

The writer mentioned Lystra

THE

“HARD THINGS” OF THE BIBLE

A SERMON

BY THE

REV. JAMES ROY, M.A.

“ Let knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell ;
That mind and soul, accbrding well,
May make one music, as before.

But vaster, ——— ”

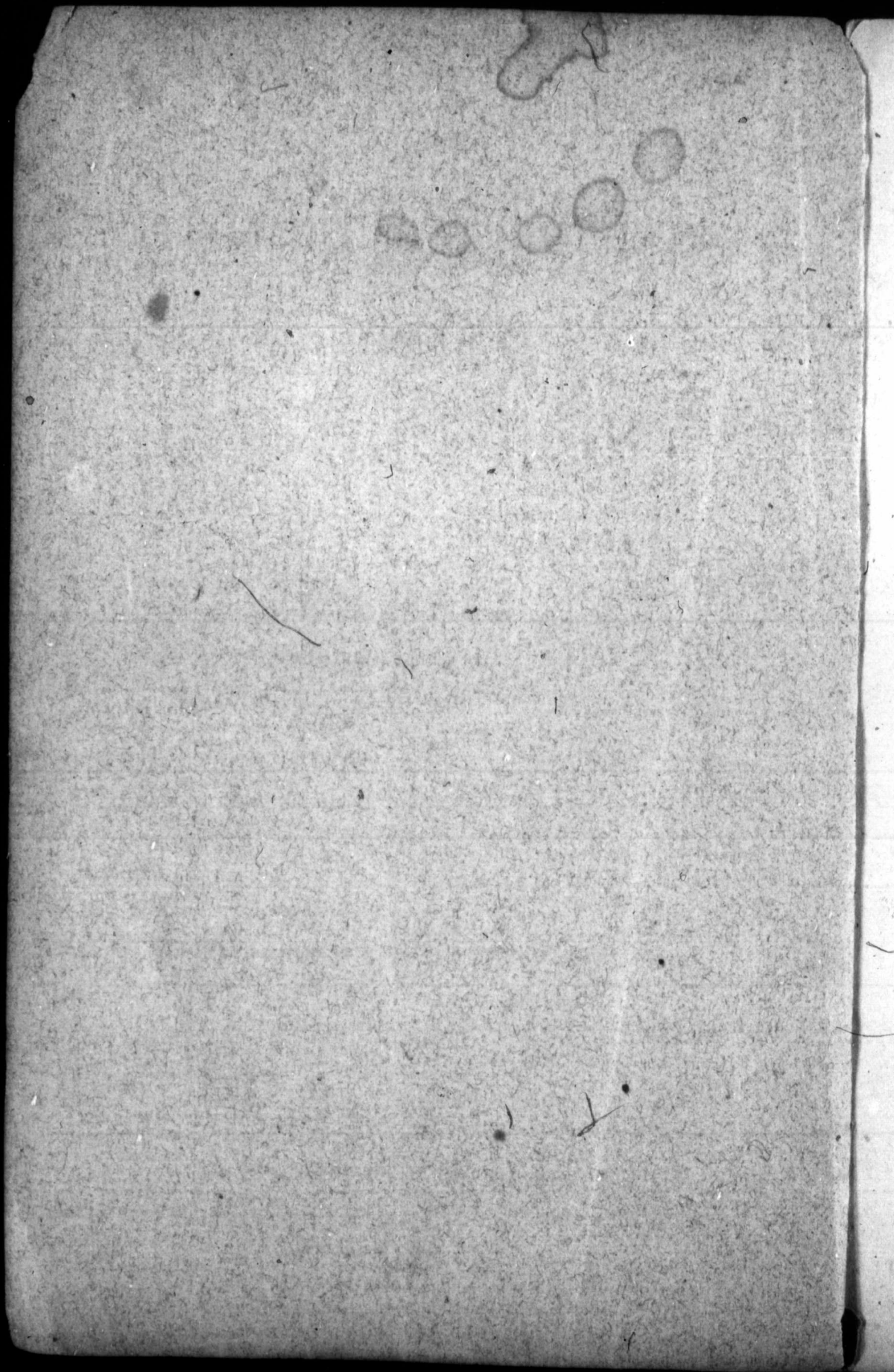
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MONTREAL:

THE BURLAND-DESBARATS LITHOGRAPHIC COMPANY.

1876



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Roy, James

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PREFACE.

To those who heard this discourse, it is my duty to say that, as I never write my sermons, and as it is impossible to remember the very words of an extemporary address, in the printed copy some changes in language and illustrations may be found ; but I have adhered as closely to the original form as the circumstances admit.

In offering the sermon to the public, through the press, I can only say that I am guided more by the judgment of those who asked it for publication than by my own. I hope they will not be disappointed in their anticipations that it may serve the cause of the Master.

JAMES ROY.

Montreal, March 21st, 1876.

THE
"HARD THINGS" OF THE BIBLE

A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE SHERBROOKE STREET METHODIST CHURCH,
MONTREAL, MARCH 12TH, 1876,

BY THE

REV. JAMES ROY, M.A.

"Even as our beloved brother Paul also, according to the wisdom given unto him, hath written unto you; as also in all *his* epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as *they do* also the other Scriptures, unto their own destruction."—2 Peter, iii, 15-16.

The first impression given by this text is that Peter classes the epistles of Paul amongst the "Scriptures," thus raising them to a high position of authority in religious thought. He calls attention to the fact that, even in that early day, the epistles of Paul had begun to furnish grounds for religious controversy. Modern polemics convince us that, perhaps, no portions of the Bible are so liable to be misinterpreted as these writings of Paul; but the text proves that the same possession of difficult things may be predicated of the whole Scriptures.

I do not propose, this morning, to investigate the hard things of the Pauline epistles, put to present the thoughts of the text in their bearing on the Bible as a whole.

I.

The first thought of the text is that, *in the Scriptures, are "some things hard to be understood."* 1. Now this is to be expected when we consider (*a*) the subjects on which they speak. They go back to a period long before man's creation, and profess to reveal events which no man was alive to observe. They unfold information on the very point towards which all sciences converge, but which no science has been able to explain, the ultimate, or rather the primary, origin of things. They speak of Him whom philosophers of ancient and modern times have agreed to call "the great Unknown." They treat of the origin, the history, and the capacities of man. They speak of the Atonement, and unfold the mysteries of its necessity, its nature, and its extent. They reveal the mysteries of the union of Deity with Humanity in the person of Christ. They predict the destiny of nations and the world. They lay before us the prospect of the Church, and point out the resurrection, the distant judgment, and the eternal state.

The text does not describe the mysteries of the past and future as impossible of explanation: that would be to repress the deepest longings of the heart, to obstruct progress, and to shut up the avenues of individual thought; but would it not be wonderful if, in such themes, there were nothing "hard to be understood?" The wording even of a definition is often pregnant with centuries of misapprehension and confusion; and he only who knows how wide a view of facts is necessary to the correct statement of any definition, can realize how difficult must be the discussion of questions of such tremendous import. To find out what the Bible teaches, and to state it definitely, demands, not merely acquaintance with a translation, but careful reading of the original, and a knowledge of the habits of life and thought reflected in the sacred writings. It demands a comparison of ancient manuscripts, and skill in detecting the faults or forgeries of copyists; for great doctrines hinge upon even so small a thing as the existence or non-existence of a stroke in the centre of a Greek letter in those manuscripts. The position of an adjective or a pronoun may be the clue to the solution of questions that lie at the foundation of our Christian belief.

When, at last, we have determined the true sense of the Book, how difficult is it often to make its statements accord with the knowledge we gain from other sources! Need I mention more than the doctrine of the conscious existence of the spirit apart from the body after death, or that crowning wonder, the resurrection of the body itself? There is in the Bible enough that is simple to make it the guide of the wayfaring man, or the runner who has time to give it but a glance as he hastens on amid life's pressing claims; but let no man think that the decision of what the Bible teaches is so easy of solution as many are apt to suppose.

But (*b*) the objects to be accomplished by the Scriptures give still greater grounds for expecting in them points of serious difficulty. The writer of every book in the Bible had a purpose in his writing; and, if there is any force in the argument from design, a providential purpose lay behind the preparation of the whole. The history of the book tells, not only that it is adapted to promote the education and elevation of the race, not only that it has done so wherever it has gone, but that it was designed to do so. This elevation of mankind could not, however, be promoted without "things hard to be understood." Muscular development demands grappling with great weights, and the overcoming of mighty obstacles. Milo gains his applauded strength only by an addition to his daily burden. Progress is ever by the collision of opposing forces. Now, education is not an accumulation of facts, but a discipline; and through this the Bible puts every nation that accepts it. It breaks up the stagnation of intellect. It brings forth the fire of thought by the friction of mind with mind. It excites curiosity and interest. It gives acumen. It trains to humility. It gives charity. But all this it does by the "hard things" it provokes us to discuss.

I may be permitted here to remark that it is not by platitudes that the intellectual and spiritual profit of congregations is to be secured. Common-places, ornamented by fancy, and impelled by the warmth of devotion, may awaken a transitory emotional zeal; but, for the sturdy strength of a thoughtful piety that is seated in the deep convictions of the mind, the "hard things" of critical investigation and metaphysical subtlety are needed. Hugh Miller, in his "First Impressions of England and its People," well describes the power of mental difficulties in

producing the intelligence and stern uprightness of the Scotch; but the same effects would be produced by constantly grappling with any knotty points, as well as with the celebrated "Five Points" of the Synod of Dort. That minister is untrue to his calling who looks not beyond the present in his preaching. It is true that men weary with the work of a previous week need words that comfort and cheer them; and words of that kind do not always demand deep thinking. It is true that a minister who preaches common-places with a warm heart and lively illustrations will be at peace, and will be popular; but he who looks far ahead, and remembers that he is not ministering merely for an hour, but for the moulding of a nation's character and for the elevation of the world, will sometimes mingle with simpler themes "things hard to be understood." Our congregations have not much time for reading; and, if ministers keep in their own hearts and libraries the growing thoughts that come to them, and give the people only the ever-repeated thoughts of their childhood, the intellectual progress of the people will stagnate, and they will go to sleep under our platitudes. Our preaching will then lose its freshness, and men will say that the power of the pulpit is declining. Our most earnest revival efforts will often end in comparative failure, and we shall wonder that, after all our prayer and weary toil, religious thought is not awakened, the masses are not reached and interested, and our churches cease to grow. All this will happen because we neglect one of the laws by which God works upon the human mind. We shall hope to secure the end without the use of the necessary means. We shall forget that awakened interest, one of the necessary factors of all progress, can be attained only by ever-widening views of great principles, and application of them to incidents and themes untouched before. The Bible is full of such incidents and themes; yet dread of going out of our theological rut leaves them unnoticed, and the freshness and power they would give to our Christian teaching is lost. Even our Saviour was obliged to be reticent of many things he had to say to his disciples; but, as they became more and more able to bear them, he unfolded to them more and more, even to the time of his ascension, "the things pertaining to the Kingdom."

(c) The time during which the Bible is to endure con-

firms our expectations of "hard things." The books these boys and girls now before me are studying at school were full of mysteries two or five years ago; the books they will study five years hence are full of mysteries to them now. What kind of a book would that be which should be their guide for a life-time! What growing wonders and perplexities would it contain! But the Bible is not for a life-time only: it is for the long ages of the world's duration. What Christ spoke in Palestine, he says unto all, even down to the latest time. The principles that lay under all that Law and Prophets taught are amongst the things that "shall never pass away." The sealed books of the Bible are sealed unto the end of time. Can it be expected that we, the school-boys of to-day, can find all easy in a book that will, doubtless, exercise the deepest thought of generations yet unborn? Learned men are, to-day, sorely perplexed with questions about the nature of mind, as distinguished from body. Even Professor Bain of Aberdeen, whose office it is to teach the sciences of mind, tells us: "We do not deal with pure mind—mind in the abstract; we have no experience of an entity of that description." After a while, they will condescend to notice phenomena which are now excluded from the realm of scientific observation; and then will rush in whole volumes of knowledge of the spiritual world. Miracles will then no longer be a stumbling-block. Demoniacal possession will be explained. Inspiration will be understood. Angel appearances and the return to earth of Moses and Elias will be mysteries no more. But, till a higher science comes to interpret the Bible, its revelations must long be "hard to be understood."

2. The existence of these difficulties is confessed. (a) Prophets confess it; for they peered into the things which "the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify," without realizing the full meaning of the words they were impelled to utter. They sought for some explanatory voice, to unravel the problems that came up before them; and no voice came but that which told them "that not unto themselves, but unto us, did they minister the things which are now reported." (b) History confesses it. Read the long record of mental struggles during the first few centuries of Christianity, and you will learn how difficult it was to decide what was the real meaning of the Scrip-

tures, and to meet the inborn cravings of the mind for hypotheses which might explain the facts. Read the polemics of a later day, and ask if the world has yet decided what is fact and what is hypothesis. Listen to the anathemas whose rumbling echoes the ages have not yet ceased to hear, and learn how precious to the heart of man is truth, but how difficult a thing it is to learn. Sometimes the choice of one or another of several legitimate meanings of a word has warped the interpretations of the Bible, and turned the current of popular opinion into a channel it has never left for generations. Councils have struggled with councils, and the Church has been rent into pieces in the long and earnest effort to decide the meaning of the Book that tells of life and duty. The voice of History, from emperor's throne and bishop's seat, from cloister, cell, and stake, warns us against the supposition that, in the Bible, all is so clear that mistakes about its meaning are little less than crimes. (c) The denominational systems of to-day confess the difficulty of scriptural interpretation. There is truth in the Book, or good men would not cleave to it as they do in all the Churches; but surely some rare difficulty lies in the way of the discovery of that truth, when men of equal honesty and learning draw such different meanings from the teachings of the same volume. See how good men rend their churches because of differences about terms of communion! See how some denominations exclude from their pulpits the pastors of others! See how these others complain of the treatment measured out to them, and then turn round and do the very same to those from whom they differ! Yet all this is done from sincere convictions of the correctness of their several interpretations of the Scriptures. Oh! my brethren, when shall we learn that we are not infallible? When shall we cease to baptize our "little systems" with names that imply their infallibility, and fasten opprobrious epithets upon the systems of men as honest and as true to God as we? When shall we remember that

" Our little systems have their day ;
 They have their day and cease to be ;
 They are but broken lights of thee,
 And thou, O Lord, art more than they ? "

II.

The second thought of the text is that *the wrong opinions formed on these subjects are to be credited, not to defects in the Bible, but to defects in ourselves.* 1. When Peter speaks of the "unstable," he points to our personal idiosyncrasies as one source of error. Now, it will not do to push this thought too far. The charity which accepts an opponent's sincerity only on the plea of "invincible ignorance" is rather a proud kind of charity; but what can be said of the spirit that explains an opponent's opposition only on the ground of an unchristian heart? Some of the holiest men have held wrong views. Men are not always

logically consistent. No errors are so dangerous as those of Antinomianism; but some of our sweetest hymns have been penned by Antinomians. A man's creed may be fatalistic; yet his life may exhibit all that uprightness which the strongest convictions of freedom and responsibility can produce. A man's creed may be sacramentarian or priestly; yet, in his deepest heart, he may lean on Christ alone; and there is no form of Christianity in which men may not have the faith, the hope, the charity, which are the master-principles of our religion. Nevertheless, it is greatly true that our mental character moulds our opinions. Scripture is often interpreted by taste and passion. The liquor-drinker, the tobacco-smoker, the slave-trader, do not first argue themselves into a conviction of the rectitude of their courses, and then engage in them. They like them first, and defend them afterwards; and the Bible is interpreted to justify that which the heart has already chosen. Portraits of Synods, General Assemblies, and Conferences, exhibit well-marked types of physical and mental character pervading whole bodies of men; and they suggest the thought that theological and denominational preferences arise more frequently from causes seated in the physical, mental, and moral frame-work of men, than from arbitrary self-will. Love for the pompous rites, and the æsthetic beauty of worship in the Church of Rome, may be traced to predispositions that have become hereditary in certain races of men; and it forms a tie which the convert to Protestantism often finds difficult to break. Let us *be* right, and we

shall be in a fair way to *see* aright. Let the Churches aim most at the rectifying of men's hearts and lives; and, by God's indirect method of blessing, the correctness of opinions will grow amongst us. Only let the sun arise, and the mists will vanish of themselves. A prominent feature of Methodism has ever and everywhere been a freedom from internal doctrinal dissensions. In accounting for this phenomenon, due weight is not given by Methodists to the power of the organization to crush promptly any such dissension. It may be questioned, too, whether wider reading and a more profound intellectuality in both people and ministers would have been attended by the doctrinal quiet which has hitherto reigned within the body. Yet, after making all due allowance for the causes here alluded to, the deeper cause must be sought in the concentration of men's attention upon the rectifying of their hearts and lives. The heart that is right with God has a clue to the real meaning of the Bible that is possessed by no other.

Wesley going forth from the room where his heart was "strangely warmed" by a new faith in Christ, is a better interpreter of the Bible than was Wesley in Georgia. Let us labor to *be* right; and the prejudices that warp our interpretations of the truth will surely vanish before the light that shines from a heart filled with the love of God.

2. When Peter speaks of the "unlearned," he points to defective education as another cause of error. Our views of things are mostly the product of the thought and experience of all past ages. Every new science adds its share of knowledge to the common stock. The wisdom of to-day is but the sum of all the accumulated wisdom of the past. No man can separate himself from his age, and the thought of his age. Interpretations of Scripture are moulded by prevailing systems of philosophy and politics. Each presents a haze through which the truth is seen, and which decides the appearance the truth presents. It is largely due to Hugh Miller's science, that the popular mind now comprehends that the Bible does not teach that the world was made in six days of twenty-four hours each. When the new study of the history of doctrines has had time to mould our theological schools, and from them the people, still greater revolutions of popular thought may be expected; and out of the changed thoughts shall come a

wider love for men and a grander view of the loving-kindness of the Almighty.

Read the life and times of the commentators on the Bible; and, even before you become acquainted with their comments, you may be able to predict much of what they will say. The commentator whose early life has been pervaded by high monarchical and ecclesiastical principles will, in his interpretation of the Bible, show his appreciation of the authoritative, the external, the governmental. The democratic commentator who has thoroughly emancipated himself from all that leans toward the "divine right" of kings, will give prominence to the subjective and the rational. He who hovers between early monarchical and ecclesiastical teaching and new convictions of the rights of men will often seem to be inconsistent, now leaning to the side of external authority, and now to the side of the internal and individual. Even our "authorized translation" of the Bible bears innumerable traces of the politics and theology of the age in which it was written, and is doing much to spread that confusion of hypothesis and fact that prejudices the minds of scientific men against the popular Christianity. For the comprehension of any subject, a corresponding training is needed. He who has never heard of Hannibal cannot properly interpret allusions to Cannae or Capua. He who knows nothing of a sense of pardon and acceptance with God is a poor biographer of Wesley. He who knows nothing of geology is not fit to interpret the first chapter of Genesis. He who does not understand the niceties of Greek constructions should be modest in his assertions of the meaning of the New Testament. Politics, philosophy, and the ever multiplying sciences, furnish us with many of the "major premises" which, with "minors" given by the Bible, lead to our conclusions; and, if a fallacy lies concealed in the "major," our conclusions as to what the truth is will surely be astray.

Blame not the Bible, then, for faults that lie within ourselves. Lay not at the door of Christianity evils whose parents have been Christians. Say not that the Truth is an *ignis fatuus* that no man can ever reach. Rather say that, high up upon the distant mountain's brow, there stands the glittering form of the imperishable and unchanging TRUE! Its glistening is seen from afar; and the distant hosts of men are trooping from all ages and all

climes to grasp its reality and beauty. Now, down in the valley, they lose, for a moment, the sight of what gives them inspiration. Now, loud and angry discussions arise when men describe its form as seen from varying stand-points; and Christians stop amid their pilgrimage, to curse each other because they do not think alike! Yet, onward is the march; and down by river's brink and forest's edge, o'er plain and knoll, the ages and the nations come. The mount is reached and climbed; and there, the glittering object that attracted them is revealed. It is the CROSS!

Only as the mind is educated to higher and higher stand-points, will the darkness vanish, the clouds sink beneath us, and the clear blue sky appear.

III.

The last leading thought of the text is that *our wrong opinions may be known by their disastrous effects*. "Destruction" follows them. Wrong opinions may be innocently held. By this statement, I do not mean that it is permitted to men to adhere to views that they know to be incorrect; but I mean that it is possible for a good man to be mistaken, and to think that to be true which is not so. The relative and the absolute right do not always coincide. Every man believes his opinions to be correct, or he would not hold them; but experience assures us that what we revered as truth yesterday, we may see reason to abandon to-morrow. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that—

I. Wrong opinions ever produce ruinous effects. Their evil consequences are often prevented by the superior power of some controlling truth which is held along with them; but, uncounteracted by the good, error leads to death. Let it lurk unobserved in a definition, and, long centuries afterward, its terrific harvest will be reaped by the unthinking nations. Let it show itself merely as an apparently insignificant, or even a meritorious, narrowness in the regulations of a Church; and, like a fungus, it will eat out the life of the strongest tree. Let the word "law," in the popular estimate of Paul's epistles, include morals, as well as ceremonies; and tongue cannot tell the horrid

orgies into which even Christians will rash. Untruths are worm-eaten planks in a ship's hull ; and, if they are not removed, and replaced by sound ones, the ocean's depths alone can tell the fearful consequences. What evils do we read of, even in Paul's own epistles, as arising from misinterpreting his words ! Some things he has written that one almost hesitates to read before a public congregation. Yet these things were done by Christians from misconceptions about the truth. Some of you have read the book lately published by " Father Chiniquy." Well, the worst things he has recorded are not to be compared with what historians tell us took place in the primitive times of Christianity through mistaken interpretations of what the Bible teaches. Let this teach us the importance of the Truth. It is our Life. It is this that sanctifies. Indifference to it is a crime. Loyalty to it is loyalty to God. It is of infinite importance what a man believes ; for, out of our faiths, the deep convictions of the soul, there comes the life.

2. But the best test of error is its fruits. There is value in the learning of the wise ; and all due respect should be given to the men who have studied for the benefit of their fellows. Their formularies and confessions are way-marks on the journey of the world. But let us not forget that they were men, that they saw through the telescope of their age, and that, after all, what they have said has often been less than the truth, and often has been more. Great men have taken the grandest truths, and labeled them " poison." God's messengers and his Son have come ; and men have beaten them and cast them out, not recognizing their majesty in the unusual garb in which they came. He is rash who hastily and contemptuously casts aside the results of the investigations of the past centuries ; but a slavish subserviency to the opinions of the past is fatal to our reverence for Him whose truth is ever shining brighter and brighter unto the coming of a perfect day. Human piety and human learning are not always sure tests of correctness of thought. Philology has gone beyond the times of Horne Tooke. Students of the old system of Chemistry find themselves left behind in these days of the new. Geologists no longer bow to the authority of the English diluvialists of the seventeenth century. Theology is a science, too ; and the Churches have studied to little profit, if they are still guided by the formulations of a century or

centuries ago. All honor to the men who, in all past ages, contributed their share to the formation of logical systems of the truth revealed. They have helped to meet one of the deepest wants of human nature; yet their words are often misleading, as they, themselves, were often misled.

But there is a test that never fails: it is the test of fruitage. When an opinion comes to you for your acceptance, ask not merely what great men have thought about it; but ask "What are its fruits?" "If views professing to be Scriptural make men scoffers, away with them! Do they make men bigots? Do they compel men, in order to be logically consistent with their systems, to deny that the goodness they see is goodness, and to trace to a satanic origin the miracles of benevolence, the existence of which they cannot deny? Do they make men impure? Do they undermine the sanctity of the family relations? Do they overturn moral obligations, and scandalize the Christian sense of a community? Do they make us reckless about the sufferings which failure in our business may entail on struggling men and women, yet leave us under the delusion that zeal for their souls will, notwithstanding, prove us honest men? Do they fashion our individual character to devoutness and liberality, yet leave the moral core of the nation's heart so corrupt that our name becomes a synonym for national perfidy? Do they make men hate each other? Do they make the men of one Church hate those of another, or make those of no Church bitter against those who have a Church? Then, away with them! Call them by what sacred name you will, away with them: the voice of God is not in them! But do they make men pure? Do they come to the drunkard, and make him sober; to the blasphemer, and make him reverent; to the dishonest, and make him upright? Do they come to youth, and give it self-mastery? Do they make men loving? Do they come to the heart that is dying to be saved from its own sinfulness, and give it power to overcome the evil, and fill it with the peace "that passeth understanding?" Do they come to us in hours of depression and trial, and give us comfort? Do they meet us at the death-bed, and inspire us with hopes that make us triumph, and kindle in the eye a light as from "the land that is very far off?" Then welcome them; for the stamp of God is upon them,

and no "destruction" follows in their path-way. Brethren, we need more reading of the Bible; and any persons who provoke us to it, call them by a denominational name or not, deserve our thanks. But let our Bible be, not the mass of meanings the "traditions of the elders" have heaped upon the words that prophets and apostles spoke. Let our Bible be the thoughts of the sacred writers, so far as critical investigation can give them to us. If, when you have these thoughts, you still find yourself impelled to construct them into logical systems, construct them. Adopt your hypotheses for the explanation of the facts you discover. Weave them into the strongest, the finest, the most beautiful webs you can. But, for God's sake, for the sake of a world that may be misled or saved, do not impose upon that world your own metaphysics and logic as if they were the truth revealed by God. Do not make essential to Christianity that which is essential only to the logical consistency of systems of thought. Do not, as you love your fellow-men, identify your systems with the Word of God. There is no explicit theological system in the Bible; and no human system has yet embraced all the facts of the Bible, and nothing more, into one consistent whole.

We have, in our houses and schools, the works of Homer and Virgil. They tell us of a city called Troy. But, in the lapse of ages, its site became a subject of controversy. Some antiquarians said: "It is here!" Others said: "It is there!" Others cried: "There was no Troy: it was but a dream!" But Dr. Schliemann dug through the accumulation of centuries, in different places, through ruined towns, even down to the primitive rock. He found that, on the very spot where the voice of ages had placed it, covered by a deep mass of earth and ruins, Troy had been. It was not the Troy of his imagination. Its shape was not what poetry had made it. Its images were not clothed with the beauties with which fancy had invested them. But it was Troy the genuine; and the rich treasures of the king were there, embedded amid its deep foundations. We have heard that there is such a thing as Truth. The varying voices of our theologies are crying: "It is in me! it is in me!" The great world laughs at the discordant babble, and mourns: "Alas! there is no Truth. We hoped it was a reality; but it was only a pleasant dream."

V

Friends, through the accumulation of ages of speculation, let us dig. The records of the thoughts of men will not all prove valueless. We may have to reject much that is worthless; but many a whorl, with strange inscriptions, many a vase, and here and there a broken idol of an owl-faced and night-loving wisdom will serve as subjects for the curious investigations of after-days. But, down below them all, in the old, old Bible, we shall find the Truth, not, perhaps, such as we had dreamed, but the genuine Truth; and there, too, but unscorched by fire and untarnished by age, shall be found the golden treasures, not of a redeemed, but of a Redeemer KING.

The traveller who seeks a land beyond the sea often finds it a lonely voyage. Chill winds blow about him, and he longs to see the shore. Far off upon the distant rocks, he sees the wrecks of gallant ships. The surf beats over them, and the low murmur of the waves sings their dirges; but, guided by the watching stars, and by the clearer sun, he keeps away from the hidden rocks where the shipwrecks lie, and lands at last in safety. He who seeks the better "home" must launch forth upon the ocean of the Bible's truth. Often will he, doubtless, feel himself to be alone. There will be times when he will see no shore. The lights upon the headlands will have gone out. The sun will go down, and he will long for light and land. But let him be warned by the breakers that roar about the shipwrecks of those whose faith and whose good conscience have foundered on the sunken rocks of error; and, as he journeys, there will walk beside him One whose voice will ring out clear and encouraging: "It is I, be not afraid!"

Accession no.

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Author, Title Roy, James.

The "hard things" of the Bible. A
Class mark sermon by the Rev. James Roy.

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