

John 3:6

TWO HEREDITIES.

BY THE EDITOR.

THIS saying constitutes our Lord's justification for his stern demand for the new birth. Why must a man be born again? Because of his fallen nature. Nicodemus represents the culturists of the present day, who are always saying: "Educate men: develop them, bring out the good that is in them." "Rabbi, we know thou art a teacher come from God!" exclaimed this ruler of the Jews. As though he had said, "men need training and educating and thou art sent to be our divine Instructor." "Nay," answers Jesus, "it is not instruction but regeneration which men need; verily, verily I say unto you except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Because men have been ill-born they must be re-born. The flesh is flesh however cultivated, educated and developed, but it does not thereby become spirit. A new nature must be communicated before a new direction can be imparted: sin must have a divine life in order to have a divine character. Let us consider the two natures and the two heredities resulting therefrom.

I. The power of Natural Heredity.

That sounds like a terribly severe saying which is promulgated in Exodus. "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." But if we bring in physiology to interpret theology it is simply saying that the stream of natural descent is irresistible and that whatever gets into its current will flow on through many generations. And there is no point in which history and the Bible more perfectly harmonize than here. The consequences of one man's sin may not come out in his own life, or in the life of his immediate descendants, but they are certain to come out sooner or later. A dead body in a river may float on for miles under the surface and out of sight, and then suddenly come to the top to defile the whole atmosphere with its putridity.

So a sin persistently committed and pursued for a life-time will start a disease or curse which may not come to the surface or generations, but it is almost certain to re-emerge sooner or later. This is the only way I can account for certain facts which come under my observation. The suffering and sickness and calamity which I sometimes find in families which seem not to deserve any such thing appalls me. But the secret often comes out in this—that some ancestor has poisoned the stream of descent very far back, and that the stream has not yet run itself clear. It is, I admit, a terrible law and one which has been much blamed by the wisdom of this world. But the simple fact is that such is the law and we must submit to and obey it. The self-indulgences of to-day are draughts on posterity payable two or three generations hence.

What a tremendous obligation does this law put upon us to live sober and righteous and godly lives. What Napoleon said to his army at the pyramids, "soldiers, forty centuries are looking down upon you," we may almost reverse and say, "forty generations are looking up to you." The character which you are constructing is not your own. It is the building-material out of which other generations will quarry stones for the temple of life. See to it therefore that it be granite and not shale. Of the two I would rather inherit a faulty character than transmit one, which is saying that I had rather be sinned against than sinning. For I conceive of no greater remorse to heap on one than to gather his children and children's children about him at the judgment day, and set their sins and woes and misfortunes before him and say—"It is your heritage of transgression that treasured up wrath against the day of wrath for these." And then to take up the proverb of Scripture against him, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." It is your sin and suffering which have brought that eternal weight of woe upon these who are bone of

your bone and flesh of your flesh. The laws of heredity are irresistible: my descendants cannot reap a harvest of "well dones" if I spend my life in sowing a seed field of ill-doing.

And what a far-reaching influence does this fact endow us with. It makes us the teachers and rulers of generations yet unborn. Great wisdom as well as wit is contained in that answer of Dr. Holmes to the question of a friend. He was asked how early parental training should begin and he replied: "A hundred years before the child is born." You call that a paradox: I call it the deepest philosophy. In the present life of your child you may shape what is plastic and changeable, but what is fixed and unchangeable has been determined for generations back. "As the twig is bent the tree is inclined," says the proverb. True! with the pressure of your fingers you can twist a sapling so that it shall for all its life be gnarled and crooked, or straight and beautiful, as the case may be. But whether the tree shall bear sweet fruit or sour: whether it shall bear figs or acorns—that is something that cannot be determined by the pressure of your fingers, —the roots that strike far down and run far back. And heredity is the root of life, underlying long generations and taking the quality from them. A Puritan root was planted in the soil of Great Britain and nourished by rigid self-culture. In the Mayflower a slip of it was brought to our shores and here planted. It sent out its boughs unto the sea and its branches unto the river, and the oppressed of all nations came to find shelter under it. It is the quality of that root with its hundreds of years of rigid training and righteous living that has made New England character what it is. And when one of your Boston liberals stands up in his pulpit and preaches about "ethical culture," and says: "See how moral and virtuous we are, and how little need we have to depend on a dismal puritan orthodoxy to produce virtuous liv-

ing," we reply in the words of Scripture: "Boast not thyself against the branches: but if thou boast thou bearest not the root but the root thee." The very morality of Boston liberalism is the product of Puritan orthodoxy, and the very virtues of these advanced thinkers, as they call themselves, are the fruit of that old Calvinistic belief which stood for every point and punctilio of orthodoxy as though the destiny of the race depended on it. Culture can perhaps bend the sapling so that the tree which grows from it shall be straighter than it otherwise had been, but it cannot determine the future of that sapling, so that if it is a thorn-tree now, it shall yet bear grapes hereafter. But regeneration in which the Puritan believed can do this. Yes! it is a wise saying: "Begin the training of the child a hundred years before it is born," and if you ask yourself "when does my training and influence and example end" let the answer be, "A hundred years after I am dead."

II. The power of Divine Heredity.

There is a text in the first epistle of John bearing on this point which is very striking: "Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin: for his seed remaineth in him, and he cannot sin because he is begotten of God." It is a saying which is very staggering to one's faith, and the interpretation of it has led to very opposite results—despair on the one hand and presumption on the other. One has said: "Alas, that settles it with me. It is no use for me to hope any further. I am sensible of constant lapses into sin, and if the Bible says that 'whosoever is born of God does not commit sin' then certainly I must surrender, and concede that I am a stranger to the new birth," and so the words drive some to despair. Another says: "Yes, that is very clear: one that is born of God cannot commit sin. Therefore it is possible to attain to sinless perfection. And that is what I have done. I believe I have lived for several years now without committing a sin." And so the words lead others to

despair. They should produce a result exactly midway between these two -- an intense striving after holiness and an intense humility because we come so far short of it.

What then is the true meaning of the words? This: "Whosoever is born of God doth not habitually and willfully commit sin. Sin is no longer his element and sphere. If he falls into sin he escapes from it as soon as possible. While he was unregenerate he lived in sin and loved it: now that he is regenerate he lapses into sin and loathes it. A fish when thrown out of the water struggles in pain and anguish because out of his element; a wounded dove when dropped into the water flutters and struggles because out of its element. One's home is in the air, and the other's in the deep, and neither can be easy in the other's habitude. The Christian "is born from above" in the language of Scripture, and is therefore a citizen of heaven. He cannot drop into the elements of earthliness and sin without being made miserable just as a man whose home and habitude is in sin and corruption would be unutterably wretched if thrust into heaven among the angels and redeemed spirits. And why is it said that the regenerate man doth not commit sin? "Because God's seed remaineth in him." That is to say, his birth from God gives him the abiding life of God—the eternal life, the divine nature, which tends to holiness as strongly as the natural life tends to sin. Birth and blood will tell to the latest generation. If some ancestor of mine got intoxicated a hundred years ago at General Washington's inauguration-day, I am somewhat the worse for it since a grain of wrong can be transmitted in its evil effects through generations. But praise God if some fore-father of mine "lived soberly and righteously and godly" a hundred years ago. I am so much the likelier to do the same since the seeds of righteous character are surely conveyed from parent to children and children's children. This

is what the apostle means by these words, "Whosoever is born of God, God's seed remaineth in him." He has a divine ancestry to keep him toward holy living, to give him an impulse and tendency to righteousness.

What astonishing words are those when we seriously meditate upon them: "He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life." The very life of very God dwelling within him as the source and spring of holy action. That life is sinless and incapable of begetting sin. Reproduce it a thousand times and the fruit will be the same, sinless and only sinless. "Eternal life means a life without end," you say. Yes, and just as truly it means a life without beginning. Therefore the Christian is a man whose training began not a hundred years before he was born, but a hundred ages. The springs of his holy living take their rise in the beginning with God. As a boat thrust out into the current of the Amazon or of the Congo has all the momentum of the head-waters of those mighty rivers behind it to bear it on, so a soul which by faith believes on Christ and thus comes into eternal life has the impulse of God's beginningless life behind it to bear it onward in righteous living.

Here is encouragement for the weakest sinner. You say, O, young man, "Alas, what is the use of trying to be good? My whole nature is against me. What avails it to turn the weather-vane to the South, when the wind is blowing from the North? And it is just as much for me to say, 'I will do right, I will be good,' when the whole trend and tendency of my nature is against me." Very true, and therefore Scripture saith plainly: "The carnal mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." That settles it. You cannot get right-doing out of wrong-being. You cannot get a rising virtue out of a fallen nature. Therefore, it is that when we believe, God puts another mind within us. "It is called the

free from the law of sin and death." Therefore, I beseech you, to let go of the fallen life of self, and lay hold of the risen life of Christ. The old life which is a perennial fountain of sin and death must be distrusted, mortified and put off: the new life in Christ Jesus must become our supreme reliance. For it is not only written, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh," and "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit," but it is also written, "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh and these are contrary the one to the other." Take sides, therefore, with the Spirit and against the flesh. Trust to the death of Christ for the remission of sin: trust to the life of Christ for overcoming sin. So shall you be "conquerors and more than conquerors," through him that loved and gave himself for us.

—End—

FIGHTING AND BUILDING.

"They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon."—NEHEMIAH 4: 17

WHAT a picture of keen alertness is conveyed in this passage. We seem to see the builders intent upon their work, yet with weapons so close at hand, so ready to be snatched up and used on the instant, that every diligent laborer, no matter what his station might be, from Nehemiah himself to the humblest burden bearer, was an embodied resistance to evil, no less than a promoter of good. Building and fighting; fighting and building; nay, if need were, even building and fighting together, while Sanballat and his companions struggled and schemed with desperate pertinacity by force or fraud to frustrate their aims.

Is it not a striking illustration of the position and duties of God's children at the present day, especially of those who are laboring directly for Him, in whatever way or sphere it may be? Day by day, hour by hour, they come in contact with the enemy,