

Passiontide Sermons
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SERMON XIX.
GUIDANCE OF THE PENITENT.
Preached at St. Paul's on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 1888.

PSALM xxxii. 9.

I will inform thee and teach thee in the way wherein thou shall go; and I will guide thee
with Mine Eye.—(Prayer Book Version.)

THIS promise occurs in the second of the seven Penitential Psalms. The Psalm was written by David soon after his great sin. The fifty-first Psalm belongs to the first period of his repentance: in this thirty-second Psalm David has had time enough to think more fully over his guilt in the past, and to understand the happiness of being indeed forgiven. And on this account, perhaps, the Psalm is chosen by the Jews to be used at the close of the service on the Day of Atonement; and you would all remember how, in the Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul connects its first verse with that faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, by which Jew and Gentile alike are justified, because it brings us into true contact with Him Who is the Propitiation for our sins.

Now the words before us are not the Psalmist's words, they are the immediate words of God, which the Psalmist hears, as he prays before the Oracle. Up to this eighth verse, the Psalmist is engaged in reviewing the past. "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered: blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity." He knows the blessedness of the pardoned soul. He knows, (it is impossible to convey by translation the exact sense of the Divine original,) he knows the threefold misery of doing wrong. It is an offence against God, or "transgression:" it is an inward defilement or degradation,— "sin:" it is an "iniquity" which clings to the soul, perhaps through life. Yet the transgression is lifted from the soul, as though it were a heavy load; the inward defilement or sin is covered; the iniquity, even though it be not entirely expelled while life lasts, is not imputed. And how has the Psalmist attained to this happiness? He has confessed his sins. There was a long interval between the sin with Bathsheba and the visit of Nathan the prophet, an interval which was spent in bitter anguish of soul that had not been without its effects upon the bodily health of David. "While I held my tongue, my bones consumed away through my complaining all the day. For Thy Hand was heavy upon me, by day and by night; my vital moisture was turned into the arid drought of summer." Then came the resolution to own his sin in its threefold aspect. "I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid: I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord, and so Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." The same three words in their deep unchanging meaning are repeated: his wrong-doing was owned before God, as a transgression of God's law; as an inward depravation and defilement; as an iniquity which clings to the soul for long years. But to confess was to be pardoned.

For this happiness of pardon, David exclaims, "Every one that is godly shall pray to Thee while the day of acceptance lasts, in a time when Thou mayest be found;" but in the time of great water-floods, of those troubles of life which overwhelm so many souls, those troubles shall not really come nigh the true penitent. They may sweep over his outward life; they will not touch that which, as St. Paul has said,—speaking of Christians—is "hid with Christ in God." And the Psalmist knows this. "Thou," he cries, "O God, art a place to hide me in: Thou shalt preserve me from trouble: Thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance."

Songs of deliverance! The Psalmist would be thinking of Miriam's Song after the escape of Israel from Egypt; of Deborah's song after the deliverance of Israel from the power of Jabin. The soul, too, has its escapes and its deliverances; and the hymns which celebrate these great events in the history of Israel are echoed by the Angels, among whom, we know, on the highest authority, "there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth."

Here there is a pause in the poem, and presently other words follow; not words which David himself utters, but words which David hears from within the Oracle before which he is praying. No mere man could well utter such words; they are the gracious and reassuring words of God. "I will inform thee, and teach thee in the way wherein thou shalt go: and I will guide thee with Mine eye." They form an answer, these words, to the secret anxiety which is so natural to all true penitents. "How shall I know," the penitent asks, "that I may not fall again?" Life is so full of pitfalls, the flesh is so weak, the devil so strong, the way so often doubtful, that it seems impossible after penitence to start again with a good hope of persevering. Sin may have been pardoned as sin, but it remains as weakness; it remains as impaired spiritual sight; it remains, if not as a habit, yet as a propensity, which must be watched, checked, resisted. "How hard," the penitent soul murmurs, "this continued, weary, uphill struggle; this unending anxiety, conflict, suspense!"

No; He Who pardons sin does not desert the penitent sinner. As to David before the Oracle, so to Christians in the Church's Sanctuary, or in the closet at home, He whispers—"I will inform thee and teach thee in the way wherein thou shalt go: and I will guide thee with Mine Eye."

Now, why should this promise of Divine Instruction and Guidance thus follow on the sincere confession of sin? The answer is, Because guidance is given where it will be followed; instruction where it will be listened to. Unless man has a hunger and thirst for righteousness he will not be filled; unless he has an appetite for truth, truth would seem to him unwelcome and repulsive. And the acknowledgment of sin; painful and irksome as it is to flesh and blood, proves the existence of the appetite for righteousness which is so necessary. The acknowledgment of sin is the way in which this appetite expresses itself: it is an effort to be, at any-rate, true. And this effort is met more than half-way by the God of Truth. "I will inform thee," He says, "and teach thee in the way wherein thou shalt go: and I will guide thee with Mine Eye." In souls which are distracted by a double purpose, by the insincerities which in the end deceive conscience itself, by the subterfuges and disguises which obscure and overlies the true facts of life and conscience,—in these God's Voice is not heard. Other voices there are; but they are the voices of self-love, of self-delusion—voices sometimes loud and shrill, sometimes soft and persuasive, but not such as to bring lasting peace and joy to the troubled spirit. It is when a man has turned a deaf

ear to these voices; it is when he has stripped off the disguises which hide him from himself, though they cannot hide him from God; it is when he had taken his resolution, "I will acknowledge my sin unto Thee, and mine unrighteousness have I not hid," that God, Who is Truth, and Who loves truth, blesses this effort to be true with the encouraging promise:—"Fear not; I will inform thee and teach thee in the way wherein thou shalt go: and I will guide thee with Mine Eye." Through outward events, and inward thoughts, and the voice of friends, and a secret control which we feel and cannot analyse, God does guide His servants.

We will not pursue the Psalm further, through the lines in which the penitent king warns and encourages his countrymen in the light of his own bitter and yet joyous experience. But perhaps we too, if we have been trying to turn this season of repentance to some account, must also look a little forward, and ask ourselves whether we shall be able to keep what we have won; whether we can hope to escape the fate of the man whom our Lord describes in the Gospel, into whose soul the evil spirit, that had been cast out, returned, and with seven other spirits more wicked than himself. Against this unspeakable calamity there is no provision save a humble, constant dependence on God; a dependence which is grounded on a sincere sense of our weakness, and of His Love and Power; a dependence which surely will be met by the gracious promise: "I will inform thee and teach thee in the way wherein thou shalt go: and I will guide thee with Mine Eye." Most of God's Servants have been helped on their road to heaven by particular passages of Holy Scripture; and this verse was constantly repeated, both in his public ministrations and in private conversation on religious subjects, by Keble, the author of the *Christian Year*. And there is reason to think, too, that it was much in the thoughts of a greater than Keble, St. Augustine. His biographer, Posidius, who was with him during the last forty years of his life, tells us that during the last ten days before he died he would not allow any to come near him except the physician who visited him and those who brought him his food, and that he caused to be written upon the wall opposite his bed in very large letters, so that his dying eyes might easily read them, the Seven Penitential Psalms. Can we doubt that in that last hour the gracious words were a support and encouragement to him: "I will inform thee and will teach thee in the way wherein thou shalt go: and I will guide thee with Mine Eye?" May God grant that these words may help us also through life's journey, and at its close, for the sake of our only Saviour and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, to Whom, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, be all power and glory!