

The Gifts of the Evil One.

A SERMON TO BOYS.

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“And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.”—GEN. iv. 6, 7.

THAT part of the Bible which contains the history of the world before the Flood has been the source of much difficulty. Some people may think that you are too young to be told of this, and that you should take everything for granted till you are grown up. Now I think otherwise. Even if reserve on such a subject were not contrary to our implied mutual contract to be above-board in everything, it would, as usual, be false policy in the end. For what happens when a young man first finds out that things which he had been brought up to regard as part of his religion will not bear the strain of honest inquiry? Why, that the very foundations of his faith are disturbed. He finds that he has anchored on treacherous ground; and then, perhaps, when compelled to shift his moorings, he drifts away from belief in religion altogether. But if you are left in doubt as to how much is literal fact, and how much is the language of parable or poetry, some of you may ask, “Then are we not to look upon this part of the Bible as inspired?” Why, it simply palpitates with inspiration. The stories contained in it are, in many respects, like our Lord’s parables. They may or may not give an account of things which actually happened, but their purpose is not to teach us matters of fact, but spiritual truth. The marked distinction of occupation between Cain and Abel is, *e.g.*, not at all like real life in primitive times; but yet their story is as true for all time as that of the prodigal son. Let us study it from this point of view.

There are two brothers,—Abel, a keeper of sheep; Cain, a tiller of the ground. With the universal instinct of human nature, whether civilised or savage, they are both conscious of a Presence from which there is no escape—of a Being who has paramount claims upon them and theirs. Each offers of his best. And here the resemblance ends. For if Abel’s offering was accepted by God, Cain’s was not. This has nothing to do with the nature of the offering, whether it was sheep or corn. God would have accepted corn from Abel, and refused flocks from Cain. For Cain is told,

“If thou doest well,” or rather, “if thou dost sacrifice aright, shall thy offering not be accepted?”—*i.e.*, “it is not the *thing* you sacrifice, not your manner of worship, which is wrong, but your heart, your conduct—*that* is what God cares for.” People sometimes talk about purity of worship as if it were connected with the presence or absence of some particular forms. But the only purity of worship which I can find in the Bible is that of a soul athirst for God and seeking earnestly for His truth. The light of a more perfect revelation shows us that the blood of bulls and of goats cannot take away sin, yet God accepts Abel’s free-will offering of love, while He rejects the tax which fear or superstition extorts from Cain.

For in the true sense of the word he cannot sacrifice, just as the king in “Hamlet” cannot pray—

“My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.”

“But if not well, sin lieth at the door.” The metaphor is not that of a crouching wild beast eager to burst in and devour when the door is opened. This is clear from the words which follow, “Unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.” They express the truth which underlies all the fables of witchcraft and the hideous rites of devil-worship, as well as the weird legend which appears in some form or other in the literature of most countries, of Faust and Mephistopheles. “Sin lieth at the door,” a fawning friend, a cunning flatterer, and, if you let him in and accept his devotion, a steady, powerful, and serviceable ally.

Let us follow this out in the sequel of the story. “And Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.” The Evil One has so far served Cain well. And not only in this primitive murder has he exhilarated the assassin’s heart with passion, and smoothed his path with opportunity. How well Shakespeare knew this! His Gloucesters and

Lady Macbeths are hurried with a supernatural joy and ease down the slope of crime; and then, by the red-handed murderer, is heard the voice of God in the guilty conscience, which we call remorse, giving, as it were, a last chance to the soul of freeing itself from the tightening grip of sin.

The verses which follow in the sacred story seem to me to present, in the form of a dramatic dialogue, the tumultuous struggle which this voice rouses within the heart of Cain. "Where is Abel thy brother?" How vain is the criminal's ready lie, "I know not"! How poor a shield for a haunted murderer is the brazen creed of selfishness! "Am I my brother's keeper?" All his defences break down; the voice of his brother's blood crieth from the ground; he hears himself sentenced to wander over the earth a fugitive and a vagabond, yet never free from a ghastly presence, never safe from human vengeance. In vain shall be the labours of his hand; the earth shall not yield her strength to his fitful efforts, palsied by fear of overhanging doom. His punishment is greater than he can bear; from God's face shall he be hid. Like King Richard on the night before the fatal field of Bosworth, he seems to have a confused horror of his own solitary and inevitable presence with himself—

"Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.
Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why:
Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? for any good
That I myself have done unto myself?
Oh no! Alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself!
I am a villain. Yet I lie: I am not.
Fool, of thyself speak well: fool, do not flatter.
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain."

What then? Are the forebodings of Cain realised in Genesis? No, they are not. He is secured from outward danger. The Lord sets a mark upon him that no one may slay him. Like many of his spiritual descendants he leads henceforth a charmed life. He is set free from inward agony. He "went forth from the presence of the Lord." The Divine Spirit, which will not always strive with man, ceases to be heard. Conscience, with her "thousand several tongues," tortures him no more. Here the human and the divine tragedy part company. Shakespeare would fail to satisfy our dramatic instinct with the horrors of that

haunted night, unless, shrieking for "a horse" in vain, the murderer was slain before our eyes. But the Bible is under no such necessity. It teaches us a deeper lesson. Cain lives and thrives. The flattering fiend, now master of the fortress of his soul, soothes him with a false peace, braces him with fresh hopes and bright ambition. He builds a city, and is the founder of a great family. And so he passes out of our sight.

I have tried to represent to you the story of Cain as the life drama of a soul which surrenders itself to the fascination of the powers of darkness; but the divine harmony of Scripture will be more clearly seen if we compare the history of his family with that of the children of Seth.

It at once strikes us that nearly the same names occur in both lists. This can scarcely be a coincidence, and is one of many proofs that the inspired author of the narrative did not intend it to be taken as one of literal fact.

But their characters, so far as they are given, are entirely different. Three of Seth's descendants are eminently good men. Enoch walked "with God, and was not: for God took him"; Lamech called his son Noah a "comfort," because he was in trouble, and believed that God would bring comfort out of it; while Noah was a preacher of righteousness, and the instrument by whom God preserved mankind. But the desire of the Evil One continues to be unto the children of Cain. He serves them well, as he had served their forefather. By his dark aid they become a prosperous and mighty race. They fill the earth with violence. They eat, they drink, they marry and are given in marriage; and it repents God that He hath made man upon the earth, because the thoughts of his heart are only evil continually.

The line of Cain culminates in another Lamech, who is pictured to us a despot glorying in the impunity of wanton bloodshed. "Have I slain a young man to my hurt?" (for this seems to be the right interpretation of his words): "if Cain hath been avenged sevenfold, surely Lamech seventy and sevenfold." There is no such thing, he boasts, as right and wrong. Power is for the unscrupulous. Conscience is a delusion. God is a phantom; and judgment is a scare. This Lamech is described as having three sons; Jubal, the father of such as dwell in tents and have cattle; Jubal, the father of all such as handle the harp and organ; and Tubal-cain, an instructor of

every artificer in brass and iron. Now all this can scarcely be *intended* literally. We are surely not meant to understand that three sons of the same man suddenly discovered the use of cattle, musical instruments, and the mechanical arts. And further, according to the story, Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-cain leave no descendants, but they and their works perish in the Flood. What, then, does the writer mean? Surely this. The godless empire of the violent Lamech gives birth to the three things which the world has always held and still holds to be the essential marks of national prosperity—wealth, art, and mechanical appliances. And it is worthy of note that the names of Lamech's wives and daughters—which mean beauty, ornament, and grace—also point to a refined and luxurious society.

All these things has the Evil One given abundantly to those who will bow down and serve him. He presided unseen at the banquets of Belshazzar. He ministered to the lusts and the ambition of the tyrants of imperial Rome, and even now he throws his bribes broadcast among men flushed with the triumphant hurry of our material progress, till they talk more and more glibly of the infinite future in store for civilisation, and mock the God of heaven with the predicted sneer, "Where is the promise of His coming?" But to the eye of the seer of Genesis, while the sun is shining with undimmed splendour upon Lamech's empire, there is a vision on the horizon of

"Ragged rims of thunder brooding low
With shadow-streaks of rain."

The storm bursts, the waters rise, and all the pride and pomp of man are sunk beneath the flood.

And here we are certainly on historical ground. The tradition of every nation bears witness that one at least of the great early civilisations was destroyed by a flood of waters, and from the point of view of an eye-witness there is nothing to cavil at in the flood of Genesis. But to engage in pitiful quibbles about the depth of the waters, or the capacity of the ark, is utterly to mistake the purpose and nature of the sacred writings. To what extent the author may have used old traditions in illustrating the truths which God's Spirit inspired him to teach, we cannot tell; but the connected story of Cain, of Lamech, and of the Deluge remains a true and awful analysis of the workings of the Spirit of Evil in the heart of man.

It tells us how, like our blessed Lord, he also

takes upon him the form of a servant, and ministers to the children of his kingdom the peace and the glory which are in his gift—the peace of the soul which has stifled conscience, the glory of the brilliant and earth-subduing crowd which has forgotten God.

But as surely as there is a God in heaven who sits upon a throne of justice, the tarrying day of vengeance will come. To more than one nation, for aught we know, it may have come in the form of a watery deluge; to the cities of the plain it came in that of volcanic fire; to the Canaanites by the commissioned hosts of the chosen people; to the Roman Empire by successive waves of barbarian inroad; to the sneering oppressors and debauchees of France in the eighteenth century by the Reign of Terror. And how shall it come in the future to every man and every nation who have not righteousness as their shield and bulwark, God only knows.

Now turn back to the beginning of this story, for that is what most concerns you. I am going to touch upon what may seem small things, but they are things more important to you than the affairs of empires. An illustration may serve to make my meaning clearer. When you are near what is called the watershed of a country, you cannot tell at a glance of which of two mighty streams the little thread of water at your feet will soon become a part. It seems so quiet that you can see no motion; but if you stir it up, the drift, though slight, is perceptible; and you know that if you followed it, the thread of water would become part of a little trickling rill, the rill of a burn, the burn of a river, the river of an ocean. Regard your boyish life as such a thread, with no apparent drift towards good or evil. But which way do the little grains of sand move when something happens to stir them up? Now leave metaphors and face realities, small in themselves, but fraught to you with results of eternal moment.

Take your school-work. Do you ever use any unfair helps? Do you ever, by word or by silence, pretend that a piece of work is wholly your own when it is not? Do you ever plead want of time or want of power when you know that your excuse is not true? And do you ever gain by this? Mark that point. Do you *gain* exemption from punishment or reproof? Do you *gain* a better chance of a remove, a mark or two against a rival, a better report, undeserved praise at home?

Again, take your social life. You fall out about some small matter with a companion. Are you perfectly fair about this? Do you ever go to other people and colour the case on your own side, so as to bring discredit and unpopularity on him, and get a better position and a better character for yourselves at his expense? Do you gain by this? Undoubtedly, so far as the attainment of your immediate object is concerned, you do gain by it.

Again, take your games—take the grandest of all your games. All games involve danger; and you will admit, when you think about it, that football, more than other games, has a special danger of its own. I don't mean physical danger. Any risk of this sort which exists is far more than made up for by the strength and vitality which it imparts to the limbs and nerves—by the courage and decision and unselfishness which it fosters in the character. But does it not, I ask you—for I must use plain English—involve a temptation to cheat and to tell lies; and do not people gain by so doing? For what is wilfully breaking the rules to gain an unfair advantage? Is it not, in plain English, cheating? Or what is asserting that a ball belongs to your own side, or that it had or had not crossed a certain line, when you were not in a position to see what happened—or by the strength of your words, or the vehemence of your tone, indicating a greater degree of certainty than you really feel? Is not this, in plain English, telling lies? And you know that people *gain* by doing these things; and that upon the whole the side which plays with a prudent amount of unfairness, and which is most unscrupulous in assertion, has a better chance of winning.

Well, can you doubt your duty as Christian boys? Would it not be better to lose every match you play than to sear your consciences by departing one hair's-breadth from truth and honesty?

Take this matter to heart. Apply the same principle to other cases. Think what happens in every case when you *gain* by tampering with sin. His desire (for remember, to you, like Cain, sin is *personal*) has been unto you: he has suffered you so far to rule over him, he has done you a petty service, earnest of greater ones to come. And for this you will have to pay with interest—let us hope, in the coin of repentance and painful amendment, that you may not, like Cain, be overwhelmed by the bankruptcy of spiritual ruin.

Look forward to your future lives. You may find yourself in company where you will be tempted to adopt a light or slighting tone about principles which in your heart you reverence; to smile at the indecent jest, often veiled in subtle innuendoes; perhaps to move your lips assentingly to the chorus of some vile song; or, perhaps, to eat and drink more than you ought on special occasions of festivity; or to dally in dangerous nearness to the pit of vice. You will gain by all this—of course you will. You will gain the reputation of good-fellowship. You will make what are called friends. You will probably increase your popularity by the agreeable ease of manner which results from a habit of acquiescence, and is tarnished by a habit of resistance and protest.

Or again, later on, when you are engaged in business, you may be told that certain dishonest practices—different in different businesses, but there are some in all—are common and profitable. So they are. And you will certainly make money faster by being cleverly and conventionally dishonest than by swimming against the stream.

It is needless to multiply instances. Under all circumstances of life you will have opportunities of *gaining* by doing things which you know to be wrong. And what I wish to impress upon you all to-day is, that such gains are the service-money with which the Evil One pays his recruits; and remember that he never gives his coin for nothing. If he can, he will lead you on, as he led on Cain, from sin to sin. If he can, he will deaden conscience, and throw your souls into that fatal mortification which can feel no pain.

Time fails me to show how, for the glittering bribes of worldly power and material possessions, nations sell their souls to him as did the children of Cain. I often tell you that I wish you would care for and study public questions more than you do—that now, in the days of your boyhood, you would prepare yourselves to be loving and useful citizens of our glorious empire. But whenever you do come to think about and take part in such questions, remember that it is the lesson of all history, that neither ships nor soldiers, nor piles of gold, nor marvels of mechanical invention can save a corrupt and unrighteous nation from a doom as terrible and as certain as the Flood.

To dwell only upon these mournful topics would be very unlike the Bible. It tells us, indeed, that

at the door of our souls there is a foe who would wear the "brows of grace," and enter as a friend, a foe who has robbed us all of the paradise of innocence; and who offers in return, if we will but sell our souls to him, as Cain and Lamech did, his doomed enchanted paradises of lust, or gain, or ease, or glory. But the Bible also tells us of a voice speaking to us from within our souls, and asking us all, as it asked Cain before he made his fatal bargain, "If thou doest well, shall thy offering not be accepted?" and offering us all the help of an ally who is stronger than the foe. Christians, indeed, have no cause for a failing heart in the great struggle; for the victory which our Leader won at Calvary and the Sepulchre has been proclaimed along the lines of wavering battle, and has nerved the arm of every true-hearted combatant with the certainty of triumph.

But if any of you in this chapel, at any period of your lives, shall ever for a time lose your hold on the blessedness of this certainty, take heart from the example of Abel, who raised his rude altar and offered of his best to God, and was accepted, though he had not received the promises. And

if the deepest feelings of your hearts shall ever find a true expression in the poet's words—

"I falter where I firmly trod,
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar-stairs
That slope through darkness up to God,
I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope,"—

surely He who accepted Abel will not reject you. There is indeed only one way—that way is Christ. But on this way you may tread, though, like Abel, you know Him not. He may reward you, even in this life, with the blessing of a fuller light and a clearer knowledge. But if not, He will not cast you off while you are seeking after God. Few comparatively of those who, in the language of our text, sacrifice aright, may have come near that perfect knowledge of the things of Christ which none can absolutely attain; but "ten thousand times ten thousand" is the number of His "ransomed saints"; unmeasured by the narrow lines of creed and system is the "roll of His elect."

Ryle's "Canon of the Old Testament." ¹

BY THE REV. J. A. SELBIE, M.A., BIRSAV.

THIS work fills up a distinct gap in English theological literature. We have been hitherto without a standard work, up to date, dealing with the canon of the Old Testament. There are valuable references to the subject in Driver's *Introduction*; the question is elaborately discussed in Robertson Smith's *Old Testament in the Jewish Church*; but Professor Ryle's book is unique in selecting the history of the canon for its exclusive subject. Moreover, in the judgment of competent critics this work has not been rendered superfluous to the English reader even by the recent translation of Buhl's *Canon*. The standpoint and the conclusions of our author are revealed in the motto: "*Canon non uno, quod dicunt, actu ab hominibus, sed paulatim a Deo, animorum temporumque rectore,*

¹ *The Canon of the Old Testament. An Essay on the Gradual Growth and Formation of the Hebrew Canon of Scripture.* By Herbert Edward Ryle, B.D. Macmillan & Co. 1892.

productus est." The history of the canon of the Old Testament, as is succinctly stated in the Preface, is "the history of no sudden creation or instantaneous acquisition, but of a slow development in the human recognition of the divine message, which was conveyed through the varied writings of the old covenant. The measure of the completeness of the canon had scarcely been reached when 'the fulness of the time' came. The close of the Hebrew canon brings us to the threshold of the Christian Church." This conclusion is diametrically opposed to the traditional view as represented by Josephus, whose position, as defined by Dr. Robertson Smith, was that "each new book was written by a man of acknowledged authority, and simply added to the collection as a new page would be added to the royal annals of an eastern kingdom." It is an easy task for Professor Ryle to show that known facts preclude the truth of such a hypothesis. As to the part