

# Cause and Cure of Despondency.

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A SERMON

DELIVERED BY

Rev. Moses D. Hoge, D. D.,

AT

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

Sunday Morning, October 2, 1898.

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JAMES E. GOODE PRINTING COMPANY.

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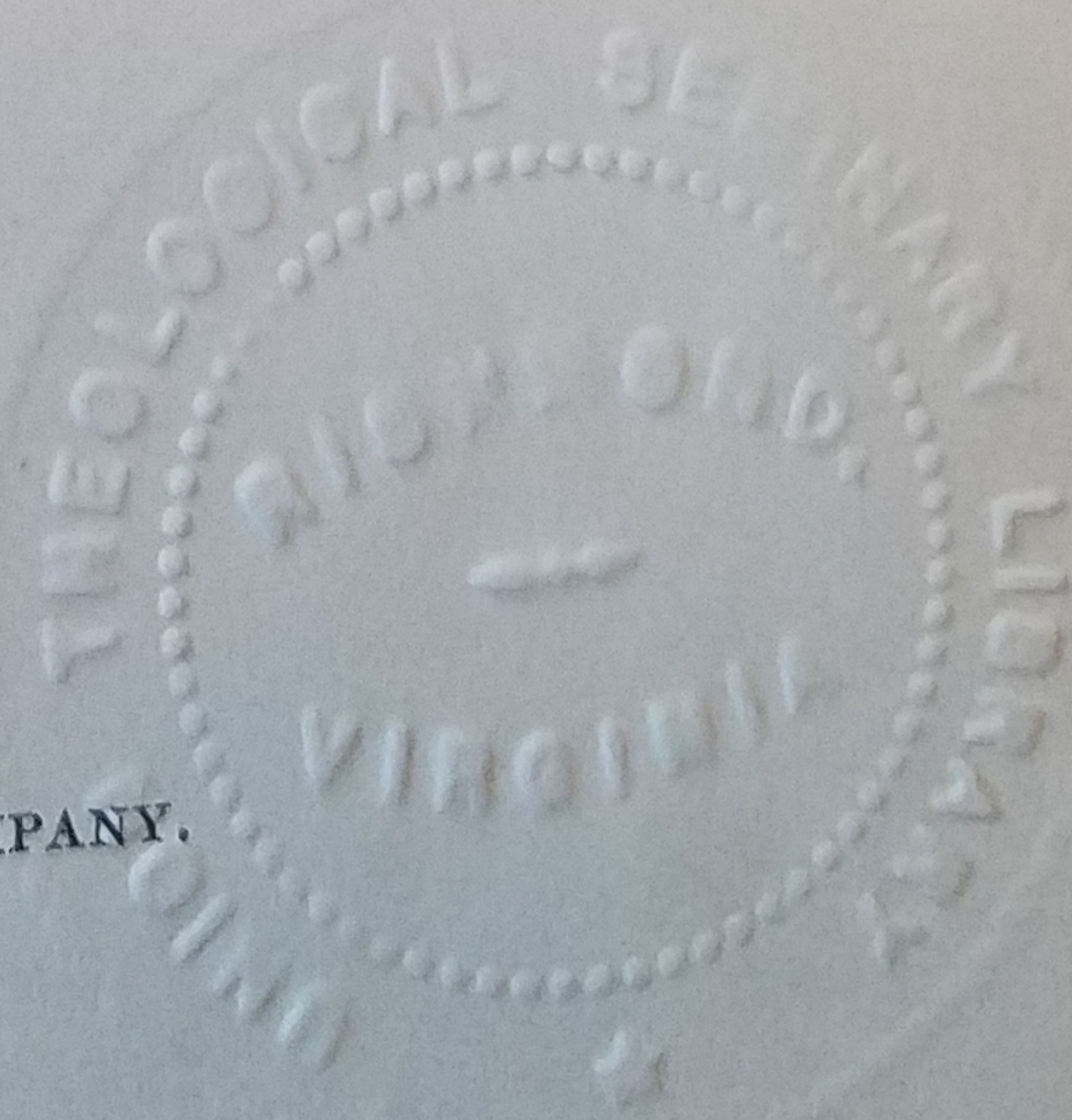
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## CAUSE AND CURE OF DESPONDENCY.

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“Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance and my God.”—Psalm 42:11.

This Psalm is not wholly joyous throughout. It ends triumphantly, but in its progress there are notes of deepest sadness. Because of its varying tones it has been aptly compared to the successive aspects of a storm, when the wind shakes the forest until the trees groan and smite one another, while clouds hide the sun and cast a portentous gloom over the scene, until by and by there is a pause in the tempest, a hush in the uproar, a rift in the sky; and as the light returns the carol of the little bird is heard as it sings in the treetop, and nature smiles and rejoices in the new glory that gilds the earth. So, in this Psalm David recalls to mind the painful passages in his life. He had traversed a waterless desert, in which he was parched with thirst. He had come to a desolate period in his life when he thought God had forgotten him. He was in an abyss where deep called unto deep. He was on a sea where all the waves and billows went over him, and as he went down into those profound depths, from which he never expected to emerge, we hear the faint, far-off voice of the man, sinking deeper and still deeper in the unfathomable gloom.



But these were not his only remembrances: some notes of gladness mingled with his plaintive song. He could recall gracious providences at the Jordan, in the land of the Hermonites, and on the hill Mizar. He could speak of loving kindness in the daytime and songs in the night. He could turn from the clouded past to a radiant future. He could replace sad memories with jubilant anticipations. He could declare, "I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God." During the time of his deepest despondency, he entered into searching inquiries as to the cause of his disquietude. His self-examination was faithful and thorough. There must be a reason for his despondence, and he would ascertain it, cost what it might. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul; and why art thou disquieted within me?" David's dejection demanded an explanation. It was not owing to anything external; it was soul trouble—something within him. And, therefore, the inquisition must be personal and penetrating.

Here we see that the soul has a strange power of going out of itself and conversing with itself as with another. It can reason with its own faculties, question its own conscience, and await a verdict of condemnation or acquittal for its own conduct.

"Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" Who asks that question? No outward voice from earth or heaven; it is the soul talking with itself. Well would it be for us if we would cultivate this habit of going out of ourselves to counsel, to examine, to rebuke, or to cheer our own hearts. God has given us memory, and reason, and imagination for this very purpose. We exercise our memory and our reason more frequently than our imagination, and fail to make a proper use of it, because we confound imagination with fancy or fiction, overlooking the fact that imagination is a conception—a realization of the unseen. It pictures to us an unseen Saviour, an unseen heaven; and, like faith, it enables us to apprehend the things hoped for as a present possession. We do not make

enough of the imagination. It was a Scriptural imagination that composed the Pilgrim's Progress; a sanctified imagination that wrote Paradise Regained. Since God has given us these faculties, let us employ them for the purpose for which they were bestowed. We live in an executive, rather than a contemplative, age. As an antidote to this, let us spend more time in self-communion. "'Tis greatly wise to talk with our past hours and ask them what report they bore to Heaven." It is greatly wise to catechise ourselves, to exhort, to scrutinize, to chide, to sit in judgment on our own characters and lives."

This is possible because man has two natures, a higher and a lower; a higher because conscience, which has been called God's vicegerent, was ordained to sit like an impartial judge to condemn or acquit according to the character of our conduct. Man also has a lower nature, dominated by evil principles or passions. The higher nature can say to the lower, "come now and let us reason together." In times of despondency it can seek the cause in order to find a cure. It can chide and warn, it can cheer and comfort. It can say "Wake up, my soul, wake psaltery and harp." It can say "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." It can say, "I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall continually be in my mouth." Thus it can whisper words of consolation, and lead the choir of accordant affections in thankful song. "Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise him." Thus we see how David's example might have given suggestion and justification to Tennyson's "Two Voices"—

"A still small voice spake unto me,  
'Thou art so full of misery,  
Were it not better not to be?'

Then to the still, small voice I said,  
'Let me not cast in endless shade  
What is so wondrously made.

I feel, although no tongue can prove,  
That every cloud that spreads above  
And veileth love, itself is love.'"



Such is the colloquy in the text: "Why art thou cast down?" one voice enquires. The other voice responds, "Hope thou in God."

I call your attention now to another experience. Often our dejection has a dreary vagueness about it, a hazy indefiniteness, like some phantom form seen through a mist. We can give no distinct reason for our despondency. Yet, there is a reason, there is a disturbing cause, if we could only ascertain it. We can never obtain comfort until we learn distinctly what that cause is. When we find it out by severe and impartial self-examination, when we have dug deep enough to reach the root out of which the bitterness springs, and to grapple with it resolutely, then we have found the only safe and sure way by which it may be eradicated. The causes of despondence may seem to be many, but they all may be reduced to one. Sin is the one cause of the darkness which shrouds the soul. If there were no sin in the world, it would be radiant with life and replete with joy. Therefore, sin in the heart and life must always be searched out, confessed and repented of. The prayer of the struggling soul must ever be, "Cleanse thou me from secret faults; create within me a clean heart, renew a right spirit within me." "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." Therefore, we see that it is not enough for the soul to try to tranquilize itself with vague and indefinite consolations. There is no trouble like heart trouble; soul sorrow is too deep for mere surface comfort. When the queen gently chided the painter for making the countenance of the child on the canvas so sad, "See, then," said the artist, "how easily the sorrows of childhood are comforted," and by a few touches of the brush he wreathed the face of the little weeper with smiles. But not thus easily, O painter; not thus easily, O preacher, shalt thou charm away the deep lines which grief has wrought in the face of man. Let us, then, when we would comfort others, or soothe our own souls, seek until we find the firm foundations of consolation.

If we must go to God for relief, even from earth-born fears

and forebodings, to whom can we go when his arrows drink up our spirit? We are told that when ships are in danger of being overwhelmed, the waves can be quieted and calmed by pouring oil upon them. True, the surface can thus be smoothed for the moment, but rivers of oil cannot arrest or tranquilize the great tides which throb through the heart of the sea and thunder along the shores of great continents. The Master must arise, as Christ did in the ship among his terrified disciples, and say: "Peace, be still!" before the storm is hushed and the raging billows calmed into silence.

But all of David's troubles were not the result of his own transgression; many of them came from others; from those who wronged him by their calumnies and hated him without a cause; by those who repaid his love with enmity, and his kindness with ingratitude. Often had he occasion to say: "Have mercy on me, O God, for man would swallow me up." "They that hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of mine head; they that would destroy me, being mine enemies wrongfully are mighty."

What a reproach is recorded against Israel when we read: "The people talked of stoning David." O, no; not David! Not David, of all men; David, their benefactor, their gracious King, their King now in trouble and needing more than ever the sympathy and loyal support of his subjects.

Sometimes his despondence came from another source. Though a ruddy and robust youth, a strong and symmetrical man, as the years wore on he was admonished of his mortality when wasting sickness came and laid him low. Then the once resolute mind, in sympathy with the enfeebled frame, became powerless to struggle against gloomy forebodings, and we hear him pouring out his complaints in notes of deepest woe.

On one occasion there was a strange aggravation of his distress. He had a visitor to his sick room who came on the pretence of friendly inquiry, but with the hope that the disease was incurable. Possibly the removal of such a conspicuous man would make his own chance of attracting public notice



more favorable. He said: "When shall David die, and his name perish?" His secret wish was, "Now that helieth down, he shall rise up no more." When the pretended friend goes away, says the Psalm, "He telleth it"—reports the case as hopeless, and silently congratulates himself on the anticipated decease; reminding us of a similar incident in the life of the first Lord Holland, who was visited during a serious illness by Selwynn, the English author. He said to his servant, "If Mr. Selwynn calls again, let him in; if I am alive I will be glad to see him; if I am dead, he will be glad to see me!"

But David's keenest pang was not inflicted by his avowed enemies, or by his pretended friends: the iron entered his soul when his son became a conspirator against his father's government and his father's life. The blast of no bitter wind was so rude, no serpent's tooth so keen as that ingratitude. The death of Absalom, which he bewailed in tones which have been vibrating through all the ages, was scarcely more afflictive than when his son was guilty of a treason, which, if successful, would have made him not only a traitor, but a parricide.

So in the vicissitudes common to human life in all generations, we, too, have our disquietudes and heart-sinkings, caused chiefly by our own indwelling corruption.

Even those who are most eminent for piety have their times when God's face seems hidden, but if others wonder why such a saint should be left to walk in darkness, *he* will never be at a loss to find a reason in himself. So far from saying that God's ways are arbitrary or unjust, he will confess that God has not rewarded him according to his iniquities, but will say "It is of the Lord's mercies that I am not consumed."

Other trials caused by the sorrows common to humanity may lead the sufferer to new consideration, new penitence, and more earnest prayer; but the hiding of his Father's face *must* do these things. But so far from resigning himself to hopeless despondency, this form of affliction, striking down into the depths of his soul, he will ask, with Job, "Wherefore con-

tendest thou with me?" and it will send him searching through all God's Word for direction and comfort, and he will not rest until restored to the joys of an assured salvation; until "The day dawns, and the shadows flee away."

Such self-scrutiny and self-examination may be sad work at the time, but its fruits are precious, and the chastened child never forgets the lessons he has learned in these hours of anguish. I am now speaking of what is profoundly experimental, and what I trust is verified in the consciousness of every Christian soul.

But it is not always the case that spiritual dejection is due to forgotten vows, or to any special transgression. Life is not all one long day of sunshine, even to the devout believer. Painful providences often perplex him, heavy cares oppress him, crushing bereavements overwhelm him; there are insoluble mysteries even in revelation itself which seem to baffle all investigation and to elude all explanation.

The entrance of sin into the world, the transmission of a tainted, fallen nature to all generations for the sin of the representative head, the fact that truth is so often on the scaffold and tyranny on the throne, that the most upright character may be branded and blackened beyond the power of earthly vindication, the unexpected cutting down of so many eminent men, distinguished for usefulness, making the world poorer by the loss, the spectacle of the whole creation groaning and travailing in pain, with the God of infinite power sitting at the top and watching it all—O, my friends, these are some of the things which have weighed down and almost crushed some of the noblest spirits in their attempts to solve these unfathomable mysteries.

In the discussion of this point I have referred to the sorrow occasioned by the death of men eminently endowed with gifts which qualified them for useful service. In this sorrow I share to-day, when I remember the privation we have suffered in the loss of my honored brother, the Rev. Dr. Barnett, of Augusta, whose church it was my privilege to dedicate,



and whose career as pastor and presbyter, whose unswerving devotion to all the duties of his holy calling won for him an ever-deepening respect and affection on the part of those who knew him best as the years have gone by.

And what a blank, greatly to be deplored, has been made in the roll of the faithful preachers of the Word, whose duty and delight it is to bear up the banner of the pure Gospel in the eyes of the unnumbered multitude, by the removal of Dr. John Hall from the wide field of his earthly labors.

And what shall I say of the sorrow of all who revere the patriot, sage and incorruptible statesman, in contemplating the death of the Hon. Thomas F. Bayard, who gave new dignity to the highest positions of trust which his country could bestow upon him. Descended from a noble ancestry, he not only maintained the family honor but added new lustre to it. Like his great progenitor, he was without fear and without reproach. No reflection could be made on his integrity, and never by the sacrifice of principle did he seek emolument or office. He probably did more than any other man to draw closely and to confirm the friendly relations between the United States and the mother country.

For more than thirty years I was honored by his friendship and by many tokens of his regard. During my last visit to London it was my privilege to be his guest, and he laid me under new obligations by giving me introductions to men upon whose attentions I had no claim beyond the fact that his position as Ambassador made him socially the peer of any prince or prelate, and secured for any one whom he befriended a courtesy which otherwise would not have been accorded to an unknown stranger.

On yesterday the funeral services were held, and but for circumstances I could not control I would have been one of the mourners beside the bier.

To return from this digression, let me say, in the next place, that despondence may arise from the believer's conviction of the slow development of his own spiritual life; his inability to reach the standard presented in the Scriptures and

illustrated in the history of so many eminent saints; or his grief may be due to the fact that he sees no fruit of his labor, though he has tried to devote himself to the active service by which men may be benefited and God may be glorified. He has labored faithfully and perseveringly in behalf of those in whom he has every reason to feel the deepest interest, but all his efforts seem to be in vain. The diligent Sunday-School teacher may see no evidence that he has succeeded in impressing the minds and hearts of the children committed to his charge. His class is his parish; he is the pastor of a little flock; yet he fancies he has failed to lead the lambs into the green pastures of God's grace. The Christian parent, too, is disheartened when he finds that the dear children for whom he has wept and prayed are still obdurate and impenitent. The husband desponds while waiting for the conversion of his wife; or more frequently, the wife is full of anguish in her yearning for the salvation of her husband; or the pastor who has expounded the great truths of God's Word from Sabbath to Sabbath, who has unfolded the rich doctrines of grace, and plied his hearers with the terrors of the law and the mercies of the cross, only to find that they are neither alarmed or allured, goes from the pulpit to his home sadly saying, "Lord, who hath believed our report, and to whom hath thine arm been revealed." All these varied causes of dejection may weigh down a sympathetic soul, and yet under any one, or under all, there is sure relief and a heaven-ordained remedy. "I will trust and not be afraid." "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, and though there be no fruit in the vine; though the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat, yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." "I will hope in God, for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance and my God." "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." The man who under all discouragements can maintain this sublime confidence is already wearing the invisible crown; the beauty of the Lord God is upon him, and in the day of his final, visible coronation.



tion he will be registered and openly recognized among the regnant, kingly men of the race.

Hear then the conclusion of the whole matter: "Hope thou in God." Hope is a celestial grace, standing between faith and charity, each holding her by the hand. We cannot make too much of hope, because of the solace and comfort it brings to the disquieted and sorrowing. It comes like a soothing balm to the bleeding heart, like an exhilarating cordial to the fainting spirit, it cheers the sick man as it whispers to him promise of recovery, it gives new vigor to the strong man, battling with the forces which impede his progress, it does not desert the aged when

"The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed,  
Lets in new light through chinks which time has made."

Hope is to be cherished, not only because it is the consoler under disappointment and sorrow, but because it is the incentive to so much that is heroic and grand in human enterprise and achievement. What, think you, could give courage and endurance to the Henry Martins, the Judsons, the Duffs, to the great missionaries who have planted the cross among unnumbered millions in heathen lands, and through long years of seemingly unrequited toil, still anticipated with joyous assurance the dawn of the day when the wilderness and the solitary places should be made glad by the Gospel, when the desert should rejoice and blossom as the rose, and the warring kingdoms of the world become the kingdoms of the Prince of Peace?

But the Psalmist does not rise to the height of his great argument until he tells us of the firm foundations of his hope. "Hope thou in God," who is its author, who has made hope for man, and made man for this hope.

I would have you notice that this text is repeated twice in the Psalm with a single exception. We have it in the fifth verse, with the omission of two words, and these words are the most precious, "My God." David's faith did not reach

that nobler assurance at first, but his faith gained its final triumph when he could say, "My God;" not the promises of God, but God the promiser; not the heaven opened to all penitent believers, but God, whose presence and smile makes Heaven and floods it with his own glory. True, the heaven of heavens cannot contain him; he is infinite in wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth; how then can he be the portion and the inheritance of a finite soul? I answer, just as a kingdom may belong to its rightful sovereign, though he may not have traversed all its territories or seen its ultimate boundaries. God is our God by covenant, by oath, by his indwelling presence. How do we possess our friends and make them ours? I answer, by intercourse, by study of their characters, by the attraction of what is congenial between their hearts and ours, by sympathy, and by affection. Love makes the husband the portion of the wife, and the wife the portion of her husband. So, God is ours when he fills our memories, when he is the supreme object of our aspiration, when by Grace we are assimilated to his likeness, when we are filled with sweetness and light, then the finite grasps the infinite, and then it is that we can say, "This God is our God for ever and ever;" our God jointly, all believing souls having a common proprietorship in him, and not only that, but our God severally, separately, personally; "the health of my countenance and *my* God."

There is no difficulty now in adding, "I shall yet praise him." When John Wesley was dying, he surprised his friends by singing this verse of a rapturous hymn:

"I'll praise my Maker with my breath,  
And when my voice is lost in death,  
Praise shall employ my noblest powers;  
My days of praise will ne'er be past,  
While life, or thought, or being last."

As he approached still nearer to the gate of Heaven, his



spirit kindled with a new fervor and he attempted to repeat the stanza, but all he was able to articulate was,

“I'll praise, I'll praise”—

And while his friends stood weeping around him, his spirit took its flight—“a mortal paleness on the cheek, but glory in the soul.”

It is not my habit to introduce personal matters into my sermons, but after so many weeks of enforced silence, through severe and serious illness, I cannot restrain the wish to express my gratitude to God for permitting me to stand again in this pulpit and speak once more to the people of my first and only love as a pastor. For what I have recently suffered I have had so many compensations that I would be ungrateful indeed if I did not express my thankfulness for numberless telegrams and letters during my absence, assuring me of the sympathy and affection of those to whom I have so long ministered; grateful that I have been the subject of so many prayers at family altars and in the congregations of my brethren who remembered me in leading the devotions of their people. Some pastor must be the happiest pastor in the world, and sometimes I think I may be the one. I can say what perhaps few can say, that I am satisfied with my lot. For more than fifty years there has been no church in the world which I would be willing to take in exchange for this.

During my recent separation from you I have been free from all anxiety on your behalf, because of my entire confidence in the discretion, the wisdom and the fidelity of my dear friend and colleague, Donald Guthrie. God has blessed his labors of love to some who united by public profession with this church at your last communion.

How it would rejoice my heart if this, my first sermon on my return, should be the means of leading some soul to Christ, or of strengthening and comforting one of God's dear children. I have nothing more to wish for as pastor except the abundant outpouring of the spirit of all grace and the happy

conversion of some in whom I feel a deep and tender interest, and who will, as I trust, soon be able say, “I hope in God, and I will yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance and my God.”