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XII. DECEMBER. THE DEATH OF ST. STEPHEN.

A. A HEBREW AND A CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM.

"And when he died, he said, *The Lord look upon and require it.*"—
2 CHRON. xxiv. 22.

"Lord, lay not this sin to their charge; and when he had said this, he fell asleep."—ACTS viii. 60.

WHEN we compare the words spoken by the Prophet Zechariah at his martyrdom—"The Lord look upon it and require it"—with the words spoken by St. Stephen at his martyrdom—"Lord, lay not this sin to their charge"—we are conscious of a very strong contrast, and we are now invited in the Church of England to pay attention to this contrast; for since our new arrangement of Lessons has been adopted, we read part of this twenty-fourth chapter of the Second Book of Chronicles for the first lesson on the afternoon of St. Stephen's Day.

We have, in fact, set before us on this festival by the new arrangement, side by side, a Jewish and a Christian martyrdom. It will be instructive to draw a parallel between the two. We may expect to see, in this way, possibly the difference between two characters; certainly the difference between two dispensations.

It may be assumed that by every reader of these pages all the circumstances of the death of Stephen are well known and clearly remembered. But it would not be reasonable to expect such recollections of the circumstances of the death of Zechariah, especially as they are recorded in a book which, till recent times, was not publicly read in our churches. They may, therefore, first be briefly recounted; and in this narration of the circumstances which led to Zechariah's death we shall find something to instruct us, even independently of that comparison and contrast which is to be our chief topic.

Zechariah was the son of Jehoiadah, a priest in the reign of Joash, king of Judah. That king had begun to reign when only seven years old—a perilous period of minority. He began well, for he had good counsellors, chief among whom was the Priest Jehoiadah, the father of the martyr. While this old and faithful minister lived, the king did that which was right in the sight of the Lord. Conjointly they repaired and restored the Lord's Temple. The Throne flourished while the Altar stood. But Jehoiadah died. He was an hundred and thirty years old when he died. His body was honoured by no common burial. They "buried him in the city of David, among the kings," because he had done good in Israel, both towards God and towards His House.

But to do honour to the dead, and to follow the good example of those who have "departed this life in God's faith and fear," are two very different things. Joash, the king, was now set free from the control which had kept him in the right path. Soon after paying to his old servant the empty honour of a royal funeral, he sought other advisers. The young men of Judah came (the young are not always the best advisers) and made him dissatisfied with the worship of that house which he had himself restored, and turned him away to serve groves and idols.

We may well suppose that this was done gradually. He had no doubt before been very zealous about the material part of the service of the Temple, as the working of the iron and brass, the gold and silver, the vessels, the spoons, the basins, the candlesticks, as carefully recorded in the same chapter of the Chronicles and the corresponding portion of the Book of Kings: and when this was done, the zeal for the external part of the Jewish religion had exhausted itself, and he began to look for further sources of religious excitement. To hear sometimes the monotonous service of the Temple, and to wander among lovely groves adorned by attractive images (*idols* they might be to *others*, but they should only be *statues to him*), to listen to the fervid eloquence of the priests of Baal, who "prophesied smooth things,"¹ was, he perhaps thought, a harmless recreation for dull routine; and as he grew more familiar with such sights and sounds, he mingled a little of their sensuous religion with that which said, "Thou shalt not worship any graven image." He thought, perhaps, that he did not actually worship or even invoke the images: they might even become aids to his other and higher devotions. At all events, he would assuredly not be like the princes of Judah, who had actually gone over from Jehovah to Baal.

But God preserves not in temptation those who willingly run into it, and it came to pass that by whatever process of false reasoning King Joash was at first drawn aside a little way from the religion of his fathers—and then drawn gradually into a closer approximation to forbidden things—King Joash did soon secede altogether, became a fervent and avowed follower of Baal, a frequenter of the groves, and a worshipper of the images.

The wrath of God was soon threatened upon these apostates. He sent prophets to warn them: "They testified against them, but they would not give ear."² Then Zechariah, the old priest's son, stood up boldly and warned them that if they transgressed the commandments of the Lord, ill would befall

¹ Isa. xxx. 10.

² 2 Chron. xxiv. 19.

them; that if they forsook the Lord, He would forsake them. But they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones; and that, too, at the commandment of the king; and that, too, on no common ground; for they stoned him in the court of the Lord's House, in the very place which his father, in conjunction with that same king, had recently restored. The following are the words in which the crisis of this history is related: "Then Joash remembered not the kindness which Jehoiadah his father had shown him, but slew his son: and, when he died, he said, 'The Lord look upon it and require it.'"

It is no part of our purpose to follow on to the history of the judgment that came upon Joash. The Lord did indeed "look" upon the crime and "require it." But our attention at this moment is restricted to the point of martyrdom in the cases of Jehoiadah and Stephen, set side by side. Having thus seen some of the instruction which is to be derived from the circumstances that led to the death of Jehoiadah, let us see what may be learnt from the contrast of the last utterances of these two martyrs.

When we turn away from the Books of Chronicles to the Books of the Acts of the Apostles, from the dying prayer of the Jewish to the dying prayer of the Christian martyr, the change is very remarkable. Stephen, before he fell asleep, knelt down and prayed with a loud voice, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." In certain respects, indeed, there is a great similarity in these two scenes of the Old and New Testaments. Both martyrdoms took place in that city, where it was no new thing "to kill the prophets, and stone them that were sent unto them."¹ In both cases there was a direct outpouring of the Holy Spirit; in both a fearless rebuke, received, not with penitence, but with hardness of heart. In both we recognise the horrors of that cruel death by stoning. But in other respects the difference between the two scenes is very great. As we gaze upon the mangled bodies of the two martyrs, and hear their last cries, how strangely dissimilar they are! In the one case a denunciatory prayer, "The Lord look upon it and require it;" in the other an intercessory prayer, "Lord! lay not this sin to their charge."

How are we to account for this difference of thought and feeling in two men, on each of whom the Holy Spirit had descended? A word explains it. They were living under *different dispensations*, of which the principle of one was *justice*, of the other *mercy*. When earth was fading away from Zechariah's eyes, whom saw he as he looked up to Heaven?

¹ Matt. xxiii. 37.

A God of vengeance by Whom "actions are weighed"—surrounded by thunder and lightning and clouds. When Stephen died, whom saw he? Let God's own words answer the question. "He, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into Heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." What each saw and what each said embodied the fundamental ideas of the different dispensations under which they lived. Under the childhood of the Church of God there was held out a strict account of rewards and punishments. *Justice* was soon visibly at hand; and the *mercy* was a long way off, seen dimly and "through a glass darkly," in prophecy and sacrifice. And so we understand how Zechariah did not rise above the knowledge given to his age.

We here touch a great principle, the full bearing of which could not be unfolded without much time and thought. But the whole principle is contained in our Lord's words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth; but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil; love your enemies: bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you."¹ In this principle of a progressive revelation of moral truth is the key which unlocks many of the difficulties that we feel, for instance, in the book of Psalms. And one great advantage of the comparison between the death of Stephen and the death of Zechariah is that it sets before us this contrast of the two dispensations in a pointed and emphatic manner. Thus from Stephen's martyrdom we obtain not only a lesson concerning the character which we ought to imitate, but a lesson concerning the nature of the dispensation under which it is our privilege to live.

We live, not under the Law, but under the Gospel. Our relation to God is not clouded with the smoke of burnt sacrifices, but stands out bright, pure, and clear through the knowledge of "Christ and Him crucified."² *In Him* justice was satisfied. *Through Him* mercy descends from God to us. So let it be from *us* to one another.

A better example than that of the martyr Zechariah—a more loving Intercessor than even the martyr Stephen—stands between God and us, even Jesus Christ our Saviour; and while the Law says of our sin, "The Lord look upon it and require it," the Gospel triumphantly intervenes and answers, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

¹ Matt. v. 38.

² 1 Cor. ii. 2.

B. SLEEP IN JESUS.

"Them which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him."—1 THESS. iv. 14.

There is a great interest, and a double interest, in the reading of these words, even before we turn closely to examine their meaning.

In the first place, this Epistle is the earliest which St. Paul wrote, or, at least, the earliest which we possess as a part of Holy Scripture. Very probably, moreover, it is earlier in date than any part of the four Gospels. Hence, when this short letter lies before us, we appear to see the formation of the New Testament from its very beginning. It is at least one of the first fresh fountains of the river which has blessed mankind; and we feel that serious attention should be given to the manner in which this writing speaks to us of that familiar subject, the death of Christian believers. It is, indeed, a familiar subject; for though Christ has been revealed to us in the Gospel as "the resurrection and the life," yet each generation of Christians has been, in the literal sense, a generation of dying men. Every village has its place of interment. Every populous city of living men has a populous city of the dead close by its side—growing in magnitude as it grows itself, and waiting in silence for the great future while the city of the living is busy with the present. We have good reason, then, for observing with interest what is said in the earliest Christian writing concerning those who are departed in the Lord.

And there is a double interest in this matter. Not only is this the first Christian writing which refers to departed believers, but the departed who are referred to here are the first of whom we have any record, as having died according to the ordinary course of nature, *i.e.*, whose cases were like our own. The Acts of the Apostles, indeed, though written later, mention those who died earlier. But those deaths were exceptional. Either they were terrible from the marks of judgment which rested upon them, or they were martyrdoms. We can easily recall the instances. A dark cloud is upon the death of Judas Iscariot; and a similar cloud is upon the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. Nothing, indeed, can be brighter than the death of Stephen, whom we commemorate this month; and the same remark may most properly be extended to the death of James, who was slain by the hand of Herod. But these were exceptional; these were violent deaths—these were martyrdoms. And the same must be said of those who were slain during the persecution conducted by Saul of Tarsus; for it does seem from his own words that he did persecute even to the death. The quiet passing away of Dorcas is, indeed, very much like cases within our own experience. It resembles the

death of many a good Christian matron in every age, whose spirit has gone to a better world, amid the grief of those to whom she has been merciful and kind. But concerning Dorcas we must add that she was raised miraculously to life; so that her case again was strictly exceptional. The case, however, of those who had died at Thessalonica was exactly like our own. Thessalonica was beginning to be, more or less, a Christian city; and the graves of some departed Christians were even now already there. Some, whom St. Paul knew, had left this world since he had been among them. Their faces he would not see again, when he next visited the place. Their death, too, had been the cause of great grief, and of some perplexity; for it was hardly known then what view was to be taken of the Christian dead. He tells them what view to take; and he comforts them with words which have comforted all mourners among Christ's people since. "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope; for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him."

The right view, then, of the death of Christ's true servants is, that it is *a sleep*; and this includes three particulars.

(1) The first fact connected with the thought of sleep is *continuity of existence*. The natural impression on the contemplation of death is that it is an absolute cessation for ever of all acting and thinking. But in this comparison of death to a sleep we are assured that it is otherwise. The very notion of sleep insists that personal identity remains. Suspension, indeed, of the exertion of all active power, whether of mind or body, there may be during sleep. But sleep is not a destroyer of those powers; and Christian death, if it is rightly compared to a sleep, is not a destroyer.

(2) And a second thought which we inevitably associate with sleep is *the thought of repose*. The great blessing which God has given to us for our powers of mind and body, when they are wearied, is sleep. There is nothing else like it. All the human race know what this blessing is, in our life of toil and fatigue. It is proverbial in every language, and in this respect the comparison of Christian death with sleep is full of meaning, full of consolation and encouragement. "Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord, that they may rest from their labours." "To-day shalt thou be with Me in paradise,"¹ said Christ to one whose firm hold on salvation came only at the last; and "paradise" is a place of refreshment and repose.

¹ Luke xxiii. 43.

(3) Thirdly, there is connected with the idea of sleep the *certainty of waking*. It is essentially a temporary condition. If we thought it would not end, we should not call it sleep. When we go to rest at night, we go in the expectation, under God's good blessing, of rising in some degree strengthened and refreshed in the morning. When we lay our children to rest, their sleep will probably be far sounder than ours; but we know how the morning will bring new life, and new merriment and laughter. And when we lay our Christian dead in the grave it is in the hope of a glorious sunrise and of the awakening to a better and happier life.

Continuity of existence, sense of repose, and certainty of waking: these are three characteristics of natural sleep and of Christian death. Concerning the death which is not Christian I say nothing. I leave that awful subject entirely on one side. I desire simply to follow the line of thought here laid down for us in the First Epistle to the Thessalonians: "Them that sleep in Jesus shall God bring with Him." It is through Jesus Christ that death becomes a sleep. The translation in the Authorised Version, though quite correct, might be made more exact and more forcible, thus, "Them that have been laid to sleep by Jesus." "Surely He giveth His beloved sleep;" and when the day of resurrection comes, though there are many things connected with that day which we do not as yet understand, of one thing we are certain, that "the saints will be with Him."

The reason why this subject has been chosen for this month, and for the conclusion of these papers, is obvious. The last words in the narrative of the death of Stephen are these: "He fell asleep." The words used by St. Paul to the Thessalonians, long afterwards, were to be an echo of these words of an earlier day, which St. Paul himself heard under circumstances which he could never forget, when he was "consenting" to Stephen's death. All are not martyrs; but all whose "life is hid with Christ in God" *fall asleep* when they die.

We study the lives and deaths of martyrs in order that, without being martyrs, we may learn to serve God, to do good to man where we are, till our time on earth is over. St. Paul, in addressing the Jews at Antioch in Pisidia, summed up in a phrase of extraordinary beauty and power the true religious view of death, when he said of David, "Having served his own generation through the will of God, *fell on sleep*."¹

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¹ Acts xiii. 36.