

THE
PULPIT TREASURY.
AN EVANGELICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. IV.

NEW YORK, JUNE, 1886.

No. 2.

→*SERMONS*←

SOURCES OF COMFORT IN THE DEATH-SHADE.

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Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.—PSALMS xxiii., 4.

A SONG of comfort, and, will you notice, in strange place. Comfort springs from the two Latin words, *con*, with, and *fortis*, strong, and so means literally to be strong with one's self, to have a shining courage at the centre of the soul. But there is nothing in the outward circumstance of the singer here to minister to such efficacy of soul. There is everything in outward circumstance to damage and defeat it.

For, in the place he stands, there is no green grass beneath his feet, nor sky of blue above his head, nor wrap of summer air around him, nor plash and sparkle of cool brook for his refreshment. It is a gaunt and gloomy place he stands in; it is the valley of the death-shade.

Amid the rocky fastnesses of Judea such places were often found. They were deep, dangerous, narrow defiles among the mountains. The way fell far down between towering heights on either side. To pass through them required the tasking of every muscle as the foot sought resting-place upon the jagged stones, and an eye alert lest an ambuscading precipice destroy. So far down did the path fall and so loftily on either side did the mountains tower that around the whole circle of the hours the sun could get chance to

✦ INDEPENDENCE DAY. ✦

TRUE FREEDOM.

BY CHANCELLOR JOHN HALL, D.D., LL.D. (PRESBYTERIAN), N. Y.

If the Son, therefore, shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.—JOHN viii., 36.

MANY men have listened to John B. Gough as in eloquent words he described and denounced the evils of intemperance, who approved, and even applauded, the statements made, and then have gone and renewed their servitude to the very sin that was denounced. I have known men who attached themselves closely to a minister, and approved his preaching until he said or did something that they did not like—either socially, politically or in some other way—and then they have left the church and lost all interest in the preaching that they formerly approved. Thus does poor, fickle human nature illustrate its folly in a thousand ways. The words of the text come from a narrative of human fickleness drawn from the ministry of our Lord. He had been setting forth His views in an effective manner, as His hearers are described as believing Him. But mere assent to truth is not everything. It did not satisfy our Redeemer, so He said, "If ye continue in My word, then are ye My disciples indeed." This was the point where they broke with Him. They would not tolerate the expression. I presume if the sophists of that day had been pushed with this query, whether they had ever been in bondage, they would have said that *de facto* they had been under the yoke of others, but never so *de jure*.

The men of the world to-day reason in the same manner. When you say to them that they are the slaves of lust, strong drink, or any other form of sin, they will say, "We know the evil of which you speak as well as you do. It is true that we have indulged in it, but it is not holding us in bondage. We can break the chain at will." That is what the Hebrew hearers would have said, but our Lord made clear this idea: "If ye continue in My word." He that is faithful to the end receives the crown of life. Am I speaking to any who say, "There was a time when I had a deep religious conviction"? I say to such a one, "Backslider, lose no time in getting back that conviction." Continuance in the truth is necessary.

True liberty, liberty from the yoke of sin, comes from a knowledge of this truth. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Jesus was not speaking of Egyptian bondage, of Syrian or Roman bondage, but slavery to sin. It is well to remember this fact, that the one element which is lacking in the writings of all the philosophers and contained only in the truth is a motive power. I am not my own, but am bought with a price. Observe in the text the varied phraseology of the words "If the Son"—the son means the heir. If the son or heir gives freedom to the bondsman, there is a guarantee of the perpetuity of the freedom thus bestowed. We can learn

a valuable lesson from the hearers whom we are considering. There are multitudes of men to-day who regard our Lord as a perfect example, an elevator of human society, a noble instructor, a profound thinker; but mention Him as their Saviour and they turn their backs on you. They do not need to be saved, they think; a conclusion founded on their ignoring the law that we have all transgressed—the divine law. We may revere in Christ all the human attributes and yet stop too soon.

“Ye shall be free indeed.” The last word suggests the possibility of there being a spurious or inferior freedom. There are many forms of freedom. There is a kind of free living which almost invariably produces the natural result—debt, disgrace and often imprisonment. Men refuse to be held in bondage to the moral law. They will be free at any cost. There is also free-thinking, which in its present adaptation implies that we as Christians are not free-thinkers. That is a mistake. We Christian people are free-thinkers in the truest sense of the term. But we believe in evidence—“Prove all things; hold fast that which is true.” We are as free as any who appropriate to themselves the claim of being free-thinkers, with this difference, that we believe in appropriate evidence. If we are dealing with a historical truth, we apply historical evidence; with a scientific truth, scientific evidence; with religious truth, religious evidence. Is that unreasonable? But some say that we are biased by our early education, by our home training, by the instruction in the Sunday-school, and necessarily biased by our calling. It is never considered honorable in good company to impute motives. If it were, could I not say to such a man, “You, too, are biased by your surroundings”? I have as much right to do so as he has to accuse me of being prejudiced. Some people consider the non-committal of themselves by a religious profession to be freedom. For a moment imagine a man, living in this country at the time when the sister colonies were seeking to obtain their independence from the mother country, reasoning thus: “I do not mean to break the laws of the land, but I will not take any part in the present conflict, but will wait until I see on which side I had better risk myself.” In that case the man might have succeeded, for politicians are sometimes venal, but not so is He with whom we have to deal. He has said, “Whosoever therefore shall confess Me before men, him will I confess also before My Father which is in Heaven,” and the sentence will be “I never knew you; depart from Me ye that work iniquity.” Brethren, avoid this non-committal policy that seeks to row in two waters, and to serve two masters.

Dismissing, then, these forms of freedom, let us look at the real and positive freedom of which our Lord spoke—the freedom from the penalty of a broken law, the guilt and the consequences of transgression; freedom from the yoke of violated justice. Free from the curse of sin for sufficient reasons.

A man was recently charged with a terrible crime, and although after a trial he was acquitted by the jury, the people in the place were so indignant at the result of the trial that they hanged both him and the jurymen in effigy. His freedom was in no sense like that which the Son gives, because He makes

atonement for the guilty person. He pays the debt and stands in the sinner's room.

This freedom given by the Son is great in quantity and great in quality. The future historians of this country will no doubt make much of the great act of liberation whereby four or five million human beings received their freedom, but it is not probable that they will call it an act of grace. And the people thus liberated have had a hard time of it in the twenty years or more that have already elapsed since they were made free. There is much work needed to be done yet in their behalf. No such limitation is known in the perfect freedom mentioned in our text. We shall have "an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled." There was an act of liberation, in another country, still greater than ours, by which forty million persons received their freedom, but no historian will call that an act of grace. Russia was forced in a beneficent, providential way to release the serfs, but still there are many drawbacks on this people as well as on the negroes; and I suppose in the nature of things it must be so. But not so when the Son makes us free. Oh, the magnitude of this liberation! We only begin to comprehend it when, in the prophecy referring to Christ, we read that "He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied." This freedom applies to the individual as well as to the multitude. Conscience will be free. No longer will I say, "Thou hast sinned, and the wages of sin is death," but I will say, "My Father, I am at peace with Thee." And not only is the conscience free, but also the reason and the imagination, the affections and all the other faculties of the mind. If you would have freedom you must not only come to the Son, but you must also stay with Him. You must be kept by Him. If I want to be safe I will say, in the words of the familiar hymn, "Nearer my God to Thee, nearer to Thee." If I wish to feel secure I will say,

" Hide me, O my Saviour, hide,
'Till the storm of life is past."

Should I fear that I might lose the freedom thus gained, I would put it in my Father's hand, as a little child might put its treasure in your hand, saying: Keep it for me. God does not by a sudden act push the divine law aside, but gives His Son to satisfy. Yea, magnify the law. Between grace and law there is no quarrel; they are made one in Christ. No one finds fault with natural law because it is arbitrary; why should they with moral law? The ocean encircles the globe; what could we do without it? And yet it is governed by an unchangeable law. You fling human beings into it and what is the result? You plead in vain for their lives, crying out, "Oh, cruel and ruthless Ocean, spare them, so fair, so good. Let them not perish." But they do perish, because the law of the sea causes them to perish. Who quarrels with the Almighty for stamping that law on the sea? In this land of national and civil institutions we should proclaim to all nations our civil liberty. Let it be instinct with the higher freedom that it may carry spiritual life and everlasting liberty to the tribes and kindreds of the human race. God-help us to do this, and to Him shall be the glory forever.