

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION.

“I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.”—*Gen.* xvii. 1.

“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”—*St. Matt.* v. 48.

THESE are two utterances, divided from each other by centuries of time, yet essentially one in their teaching. We do not know, and cannot imagine, what is signified by the Lord’s “appearing” to Abraham. It need hardly be said there could be no such appearance. No vision vouchsafed to any human eye could ever contradict the words of the Evangelist, “No man hath seen God at any time.” Yet in several passages of the Old Testament we find language used which implies this possibility. It was used, no doubt, to mark with emphasis the greatness of the occasion, the momentous nature of the crisis, the arresting importance of the truth, to which it is the preface. It is not the first time in Abraham’s history that the Lord is said to have appeared to him; but there could be no *vision* of God. Again and again the Lord is said to have “spoken” to him; but there could be no *voice* of God. Why, then, use this language? We must remember the time was the dawn of religion. Here was a man who, with many a failure and backsliding, yet appears to us, and no doubt appeared more plainly to the rude tribes among whom he dwelt, to be one whose life was swayed by other motives than theirs, ruled by some principle beyond their comprehension. It was a higher life with higher aims than theirs. Surely this man had relations with an Unseen Power which were denied to them. It was easy to believe he had heard voices to which their ears were deaf, and seen visions to which their eyes were sealed. And so the legend grew; yet all the while there was a deep reality in

it for the patriarch. With his clearer insight he had discerned, above the golden sun and the shining host of heaven to which other men bowed down, the all-controlling power of one supreme Being. He had heard, with the inner ear, a voice that in the divine silence of thought and prayer revealed to him the idea of a perfect life. It is this revelation and the character of it that are enshrouded in all the mystery and solemnity of this vision and utterance of the Lord appearing and speaking to His servant, who, alone of all those whose records stand for us beside his, was able to rise to the great governing ideas of true religion—the unity of God, and the moral basis of life. *One God*—"I am the Almighty"; the *aim and end* of all life that is worth the living—Perfection: "Be thou perfect"; the *means of reaching this perfection*—conscious and constant reference to a Divine presence and power: "Walk before Me."

Some theologians are fond of enlarging upon the harmony between the religious standards and sentiments of the Old Testament and those of the New. But a great deal of the Old Testament exhibits no such harmony. That much of it was written, or compiled, by men whose standpoint was utterly removed from the New Testament's, is plain. The blessing of the Lord represented as following the mean and selfish trickeries of Jacob; the praise accorded to the cruel treachery of the wife of Heber the Kenite; the ruthless extermination of men, women, and children in the early Hebrew wars, narrated not only without any repugnance, but ascribed to the direct command of God; the arbitrary and vindictive character often set forth as His—all show the wide difference that separates the religious ideas of writers in the early books of the Old Testament from those of the Evangelists and Apostles of the New. But this difference only brings out into more vivid relief the fact that however far the popular religious ideas might lie apart, in the distant centuries, from such as gained a

hold of men's minds after the Captivity, the essential elements of religion were always the same—that all men of spiritual insight, and earnest heart, and Godward instinct, felt themselves to be the subjects of a kindred revelation; had the same vision of the one Almighty God; the same call to walk in the light of the same Presence, to the goal of the same Perfection.

Yet not absolutely the same. The early conception was that of the unity and power of God; of One who could say, "I am the Almighty"; who could give the command, "Live and act as under My eye. Whither shalt thou go from My spirit? Whither canst thou flee from My presence? Walk before Me, and be perfect. Keep My law as thou hast understood it; do My will as thou hast learned it. So shalt thou reach forth unto perfection."

Thus the inner Voice spoke to the ear of Abraham. Thus his idea of God shaped itself—the idea of an Almighty Being, whose power encircled his life, and whose will demanded his obedience. The root of all true religion was there, in his sense of the infinite and almighty, in his consciousness of a relation thereunto, and of the necessity of a moral obedience to a supreme Will and Law.

We pass over many ages. We find we breathe a fresher air. The mists of the morning have passed away, and the light is shining in its strength. A new Voice speaks to us, but with a deeper tone and a clearer message. It says, "Be ye perfect, *as your Father in heaven is perfect.*" Its burden still is perfection, but the perfection is defined as it was not before. The one God has got a new name: not the Almighty, but the *Father*. The perfection is to be such as His.

Now, observe here that the character of the demand to which the conscience answers is the same as before. It is a moral demand *to be perfect*. We may say there are many types of perfection: the perfection of power, of

beauty, of knowledge. It is manifold; but what we are told to strive after here is perfection in *character*, and that can only be a *moral* perfection. We are told to be perfect as the Divine Father is perfect. Perfect in power as the Almighty? in knowledge, as He who sees the end from the beginning, and from whom no secret is hid? in any beauty or outward gift that the eye can see or the heart conceive? Not so: but in that in which human creatures are most alike when rising to the noblest heights of their humanity, they feel the links between their own lives drawn closest, and are conscious of an affiance with the Eternal and Unseen that has become to them an anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast,—perfect in that which “casteth out fear,” the love which is the very element in which the Eternal Father has His being. In gaining this we gain some measure of the Divine likeness. To be perfect as the Father is perfect implies a likeness to the Father, a likeness in that in which alone the human can resemble the Divine, the finite stretch out its hand to the Infinite without being sent empty away—a likeness in these moral constituents of character of which love is the highest.

But is not this talk of a Divine likeness vague and fanciful? Where are we to see the Great Original? Is it a thick darkness, or is it an excellent glory that hides it from our sight? “Oh, that I knew where I might find Him!” cried Job of old, believing yet perplexed and groping for the light. “Oh, that I knew where I might find Him! that I might come even to His seat!” So many are crying still. But the answer, if they would but listen to it, is in the words of the same Teacher who laid down the principle, “Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.” “He that hath seen *Me* hath seen the *Father*. I and the Father are one”—words veiling their full meaning in that mystery which no human mind can penetrate, but in which we can discern this clear message, “He, whom I call the Father, is

infinite, is unseen, is in Himself unknown ; but I am His Revealer. What it is possible to know of Him you can behold in Me." So then we come to this, that the likeness of the Father dwells in Jesus Christ ; that if the human would be like the Divine, it must strive to be like *Him* ; that the method of perfection is the imitation of Christ.

I have said that the human likeness to the Divine must consist—only can consist—in these moral characteristics, of which love is the highest—is the element, as it were, in which all others live and move. We see this if we look into the character of Christ. We find that character occasionally depicted, or interpreted, as if wanting in some of the *strong* features, that make characters influential through their manliness and independence, their courage and resolution. But it is a very partial and one-sided conception of the character of Jesus Christ that dwells only on its tender gentleness and submissive humility, on what may appear its softer and more loving qualities. Yet who could be bolder with the stoutest moral courage than He, when He denounced the pretentious religious leaders of His day with their insincere formalities and hypocrisies, when He drove out of His Father's house those who were making it a den of thieves ? Who could show a calmer bravery when He faced the insults and brutalities of the cruel Jewish mob and Roman soldiers, and the shameful cross itself, rather than fail in fulfilling one iota of the obedience that He knew His Father's will required ? And yet we feel, as we consider it all, that alike in His times of conflict and of peace, when teaching His disciples, when rebuking sin, when comforting the sorrowful, and helping the helpless and needy, the element of His life was Love ; that He thought of others, not of self ; that He bore other burdens besides His own ; that even His anger was but the wrath of love finding itself rejected, and its will to bless thwarted and set at naught. So that we may say that it is in proportion to our

ability to gain this high quality, this "altruism"—to use the modern phrase, not half so good as the old "charity" of the New Testament—this all-comprehending principle of self-abnegation, of vast pity, of divine tendency, of generous goodwill towards all—even the unthankful, the evil and unworthy—it is in proportion as we can gain this that we come nearest Him, the Son of man, the Son of God, who was able to say, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." The farther we get from self the nearer we get to Him. The more fully we realize that our true life is the *filial* life—the life of the Son of God—the farther do we advance on the good and perfect way, on the path which the lion's whelps have not trodden and the vulture's eye has not seen, but which leads to the shining gates of the city of the Great King.

"Ye are the sons of God." "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." Be like Him, as His likeness is disclosed in One who was the First-born of many brethren—the Elder Brother of the whole family of redeemed mankind. It is this belief that we are the sons of God, and that, as such, we can attain to some measure of the Divine character, that more than aught else gives meaning and dignity to human life. The ideal of humanity is the likeness of the Man Christ Jesus—never attainable in all its features, and therefore the only ideal that leads us ever onward and affords the amplest scope to moral effort and spiritual aspiration.

In Him is the motive of our higher life; in Him the moral stimulus, the spiritual power, which enables us to strive after it, and in some degree to reach it. In some degree—but in that only—spiritual death awaits any one who gains a point at which he imagines that he may say, "Enough; I need strive no farther. I have seen the full vision of the glory to be revealed. I have laid hold of the whole of the hope set before me. I have learned the whole

secret of Christ. I have attained to the Divine likeness and the recompense of my reward." But the full reward is never *gained*. It is nothing that is bestowed on a man from without. It is something that grows up within him as he strives. It is the inward strength and knowledge and capacity of endurance that are bred of his earnest effort. It is the richer manhood, the diviner love that beautify and sanctify his character. It is the uplifting consciousness that rises in his soul to sustain him, as he follows on to know the Father's will and to copy the Son's example ever more and more faithfully, that though the fulness of complete possession never may be his, he yet does well to cherish in his heart that sublime ideal.

But to speak of the Ideal to those who are engaged, day by day for many a toilsome year, in the labours and cares and studies and burdens of our life, may seem delusive and discouraging. Why mock us with counsels of perfection? "Who is sufficient for these things?" But the Ideal is, after all, not a mere vision of a cloudland, "far off, unattained and dim." It is but the Real looked at through the light of Christ. In that light the ideal life is seen to be the life of *duty*, duty that does not lie within formal lines of definition, duty that is the son's function, not the servant's. Its voice is not the voice of law, of regulation, of prescription. It is an inward spiritual call—like Abraham's—to strive after a perfection of which each man has his revelation, according to his light and his capacity for receiving it, if the light that is given to every man be not in his case darkness, because he has suffered it to be quenched by the foul air of his own carnality and worldliness. It is the call to each to be and to do his best, whether his place be one of command or of obedience, of toil of hand or of head, of the scholar or of the teacher, of bold adventure or of patient watching, among those who also serve, though they only stand and wait. It

is the call that always is heard by each who has done his most and best, saying, "Friend, come up higher." Come up higher, because each step gained in the steep ascents of life opens to you an ampler horizon, and discloses broader fields that stretch, at last, to the utmost bounds of the everlasting hills.

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