IS THE WORLD GROWING WORSE?

A SERMON OF HOPE.

BY REV. RICHARD MONTAGUE, D. D.

"And the Apostles said unto the Lord, 'Increase our faith.'"—Luke 17: 5.

It is not quite certain what called out this earnest request. It has been plausibly conjectured that it was in response to Jesus' pithy exhortation, when the disciples saw the fig tree withered at His word,—"Have faith in God." "The wonderful works that I do," Jesus says, "you shall perform and greater works than these, if you but have sufficient trust in God." And Peter and the rest, conscious how imperfect was their faith, yet knowing that the seeds of divine confidence were in their hearts, replied, "Lord, increase our faith."

Whether or not this connection can be made out, it is wholly probable that some extraordinary manifestation of the power of Jesus had impressed the apostles with their need of divine help for the accomplishment of their mission, and it both taught them their own weakness and awakened the cry, "Lord increase our faith."

Some faith they already had. A little power, and love, and joy were already theirs. But there was need of more. And they had learned that all power and grace in human hearts go back to faith as their root, and so they asked, "Add to our faith."

What is faith? Specific saving faith is that assent of the mind and consent of the heart which receives Jesus Christ as a personal Saviour and Lord. But the word is often used in special and larger meanings. In the epistle to the Hebrews it is presented as the substance, *i. e.*, the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence, *i. e.*, a conviction of things not seen. We may take it in its widest meaning in our text. It is that recognition of the reality and supremacy of a spiritual world which so immeasurably separates the consciousness of man from that of beast. It is that power and disposition to keep in thought the invisible things of God, and immortality, which leads men now, as it led men of old, to confess that they are strangers and pilgrims on the earth. It is that confidence in the wisdom and power and goodness of God which keeps the mind in a buoyant optimism concerning the issue of events, personal, national, or world-wide. It is that daily dependence on God for strength, forgiveness and guidance, which keeps us serene, sweet and docile. It is that large recognition of the purpose and providence of God, which leads us to expect great things. It is a little child's trust in the unseen, untold treasures of his father's knowledge and power. All this is what we want when we intelligently pray, "Increase our faith."

The petition is always a timely one, but, as I have cast my thought over men's needs to-day, it seems as if it were never more pertinent than now, and I wish, if I can, to stir up our hearts to this prayer.

I. THE CHRISTIAN PATRIOT.

It is a timely petition for the Christian patriot anxious for the welfare of his country. The intelligent student of current history has no question that he is living in a critical era. As in the evolution of the material world there have been long periods of comparative quiet and stability, succeeded by ages of disturbance and readjustment, so in the development of human history, the movement has not been the quiet flow of the gentle river, but rather the complex movement of brook, and stream, and cascade, of calm river and mighty torrent. Ours is an age of mental fermentation. History, good or bad, is making very rapidly, and the germs of great changes in human affairs have not only sent their roots into the earth, but are pushing their shoots above the ground. Japan is changing her civilization. China is invaded from coast and inland border by Christian teachers. British rule is extending in the East. Africa is opened to commerce and Christianity. Turkey's days in Europe are numbered. Good judges see much, especially in the young Emperor's spirit of imperialism, to awaken anxiety touching the permanence of the present order in Germany. No man may say how long Russian absolutism can check and suppress the rising spirit of freedom in the Empire of the Czar; but internal disturbance and external plotting are Russia's sure inheritance for a long time to come. Careful observers see conditions which must, they think, soon lead to a general European war. England has by no means settled all her problems when Ireland has home rule. America has her grave problems. Immigration, monopolies, disturbed relations between workingmen and capitalists, strikes, boycotts, occasional mob violence, rapine, and even homicide shoot up their lurid flames. There is a widespread feeling of uncertainty as to the outcome of our civilization. Men are asking, whereto will this grow? Undoubtedly, some see the foreshadowing of our national downfall, in all such conflicts. Not a few find in the world-wide disquietude a sign of speedy universal rest.

For myself, I cannot so judge. I read that when God's Spirit moved upon the face of the waters chaos began to shape itself into cosmos. Modern science has taught that nearly every step in that progress has been accompanied by disturbance, conflict, waste, partial ruin. Every new and superior race of animals that has appeared on earth has fed on its inferior, has fought for its position, has survived because fit. Every advance in human fortunes, has cost the same sacrifices. The great principles of modern civilization, of Anglo-Saxon government, cost our forefathers thought, sacrifice, and blood. Their maintenance and development cannot be secured without price. All these disturbances of our day are not mere wild vagaries. The Russian Nihilist, extreme as he may be, stands for some inherent rights of man. The uneasy Celt has had a cause which England and the world now admit. The labor agitations of the United States are not the outcome of mere perversity. The bread riots of Berlin and Dantzig are not mere wickedness. Wage-earners have had some grievances. Capitalists in too many cases have been grinding and unjust. Combinations of labor are wise, necessary, and will issue ultimately in the general good. While there is temporary folly, excess, injustice, and violence, we believe there is to be ultimate benefit and prosperity from these disturbances. We are simply witnessing the incidental harm of a great upward movement of humanity throughout the nations. God has many generations in which to accomplish His purposes, and the evils of to-day will accrue to the advantage of to-morrow. Universal history shows the unity of God's purpose—the education of the race. The movement of humanity is a movement of progress. The Christian patriot, if alarmed, needs more confidence in the divine purpose, he must grasp the divine promises. The Golden Rule is to be the law of human relations. Men are not receding from it. But by conflict sometimes, by conference often, by initial impulse rarely, they are slowly working toward it. It is to come. In that conviction, let us pray: "Increase our faith."

II. THE CHRISTIAN STUDENT.

This is a suitable petition for the Christian student as he views the conflicts of religious thought. This has often been styled an unbelieving age. It certainly is not a credulous age. It is characteristically critical. It is more analytic than creative. It tells you how things grow, though it does not so often start them growing.

The immense progress of physical science within this century has awakened methods of research and criticism before unpracticed. These methods have been most fearlessly applied to religion. It is not strange that faith has been disturbed in many minds. All such movements tend to extremes. Physical science has tended to usurp the scholar's attention. Moreover, the new methods of research have brought to light certain Biblical and universal facts, which compel a readjustment of former statements of religious faith. The strict definitions of the past have been modified. The lines of demarkation between the sects are disappearing. Some men who used to believe, no longer do believe. Undoubtedly there is in some directions a falling away from the standards of our fathers.

But then, that is of itself nothing alarming. Every generation, if its religion is to be real, and not parasitic, must recast its expression of faith. The Bible does not give us ready-made dogmas. These are the combinations of divine facts found in Scripture, which, in some degree, each age must make anew. Every generation must have a new theology, if it is to have a real theology. The present fermentation of religious thought is inevitable. It will issue in good. If we rightly understand, we shall thank God for it. Moreover, the irreligion of our day is greatly exaggerated in relation to that of former ages. This is not justly styled the age of unbelief. When Mr. Tyndal first visited this country he expressed amazement that, without the patronage of a state establishment, we had erected so many noble church edifices and were prosecuting such vigorous religious work. Can that fairly be called an age of declining faith in which, during eighty years, the church-membership of our country increased three times as rapidly as the population? Is that a time of religious decay when evangelical communicants rise from one in fifteen to one in five of the entire nation? Is that an unbelieving age when Chicago universities are endowed with millions of dollars for the glory of Christ, and as a "thank-offering to God"?

Is it an unbelieving age which sends its missionaries to Japan, China, Burmas, India, the Pacific Isles; and, when the miasma of the African coast, or the fierce cruelty of enraged natives, lays its score and more of godly educated men beneath the sod, rises and in the person of twice as many successors says with yet more eager zeal: "Africa must be redeemed; the Dark Continent must see the Light of the World?" Is poetry, heroism extinct?

It is well enough to bear in mind that faith has other tests than rigidity of creed. Orthopraxy is more vital than orthodoxy. Right doing is more essential than correct thinking. Missionary zeal, benevolence, charity, are quite as good tests of faith as is dogma. We believe that, broadly speaking, the doctrines of the church were never, since the apostolic era, nearer the New Testament standard than they are to-day. The enterprises of the church point on nearly every hand to advance, growth, and a hopeful future. If ever we are tempted to question the progress of our Lord's kingdom, we need to pray: "Add to our faith."

III. THE CHRISTIAN WORKER.

There is no better petition for the church in its work of winning men. For win men it must, if it is to fulfil the Master's commission. For the church, stability is the beginning of death. She must grow to maintain life. She lives to grow. Conquest is her mission.

Now there is frequent discussion in our religious and secular press, at conventions, and in private circles, touching the secrets or conditions of church expansion. Nearly every church has its spasm once in five or ten or twenty years of revising its methods of procedure for conquering the world and baffling Satan. It gets a new preacher. It revolutionizes its manner of praising God in the service of song. It builds a new meeting house. It employs missionaries. It organizes committees. It summons an evangelist. It adopts fresh, special measures.

All this, I believe, is to be commended. I have no commendation for that conception of church work which goes on from generation to generation in the same humdrum way, content with old methods when God has introduced new circumstances, drowsy and self-satisfied, when God is saying, "Awake, thou that sleepest." Where there is life there will be, there must be, judicious change. The man who conducts a business now precisely as he conducted it twenty years ago, will quickly be crowded out and left behind. The man whose ideas have not been modified or enlarged is on the back track. The church which cannot or does not adapt its services, its activities, its missionary efforts, to new conditions, should bend its ear and hear Christ saying: "Thou hast a name that thou livest, but thou art dead."

But true as all this is, it is minor, subordinate truth. No change of method can lead men to Christ, if it be not the outcome of spiritual life. We are sometimes told that we ought to accommodate our ways to the world, if we are to bring the world into the church. Ah, I am sometimes not so much troubled to know how to win the world to Christ, as I am pained to know how to check the world from winning so many Christians to itself.

The world knows well enough what a true religion is. It has no respect for accommodations and compromises. It may oppose, but it honors a spiritual church.

If you and I, my brethren, are to be instrumental in winning our fellows to Jesus Christ, we need to cultivate a deeper faith. I use this word in its broadest sense. If faith be the power of seeing the invisible, we need more faith. If faith be confidence in the promises of God, we need added faith. If faith be, daily dependence on our heavenly Father we need increased faith. If faith be the acceptance of mercy in Jesus Christ, we need abounding faith. Beyond all power of organizations, societies, choirs, rituals or meeting-houses is this invisible, spiritual, but mighty power, of a man or woman who is seen to live under the influence of eternal things.

We hear much of the Puritans, and of the Puritans' religion. They are much criticised, and sometimes justly. We may not care to copy all their ways. But one thing we may easily imitate. The Puritan believed in God. He was not a far-off being, He was not an impersonal force, He was a personal presence, dwelling in man's conscience, noting all his acts, and sure to summon him to punishment or reward. The Puritan believed in heaven and hell. He did not have the gross material ideas so often attributed to him. His conceptions were rational, scriptural. But he had not so wiped out the lines of parting 'twixt good and evil as to merge the futures of the righteous and the wicked into a common state of peace. He believed in a personal Redeemer. The law of God was so holy and the wrath of God against sin so awful, that it needed a mighty Saviour to accomplish man's deliverance. The Puritan loved Christ, he revered Him. He adored Him. He did not address Him in the sickly sentimentalities of some modern hymns. He did not violate sound taste and pious reverence by pretending to have a familiarity with the Son of God which has been claimed by some of His degenerate successors, but he did hold communion with his risen Lord, and he did feel the power of an endless life. Christ was in him, the hope of glory. And the Puritans trusted God. Theirs was not a vague confidence in the wise order of nature. It was not a sanguine temperament willing to run its chances. It was heroic faith,—that living trust in the protecting care of their heavenly Father, which nerved their arms to fell the forest, to plough the fields, to plant new colonies, to build new school-houses, to erect churches, to resist encroaching enemies; and gave them confidence, when their work was accomplished, to commit their souls to the great Shepherd, who should lead them through the valley of the shadow of death to the green pastures and still waters of a happy immortality.

And it is something of this spirit of the men of old which is needed in all these towns and cities of a growing West, if we are to be more than mere animals, machines or treasure vaults. The rush and care of material pursuits are likely to lead many of us to forget that we are men, created in God's image. Some are not content with eating, drinking, sleeping, mines and real estate, driving in half-mad pursuit after the dollar, for six days in the week. They must even use the Lord's Day for secular gain. They are not satisfied to make good, or even large provision for their bodily wants. They would even forget that they have any souls. Christians can win and save them only as they exhibit a higher standard. They must live as seeing the invisible, or fail. If the church is secular, what may the world be expected to be? If her standards are material and selfish, what shall the unchurched become? O, army of Christ, your battle is against principalities and powers, spiritual wickedness in high places. Lift high the standard of the cross, and march forth to the battle with united prayer: "Increase our faith."

Ministerial Reading.

BY SMITH BAKER, D. D.

More than any other man the preacher needs to be a reading man. It may do for the merchant to read nothing but his ledger and the market reports, or for the physician to read only what pertains to his special science, or even for the lawyer to be conversant only in the line of his profession. It may suffice for the travelling evangelist who spends only three or four weeks in a church and preaches the same sermons over and over, to study only the Bible. But the pastor who is to devote years of preaching to the same people must be a broader and more rounded man. He must be more than a Bible student, or he will be narrow in his views of life and tame in his presentation of truth.

The object of ministerial reading is three-fold: for illustration, for enlarging one's view of truth, and for increase of thought power. This requires that one's reading should be varied and much outside of purely Biblical study and sermon making. Religious truth, more than any other department of truth, touches all lines of knowledge. To it all other truth is tributary. The minister, aside from his sermon making and Bible study, should read at least three hours each day. Not newspapers and the gossip of light literature, but that which will feed his imagination, increase his general knowledge and sharpen his mind.

He does not read for pleasure alone; but that he may be the better prepared to unfold and present God's Word to the people. Therefore, history, poetry, fiction, natural science, metaphysics, politics and theology are so many different streams from which he is constantly to drink. The common books, as a rule, should be let alone. Most ministers after years of experience, have many volumes the like of which they no longer buy. The second-hand and third-hand presentation of questions, and other ministers' sermons, are not the books to develop the preacher's power, though now and then, one will wish to see how the masters present truth; but as a rule it is better to go where the sermon makers themselves went, and drink from the fountain heads and not from other men's little dippers. The minister should read the highest authorities; his fiction should be three or four volumes a year of the masters, and his poetry of the same nature. Then the preacher should always read somewhat of that which it is hard to read. The merely enjoyable does not increase one's power to think. As the muscles need to lift in order to become strong, so the brain must sometimes think hard over a book in order for its growth. No matter if a book is not interesting or does not instruct one, if it is the work of a master and makes him think to understand it, then it pays; for it helps him in his own thinking. Lincoln sometimes before he was to make an important speech went through with a problem of Euclid, for his own benefit. Frequently when in the midst of preparing a sermon, and the mind becomes sluggish, let the minister read a few pages of metaphysics which may have no connection with his subject, and his own thoughts will come the easier to him.

It is well to be reading several works at a time, as pupils in school carry along several studies in their course. It keeps the mind from becoming tired, and secures a variety all the time, for we have no time to lose. To read only one department of knowledge, or make of some science a special devotion, is apt to reveal itself in one's preaching. We knew a good man who took geology as a kind of side study. He became very fond of it, and proficient in it, but his people remarked that in each sermon they could tell where "the old red sandstone" or some other geologic expression was to come.

The minister should not make a hobby of anything save the Bible. That is his special study. And then go out into all departments of knowledge and cull a little from all truth to illustrate and enforce the Word of God. This requires plan and work. For instance, a friend during the month of January had the following books: Procter's "Popular Astronomy;" Arnold's "Light of the World"; St. Amand's "Famous Women of the French Court;" Madam DeStael's "Corinne;" Gore's "Incarnation" and James's "Psychology," all but one of them recent works of the best authority. A part of them are solid beefsteak, a part good turkey, a part chicken-salad, a part sponge cake and a part ice cream; but all good. The pond which does not have streams running into it will soon become dry. A good deacon once said, books were to ministers what dressing was to his garden.

A minister should constantly set apart a little of his income for the best works, and if he cannot then go to the public library, and if there is no public library, then borrow from his fellow ministers and from his people. For the preacher must not only exercise his brain but he must feed it, and the better he feeds it, the more he can exercise it. Therefore, read; read much and read only the best.

—*Advance.*

Helen Keller.

"Phebe Bird" writes in the Chicago *Advance* some interesting things about Helen Keller, a little deaf and dumb and blind girl, who has of late attracted much attention on account of her remarkable intelligence and the wonderful progress she has made in learning:

You remember that, as the result of a dreadful sickness when she was eighteen months old, she became totally blind and deaf, and of course could not learn to talk. When she was nearly seven years old she was placed under the care of a teacher, Miss Sullivan, with whom she has remained ever since. Within four months from her first lesson, she had learned four hundred and fifty words, which she could spell correctly with her fingers, and which she always used correctly. In a little while longer she had learned to read the raised letters for the blind, and to write; and some of the letters she wrote would do credit to a child much older than she, who had possession of all her senses.

Since that time her education has been going on, and she has made wonderful progress. She has even learned to speak some words, though her ordinary method of communication is by her fingers or by writing.

She is now a sweet, healthy, happy girl of eleven years old, finding employment in everything, and her active mind reaching out in every direction in search of something new.

Whether wisely or not—unwisely we think—her teacher has tried to keep her in ignorance of God and all spiritual things; wanting to see whether so bright and active a mind as Helen's would of itself, alone and unaided, seek to get at the Source of all things. But reading as she did, and coming into communication with so many other people, it was impossible to keep from her all knowledge of God, and three years ago, she began to overwhelm her teacher with such questions as these:

"I wish to write about things I do not understand. Who made the earth and the seas, and everything? What makes the sun hot? Where was I before I came to mother? I know that plants grow from seeds which are in the ground, but I am sure people do not grow that way. I never saw a child-plant. Little birds and chickens come out of eggs. I have seen them. What was the egg before it was an egg? Why does not the earth fall, it is so very large and heavy? Tell me something that Father Nature does? May I read the book called the Bible? Please tell your little pupil many things when you have much time."

Sometimes her teacher has to remind her that there are a great many things in the world which even the wisest men cannot explain; but she always replies: "We must study very hard, and perhaps we shall find out more about them."

She has been writing letters to Bishop Phillips Brooks, asking him to explain some of the questions that puzzle her so. Here is one of them:

"Why does the great Father in heaven think it is best for us to have very great sorrow and pain sometimes? I am always happy, and so was little Lord Fauntleroy; but dear little Jakey's life was full of sadness, and God did not put the light in his eyes, and he was blind, and his father was not gentle and loving. Do you think Jakey loved his Father in heaven more because his other father was unkind to him? How did God tell people that His home was in heaven? When people do very wrong and hurt animals and treat children unkindly God is grieved, but what will He do to them to teach them to be pitiful and loving? Please tell me something that you know about God. I like so much to hear about my loving Father, who is so good and wise."

Bishop Brooks answered very kindly:

"I want to tell you how glad I am that you are so happy, and enjoying your home so very much. I can almost think I see you with your father and mother and little sisters, with all the brightness of the beautiful country about you, and it makes me very glad to know how glad you are.

"I am glad also to know, from the questions which you ask me, what you are thinking about. I do not see how we can help thinking about God, when He is so good to us all the time. . . . .

"But God does not only want us to be *happy*. He wants us to be *good*. He wants that most of all. He knows that we can be really happy only when we are good. A great deal of the trouble that is in the world is medicine which is very bad to take, but which it is good to take because it makes you better. We see how good people may be in great trouble when we think of Jesus, who was the greatest sufferer that ever lived, and yet was the best being, and so, I am sure, the happiest being, that the world has ever seen."

Again she writes:

"It fills my heart with joy to know that God loves me so much that He wishes me to live always, and that He gives me everything that makes me happy—loving friends, a precious little sister, sweet flowers, and, best of all, a heart that can love and sympathize and a mind that can think and enjoy. I am thankful to my heavenly Father for giving me all these precious things. But I have many questions to ask you—some things that I cannot understand, because I am quite ignorant; but when I am older I shall not be so much puzzled.

"What is a spirit? Did Jesus go to school when he was a child? Teacher cannot find anything about it in the Bible. How does God deliver people from evil? Where is heaven? My teacher says it does not matter where it is so long as we know that it is a beautiful place, and that we shall see God there and be happy always. But I should like to know where it is and what it is like. What is conscience? Once I wished very much to read my new book about Heidi when teacher had told me to study. Something whispered to me that it would be wrong to disobey dear teacher. Was it *conscience* that whispered to me it would be wrong to disobey?"

Bishop Brooks answers:

"God tells us in our hearts that He is our Father. That is what we call conscience—God's voice in our hearts. Your heart takes God into it as the flower takes in the sunshine; and then when you think God's thoughts and do God's actions, it is a sign to you that God is in you and that you belong to Him.

"People have always thought that God must be their Father because He showed Himself to them in the beautiful world, and because he spoke to them in their hearts; but he wanted to make it perfectly clear and sure to them, so He came and lived among them. He took our human life and lived in it. He showed us what our life would be if it was absolutely filled with His Spirit. That is what you read in the beautiful story of Jesus. And we can see Him and hear what He says and come near to Him too; for we have the story of the precious words which He spoke, and of how He was willing even to suffer to make men good; and we know that he promised when he went away that he would always be where people could always talk to Him and love Him and tell Him all their troubles and their needs.

"I suppose that Jesus went to school when He was a little boy. Indeed, we have one story of His going up to the temple and asking the wise doctors the questions which had come up in His mind; and that was really going to school. At any rate, we know that He lived in His mother's house and was very obedient. And so we know that even in the simplest things, in obedience and faithfulness to those who love us, we may be like God."

Her teacher says she received the idea of a God as naturally as a flower receives the sunshine. She gave a glad assent to the thought that she is God's child, that He loves her, and wishes her to love Him. The story of the life of Jesus affected her greatly when she heard it. One day she said sadly:

"I am blind and deaf. That is why I cannot see God."

Then her teacher tried to explain that God is a spirit, and that none of us can see Him with our natural eyes; we can only apprehend Him when our hearts are full of love, and we try to be good and to be like Him.

Her teacher says that Helen seems instinctively to know what is right, and to do it joyously, and to recoil from what is wrong. She lives in an atmosphere of love. She loves everybody around her, and when any of the children are naughty, she immediately begins to find some apology and will say:

"It was a mistake. He did not mean to do wrong."

Helen is now at the Perkins Institution for the Blind, in Boston. She loves to study and loves to play, and enters into everything with all a child's enjoyment and enthusiasm; and while learned men are wondering over her remarkable powers and the progress she has made in the five years since she came under instruction, she goes on her happy way, utterly unconscious of the great interest she has aroused among thousands of people who never saw her.

She writes letters, writes in her diary, and sometimes writes a "composition." One of these last, "A Dream," we print in another column, that you may see how vivid is her imagination, and great her power of expression.

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