels and revelation. For so we are taught that the sublime doctrines of an incarnate God and an opened heaven are of no avail except we embody the spirit of religion in the fitting form of moral beauty, amid whatever burdens and trials God calls us to glorify Him by well doing.

In such lessons these two books, however diverse in special colouring, blend in impressive harmony. We find their details in similar accord, in exhibiting the spirit of piety in practical and moral forms, rather than devotional and religious.

Compare, for instance, the dutifulness of Esther toward Mordecai, even after she became queen, and the dutifulness of Ruth toward Naomi. Compare again, the combined energy and prudence of each in her time of need, Esther employing all of woman's tact in conducting her perilous and delicate part with the king and with Haman, Ruth (in concert with Naomi) declining the privilege of the law of inheritance until she had established her character by industry and filial piety.

Compare each again in her relation to those unknown elements in the hands of providence which are the reliance of the righteous and the dread of the wicked. Of Ruth, as she went to glean, we read that "her *hap* was" to light on the field of Boaz. Concerning Esther we read, in combination, the singular postponement of the fatal day by her adversary's superstitious use of the lot, and the unexpected blasting of Haman by the sudden disclosure of the fact that his revenge had ignorantly struck at the queen.

Peculiarly intense in colouring is the picture of providential control as it appears in Esther's record. Wrath fell on Haman as a thunderbolt from a clear sky, when Esther in her supreme moment simply said, "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman." The fact, to him before unknown, that the queen was of the race he had struck at, saved them and destroyed him. How striking this suggestion of the unknown elements by which providence operating through law destroys the wicked and delivers the Godly! The success of any selfish scheme depends on an indefinite number of particulars, some of which he cannot know, and any of which, when reckoned in, may change the whole result. Hence he is ever at the mercy of the unknown elements by which the omniscient disposer of events controls the issue. The unknown elements in human calculations! Never forget them. These are the avenging and recording angels by which every soul is made, sooner or later,

to realize that the supreme power works for righteousness.

The very position which these books respectively occupy in the Bible between those which precede and follow carries the analogy between them still further. It is singular to find the book of Esther, so intensely secular in its form and its phraseology, inserted between books so intensely religious in external expression as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah preceding it, and the book of Job which follows. Equally singular, though in another point of view, is it to find that peaceful scene of rural innocence and piety, which the book of Ruth depicts, between the book of Judges and the books of Samuel, so full of bloodshed and mourning, and fierce struggles and wild cries of victory. It intervenes like the even-song of shepherds in a lull of battle-drums and trumpets. It teaches us the comforting belief that even in calamitous times earth's happiness has not all been spoiled. The world's past is not so dark as history pretends. Our thoughts may always turn from that record of strife and crime and suffering, which it often seems the chief task of the daily newspaper to spread before us, to contemplate those unpublished ministries of virtue and goodness which are covered from the eye of the reporter to smile in the sight of the recording angel.

In exhibiting the analogy between these two books this feature ought not to be omitted, that each is the story of a good woman in a hard place. Less need be said of that here, because that seems to be a characteristic of most Bible biographies,—stories of good people in hard places, the moral victories of constancy and faith amid sore trials. In this respect the account of Esther demands especial notice. She held only the rank of the best loved one in a polygamous household, whose arrangements were as repugnant to our moral sense as is the odious peculiarity of Mormonism. To Esther's moral sense—confessedly noble as was her character—it can hardly have been thus repugnant, with the polygamous precedents set in her own nation by sovereigns from David's time, and equally common in the foreign land of her birth. Such is the revelation of moral progress which the Bible history gives, by incorporating such usages of the best men and women of earlier times, in the same record with the teachings of Him who made known to later times the divine intention of the fact, that the first family consisted of a wedded pair.

To conclude: the lesson of *inclusiveness* which Esther gives by ignoring the outside distinction between "sacred" and "secular," Ruth gives in another way by ignoring the distinction elsewhere recognized between the chosen people and the heathen. Moses had pronounced a curse on the race of Moab, which after a thousand years Nehemiah kept in force. From this accursed race, and against the prohibition of inter-marriage with them, came "Ruth the Moabitess."

The Jewish Church, as narrow and exclusive as any church that ever existed, was obliged by the necessities of its position to be such. The feeble light amid fierce winds must be within a lantern. Something was needed to offset this, and to show that this was not the divine ideal, but a temporary arrangement for an exigency. Hence, in remarkable contrast with the exclusiveness of the people and their institutions, the repeated testimonies of the prophets to the truth which we find embodied here in the living example of this woman. The name of the foreigner from the accursed race is here inscribed in the national record beside the names of Moses and Samuel, as a silent testimony that God is the God of all mankind, and that all have an inheritance in Him. Thus, side by side with the exclusiveness of temporary religious forms, the Old Testament places the inclusiveness of the abiding spirit of religion. While the Moabite was debarred from the national sanctuary, the Moabitess is enrolled in the holy volume which that sanctuary enshrined. And so long as creeds and sects and religious forms estrange men's sympathies, so long will her story repeat the timely lesson, to seek in the religious spirit the inclusive bond, the essential unity.

It is not unworthy of notice that the two books of the Bible which bear women's names are wholly occupied with present duties, and things near at hand in

a narrow range, while over all there plays the light that comes from afar and from above. Nowhere is the great consequence of some little things more impressively displayed than in the incidents of these books—the king's sleepless night saving Mordecai from the gallows; Ruth's casual entrance of Boaz's field conducting her to the place in history which is hers. Nowhere is the supreme worthiness of uprightly, dutifully, and bravely living the lot which providence assigns more persuasively set forth. What worthier lessons could women, or men, teach mankind than the lessons of these books, in which the distinction between royal Esther and humble Ruth is lost sight of amid the light that glows in the simple goodness of both?

"Honour and shame from no condition rise;  
Act well thy part; there all the honour lies."

"What shall I do to be forever known?  
Thy duty ever."

—Sunday Afternoon.

#### INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY OF CHRISTIANS.

Never have there been such wide-spread opportunities for Christian usefulness as at present. Christians need scarcely ask, "Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?" for the work lies all around, and presses upon them and claims their active zeal. Sad it is that so many are found negligent or forgetful of their individual responsibility to be co-labourers in hastening on the triumphs of the Redeemer's kingdom. The whole world is now the gospel field, and already "white to the harvest." India and Japan, the islands of the South Seas and of the far-off Western Pacific, are having the gospel preached to them; and Ethiopia and the partially explored African continent stretch forth their hands for the Christian labourer. Yet many, even in our own Zion, are ignorant of the fact that thousands all over these heathen lands have heard the Word of Life and rejoice in a risen Saviour; and, as gleams of light shining in dark places, show so sadly the millions who are passing from time to eternity in worse than Egyptian bondage, because the coffers of the Lord's house are not overflowing with the free-will offerings of every individual Christian.

Our home work suffers, too, from the lack of this individual responsibility. How many waste places might "bloom and blossom as the rose," if in sparsely settled parts of our country, individual Christians would gather themselves weekly in the Sabbath school and prayer meeting! God would soon bless such efforts by sending them an under shepherd.

Even in our towns and cities—with their beautiful churches and softly-cushioned seats, where the Pauls and Apolloses in the pulpit tempt the passers-by—how many professing Christians are satisfied to be in their places only on pleasant Sabbath mornings. How many vacant seats, at the evening service and prayer meetings, to pain the heart of the faithful minister, instead of each and every professor being Aarons and Hurs to hold up the hands of the pastor in his labourious work!

Is not this a true picture of too many in all the churches of this Christian land? What is the secret of this sad apathy? Is it not found in the *individual* inner life? Christian reader, do you appreciate the high privileges of your calling? *Your* Christian life is called a race, and you are enjoined to "so run that you may obtain;" "to press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." You are called to be a soldier of Christ, and to "gird yourself with all the panoply of the gospel armour" and then "fight the good fight of faith." The Saviour says to you, "Go, work in my vineyard." Will you go, or leave others to do the work? Christ is King in Zion. He has "girded on his sword, and in His glory and His majesty he rides prosperously." Would you, Christian reader, share the triumphs of Christ's kingdom? Then work; and whether ten talents, or five talents, or only one talent have been committed to you, let not your Lord, when he comes, find yours laid away in a napkin. Would you wear an incorruptible crown, and shine as the stars for ever and