

Sunday Reading.

Year unto Year.

As year unto year is added,
God's promises seem more fair,
The glory of life eternal,
The rest that remaineth there;
The peace like a broad, deep river
That never will cease to flow;
The perfect, divine completeness
That the finite never know.

As year unto year is added,
God's purposes seem more plain,
We follow a thread in fancy,
Then catch and lose it again;
But we are far on in the future
A rounded, perfected bliss;
And what are the wayside shadows,
If the way but leads to this?

As year unto year is added,
And the twilight of life shall fall,
May we grow to be more like Jesus,
More tender and true to all,
More patient in trial, more loving,
More eager his truth to know,
In the daily paths of his choosing
More willing in faith to go.

Retrospect and Prospect; or, the Old Year and the New.

BY REV. DR. STANFORD.

"Because Thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of Thy wings will I rejoice."—PSALM lxxvii.

In this passage we have first the language of review, and next the language of resolve. "Thou hast been my help." The words are vital, for whether they give a short report of a long story, "Thou hast been my help." When? Let that be the first question noticed under review. When? Why this morning. The when at which we glance is the year. The last Sunday of the year is a day on which we seem to stand for a little breathing moment on the bridge of time. We look up the river and down the river; we look this way and that way; and while we stand just here looking at the past, we say to Him who is Lord of all time, "Thou hast been my help." Ever since I look back upon a marvellous individual story. Sometimes when you have been out on your travels of recreation you have gone into a park and have been delighted to look up an avenue of the trees, trees, tree, pillars of the sky, veiled with green leaves, trailing into the distance; and such a road has been our road in the past. For ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy years some of you look back through an avenue of time! 365 days take the last measurement—what an avenue of mercies over-arching mercies, blessings of the way, marking the path, the manifold wonderful help; many helpings. In sunshine and shadow, in summer and winter, on the land and on the sea, up hill and down hill, sometimes in day when you have been obliged to understand the laws of health, when a cold and disease invade this trembling house of clay; sometimes when your intellect seemed to be strained to a tension which was unbearable, when the strings of life were about to snap—yet you have been brought through. You, in the past year, looked forward and said, "When I come up to that mountain, I know what I shall do; I shall never be able to travel over it, or go round it or through it." When you got up to it, you had to say, "Who art thou, oh, thou great mountain? Before Zebulun thou hast become a plain." David said, "O day I shall perish," yet he passed through that. There was a time when Elisha thought he should perish, yet he lived to be more illustrious than ever. Jacob said, "All these things are against me." But the Spirit said, Ah, Jacob, all these things are for you, not against you, and there will be a time when your illumined spirit will see it; how these things have been working out to God's glory. There was a time when the disciples said, "Lord we are going down, Lord save us." But they did not perish. They live, seated on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. They lived, to write wonderful books, and we live because they live. So in your history of the year. You looked forward to something which you thought would be death to you still here you are, every one, to thank God for His helping mercy. So that this is the first answer we have to give when we speak of the review, "Because Thou hast been my help."

Another question must be answered: Who has been my help? "Thou hast been my help," said the poet monarch. Did he mean Job or Jonathan, or his mother or father, or Absalom, or his friends? David uses the personal; and thank God for the personality. Read the book of Psalms in these days when science is trying to obliterate the personality of God. Thank God that He is One to whom you can say "Thou." I

have heard of one who became a most distinguished philosophical Christian thinker, who had lost at one time all faith in the Divine personality, but who, through Divine grace, found it was full of joy unspeakable. Some of you have gone very near to that loss, so that you have come very near to the joy of this discovery. Oh, to think that in the joy of this universe, in the movements which are so overwhelming and intricate, there is no controlling Person! No one beyond man! Oh, to feel obliged to shut oneself up by philosophy, so called, to that thought! If one of you is now a Christian that person can tell me the joy he felt when he was able to say, "There is a God in the universe." There is no longer the dreary "No." "There is Love; there is a heart that beats in response to my heart; there is a hand that touches my hand; that incomprehensible magnitude; that mysterious personality that fills all space; the awful abysses of whose glory are beyond our power to search; whose dazzling white purity makes the holiest spirits cry, 'Holy, holy, holy.' He is a man; He is a God. I can say to Him, 'Thou art my God.'" So it was with David, long before our era. He looked when he wanted light, not to the place where death was not to the place where state or royalty was, not to the place where an army was, but "I will lift up my eyes to the hills, my help cometh from the Lord." Heaven and earth are full of the signs of what God is. Oh, that "God is my help." Only think of that. Think of the landscape, all black with night, turned into day. Think of all that is meant by the word God; all the power, all the wisdom, all the love of eternity, all the ability of the Almighty—all that turned into help! And, further, it is the language of appropriation, "God is my help." Let us understand, who are Christians, that all through this very year God is our very own.

The dear delights we here enjoy,
And fondly call our own,
Are but shadows of things borrowed now
To be repaid to Him.

But God is eternally our own. This is the answer to the second question in the review of this review.

Then the third inquiry comes—How have you learned this? Why, experimentally. David was speaking from experience. We can speak from experience. There are some who still smile at the term "experimental treatise" or "sermon." Why not smile at the term "experimental chemistry" or "experimental philosophy"? Only an experimental Christian is a Christian. "Thou hast been my help" is our experimental experience. We have trusted Christ, and we have found Him our help. For He is not the help of those who have never tried Him. Tried in all circumstances He has been faithful. We can never point to one single passage in the past year's history and say, "Oh, Christ, thou didst fail us here." We have also experimentally got to this conclusion through our trial of His help through prayer. We have a great deal of discussion in the present day about the philosophy of prayer. When a man is known to be a praying man he is almost sure to come into contact with some theologian who knows nothing higher than science, and he will say, "Philosophy says the alleged power of prayer is impossible. It is impossible for you to say you can set aside the laws of creation with prayer." Who wants to set aside the laws of creation? God can answer my prayer without touching the constitution of creation. I find things brought into my nature which expect prayer to be answered. I find in the Bible all inducements and promises and incentives to encourage obedience to the command to pray without ceasing. "Do not pray until you understand the philosophy of prayer," says the scientist. Common sense refuses to stop prayer until we can understand the philosophy of it. Do not listen to the man who says, "Do not pray until you understand the position of prayer in the councils of the universe." Last year we tried it and found it answered. Answers to prayer are ascertained facts, and no man with a healthy mind will stop prayer or question its efficacy, whatever the difficulties arising from the philosophy of it. When I know from experience last year that God hears and gives help through prayer, I am not likely to be put aside from praying because some young man tells me that the alleged efficacy of prayer is inconsistent with the real stability of natural law. Also—and this is the third particular—we know He has been our help from His words and from our trial of His word. I am afraid many Christians are too hurried, even in their Christian work, to get what is really to be had from the Bible. But if you search for God's helping mercy as for hidden treasure, if you look in the Bible as you look for a lost will, you will get help from the Bible.

Now a few words on the resolve.

"Because Thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of Thy wings will I rejoice." This is the language of trust; but trust expressed in the language of logic, in the language of poetry, in the language of joy. The language of logic, for there is a "therefore" in it. We ought to act logically, as well as talk logically. How often we have the word "therefore" put in this form in the book of Psalms. If we have found God to be strong and wise, ought we not to trust Him, and give our selves up to His guidance? If we have found God to be loving, shall we not therefore abide in His love? Jesus commended to adopt the poetical language of the Old Testament when He spoke of the hen and chickens. So God takes care of us. And this trust was the long age of one who was not yet put of trouble; David was not at rest yet. Yes; he was only a fugitive; he had no friends about him, and very few comforts. He was still in the dark, and we are not out of our troubles yet. There are more to come, surely, if we live—more anxieties, more fears, more great trials, and vexations. What does David call this trouble? A "shadow." What is it that casts a shadow? God's wing. Look at these words of the text in connection with the words that go before, "I will remember Thee upon my bed, and meditate on Thee in the night watches; because Thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of Thy wings will I rejoice." And then he rises from the shadow he was under to the thought of God's wing. Why, these very troubles, after all, to those who trust, are the very things that show God is remembering you. They are the shadow of His wings. Do not be frightened. He is not far away. It is He who has flung this shadow over you. There is the child in the cradle, and a shadow comes over it. Whose shadow is that? Why, the shadow of its mother. Thus, love is very near, comfort is very near, strength is very near, when God is near you. David comforts himself that the shadow is from God. Who told you that the night would never end? Who told you last year, when you were so low down, that you never would be out of the mire clay? We ought to rejoice we have a God who is a fountain of rejoicing, and at whose right hand are pleasures for ever more. We ought to rejoice, and we shall rejoice, if we have the spirit of God in us, in the shadow—even on the sick bed. This, then, is the substance of what I have to say this morning. I want you all to know the power of these words. Those who through the perils and providences of this past year, have turned a deaf and dull ear to God, I want you to learn before the year winds up how to sign with us, "Because Thou hast been my help, therefore will I rejoice in the shadow of Thy wings."

Oh, make but trial of His love,
Experience will decide
How blest are they, and only they,
Who in His truth confide.

A Christmas Eve at Bethlehem.

BY REV. THADDEUS A. SNIVELY.

Two days before Christmas we passed through Bethlehem on our way to Hebron. The latter is as closely associated with the beginnings of the revelation of God's truth to a nation—a peculiar people—as the former with the birth of Jesus Christ—the coming of God in human form—the Revelation to all the world.

The form of Abraham ever rises before the mind when Hebron is mentioned and Hebron and its history are forgotten by thousands who look with profoundest veneration and love to Bethlehem, where one greater than Abraham, though his offspring and heir, was born. In entering Hebron we passed the large tree known as Abraham's Oak—a very ancient one, twenty-three feet in circumference. It cannot be as old as its name suggests by many, many centuries, but it is the last of the family of Oaks of Mamre, under whose branches angels were entertained unawares.

Hebron lies in "the Valley of Eschcol" rich with vineyards, olive trees and fruits. The attraction of the whole place, however, is that which but few Christian pilgrims are allowed to approach, and none to enter for these seven hundred years past—the Cave of Machpelah. So we hastened to look upon the walls which enclose the precious mystery—the place universally admitted by Jews, Christians and Muslims to be the sepulchre of the patriarchs.

The Haram, "the forbidden place," is a building of Jewish origin, standing high above all else, the marked feature of Hebron. We hurried up the steep

way in an enthusiasm of interest, in spite of the darkening faces of the people and the protests of the guides, until flying stones convinced us that discretion was the course of wisdom. Only the outside can be seen by ordinary mortal; yet it is very interesting to stand so near a spot made sacred by such memories and devotion—one of the few localities that seem to be beyond question a few favoured ones, such as the Prince of Wales, the Marquis of Bute, Crown Prince of Prussia, and later the young sons of the first named, have looked from the floor of the Mosque into the cave itself which was the resting place of Abraham. Perhaps even the ashes of patriarch and mother in Israel are still there, guarded by Moslem fanaticism. Christian love and Jewish pride alike look to this place as one of the most sacred in the world's history.

The road from Hebron to Bethlehem passes the Pools of Solomon, which were part of the system of supplying the Temple with pure water. An aqueduct from them follows the road to Jerusalem and ends in the Temple enclosure.

We reached Bethlehem early in the afternoon of the day before Christmas. What a flood of thoughts comes over us we enter this place! Though so small, "it leameth the thousands of Judah," yet it is second only to Jerusalem in sacred interest to-day. In itself, however, it is a charming spot. It is situated on an elevation, quite narrow, running down in terraces to the valley beneath. These slopes are covered with rich fruit and vegetation. And above all the mass of buildings known as the Church of the Nativity stands isolated looking down upon the valley. Here is the scene of the sacred story of the Saviour's birth. Here was enacted the Idyl of Ruth, and David's shepherd life carried him everywhere over these hills and dales.

But thoughts of other shepherds come to us, and we hasten through the village to the plain where "shepherds watched their flocks by night." Tradition leads us to a little grotto which is guarded by the Greek Christians, and is probably the site of the angel visitants. Nothing is there to mark the story. It is a simple, uncared-for eastern pasturage, yet how sacred to the heart of the Christian world. In this cave the shepherds are supposed to have been watching, and near it is the village in which they are supposed to have lived. The plain as we saw it again in the moonlight harmonized sweetly with our dreams of that wonderful night.

It seems a fitting thought that the Lamb of God, who was to be the Good Shepherd of souls, should have first been announced to humble watchers in the valley guarding their helpless charge. When we passed over this same plain before, we had seen a picture of eastern life that gave new meaning to this touching metaphor. In the distance, twice as dark and shepherds been seen; but in each case the shepherds had come first, carefully bearing the little lambs or the wearied ewes in their bosoms. Behind them came the flocks, so gently led, following their master's slightest word or look. They were made up, also, both of sheep and goats, easily separated and sometimes necessarily divided the one from the other.

From the plain we hurried back to see the place of our Saviour's nativity before darkness came on, with the celebration of Christmas eve. The cave, which is supposed to have been the stable of the old caravansary or khan, is now hidden from sight by the massive church. One can see nothing of the manger even, as it is covered with cloth and marble and lamps. Christian superstition has concealed the first great thought under degrading and lowering associations. Just beside the shrine is shown the place where stood the manger-cribble, at whose side eastern wise men once knelt in homage. Its place is now supplied by a marble trough, and tradition points to the real manger as being in Rome, a belief which may well be questioned. The whole ground and all the surroundings are carefully measured off, each sect coming in for a separate portion. The grotto itself is common to all, though the Greeks seem to have the best of it, as the apse (the chapel) of the old Basilica which covers the cave is theirs. This church was erected by Helen, the mother of Constantine the

Great, in A. D. 327, and is therefore the oldest Christian church in the world. It is divided among the Greek, American and Latin (Roman) Catholics, each jealously watching for any encroachment of the other and ready to resist even unto blood. The whole visit is saddened by the presence of the Turkish guard, who are there to keep the Christian fanatics from tearing each other to pieces. Each of the three bodies have a portion of the church above, and have their own approach to the shrine, which is beneath. It is said that many bitter contests have been waged for a few inches of wall, and that the question of the opening and shutting of the doors has well nigh involved Europe in war.

But, in spite of all these drawbacks, one cannot but absorb the spirit and enthusiasm of St. Jerome, whose study is one of the precious spots under the Latin control. Here that illustrious saint and student lived and worked and did showing in his consecrated life the power and influence that came to men in that Divine Birth, which consecrates the whole place.

The memories, the history, the sacred associations, lead one to forget the sad exhibition of human nature and religious bitterness which are entrenched over the sacred spot. Such thoughts are needed indeed. We attended the midnight service at the Latin Church, which was a mere travesty of Christian worship, utterly unworthy of the church whose ceremonies can be made so grand and impressive. It seemed so unfitting to hear a cracked-voice organ playing airs from Offenbach operas during the service in celebration of the Saviour's birth; but all else was likewise sadly unsuited and inharmonious. Yet it was indeed an impressive moment—a privilege to be there in Bethlehem, and to kneel on the eve of Christmas at the shrine made sacred by that Marvellous Gift.

It gave intense reality to the Gospel story in all its humility, as well as its grandeur. The new born Babe lay there in its weakness upon that first Christmas eve, but now a world is moved by that power, and untold and measureless millions have knelt in homage and obedience at his feet. We went back to our camp singing carols and hymns of Christmas joy, making the little village ring with words so strange to them, yet praising God for the great fact that gave that little town an everlasting fame.

The tents were pitched by the Well of David for whose sweet waters his devoted followers had risked their lives; but here in the house of David a greater Fountain had been opened for sin and uncleanness. All was brilliant in that brightness of an eastern night. Below us lay the plain of the shepherds in full light, silent and peaceful as of yore. Above, the heavens were studded with numberless stars, that each seemed to stand over where the young Child lay. And out of the clear sky we could almost hear the voices of the angelic hosts as they chanted the good tidings of great joy for all people, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men."

"Such music as 'tis said
Before was never made,
But when of old the sons of morning sung,
While the Creator great
His constellations set.

And the well-balanced world on hinges hung;
And cast the dark foundations deep,
And bid the weltering waves their oozy channel keep.

"Ring out, ye crystal spheres,
Once bless our human ears,
If ye have power to touch our senses so;
And let your silvery chime
Move in melodious time;
And let the bass of Heaven's deep organ blow;
And with your nine-fold harmony,
Make up full consort to the angelic symphony."

CHRISTMAS.—When Irving was reproached for describing an English Christmas which he had never seen, he replied that, although everything that he had described might not be seen at any single house, yet all of it could be seen somewhere in England at Christmas. He might have answered, also, that the spirit of what he had described, was visible everywhere in Christendom on Christmas-day.

"Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawn singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time."

This is the Christmas sentiment of today, as it was of Shakespeare's time. It is the most human and kindly of seasons, as fully penetrated and irradiated with the feeling of human brotherhood, which is the essential spirit of Christianity, as the month of June with sunshine and the balmy breath of roses. Santa Claus coming down the chimney loaded with gifts is but the symbol of the gracious influence which at this time descends from heaven into every heart. The day dawns with a benediction; it passes in holiday happiness; and ends in soft and pensive regret. It could not be the most beautiful of festivals if it were doctrinal, or dogmatic, or theological, or local. It is a universal holiday because it is the jubilee of a universal sentiment, moulded only by a new epoch, and suitably adapted to newer forms of the old faith.—*Harper's Magazine, December.*

Thoughts for the Closing Year.

BY REV. A. MACLAREN, D. D.

Moses sought to secure Hobab for a guide because he was a native of the desert and had traveled all over it. His experience was his qualification. We have a brother who has Himself travelled every foot of the road by which we have to go, and His footsteps have marked out with blood a track for us to follow, and have trodden a footpath through the else pathless waste. He knows "how to encamp in this wilderness," for He Himself has "tabernacled among us," and by experience has learned the weariness of the journey and the perils of the wilderness.

His life is our pattern. Our marching orders are brief and simple; follow your leader and plant your feet in his footprints.

This is the sum of all ethics, and the *vade mecum* for practical life. However diverse our duties and circumstances are, the principles which come out in the Divine record of that fair life and wondrous death will fit with equal closeness to all; and so Divine that all comprehensive is it that it abides as the sufficient pattern for every class, for every stage, for every variety of character, for every era, and every land, till the end.

Our poor, weak hearts long for a brother's voice to whisper a word of cheer, for a brother's example to animate as well as to instruct. An abstract law of right is but a cold guide, like the stars that shine keen in the polar winter. It is hard even to find in the bare thought of an unseen God guiding us by his own unseen Spirit within and His unseen providence without, the solidity and warmth which we need. Therefore we have mercifully received God manifest in the flesh, a brother to be our Guide and the Captain of our Salvation.

To Him, then, transfer all those feelings of confidence and affection too often lavished on men. The noblest use for the precious ointment of love, which the poorest of us bears in the alabaster box of the heart, is to break it on His head.

Thus loving and following him we shall be set free from undue dependence on human helpers whilst they are with us, from eagerness to secure them, from dread of losing them, from despair when they depart. Perplexities will disappear. Duty will become plain. Life will not be a weary march through an unknown land where we have to choose our path by our own poor wisdom, and death is often the penalty of a blunder. All our duty and joy lie in the one command, "Follow Me," and if we only ask Him to be with us, instead of eyes, and accept His gentle leading, we shall not walk in darkness, but may plunge into thickest night and the most unknown land, assured that He will lead us by a right way to the city of habitation.

The New Year.

Another year is dawning!
Dear Master, let it be,
In working or in waiting,
Another year with Thee.

Another year of progress,
Another year of praise;
Another year of proving
Thy presence "all the days."

Another year is dawning!
Dear Master, let it be,
On earth, or else in heaven,
Another year for Thee.

—Frances R. Havergal.