

The Strength of the Lord

The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: yea, it is he that shall preserve thy soul.—PSALM 121: 7.

RECENTLY read this Psalm by the bedside of a very sick person. It is a very beautiful Psalm and in its metrical setting supplies one of our most popular hymns.

Unto the hills around do I lift up
My longing eyes
O whence for me shall my salvation come
From whence arise?
From God the Lord doth come my certain aid
From God the Lord who heaven and earth hath made.

But as I read it at that bedside I wondered what might be the thought of the sick person. "The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil" I read. But surely sickness is an evil. "He shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in," it continues.

And yet life was hanging by a thread!

Let me give another example also from my own experience. A year or two ago, I was visiting a sick person who was dying but of a slow and trying disease. I said, "Would you like me to read to you?" She said, "I would." "Have you any favorite passage?" She replied after a moment's thought, "I would like the 91st Psalm." Here are a few verses, and bear in mind it was a hopelessly sick person who asked for this Psalm.

"Whoso dwelleth under the defence of the most High:
Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty—

He shall deliver thee from the snare of the hunter

And from the noisome pestilence
He shall defend thee under his wings
And thou shalt be safe under his feathers.
His faithfulness and truth shall be thy shield and buckler.

Thou shalt not be afraid for any terror by night
Nor for the arrow that flieth by day—
For the pestilence that walketh in sickness:
Nor the sickness that destroyeth at noon day—
A thousand shall fall beside thee
And ten thousand at thy right hand,
But it shall not come nigh thee."

What did these words mean to one who was obviously smitten by pestilence and fallen to rise no more in this world?

I can picture the superior smile of the skeptic. He might say something like this—In those olden days men had very limited knowledge of the laws of nature. They thought God was just above their heads and if they offered him the proper sacrifices he would perform unlimited miracles on their behalf. That, he would continue, is all exploded now, and though we grant to such Psalms a great beauty and literary charm they have no practical value for us.

Yet a very sick person chooses these words which the skeptic would regard as a kind of satire on religion. She chooses them deliberately and they give her comfort. She found no mockery in them but they spoke peace to her!

And then my thought travelled far afield. I thought of those congregations of soldiers who during four years came and went from our Churches and often have sung with hearty voice that same hymn.

"He will not suffer that thy foot be moved
Safe shalt thou be."

And how many lie under the sod of blood-soaked France and Belgium?

What shall we say to these things?

Well let me say this first. As I was reading this 121st Psalm one line leapt suddenly out and interpreted the whole of it, yes and the 91st Psalm too.

"Yea! it is even He that shall keep thy soul."

And that is what those sick persons felt. The clever skeptic has undoubtedly got hold of a truth, but it is the superficial truth. These simple folk had got what the clever skeptic had not, the deep truth which underlies the superficial truth. They could not have explained it, but they felt it, and there are some truths that are no truths till we feel them.

"GOD THE STRENGTH OF THE SOUL," is what they felt, and that is my present subject:

I.

It is at the skeptic's piece of truth that we will look first. He says the laws of nature are unchangeable and science has for many years presented a vast array of facts that confirm this truth. And one of the great perplexities that have harassed the souls of many during the past war, has been the apparent silence of God. The bad and the good have been cut off indiscriminately. Here at home vice and selfishness seemed triumphant and over there our bravest and best went down. People strove hard to catch some evidence that here and there God saves by special intervention this or that one. The following story is told by a distinguished divine in England. A mother came to him in a kind of triumph. "Doctor," she said, "there were six aeroplanes together, five were shot down and my boy in the sixth, was saved. Do you not call that a special Providence?" "Madam," replied the divine somewhat sadly, "ask the mothers of the other five."

I think that we shall rise to a higher faith and a better faith and one which will bring us great strength, if we frankly acknowledge the truth that God in the sphere of the material world works through what we may call the law of material things. If a man were falling through the air from a cathedral spire you would feel so sure that he would fall to the ground that you would not even pray that he might be suspended in mid air, or fall with the buoyancy of a feather. I think we must apply this truth universally. I think it is a truth that God Himself reveals to us through science.

Yet we must remember that there are ways in which we can turn our knowledge of law to a saving end. Law is not in itself terrible. It is something to be studied and used. The old pestilences of the Middle Ages swept away vast populations. They have been overcome by the application of other laws through the patience and love of truth of many men of science.

Let me sum up what I have said on this part of our subject before passing on to higher aspects. In the world of material things including our material bodies we are governed by laws. Even here we may have a living faith in Providence, though not I think in a Providence who now and then, for some favourite child, interferes with or suspends his own laws. But we may have a living faith in a Providence who works through law, and in that faith we can lend our energies to overcoming of the evils which spring from ignorance of law by bringing to bear upon them other laws. For example it is certainly true that the invention of more efficient brakes on trains has saved hundreds of lives. It is certain that modern medicine and surgery has saved millions. Therefore believing in a God who thus works, we are stirred to promote the advance of truth, the knowledge of law, and thus the saving and the bettering of material life.

II.

But the material life is not all. Man is also a spiritual being. I care not how you define spiritual. I only affirm its reality. Therefore he demands for his spiritual life, something more than material law can provide. For his spiritual life he demands a spiritual sustenance. I lay this down as a fact and not a fact only of the past, but also of the present. It is a universal fact. You say and you say rightly, I want something more than a Providence who is but a series of unchanging laws. That is a doctrine of stones

instead of bread indeed. I want some one who knows and feels, some ONE, not some THING. Thus humanity in its upward march of development has cried and still cries "My soul is athirst for the living God." Only that Providence, that Spiritual Power, must be found where Elijah—soul-wrecked by conflict and peril and depression—found it, not in the storm, not in the earthquake, not in the fire which are material things and devastate material things, but in the still small voice within.

Now it is this sense of the spiritual power of God, this sense that the human spirit can commune with God, that finds its expression in the 91st and the 121st Psalms and many others. Whilst the Psalmist does express himself in material terms at times, the spiritually minded reader can feel behind that expression the sense that it is a spiritual power that prevails and not the faith in material security. That was what the dying woman who wanted the 91st Psalm felt. To the man or woman who has acquired a measure of strength of soul it is all true. The Lord is keeping us in all our ways. The Psalmist did not always attribute material security to those who loved God. In one Psalm I find this—

"My flesh and my heart faileth
But God is the strength of my heart
And my portion forever."

And

"Yea, though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil
For Thou art with me."

Two years ago when I was lecturing at length in the Y.M.C.A., on this topic, I received a remarkable letter from a young soldier who had been "over the top." Here is a part of it. "Your remarks on prayer made me think of my prayer on several occasions when under terrible shell fire. More for the sake of my father, brothers and sisters than my own, I was tempted to pray for my life, but the time and place were too serious for such a silly petition, so I just repeated in my mind 'God be with me' and the greater the danger, the clearer was my thinking and the steadier my nerves." That lad had found the truth.

What the Psalmist expresses is his confidence that with the inner sense of the presence of God, the soul can surmount all misfortunes of the body. That there is an inner strength of the soul that is stronger than any outer calamity. In this faith the martyr has gone to the stake even with joy. This is the inner Providence. The soldier has had it. It has glowed in the heart of the reformer when all without was cold and unresponsive. Such is the infinite spirit entering into our finite spirit, expanding, inspiring, ennobling, and enabling him to cry—

"And all is well tho' faith and form
Be sundered in the night of fear
Well roars the storm to those who hear
A deeper voice across the storm."

So even with Christ in the agony of the garden—

"And in the garden secretly
And on the Cross on high
Should teach His brethren and inspire
To suffer and to die."

This power of the spirit within, is the proper power of true religion. It is a transforming power, which takes evil and out of it brings good.

"Blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee
In whose heart are Thy ways
Who going through the valley of misery uses it
for a well
And the pools thereof are filled with water."

Lastly this doctrine of the inner Providence is not a doctrine of folded hands and selfish content. It is a call to go forth to war against every power hostile to man's inner strength. It is a gospel of courage, of enterprise and of noble adventure.

Professor Edward Caird, Master of Balliol, used to open his class for the study of Moral Philosophy, with the prayer: "Almighty and most Merciful God, grant unto us purity of heart and strength of purpose, so that no selfish passion may hinder us from knowing Thy will, and no weakness from doing it, that in Thy light we may see light, and in Thy service find perfect freedom through the Spirit of Christ."