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THE
CHURCHMAN

MARCH, 1904.

ART. I.—A LENTEN MEDITATION.

De Profundis (Ps. CXXX.).

FEW expressions in the Scriptures have awakened a profounder echo from the human heart than the first words of this psalm, "Out of the depths"—*De Profundis*. A great part of life, indeed—possibly the largest space of it—passes without any sense of these depths. In the ordinary life of childhood and youth, the ordinary business of manhood, the soul sails, as it were, upon a level ocean and on an even keel. But in most lives there come those periods when, at the Divine word, "the stormy wind ariseth, and lifteth up the waves thereof," when "they mount up to the heaven and go down again to the depths," and the soul "is melted because of the trouble." The best poets of the world, indeed, have said again and again, in varied tones, that until a man or woman has passed through that experience they know not the realities of life, its possibilities and dangers, its evil and its good, the heavenly and infernal powers by which it is surrounded. No man is in a position to judge what the problems of life are, and what is their true solution, who has never looked at them *De Profundis*. The depths may be opened to him in various ways—by some disaster from without which plunges him into suffering and helplessness, such as those captivities which wrung some of the bitterest cries of these psalms from the hearts of the Jews; in some severe bereavement, which wrenches from him half the life of his soul; or in the revelation to him of his own evil, whether by the consequences of some of his wrong-doing coming home to him, or by the anguish of an awakened conscience; or.

finally, it may come to him at the approach of death, when the windows of heaven and hell are opened to him, and he gazes appalled into the abysses of a future world. At one time or another a man must expect to find himself in the midst of these depths, and, at his wits' end, sensible of his own utter feebleness, physical and moral, in this world and the next. As long as things run smoothly a man may escape the consideration of these realities; but they are none the less around him, and he may find himself plunged into them at any moment. If there are any persons who escape them, they are hardly to be envied; for the way to the heights of life is out of its depths, as the mountains must be ascended from their valleys.

The chief question of life, accordingly, its ultimate question—the question of its last and most solemn hour, at all events—is, What is a man to do when he finds himself in these depths? We have here the Psalmist's answer: "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord." In that cry, and in all it involves, lies the life and reality of religion, and, above all, of the Christian religion. The Psalmist's experience assures us that there is a living Being to whom the soul can thus cry out of the depths. Those who live without religion, or those who tell us that we know nothing of the unseen world or of God, forbid that cry. To them the world must needs be a vast system of laws, an immense mechanism, in which the individual soul is but a very small part, which must meet its fate as it may, and bear the consequences of its action without modification. If there were no living Being superior to the powers and forces of the world in which we exist, whether here or hereafter, then, when a man is in the depths, he must make up his mind to let the waves roll over him; he must be content that the waters should overwhelm him, that the stream should go over his soul. Or, if he knows of no such living Being, he is at least destitute of any comfort in such moments of agony and helplessness; he can have no assurance whatever of deliverance, and must remain destitute of the hope and energy which such assurance affords. In the evil of a man's heart, when his sins are brought home to him, when he sees the apparently irreparable wrong that he has done to others, when he recognises even more clearly the apparently irremediable corruption of his own soul, then, if there were no living Power above him, to bring him the salvation he cannot bring to himself, what hope could he have of peace or deliverance? If man were alone amidst the fixed laws of Nature there could be no forgiveness, no reparation of ruined souls and lives—in a word, no salvation.

The condition of a man in such circumstances is indicated by the verse which follows: "If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" Nature, as we are continually reminded, the ordinary course of life, marks and observes iniquities and errors, and exacts their strict penalty. In the ordinary course of things a man reaps as he sows, and the discipline of life is based on this principle. It is maintained as God's ordinary law for the purpose of our moral education. But if there be no modifying power, no Divine mercy and equity, what can we do but echo the Psalmist's words: "Lord, who may abide it?" Who can fail to be sensible that if, in our various relations with one another, every fault was marked, every error punished with strict justice, every debt exacted, neither individual nor society could stand? Forgiveness, as our Lord has impressed upon us so earnestly and repeatedly, is the first condition of our common life. But if we need it in our ordinary dealings with each other, how much more in our relations to those eternal laws of right and wrong with which our souls are confronted in their secret life, in their central and abiding consciousness? Are all those sins—some of weakness, some of passion, some of blindness, some of wilfulness—which are recalled to our minds at a season like this, and which crowd upon the soul in their darkness in moments of solitary meditation, are all these to be marked, observed, maintained, in their abiding effect? How could it be otherwise if we were only the creatures of law, living in a world of nothing but laws and of a fixed system? If we had no assurance of our being in communion with any other power, where would be our refuge in those moments of anguish or our hope in the future? Accordingly, the central blessing of revealed religion, and of the Christian religion above all, is the assurance that when these words *De Profundis* are wrung from our lips, we can always add to them: "I cry unto Thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice: let Thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications."

For the Psalmist proceeds: "For there is forgiveness with Thee; therefore shalt Thou be feared." That is the ground on which the soul bases its cry to the Lord—that there is forgiveness with Him. The God to whom it is privileged to appeal is "the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin," though He will by no means spare the guilty. He was revealed to the Psalmist as a living Person, capable of exercising, and continually exercising, that personal dealing with persons which takes into account their various positions,

and who is able, by His Divine supremacy, to deal equitably, as well as justly, with them. He can be with them by His loving sympathy and His spiritual influence in their temptations; and if, in spite of His gracious help, they have fallen, He can, in proportion to their repentance and faith, soften their punishment to them, or enable them to bear it, and eventually restore them. There is "mercy with Him, therefore shall He be feared." If there were no mercy with Him—if we were in contact simply with a supreme force, acting regardless of individuals, incapable of modification, exacting all consequences to the uttermost farthing—we might indeed dread such a force, we might bow in blank resignation to its pitiless decrees; but why should we yield to it that fear, that humble and reverential regard, that homage, which is the characteristic of religious faith? It is the mercy of God combined with His power, the assurance that "He is able to forgive us and most willing to pardon us," which brings us to His feet in gratitude and hope, as well as awe, and which makes us cling to Him as the one Source of our hope amidst the depths of life and death. "A just God and a Saviour." It is the combination of these two attributes which, in spite of all difficulties, and amidst all the doubts which the intellect can raise, attaches men to the throne of God as revealed in Christ and in the Scriptures, and evokes their perpetual cry to Him.

But what justification have we for this belief? Where is the evidence for it? Mere hope alone that there might be such a Being, capable of all this mercy and power, would not suffice to evoke a psalm of such confidence and such earnest prayer. Nor does it suffice with mankind at large. There are utterances, indeed, in all religions which are the testimonies of the natural Christianity of the human soul. But take the world at large, apart from the influences of the Jewish and Christian revelations, and these words, "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord," are excluded from men's use, and inconsistent with their formal religious principles. The fatalism of the Mohammedan, the resignation of the Buddhist, are inconsistent with such a cry. What has created it in the Jewish and Christian Churches? The Psalmist proceeds to give the answer: "I wait for the Lord: my soul doth wait; and in His word is my hope." "In His word"—that is the source, and the sole adequate source, of this faith, and of these appeals of the soul to God. The Psalmist wrote, as has just been recalled to mind, under the influence of that revelation of God which declares Him to be a God "merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and of great goodness, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin." As the course of Jewish history

proceeded, prophet after prophet reiterated the same gracious declaration. They came, indeed, to warn the people that God was coming out of His place to execute judgment upon them for their apostasy and their numerous sins, threatening them with the most terrible judgments in the desolation of their land, and in the sufferings which would be inflicted on them by the invading hosts of Assyrian and Babylonian conquerors; but yet, in the same breath, continually assuring them that God's mercy and love were ever living, even amidst these chastisements, and that He was able and willing to pardon them. "Turn ye even now to me, saith the Lord, with all your heart, with fasting and with weeping and with mourning; and rend your heart and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God; for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and repenteth Him of the evil. Who knoweth if He will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind Him?" Or, in Isaiah's still more touching words: "Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; and though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land; but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." It is this combined message of judgment and mercy, the declaration that "there is forgiveness with Him, therefore shall He be feared," which was impressed ever more deeply upon Jewish hearts by the words of the prophets, or, rather, by the word of God which they proclaimed. This was the basis for the Psalmist's assurance. Our ground for the same faith includes all these prophetic assurances; but we rest above all on the far stronger and final assurances of the great Prophet and Priest, our Lord Jesus Christ. His characteristic message was that of the forgiveness of sins. He said that He came to save His people from their sins. He brought the assurance of forgiveness and salvation from His Father; and thenceforth it is upon His word, His assurance, that the Christian builds his hope, and cries to God out of the depths. Let these assurances, and, above all, the assurances of our Lord, be left out of view, and there is no end to the despairing speculations which the human mind may weave respecting its own future and the future of the world at large. But if we accept the word of our Lord we can rest upon His assurance that "with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption, and that He shall deliver Israel from all his iniquities."

"From all his iniquities." In those concluding words of the psalm we are brought back to deliverance from what are, after all, the deepest and most gloomy depths into which the soul

falls, and we are given an assurance of the salvation for which, above all things, the heart craves. There cannot be a serious soul which, even without the message of a season like this, is not possessed by one desire above all others: to be delivered from its iniquities, and to realize its better aspirations. It is the privilege of the young and comparatively innocent to cherish visions and ideals of high aims and noble achievements. It is too often the penalty of maturer life to lament the defeat of such aspirations; and perhaps it is its greatest temptation to regard such failures with a cynical acquiescence. But in this psalm, and in the promises of the Gospel, we have the assurance that everyone has it in his power to realize what, after all, is the most blessed of all hopes—restoration to the goodness and truth for which he knows he was designed. It is this which is rendered possible by the revelation of that living God and Saviour to whom the psalm is addressed. No mere natural forces can remedy the past, or restore the purity the soul has lost, or raise it to the height for which it was intended. That is the work of the Saviour and of His Spirit. According to the memorable proverb, "The fining pot is for silver, and the furnace for gold; but the Lord trieth the hearts." Our redemption is assured to us by the personal action on our souls of a living Person, who by His sacrifice of Himself has made atonement for the sin of the world, and who by His Spirit is able to penetrate into our hearts, and with His almighty power to regenerate them. The Gospel assures us that we are in communion with that Saviour, and each Lent we are invited to turn to Him with deeper earnestness and sincerity. In proportion as we are really sensible of the depths into which by our weakness and sin we have fallen, in proportion to the earnestness with which we cry to Him out of them, and submit ourselves to His gracious influences, shall we learn by our own experience the truth of the Psalmist's assurance that "with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption, and He shall redeem Israel from all his sins."

HENRY WACE.

