

The Quiet Hour.

Prophets and Kings and People.

S. S. Lesson. Fourth Quarterly Review,
Dec. 18 1904.

GOLDEN TEXT.—Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.—Luke 4:8.

BY ALEXANDER MCLAREN, D. D.

The first five lessons, relating to Elisha's miracles, may be taken together as illustrating the beneficent working of revelation, and as therefore prophetic of the highest blessings that flood humanity from Christ, the highest apex of all revelation in Elisha's first act is significant of his whole position. He "takes up" Elijah's mantle, that is, he serves himself heir to Elijah, claims like inspiration and authority, yet proclaims himself not an originator but a continuer, and in so far as, inferior. He stands in the line of succession. In answer to his request for a first-born's portion, he comes "in the spirit" though not in the "power of Elijah." Originators have the more shining position, but all men leave unfinished work, and there is as much need of faithful continuers as of bold strikers out of new departures. Whether we are path breakers or followers, we may all have the self-same Spirit.

Elisha's first miracle, the healing of the waters, was not only a beneficent work for the little city, but it was a kind of program of the purpose of all prophecy, namely, moral cleansing. Humanity is tainted. However pleasant the city, if the "water is naught" the land will languish, and the prophet's highest office was to cleanse the fountain. Therefore Jesus, as the perfect revealer and prophet, does perfectly what they did partially. He is himself "the new cruse" containing the salt of a perfect, sinless manhood, which, being lodged in the very heart of the race, works sweetening and purifying.

Similarly the second miracle, that of the multiplication of the widow's oil, besides its lesson that God "thinketh on" the "poor and needy," who cry to him, throws into picturesque form great truths as to the gift, through Jesus, of the oil of the Holy Spirit. The widow was bidden to bring vessels to receive the oil, before it began to flow. The number brought determined the amount received. The golden flow ceased when she brought no more. She obtained more than enough and had something over for to-morrow. Is not all this a parable? "According to your faith, be it unto you." Our capacity settles our reception, and our faith and desire settle our capacity. The river is always flowing; we regulate the quantity that pours into our garden.

In Lesson 3, the communication of life to the Shunammite's boy has the same double character of symbol and prophecy. It is the purpose of all revelation to bring back life to dead souls. Jesus, and Jesus only does that. But the differences between Elisha and Christ are even more noteworthy than the resemblances. For the former failed altogether in his attempt to make his staff serve instead of himself, and succeeded, when he came in person, only by exhausting effort and prayer. Contrast his conduct with the healing of the "nobleman's son" from a distance by a bare word, and with all Christ's resuscitations of the dead, when "He spake and it was done," and ponder the gulf between the prophet and the Christ. He is the life, and from him we may all draw life eternal.

The symbolic element is even clearer in Lesson 4. Naaman's is an instance of the offense taken by men at the non-deferential way in which Christ and his gospel treat them. He insisted on being regarded as a very distinguished personage who happened to be a leper, and had rather honored Elisha by condescending to come to him; Elisha insisted on treating him as a leper who happened to be a distinguished personage. The gospel serves everybody alike. There are no private entrances for notabilities. Your disease is the only thing about you that the doctor takes note of, and the treatment is exactly the same whether you are a millionaire or a pauper, a professor or a fool. Naaman was offended at the simplicity of the cure. We are much more willing to take elaborate remedies than simple ones, even for our bodily sicknesses. Many people have no faith in doctor's stuff unless it smells and tastes strong and nasty. And many had rather macerate their bodies and toil at patching themselves up than accept the free salvation which calls on them for nothing but self-surrender and faith.

The strange story in Lesson 5 has a similar symbolical force. It illustrates on two sides the effect of the prophet's word, in that it gives sight to the blind and blinds the seeing. That is ever the effect of revelation, and is eminently the effect of Christ, the light of men. He declares that he comes "that they that see not may see; and that they that see may become blind." The sight that was bestowed was of invisible realities. The circle of angel guards had been flaming round Elisha all the while, but now the inner eye was opened and the sight scattered fears. The cure for terror is to see by faith "the angel of the Lord" encamping round about us.

Lessons 6 and 7 go together. The one shows the early training of Joash, and the carefully planned revolution which set him on his throne; the other shows his early zeal for the temple and his practical common sense. One poor infant was all that remained of David's house. That frail bark carried all the hopes of the nation and the promises of God; what if it were shipwrecked, as might well be in such a storm? But that thin thread could not be shorn in two, for God keeps his word, however unlikely its fulfilment may appear. The tree was felled to its stump, but a sucker sprung from the root, and sun and dew were forthcoming for its growth. "Never despair of God's promise" is the plain lesson read from that store-room in the temple where the infant was hidden for six years. Was not that a better nursery for Joash than the palace with its luxury and idolatry, and was not his brave aunt a better nurse than Athaliah? The quiet atmosphere of a Christian home, with the fragrance of cheerful godliness in the else scentless air, is the best growing ground for character. The revolution was the work of Jehoiada, who was as prudent as he was bold, and engineered the plot with consummate skill, so that not a whisper of it was blown over the wall to the adjoining palace. How much one strong man can do to alter the face of things! Joash is an example of the power of early impressions and religious training and, alas! is also an instance of early promise overcast, and of a weak character deteriorating when left without the strong arm to steady it.

The teaching of Lesson 7 is chiefly that religious work should be done on business principles. It also enforces the caution against leaving the guidance of such work in the hands of officials, who will often be perfunctory and sometimes barely honest. It teaches, too, that willing gifts, not compulsory taxes, yield the largest return and are the only right source of supply for such work. And generous trust gets better work out of men than perpetual suspicion.

In Lessons 8 and 9 Isaiah paints the moral foulness of both Judah and Israel, in burning words of rebuke and entreaty. Lesson 8 sets forth the great suit of Jehovah versus Judah. In it we have, first, the indictment, which is not only an indictment, but also a lament and an entreaty. Sin is blackest when seen against the whiteness of God's goodness. God bewails the prodigal's flight, even while he sternly enumerates his sins. Man's sin brings sorrow to God as well as misery to man. The dismal result of national sin is national misery, as depicted, first, in the metaphor of a man deadly wounded, and then in the plain prose of a desolated land and flaming cities. Sin desolates individual characters and lives as certainly. But God pardons as well as indicts and punishes, and the lesson closes with the assurance of forgiveness and cleansing. By repentance and faith, we can receive the life which cleanses our lives and puts away the evil of our doings.

In Lesson 9 we have a realistic picture of the national sin of drunkenness. Ugly people make ugly pictures, and a drunkard's portrait must needs be disgusting. So Isaiah spares none of the foulness and becomes "very coarse indeed," as he had to be. He will set all down, reeling, staggering, and vomiting, stuttering and thick-spokenness—with remorseless fidelity. And the drunkard reels and staggers in his wits as well as in his legs, and, worst of all, lets his foul mouth blossom into rank words of contempt of God's warnings and indignation at being talked to as if a baby. But his words are given back to him, and his sentence passed. He has refused to listen to Isaiah, the Assyrian will make him hear on his deafest side. He had scoffed at the patient wooing of God's persistent voice; that very resistance will make his ruin more complete.

Huzekiah's restoration of the temple was a one man movement, and transient according. The idolater Ahaz preceded him, the idolater Manasseh succeeded, and each swept the nation along with him. It was mainly a matter of ritual; the ethical and spiritual aspects of religion were subordinate in it. The sacrificial worship connected with it must have been a strange, wild, and to us repulsive, sight. But in the order of the sacrifices, we have a symbolic presentation of the soul's way back to God, which is eternally true. The sin offering must come first. The burnt offering can only be presented on the footing of the preceding sin offering, and will certainly follow it. Self-surrender, consecration by the kindled flame of thankful love, is possible and certain, when Christ's sacrifice has been offered, and we have associated ourselves with it, laying our hands on his head. And the thank offering of a life of service will follow both.

Lesson 11 piles up Israel's sins in one long sentence of ten verses, and the black heap is burnt up by one flash in the last verse. The mad lust after many, any, gods witnessed to the insufficiency of each and all, and is paralleled by our folly in accumulating many objects of desire, pursuit, and worship, and turning away from the One. Israel's relapses were in essence identical with ours.