

THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

SERMONS

BY THE

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WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

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XVI.

THE PROMISED LAND.

“And Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto the mountain of Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, that is over against Jericho. And the Lord shewed him all the land of Gilead, unto Dan,” &c.—DEUT. xxxiv. 1-5.

THERE are in history few figures equal in grandeur to that of Moses, and I know not if within the whole range of the Old Testament there is one narrative more sublime, more pathetic, than that of his death. Nearly a century had elapsed since, in the palace of Pharaoh where he had been reared amidst the pleasures of Egypt and the splendours of royalty, the thought of his people's degradation had laid hold of his heart for ever. From that time he had wandered about as an exile, taking refuge in the wilderness where God had called him to fulfil the most formidable of missions. He, the meek and timid man, who shrank from notoriety, had been forced to resist a cruel and crafty king until the day when Israel, delivered by his hand, was able to cross the Red Sea and direct its steps towards the land of Canaan; but then had begun for him an unceasing struggle with that ignorant, ungrateful, and rebellious nation, unfit to bear the noble burden of its religious destinies and of its liberty. He had witnessed all the people's revolts, all their sins; at the foot of Sinai where God had proclaimed the sublime law which will endure to the end of time, he had seen them worshipping the golden calf. Misunderstood by them, alone in the midst of Israel, he had taught, led, sustained them during forty years, ever ready, watchful, and indefatigable, now pleading with God for His people, now pleading with his people for God. At length he is drawing near to the long-desired end of all his thoughts. The promised land stretches out before him, and the waters of Jordan alone separate him from it. The promised land! . . . Oh, how often had he longed for it and beheld it afar off in his solitary dreams during the long nights passed in the wilderness when, beneath the starry sky, he had conversed with Jehovah! . . . There Abraham and Jacob had fixed their tents, and their tombs awaited the return of Israel; there the reign of God upon earth was to be established; there, for Moses, was rest, the realisation of all his hopes, the reward of all his toils. . . . Then it was he heard the voice of the Lord saying unto him: “Get thee up into the mountain; thou shalt see the land before thee, but thou shalt not go thither.”

From the solitary summit of Nebo, the worn and aged man casts a wistful glance before and around him; he sees all the land from Dan to Gilead: there Jericho, the city of palm-trees; there the fertile plains of Naphtali, Ephraim, and Manasseh; then Judah, and beyond, in the far distance, the western sea. . . . Yes, this is indeed the promised land, but he is forbidden to

set his foot upon it. . . . For one moment his heart sinks beneath its weight of anguish, but soon, forgetting himself, he thinks of Israel's future, he beholds with deep emotion the spots where God will establish His sanctuary, the valleys out of which will one day come the salvation of the world. Northward, the far-distant hills of Galilee; southward, Bethlehem, Moriah, and the mount upon which was to be raised the Cross we now adore. . . . Then, having embraced that long-desired land in one last lingering look, Moses bows his head and dies.

A grand lesson is taught by this sublime scene. Have we not all dreamed of a promised land upon earth? Have we not yearned for it? Have we not been on the point of reaching it when suddenly we have heard a voice saying: "Thou shalt not go thither." I would inquire today why God refuses to give us what we ask of earth; I would plead His cause and justify His ways. I shall be happy if I attain this end, if, instead of leaving you to the bitterness which fills your irritated and disappointed hearts, I may lead you to submission and gratitude.

Yes, we all dream of a promised land upon earth. Is there a man who has not expected much of life, or one whom life has fully satisfied? . . . Do not believe in appearances, trust not to the outward joy, to the unconcern depicted on so many faces. All these are but the mask. Underneath lies the true being which, if sincere, will tell you that it seeks and suffers. But for Moses the promised land was the country where the Lord should reign; the glory of God alone inflamed his soul; it was after righteousness and holiness that he thirsted. Where are those now whom the same ambition fires?

The promised land—is it for you that renewed earth in which justice shall dwell? Is it the reign of God realised among men? Is it God loved, adored, occupying the first place in the hearts and minds of all? Is it the Gospel accepted, the Church restored, souls converted, the Cross triumphant? Is it, in the beautiful words of Isaiah, the knowledge of the Lord filling the earth, as the waters covers the sea? Are you so completely inspired by this lofty ambition, by this ardent desire that, though otherwise happy and enjoying all possible earthly blessings, this one thing failing, you feel that all else fails to satisfy? Need I say that this promised land will never be yours here below? In the fervour of your faith you may have hoped to reach it. By certain signs you thought you had perceived the approach of new and better times; you had seen the tottering nations shake off their deadly sleep; the Church rise at the voice of God and awaken to the sense of her sublime destinies; you had seen the Holy Spirit descending as in the day of Pentecost and kindling the sacred flame in every heart. . . . Thus in the primitive Church did the believers await on the ruins of the pagan world the triumphant return of Christ. Yes, that was the promised land. Alas! the world has continued its march, the reign of God cometh not with observation, the

work of the Spirit is pursued silently and mysteriously, and whilst this brilliant vision of a renewed earth still flits before your troubled sight, a voice whispers mournfully in your ear! "Thou shalt not go thither."

Let us not delude ourselves, however. They are few in the present day, those who, consumed by the thirst for righteousness and truth, ardently long for the establishment of God's reign. We are not to be compared with those believers of whom the world was not worthy, with those humble yet grand witnesses of the truth who, having all the earthly blessings their hearts could desire, counted all these as nothing because the God they loved was denied by the world. Alas! when we lack nothing, when we have health, strength, fortune, hope, and earthly affections, do we feel that we are strangers here below? Do we think of the reign of God, or pray that it may come? Let us confess it, even our griefs have a different character. Some selfish thought ever mingles with our sorrow. The promised land for you was your personal happiness,—the happiness you sought after with unswerving perseverance, and which you afterwards so bitterly regretted. In His Divine mercy the Lord does not despise these sorrows, these regrets, however mingled with selfishness they may be. The God who raises the bruised reed without questioning whence came the wind that crushed it to the earth, often makes use of our earthly troubles to bring us back to the right path, and to awaken in our hearts a secret desire for true peace, for pardon, for eternal consolation. . . . Look into the history of your own lives and see if this be not true.

You had dreamed of a grand and noble existence upon earth, for your nature shrank from sordid pleasures. God had given you talents, brilliant faculties, a keen sense of the beautiful and the sublime. How joyfully you rushed towards the new sphere of life that opened before you! How every noble cause claimed your sympathy! Each day was to find you stronger and wiser. To know, to love, to do,—such was your aim. All these enchanted paths stretched out before you wrapped in the dewy haze of morn, which, in the spring time, betokens the brightness and warmth of a fine day. That was your promised land; your eager eyes rested upon it, you were on the point of entering it. . . . Suddenly misfortune has come upon you; disease has shattered your frame, your fortune has escaped you, you have been forced to earn your daily bread in the sweat of your brow, crushing cares have weighed down your heart and withered your hopes, the selfishness and hardness of men has caused you many a bitter and cruel deception, and whilst others outstripped you in the race and hastened to reach those prospects of felicity which henceforth were closed to you, the stern voice of affliction murmured in your ear: "Thou shalt not go thither."

You, my sister, had dreamed of the happiness of reciprocated love; the way of life appeared smooth to you whilst leaning upon a loyal arm and

heart. What joy to pour all your thoughts and affections into a congenial soul! What joy to have ever present at your fireside a living sympathy for which nought that would affect you would be indifferent! What joy to be able to share in labours, preoccupations, works which would become yours! That was your promised land. . . . And now you are a widow; you are treading alone that solitary path whose asperities none can smooth for you. Or, what is harder still, you have seen infidelity, falsehood, cold indifference, perhaps, opening between you and the heart of the man whose name you bear, a gulf which nothing can fill up; you have buried your hopes in a grave before which you dare not ask for sympathy, for neither respect nor love can soften the bitter anguish of this heart-sorrow which you must endeavour to conceal from the world.

To others God has spared this trial. You have seen a joyous family-circle gathering round you; you have prepared for life the children God had given you. How gladly you have observed the first awakenings of their intelligence, how anxiously you have watched their temptations and troubles, how thankfully you have witnessed their victories and their progress! They have never known all the prayers and tears and sacrifices they have cost you. Your end was well-nigh attained. They were ready for the struggles of life; all that a watchful love could sow in their hearts had been sown. Their soul understood yours, and with a confident eye you glanced upon their future career, their success, their noble activity. That was your promised land. . . . Alas! but yesterday yet all this was real. But a day has come—a day of fearful anxiety, of terrible presentiments, followed by a reality more terrible still. . . . From your desolate home a funeral procession has passed, and to-day your wavering faith must seek in heaven the image which continually floats before your weeping eyes.

Shall I tell of all our other deceptions? Shall I speak of those works so long pursued with abnegation and love, but which have ended in failure and ingratitude, if even our best intentions have not been misjudged and calumniated? I will not attempt it. Let those answer who in all ages have looked for happiness, rest, and gratitude upon earth as the reward of their efforts. Let them tell us what the world has given them, and how many of those fruits of which the spring gave fair promise have lasted until the autumn, Ah, the promised land!—it is not here below. We see it, we hail it from afar, we hope to cross its threshold, but sooner or later a voice is heard which says, “Thou shalt not go thither!”

“Vain desires! fruitless illusions!” exclaims the world, and in the name of its selfish philosophy it recommends forgetfulness and dissipation. But of this forgetfulness we will not hear. No; better far to have suffered, to have known those desires, those affections, those hopes; better far to bear with us those holy images and sacred memories; better far to endure the

torment of a soul that believes, and of a heart that loves, than to enjoy the senseless and contemptible frivolity of the world; better far, O Moses, after forty years' fatigue and suffering, to die within sight of the shores of Canaan, than to drag the heavy and shameless fetters of pleasure and sin in the palaces of Egypt!

And yet in presence of the stern law which forbids our entering into possession of the promised land here below, our troubled heart turns questioningly towards the God of love, and we ask Him to disclose the secret of His ways which astonish and sometimes confound us. "Wherefore," we ask, "wherefore!" Never on earth shall we fully know the true cause of the ways of God. There are, particularly in suffering, mysteries which are beyond all human explanation. Nevertheless, it is written that the secret of the Lord is for them that fear Him. Let us therefore endeavour to explain it in part. Let us endeavour to understand that we may the better learn to praise and to be content to remain in ignorance.

If Moses does not enter the promised land, it is, in the first place, because he has sinned. On a solemn occasion, in presence of the unbelieving and rebellious nation, he transgressed the command of the Lord, and then for the first time he was told, "Thou shalt not enter the land of Canaan." What! some will say, could not God forget the faults of His servant? Had not Moses been His prophet, His witness? Had he not glorified His name, defended His cause, ardently desired His reign? Had not his whole life been one long-continued sacrifice to truth? And would not the God he had served so long now remember to be merciful? Yes; He has remembered mercy. Moses has received His pardon—he is not cast away, and God, who has chosen, who has kept him, will take him to His bosom; but pardon and mercy do not annul Divine holiness, and so long as Moses will remain upon earth he will endure the visible consequences of his former transgression. As he sinned in presence of the people, so in presence of the people he will be smitten.

Now, this is what we find it difficult to understand. The sense of Divine holiness is daily becoming more feeble. Alas! our unnerved conscience is afraid to hear anything that is likely to produce disquietude or alarm. With the Gospel we say God is love, and we forget that the Gospel never separated His love from His holiness. We forget this, even in presence of Gethsemane, of Calvary, of those unutterable sorrows which remind us that pardon does not annul justice, and that Divine holiness demands an expiation.

Yes, God is love; but have you thought of this, that what God loves above all things is the right. Can God love His creatures more than He loves the right? That is the question. Men at the present time solve it as best suits their weakness. God, they say, loves His creatures above all else, and when they speak thus they overthrow the entire Gospel; for it is obvious

that, if God loves His creatures better than He loves the right, He will certainly save them, whatever be their corruption or their unbelief. Thus heaven is open to all—to the impenitent, to the proud, to the rebellious, as well as to the penitent and broken-hearted. Thus sanctification becomes nothing more than a simple accessory to be possessed only by a chosen few, and pardon a mere declaration of universal indulgence. What, after all, are pardon, change of life, the painful struggle against sin? God loves us, He saves us all, and whatever we may do, we are sure of heaven.

That is not all. If God can thus give to the right a secondary importance, can He not do so in every case? What henceforth becomes of His holiness? Why speak to us of His law, if that law may be altered at His will? I go further. Why speak to us of redemption, and of the Cross of Calvary, if you divest them of the idea of a sacrifice claimed by Divine justice—of that idea which the apostles have ever attached to them, and which alone gives to the Cross its incomparable power?

That is what many make of the Gospel; that is the convenient doctrine which, too often proclaimed from our Christian pulpits, lulls consciences to the sleep of death, lowers the Church, and then boasts of its popularity in the midst of a generation whose every instinct it flatters. Not only is the notion of God darkened and obliterated, but I defy you, with such a system as this, to explain suffering. What! God loves His creatures better than He loves the right, and He leaves them to suffer; and suffering, with its poignant reality, is the perpetual law of history; and, without necessity, millions of beings whom God with a word might save, must know of life nothing but its bitterest griefs! . . . And often the noblest and best are those whom He calls to the most fearful trials!

On the contrary, admit with Scripture that God loves the right above all things, that holiness is His very essence, and you will very easily conceive that, if for the sinner His name is Love, for sin His name is Justice; that suffering, ordained by Him, is inseparably joined to evil; that sinners, persevering in impenitence, are for ever excluded from His communion, and that even to pardoned sinners suffering is imposed that they may remember His holiness.

That is the Gospel, the true Gospel, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the only one a Christian minister should be allowed to preach from a Christian pulpit, the only one that affirms God such as He is, with all His rights, the only one that troubles, but also the only one that converts and saves, and notwithstanding its many severities, the only one that explains our sorrows and comforts our hearts. You wish to know why life does not keep its promises, why your day-dreams, your prospects of felicity are mercilessly destroyed; why, within sight of the promised land, an inexorable voice exclaims, “Thou shalt not go thither?” The Gospel answers, Because you are sinners;

because this earth which sin has sullied cannot be the land of rest and happiness for you; because God's purpose is to warn you and prepare you to meet Him. You wish to know—you, the redeemed of the Gospel—why, though you have believed in the pardon of God, in His love, in His promises, you are treated by Him with a severity which bewilders you. Ah! it is because God, who has made you His children, would also make you partakers of His holiness; it is because He would have you constantly remember what you formerly were, and what, without Him, you still would be. Thus in all ages God has dealt with those who most loved Him. Ask Moses why he does not enter Canaan. Does he murmur? does he complain? does he accuse Divine justice? No; he bows his head and adores. Ask Jacob why his grey hairs will go down in sorrow to the grave. Does he accuse God? No; he remembers the artifices of his youth—his conduct towards Isaac, his perfidy towards Esau. Ask David why he wanders as a fugitive among the mountains of Israel, pursued—oh, sorrow!—by his son, by his own son. Alas! he remembers his shameful sin, his murder, his adultery. Ask St. Paul why his apostleship is such a long martyrdom. He remembers that he has kicked against the pricks of his conscience and persecuted the Church of God. Thus it is God acts towards His worthiest servants. Thus is the declaration fulfilled that judgment must begin at His house. Thus God reminds those He has pardoned, and whom He saves, that if they are the children of a God of love, they are to become the children of a God of holiness.

Oh, stern but paternal discipline, against which our hearts have so often murmured; we bow beneath thy rod, for, by our very afflictions, thou remindest us that God, yea, God Himself, is labouring for our salvation

But when, as for Moses, God forbids our entering the promised land here below, He has another purpose still—He aims at strengthening our faith. Let us for one moment suppose we were permitted to realise our desires upon earth, to see our designs accomplished, our sacrifices rewarded—in one word, to reap all we have sown—what would happen then? We would walk by sight, and no longer by faith; gentle and easy would be our progress through a life in which every one of our efforts would be followed with success, and every one of our sacrifices with its reward. Who would refuse to be a Christian on such conditions as these? Who would not seek this immediate and visible blessing? Do you not see that an interested and mercenary spirit would mingle with your obedience like a deadly poison? Do you not see that your hearts, attracted earthwards by the whole weight of their happiness, would soon forget the invisible world, and their true, their eternal destiny? What henceforth would become of the life of faith, of that heroic struggle of the soul which endeavours to break off the chains which bind it to the world of sight, that it may unite itself to God? What would become of that noble heritage which has been transmitted to us by

the believers of the past? Now, God expects better things of us; and according to the beautiful image of Scripture, as the eagle, bearing its eaglets on its wings, teaches them to take their flight, so God tears us away from the world we see that we may learn to soar towards our true country. That is why He refuses you present rest and peace, the sweet security of heart, and the delights which you would have lingered to taste. That is why, when the world has spread out before your gaze the promised land of felicity which enchants and attracts you, you have heard this inexorable voice saying, "Thou shalt not go thither." But be sure of this,—He does not deceive you; for true rest, true happiness will still be yours. O Moses! thou hadst dreamed of a holy and blessed land beyond Jordan; beforehand thou hadst beheld its smiling valleys, its shady and peaceful groves where rest awaited thee; thou hadst contemplated the sanctuary in which the Ark of the Covenant would have its dwelling-place; and thou hadst already heard the songs of the faithful worshippers resounding on the hills of Canaan, beside the graves of thy fathers! Alas! this vision was but a dream. Beyond Jordan, as in the wilderness, thou wouldst have found an ungrateful, idolatrous, and rebellious people; thou wouldst have seen the name of God dishonoured, His glory despised, and each step of the conqueror marked by crime and turpitude. Ah! better far is it for thee to die on Mount Nebo, for God has reserved a goodlier inheritance for thee—a promised land which thou shalt enter in peace. There sin is no more; there pure voices proclaim the glory of the Lord; there His sanctuary is raised in ineffable radiance and ideal beauty; there rest, in the bosom of infinite Love, all those who, like thee, have fought for justice; there God reigns, surrounded by the countless multitudes of His worshippers. Close thine eyes, weary pilgrim; thou wilt open them again in light, in the heavenly Canaan, in the holy Zion, in the courts of Jerusalem.

Finally, if God refuses to give us what we would have desired to possess here below, it is that our hearts may be His unreservedly and for ever. Some will doubtless object; yes; holiness and faith may be learned at this school, but love, is it indeed thus that God thinks to obtain it? Would we have loved Him less had He left us those treasures His jealous hand has so soon ravished from us? Would we have loved Him less had we been able daily to render Him thanks for the continuance of the joys and actions He has so cruelly wrenched from us? Would we have loved Him less had our heart, instead of retiring sorrowfully within itself, been permitted to open to felicity, and to beat freely in the full confidence of bliss? Less? Ah! we affirm it indeed. If what we have lost could be restored to us today, if our loved ones who have died could come out of their graves and appear to us, if our youth, our life, our hopes could revive, no human words could tell our gratitude and our love. I hear; but beware, you have said, *Today*, and you are

right, for yesterday, alas! when you were in full possession of these treasures, when your life was happy, where was that gratitude, that zeal, that love which should have overflowed? Answer! Where was that life, consecrated to the God. from whom you had received so many blessings? where those prayers, that courageous profession of your faith and hopes, those sacrifices? What place did God hold in your thoughts, in your dreams of the future? Did you reflect that God Himself was scorned and treated as a stranger on that happy earth, decked with all your joys? Did you think of His cause forgotten, of His Gospel attacked, of His Church enfeebled and divided? Did you care for those thousands of souls groaning beneath their weight of ignorance, misery, and sin? Did you hear their never-ceasing cries of anguish? Did you seek the land where righteousness dwells? . . . No; that all these might be revealed to you it was necessary you should suffer. When injustice has touched you and pierced you with its keen darts, you have understood what the oppressed feel here below; your bereavements have inspired you with a new and profound sympathy for those whose hearths death has made desolate; sickness has revealed to you some of the trials and temptations which are unknown in the strength of life; your humiliation, your secret dishonour have made you sensible of the hidden sorrows which are afraid of the light of day; and the more vividly evil, sin, and suffering have appeared to you in their terrible reality, the more you have understood that refuge, consolation, salvation are to be found in God alone, the more your heart has yearned for Him, the more you have loved Him, the more you have felt the truth of the Apostle's words—"Lord, to whom shall we go but unto Thee?"

We have seen how God rears us and prepares us for the promised land which is not on earth, but in heaven. Happy are those who wait not till they feel the rod of trial to bend their steps thither, but happy also are those whose chains trial has broken, and who are now walking towards the true fatherland. Companions in sorrow and fatigue, let us march on together, some with a firm and joyful step, others more feebly and falteringly. The Lord leads us on; and if He gives courage to the strong, infinite tenderness and inexhaustible patience are for the weak and trembling. Let us march on! The promised land is open to us. Jesus has conquered it by His sufferings and death. He calls us all. Come, you whom earth has deceived, come to the God who never lies; come, and may we all one day, gathered in our true home, be for ever united with the redeemed of all ages in the communion of the thrice-holy God.