

THINK IT NOT STRANGE.

H. H. LOOMIS.

"Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you.—1 Peter iv. 12.

The saints have all gone up the way That leads through fiery trial, To gather in celestial day The fruitage of denial.

Though human wisdom is surprised Before the test, and feeling, Weeps at the chastening, heaven-devised The soul shall own its sealing.

True faith bows down before the will Of him whose love is leading, And holds the severed heart-strings still, Though all be pained and bleeding.

It asketh not, "What dost thou?" But joyfully endureth The anything, or anyhow, So it but strength seareth.

If gloomy questionings arise When trials doth oppress thee, 'Tis proof some evil moving tries To curse where God would bless thee.

Perhaps the heart hath dreamed of joy In earth-goods that shall centre, And he would banish the alloy Which let the vision enter.

Perhaps thy soul doth covet ease, Or faith or hope is waning, Or thou thy friends or self would please, Nor Christ o'er all is reigning.

God knoweth best. And thou shouldst know That all things work for blessing Upon their chosen lot below Who Zionward are pressing.

If heaven please thy hope, 'tis well, 'Tis best that thou please heaven; And every principle repel That's not divinely given.

Then when the mysteries unfold Of trials and temptation, Thou'lt own were precious more than gold, The pains of thy probation.

Sol.

Visitor Pulpit.

NOW, NOW—NOT BY-AND-BYE.

A Sermon to the Young.

BY REV. ALEX. MACLAREN, D.D.

"And as Paul reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix, trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.—Acts xxvi. 25.

This Felix, the Roman governor of Judea, with his brother, had been favorite slaves of the Emperor, and so had won great power at court. At the date of this incident he had been for some five or six years the procurator of the Roman province of Judea; and how he used his power the historian Tacitus tells in one of his bitter sentences, in which he says, "He wielded his kingly authority with the spirit of a slave, in all cruelty and lust."

He had won, or tempted from her husband, Drusilla, a daughter of that Herod whose dreadful death is familiar to us all; and his court reeked with blood and debauchery. He is here face to face with Paul for the second time. On a former interview he had seen reason to conclude that the Roman Empire was not in much danger from this one Jew whom his countrymen, with suspicious loyalty, were charging with sedition; and so he had allowed him a very large margin of liberty.

On this second occasion he had sent for him evidently not as a judge, but partly with a view to try to get a bribe out of him and partly because he had some kind of languid interest, as most Romans then had, in Oriental thought—some languid interest in this strange man. Or he and Drusilla, perhaps, were longing for a new sensation, and were not indisposed to give a moment's glance at this man, with his singular ideas.

So they sent for the apostle, and the guilty couple got a good deal more than they bargained for. Paul does not speak to them as a Greek philosopher, anxious to please great personages, might have done, but he goes straight at their sins, "reasons of unrighteousness" with the unjust judge, "of temperance" with the self-indulgent, sinful couple, "of the judgment to come" with these two, that thought they could do anything they liked with impunity. Christianity is sometimes very impolite, exceedingly rude in reference to the sins of the upper classes; and here is an instance of it.

As Paul goes on, a strange fear began to creep about the man's heart. It is the watershed of his life that he has come to, the crisis of his fate. Everything depends on the next five minutes. Will he yield, will he resist? The tongue of the balance trembles and hesitates for a moment, and then, slowly, the wrong scale goes down. "Go thy way for this time."

Ah! If he had said: "Come and

help me to get rid of this strange fear," how different all might have been! The metal was at the very point of melting. What shape would it take? It ran into the wrong mould, and as far as we know, it was hardened there. It might have been once, and he missed it, lost it forever. No sign marked out that moment from the common uneventful moments, though it saw the death of a soul.

Now, my dear young friends, I am not going to say anything more to you of this man and his character, but I wish to take this incident and its lessons and urge them on your hearts and consciences.

I. Let me say a word or two about the fact, of which this incident is an example, and of which I am afraid many of your lives would furnish other examples, that men lull awakened consciences to sleep and excuse delay in deciding for Christ by half-honest promises to attend to religion at some future time.

"Go thy way this time" is what Felix is really anxious about. His one thought is to get rid of Paul and his disturbing message for the present. But he does not wish to shut the door altogether. He gives a sop to his conscience to stop its barking, and he probably deceives himself as to the gravity of his present decision by the light given, and well-guarded promise with its indefiniteness, "When I have a convenient season I will send for thee." The thing he really means is—not now, at all events; the thing he hoodwinks himself with is, By-and-bye.

And now that is what I know some of you are doing; and my purpose and earnest prayer is to bring you to the decision which one vigorous act of your wills will settle the question for you for the future as to which God you are going to follow.

So, then, I have just one or two things to say about this first part of my subject. Let me remind you that however beautiful, however gracious, however tender, and full of love, and mercy, and good tidings the message of God's love in Jesus Christ is, there is another side to it, a side which is meant to rouse men's consciences and to awaken men's fears.

You bring a man like the man in this story, Felix, or a very much better man than he—any of us that are here—bring him right up into contact with these three—"Righteousness, temperance, judgment to come," and the effect of a direct appeal to moral conviction will always be more or less to awaken a sense of failure, insufficiency, defect, sin, and to awaken a certain creeping dread. If I set myself against the great law of God, the law of God will have a way of crushing me. That is true! And God's gospel comes to us, and it is a gospel, and just because it is a gospel, and is intended to lead you and me to love and trust Jesus Christ, and give our whole hearts and souls to Him—just because it is the best good news that ever came into the world, it begins often, not always, perhaps, by making a man feel what a sinful man he is, and how he has gone against God's law, and there hangs over him, by the very necessities of the case and the constitution of the universe, consequences bitter and painful.

Now, I believe that there are very few people who, like you, come occasionally into contact with the preaching of the truth, who have not had their moments when they felt—"Yes, it is all true—it is all true. I am bad, and I have broken God's law, and it is a bad look-out for me!" I believe that most of you know what that feeling is.

And now my next step is that awakened conscience is just like the sense of pain in the physical world; it has got a work to do, and a mission to perform. It is meant to warn you off dangerous ground. Thank God for pain! It keeps off death many a time. And so thank God for a swift conscience that speaks. It is meant to ring an alarm-bell to us, to make us, as the Bible has it, "fee for refuge to the hope that is set before us."

My question to my young friends to-night, and my imploring question to them is: "Have you used that sense of evil and wrong doing, when it has waked up in your consciences, to lead

you to Jesus Christ, or what have you done with it?"

There are two men in this book of the Acts of the Apostles who pass through the same stages of feeling up to a certain point, and then they diverge. And the two men's outline history is the best sermon that I can preach upon this point. Felix, "becoming afraid, recoils," shuts himself up, puts away the thing that disturbs him, and settles himself back into his evil. The Philippian jailor becoming afraid, (the phrases in the original being almost identical), like a sensible man tries to find out the reason of his fear, and how to get rid of it; and falls down at the Apostles' feet and says, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

The fear is not meant to last; it is of no good in itself; it is only an impelling motive that leads us to look to the Saviour, and the man that uses it so has used it rightly.

Yet there comes in many a heart that transparent self-deception of delay. "They all with one accord began to make excuse." It is the history to-day as it was the history then. It is the history in such a congregation as this. There will be dozens, I was going to say hundreds, that will leave this chapel to-night feeling that my poor word has gone a little way into their hardened hide; but settling themselves back into their carelessness, and forgetting all impression that has been made. O, dear young friend! do not that, I beseech you; do not stifle the wholesome alarm, and cheat yourself with the notice of a little delay!

II. And now, I wish next to pass very swiftly in review before you, some of the reasons why we fall into this habit of self-deceiving, indecision, and delay—"Go thy way," would be so sharp and unmistakable if it were left alone so it is filed off: "I will not commit myself beyond to-day." "For this time go thy way, and when I have a convenient season I will call for thee."

What are the reasons for such an attitude as that? Let me enumerate one or two of them as they strike me—First, there is the instinctive, natural wish to get rid of a disagreeable subject,—like a man who, without knowing what he is doing, twitches his hand away from the surgeon's lancet. So a great many of us do not like—and no wonder we do not—these thoughts of the old Book about "righteousness, and temperance, and judgment to come," and make a natural effort to get our minds away from the contemplation of the thing because it is painful and unpleasant.

Do you think it would be a wise thing for a man, if he began to suspect that he was insolvent, to refuse to look into his books or to take stock, and let things drift, till there was not a half-penny in the pound for anybody? What do you suppose his creditors would call him? They would not compliment him on either his honesty or his prudence, would they?

And is it not the part of a wise man, if he begins to suspect that something is wrong, to get to the bottom of it, and as quickly as possible to set it right? And what do you call people who, suspecting that there may be a great hole in the bottom of the ship, never begin to work the pumps or do any caulking, but say, "Oh! she will very likely keep afloat until we get into harbour?"

Don't you think it would be a wiser thing for you, if because the subject is disagreeable, you would force yourself to think about it until it became agreeable to you? You can change it if you will, and makes it not at all a shadow or a cloud, or a darkness over you. And you can scarcely expect to claim the designation of wise and prudent orderers of your lives until you do. Certainly it is not a wise thing to shuffle a thing out of sight because it is not pleasing to think about.

Then there is another reason. A number of you young people say, "Go thy way for this time," because you have got a notion that it is time enough for you to begin to think about serious things and be religious when you get a bit older. And some of you even, I daresay, have an idea that religion is all very well for people that are turned sixty, and are go-

ing down the hill, but that it is quite unnecessary for you. Shakespeare put a grim word into the mouth of one of his characters, which puts the theory of many of us in its true light, when, describing a dying man calling on God, he makes the narrator say: "I, to comfort him, bade him he should not think of God. I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet."

Some of my hearers practically live on that principle, and are tempted to regard thoughts of God as in place only among medicine bottles or when the shadows of the grave begin to fall cold and damp on our path. "Young men will be young men," We must sow our wild oats," "You can't put old heads on young shoulders"—and such like sayings, often practically mean that vice and godlessness belong to youth, and virtue and religion to old age, just as flowers to spring and fruit to autumn. Let me beseech you not to be deceived by such a notion; and to search your own thoughts and see whether it be one of the reasons which leads you to say "Go thy way for this time."

Then again, some of us fall into this habit of putting off the decision for Christ, not consciously, not by any distinct act of saying—"No! I will not" but simply by letting the impressions made on our hearts and consciences be shuffled out of them by cares and enjoyments and pleasures and duties of this world. If you had not so much to do at Owen's College you would have time to think about religion. If you had not so many parties and balls to go to, you would have time to nourish and foster these impressions. If you had not your place to make in the warehouse, if you had not this, that, and the other thing to do; if you had not love, and pleasure, and ambition, and advancement, and mental culture to attend to you would have time for religion; but as soon as the seed is sown and the sower's back turned, hovering flocks of light-winged thoughts and vanities pounce down upon it and carry it away seed by seed. And if some stray seed here and there remains and begins to sprout, the ill weeds which grow apace, spring up with the ranker stems and choke it. "The cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word," and efface the impression made upon your hearts.

Here to-night some serious thought is roused, by to-morrow at midday it has gone; you do not intend it to go, you did not set yourself to banish it, you simply opened the door to the flocking in of the whole crowd of the world's cares and occupations, and away went the shy solitary thought that if it had been cared for and tended might have led you at last to the Cross of Jesus Christ. Do not allow yourselves to be drifted by the swaying current of earthly cares from the impressions that are made upon your consciences, and from the duty that you know you ought to do.

And then some of you fall into this attitude of delay, and say to the messenger of God's love—"Go thy way for this time," because you do not like to give up something that you know is inconsistent with his love and service. Felix would not part with Drusilla, nor disgorge the ill-gotten gain of his province; Felix therefore was obliged to put away from him the thoughts that looked in that direction. I wonder if there is any young man listening to me to-night that feels that if he lets my words carry him where they want to carry him, that he will have to give up "fleshly lusts which war against the soul." I wonder if there is any young woman listening to me to-night that feels that if she lets my words carry her where they would carry her, she will have to live a different life from what she has been doing, to have more of a high and a noble aim in it, to live for something else than pleasure. I wonder if there are any of you who are saying, "I cannot give up that." My dear young friend "If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee! It is better for thee to enter into life blind than with both eyes to be cast into hell-fire."

Reasons for delay, then, are these: first, getting rid of an unpleasant subject; second, thinking that there is time enough; third, letting the world obliterate the impressions that have been made; and fourth, shrinking from the surrender of something that you know you will have to give up.

And now let me very briefly, as my last point, put before you one or two of the reasons which I would faint might be conclusive with you for present decision, to take Christ for your Saviour and your Master.

And I say, do not delay, but now choose him for your Redeemer, your Friend, your Helper, your Commander, your All; because delay is really decision the wrong way. Do not delay, but take Jesus Christ as the Saviour of your sinful souls, and rest your hearts upon him to-night before you sleep; because there is no real reason for delay; no season will be more convenient than the present season. Every time is the right time to do the right thing, every time is the right time to begin following him. There is nothing to wait for, there is no reason at all except their own disinclination, why every man and woman in this chapel this evening should not now grasp the Cross of Christ as their only hope for forgiveness and acceptance, and yield themselves to that Lord, to live in his service forever.

I say, let not this day pass without your giving yourselves to Jesus Christ, because every time that you have this message brought to you, and refuse to accept it, or delay to accept it, you make yourselves less capable of receiving it another time.

I heard a few nights ago that if you take a bit of phosphorus, and put it upon a slip of wood, and ignite the phosphorus, bright as the blaze is, there drops from it a white ash that coats the wood and makes it almost impossible to kindle the wood. And so when the flaming conviction, laid upon your hearts, has burnt itself out, it has coated the heart, and it will be very difficult to kindle the light there again. Felix said, "Go thy way, when I have a more convenient season I will send for thee." Yes! and he did send for him, and he talked with him often; he repeated the conversation, but we do not know that he repeated the trembling; he often communed with Paul, but it was only once that he was alarmed. You are less likely to be touched by the gospel message for every time that you have heard it and put it away. That is what makes my place here so terribly responsible, and makes me feel that my words are so very feeble in comparison with what they ought to be, that I know that I may be doing harm to men just because they listen and are not persuaded, and so go away less and less likely to be touched. Why should you postpone possessing the highest joy, the purest blessing, the divinest strength? Why should you put off welcoming your best Friend into your hearts—why should you?

Ah! dear friends, you will, perhaps, never again have as deep impressions as you have now; or at least, they are not to be reckoned upon as probable, for the tendency of all truth is to lose its power by repetition, and the tendency of all emotion which is not acted upon is to become fainter and fainter. And so I beseech you that now you would cherish any faint impression that is being made upon your hearts and consciences. Let it lead you to Christ; and take him for your Lord and Saviour now.

I say to you: Do that now, because delay robs you of large blessing. You will never want Jesus Christ more than you do to-day; you need him in your early hours. Why should it be that a portion of your lives should be left unfilled by that rich mercy?

I say to you again, take Christ for your Lord, because delay lays up for you inevitably bitter memories and involves dreadful losses. There are good christian men and women, I have no doubt, in this world now who would give all they have if they could blot out of the tablets of their memories some past hours of their lives before they gave their hearts to Jesus Christ. I would have you innocent of such transgression.

Oh! young men and women! If

you grow up into middle life not christians, then should you ever become so, you will have habits to fight with, and remembrances that will smart and sting; and some of you, perhaps, remembrances that will pollute even though you are conscious that you are forgiven them. It is a better thing not to know the depths of evil than to know them and not to have been raised from them. You will escape infinite sorrows by a real cleaving to Christ your Lord.

Do not delay, because delay is decision in the wrong way; do not delay, because there is no reason for delay; do not delay because delay is you of a large blessing; do not delay, because delay lays up for you, if you ever come back, bitter memories; do not delay, because delay may end in death. And for all these reasons come as a sinful soul to Christ the Saviour; and ask him to forgive you, and follow in his footsteps. And do it now! "To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts."

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