

WHICH WAS RIGHT?

OR,

THE CONTRAST.

BY BISHOP M^cILVAINE.



MANY years ago, as I was engaged in a visitation of the parishes of my diocese lying on the Ohio River, the incidents here related occurred. This little narrative was written immediately after, but has been unused till the present time, when the thought that perhaps the Lord may bless it to some soul has caused it to be put in print. The time referred to was

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long before, in the gracious providence of God, the territory of the United States had been delivered, as it now is, from the dreadful curse of slavery. The State of Ohio, though never allowing it on her soil, was bordered on two sides by slave States, Virginia and Kentucky; and many that had tasted the bitter cup were found in Ohio, who had escaped from bondage either by legal emancipation or by flight.

I was sitting on the deck of a steamer on the Ohio River, when a stranger entered into conversation with me—a man, as I learned, of some position in the town to which he belonged, of property, intelligence, vigour in business, and ability in matters of this life. In the course of our conversation the everlasting interests of the soul came up; and he said, with much decision of manner:

“About this time a year ago I set out for the first time to serve my Maker.”

“Ah!” said I, “I am very glad to hear you say so. Were there any particular circumstances that led to that change in your life?”

Seeming by no means averse to tell, he said he was about his usual employment, when a sudden impression came over him. It seemed as if he could hear a voice speaking within him. He determined at once, and went home and told his wife he was going from that time to serve God.

I tried to ascertain how far his knowledge extended as to what it is to serve God.

“ My friend,” said I, “ what was on your mind that led you to form that determination? Had you any solemn, humbling sense of sinfulness before God, which made you feel that you were a lost sinner, under condemnation, and that you must flee to Him for mercy ?”

“ Well, I can't say,” he answered, as if I had lighted on a subject that he knew little about; “ I know that I am a sinner. I don't think I have had a change, such as I hear people talk about. But I do all I can.”

“ Do you really think you do all you can ?” I asked. “ That is saying a great deal. I fear there are few who can say that they cannot, by the help of God, do more than they do, in striving and watching, in seeking God's grace and fighting against sin. But I do not ask whether you have felt just as you may have heard some people speak of a change in them. They are not your rule. But we must ask what the Bible says. Now we are there told that our Lord Jesus came to save *the lost*. Have you been led so to see your sinfulness as to see that by it you are lost, unless you flee to Him for salvation? Have you felt your soul humbled before God as one deserving only His wrath and indignation, so that all hope in yourself has been taken away? True religion begins there. The sacrifice of God is a broken and contrite heart.”

He made no reply that gave the least indication of any knowledge of himself in this respect. As he had not so much as mentioned the Saviour's

name, and his determination to serve God seemed to have no connection with any thoughts of Christ, I represented to him the office of Christ, as a Sacrifice and Intercessor—the only way of a sinner to the Father; the exceeding prominence in which He is presented in the Scriptures; how precious He is to the believer; how the blessedness of heaven is represented as consisting in being *with Him, like Him, and seeing Him as He is.*

I looked for some response to encourage the hope that he knew a little at least of Christ as a precious Saviour. Not a word! My words touched no chord in his heart. He had nothing to say about a Saviour. I then spoke of prayer—secret prayer—how necessary to Christian life. All I could get in reply was a self-complacent declaration that, since he set out to serve God, scarcely a morning or evening had passed without his asking God's blessing. But that he knew anything of prayer—as the Publican knew—as a contrite heart knows it—I saw no reason to hope. That I was instrumental, under God, of doing him any good, I know not. He listened respectfully, and seemed to draw nearer to me the more I talked with him. But when I parted with him my mind was painfully affected with such indications of spiritual blindness, united with much evident self-confidence and complacency. He really thought he had set out to serve God, and was a Christian, and yet without the least idea, so far as I could discern, of any need of Christ. A

blind impression that he must serve his Maker, and a determination, in his own strength, to do so, was all he had experienced.

—Now *the contrast* :

The next day, being at a little rural parish, I had taken a solitary walk on the hills for rest of mind, and for that sweet indulgence of thought and quietness to which the natural forest, especially when, as then, the fresh spring is in all its brightness and fragrance, so strongly invites me. I had just been sitting on a jutting rock on the hill-side, overlooking a beautiful prospect of land and water, and enjoying a few minutes of prayer for myself and many others. And supposing none was near but God, I had indulged in audible as well as inward supplication, when, renewing my walk, I saw, a short distance off, hid from me before by a corner of the hill, a negro man and his little son at work, splitting the wood of a tree which the man had cut down.

I drew near, and was attracted and interested by the remarkably respectful and well-bred manner and voice and words with which the father saluted me. I stood by, and for a few minutes conversed about his work. He was a man of an uncommonly intelligent countenance, jet-black, and probably about fifty years of age. After some little talk, I said :

“ But, my friend, what are you doing for your soul ?”

He laid down his tools, slowly and solemnly, lifted himself up to an erect position, and, with an intelligent, happy smile, with promptness

and decision, and yet with no apparent want of humility, answered :

“That, sir, is just what is the object of my whole life ; that’s what I strive for.”

Then he began to tell me of what God had done for his soul.

“Twenty years ago,” he said, “I got such a burden on my soul, that I could neither eat nor sleep. I was in such misery, sir, I thought I should certainly be lost. I went and bid my wife good-bye, for I thought I should soon be in hell.”

I wanted to ascertain how far there was *light* in that impression.

“You say, my friend, that such a burden came over your soul. What was that burden ?”

“Why, surely, sir, it was the burden of my sins. I felt what a sinner I was, and I could take no rest.”

“Truly ; but what showed you your sins, so that they seemed such a burden ?”

“The preaching of the gospel, sir.”

“Who,” I asked, “was the preacher ?”

“Parson ——, in —— county, Virginia.”

“Ah !” he added, “there was no better preacher than he.”

But I wanted to trace his mind still further.

“What became of that burden ?”

“Why, sir, I was at work in the corn-field— I remember it as well as if it was to-day—when all at once I felt the burden taken away. My soul felt light and happy.”

His countenance beamed with animation as he

thus recurred to that relief. I have so often heard persons in his circumstances speak in such terms, with whom there seemed little else than some blind sensation, unconnected with the operation of any distinct gospel truth or promise in their minds, that I was not inclined to sympathize with my negro friend in his pleasant recollections of relief till I had looked further into them. So I said :

“When you felt that deliverance from the burden of sin, was it because of any view you had then given you of God’s promises?”

“It was Jesus, sir: I fled to Jesus: I laid it all on Him.”

“What has become of it?” I asked.

“He took it from me.”

“Well, my friend, where is now your heart?”

“It is with Jesus.”

“Is it on Him as the most precious object of your desire? Do you want to do all His will?”

“Why, sir, when the Lord took away my burden, He shed abroad the love of God in my soul.”

“Yes,” said I, “and you have just spoken as St. Paul speaks on the same subject, in the Epistle to the Romans: ‘Hope maketh not ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost.’ And now, my friend, do you feel that you want to serve God and do His will all your life?”

To this he responded most earnestly and satisfactorily. I forget his words, but I re-

member how strongly he immediately afterwards said :

“ I have learned, sir, that there is no power that can enable me to serve God—*but* God. I must seek His grace, or else I can't serve Him. I fight, and strive ; when temptation comes against me I go right at it. But I have no strength without the grace of God. I remember once, in Virginia, I had got into a lukewarm state, as we say. I felt very bad. My heart seemed almost dead. And there was to be a camp-meeting in the county, and I thought I would go there and get a revival in my soul. And I went, and stayed, and went home as cold and dead as before.”

“ And,” I asked, “ do you know the reason ? ”

“ I suppose,” said he, “ it was because my heart was not right, somehow.”

“ This was the reason, my friend : you went to the meeting trusting *in the meeting* more than in God ; expecting the meeting would revive you, instead of looking only to God. You ought to have remembered that God is to be found at home—everywhere, anywhere—by an earnest heart. You made too much of man.”

“ Well, sir,” he rejoined, “ I learnt one thing—that it is in trying to do God's will in all things—at home, in all our duties—that He will bless us. We must seek Him there.”

He meant that meetings and such like will do us no good while we neglect relative duties—home work, secret prayer—and that in such duties we may always find His renewing grace.

I was much struck with the good negro brother's intelligence in that matter.

He then began to speak of what seemed to move him very deeply.

"I have had a great deal of trial and trouble in my life," he said, with an expression of thankfulness as if he had said so, not to call up a remembrance of pain, but a feeling of thankfulness for the grace that had sustained and comforted him.

"I have known such sorrows," he continued, "that when it was day, I prayed for night; and when it was night, I prayed for day."

He entered into no particulars. But I was led to ask him :

"When you were turned to the Lord in Virginia were you a free man?"

"Oh no, sir! I was a slave. I am free now. I bought myself first, and then my wife and this little boy here [a boy of about twelve years], and two younger children."

He told me he had been only a year or two in Ohio. What he had given for himself and family had cost about two thousand dollars (or 400*l.* English money). I asked him how he had contrived to get so much money. He said partly by work, and partly by begging. After he bought his own freedom, he worked and asked good people to help him buy the rest; and all the while he asked the Lord to help, and he evidently felt that it was God's hand that had delivered him and them from bondage.

But I had not yet reached, I thought, those sorrows that he had spoken of so feelingly. I asked if he had other children, besides those he had bought. Now I probed the wounds. Yes, he had *three children*, one of them a daughter, all sold from him at different times, about four years ago. I think he said they were sold off to some far southern State, he knew not where. How deeply I felt for him, as a father, I need not say. I was the more affected with his account, because, as he spoke of these deep sorrows, there was not the least expression, in look or word, of any bitterness of feeling towards man, or of any complaint, as if the providence of God had dealt hardly with him. All that his mind seemed to be engaged with was the greatness of his trial, and the goodness of God in supporting him under it.

I asked him if he ever heard of, or from, his children. He said, "*Never.*" My heart was pierced for that poor father, and in thinking of that poor mother. Never did slavery appear to me in a more appalling aspect—that poor negro parent sorrowing for lost children—*so* lost that, to use his own simple account, when it was day he prayed for night, and when it was night he prayed for day. I said :

"My friend, you needed a great deal of grace from God to be enabled to bear such trials without murmuring against Him."

"Oh, sir !" he answered, "I never could have borne it without His help. He held me up."

We had now conversed a good while. I

thought I had long enough kept my negro brother from his work. He was working for himself, and not another. But though it was the hill-side, and in an open wood, I wanted not to leave him without praying with him, for my own edification and enjoyment—thus to join that humble brother in Christ before the throne of our common Lord, and Hope, and Life—as well as to seek a blessing on him. I therefore took off my hat, and he and his son removed theirs, and they leaned upon the trunk of the felled tree, and we prayed together, and I bade them farewell, and shall rejoice if ever my labours and journeys should give me again an opportunity to talk with that intelligent and enlightened, poor, but rich, negro man again about his Lord and my Lord—his home and mine. I was much struck with the real refinement of his manners, as well as the real piety of his heart.

As I was walking from him down the ridge, and had got perhaps a half-mile, I met a person of the neighbouring town, of whom I inquired concerning that man. He knew him well, and said that he and his wife were considered in the neighbourhood as very good people.

Thus I had *The Contrast*.

What made the great difference? In the first man there was a measure of earnestness, but no light, no self-knowledge, no self-humiliation. There was a *blind impression* from an imaginary *voice*, followed by a determination, in his own strength, unattended by any sense of the need

of earnest prayer, to serve God ; but how a *sinner* was to serve a holy God and find acceptance with Him, that impression or voice did not lead him to inquire. It brought no conviction of sin, and therefore no sense of the need of a Saviour, and especially of the preciousness of *our* dear Saviour, Jesus Christ. Had we the further history of it, we should probably learn that the determination soon expired, because "the root of the matter" was not in it.

In the second case there was a stronger and deeper *impression*, and from a higher and surer and mightier voice—the voice and calling of the Holy Spirit of God, through the ministry of His written Word. The entrance of that Word "giveth light to the simple." That simple man it made "wise unto salvation." It showed him his sinfulness and ruin. It showed him his refuge in Jesus. It led him to Jesus, and gave him a new heart and a right spirit, which determined him, in a godly sorrow for his sins, to strive to serve God in a loving obedience all his days, leaning on the Saviour's grace for all his strength. And did we know the further history of that simple disciple, I am sure we should find that, if still living, he is still living unto God—following that voice of the Spirit, in His Word, as the lamp of his feet and the joy of his heart.