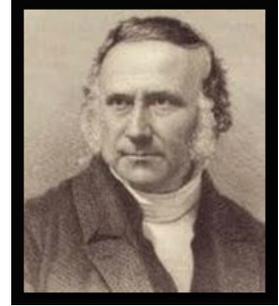


The Neglected Bible



In the month of February, 18—, I called at the house of a family, which I had several times visited before. I knew them well, and my purpose was to make another attempt to do them good. They were very poor, their home was very uncomfortable, their apparel dirty and ragged, and what was most mournful of all, these evils were manifestly occasioned by intemperance. The husband and father was an intemperate man, as all his acquaintance knew, and as anybody would know by the sight of him; and the wife and mother was an intemperate woman, as I was frequently told, and as her appearance but too plainly indicated. Such they had been for more than a score of years. They had several small children, who were miserably clothed and repulsively dirty, appearing to be little cared for by either father or mother. They had one daughter, the eldest of their children, a very worthy girl, of about eighteen years, who was a seamstress, supporting herself in a very respectable manner, and moving in respectable society. But she seldom or never went home. She had left her parents because she could not live with them any longer. She once told me, that she could not endure the pain of seeing her father, and especially her mother, in such a condition as they were; and when she had sometimes gone home to see them after she left them, they only complained of her, and reproached her for her pride, because she had dressed herself in a decent manner, and because she would not consent to board at home any longer. Her mother had once requested me to induce her to return to them; but after learning all the circumstances, and hearing the daughter's touching story from her own lips, I had no heart to

do it,—I could not attempt it,—I told the poor girl, that in my opinion she was right in staying away. She could do them no good. She had tried it. She was only reproached if she called upon them. The treatment she received made her the more unhappy; and she once told me with bitter weeping, that if she went there at all, she “came away with such a feeling of shame, that it made her wretched for a month.” It was a very delicate thing for me, and a very painful one, to mention the subject to her at all; but I trust I was enabled to do it in such a manner as to wound her feelings but little, and to gain her respect and confidence entirely. She certainly gained mine.

On the morning to which I now allude, I rapped at the door, and the old woman opened it and looked at me without uttering a word. She did not even respond to my “good morning;” and when I enquired more particularly how she was, in as kind and respectful a manner as I could, she scarcely made any reply at all. She did not ask me to walk in; but as the door was open, and she did not forbid me, I passed into the house. Thinking that she might perhaps be a little disconcerted by my coming at a time inconvenient for her to see me, I told her as I went into the house, that “I would not hinder her long, I had called for only a minute, to see how she was.”

“I am glad to see you,” said she, with a low voice and a very sullen look. She appeared so different from what I had ever seen her before, so downcast and sad, that I thought she might be unwell, and therefore enquired particularly if she “was sick.”

“I am well,” was her brief and solemn reply, uttered in a low and sepulchral tone.

In order to make her feel at ease, if possible, I seated myself upon a chair. It was covered with dust; and her whole room, as I had often found it before, was so far from being decently clean, that I hesitated to sit down in it. Everything was in disorder. The floor had not been swept apparently for a week,—the ashes were scattered over the hearth-stone,—the scanty furniture was most of it broken, and resembling one of the chairs, which had but three legs, and was lying on its back,—the ceiling was festooned

with cobwebs, that had caught the floating dust, and as they waved to and fro in the wind, they appeared like a mournful token of the wretchedness, which seemed to have taken possession of her heart.

I made several attempts to lead her into some conversation, but it was all in vain—she spake only in muttered monosyllables. This surprised me. I had many times visited her before, and had supposed that my attention to her, my familiarity and kindness, had entirely won her esteem and good-will. Indeed I had supposed myself quite a favorite with her. Though I had sometimes reproved her very plainly, I had always done it affectionately, and she had always treated me politely, and as a friend. But now all was changed. She was cold and mute. She appeared very much as if she was angry, and moved about the room adjusting her little stock of furniture, as if she was too sad or too sullen to be conscious of my presence. She scarcely noticed me at all.

Most sincerely I pitied her. I saw she appeared very wretched. I thought of her poverty, of her better days, of her youth, of her children, of her sins and her soul. She was of a respectable family, and had received a respectable education in her youth. I had often thought in my previous conversation with her, that she possessed a superior mind. And now, to behold her in this miserable condition, and no prospect before her of any relief, a disgrace to herself, to her children, wretched and heart broken; was too touching a thing to allow of any other feelings, than those of compassion and kindness. My heart bled for her. I could not have uttered a word of censure, even if my principles would have allowed it. I resolved to soothe and console her for a moment, if I could, before I left her. Said I:

“Mrs. B—, do you remember what I was speaking to you about, when I was here week before last?”

“Yes,” said she, with a low and sepulchral voice.

“You know I told you that you had no reason to be discouraged.”

“I know you did,” said she mournfully.

“I told you that I thought you a woman of superior sense, and capable even yet of doing a great deal of good to yourself and your family.”

“What can I do?” said she in a tone of despair.

“My dear friend, I told you when you asked me that question the other day. With God’s blessing, if you will seek it, you may do anything you wish—you may be respected and happy here, and be saved in the world to come.”

I paused, but she made no reply. Said I:

“Have you thought of what I told you then?”

She gave no answer. Said I:

“Have you any disposition to try to seek God, and aim to gain everlasting life?”

Still she was silent. Rising from my seat, and stepping towards the door, I said to her:

“I am aware that I have called on you rather early in the morning, and I will not hinder you any longer now. If you will allow me, I shall be glad to call on you at another time.”

I offered her my hand to bid her good bye, but instead of taking it, she placed her hand against the door to hinder me from opening it, saying in a firm and solemn tone, “Don’t go.”

“I will stay longer,” said I, “if you wish me to do so. I will do anything in my power for you, Mrs. B—, most willingly; but I suppose—” (lifting my hand to the latch)—

“Don’t go,” said she, placing her shoulder firmly against the door, to keep it from opening.

“What can I do for you?” said I.

She did not answer.

“Is there anything you wish to say to me, Mrs. B—? I hope you will speak freely to me. I assure you I will treat you with all kindness, and I think you know me well enough to trust me.”

Still she did not answer. She stood like a statue of stone, her eyes fixed on the ground, her large frame slightly bending forwards, and her

countenance strongly indicative of deep thought and melancholy emotions. She seemed lost in her own contemplations. I considered her for a short time in silence. She moved not—she spake not—she never raised her eyes upon me—she scarcely breathed. I knew not what to think of her. She appeared angry, and yet it was not anger. Her solemn look, fixed and indescribable, made her resemble one wrought up to an iron determination for some mighty purpose. Said I:

“Mrs. B—, you appear to feel unhappy this morning. What has occurred that troubles you? or can I assist you in any way?”

She drew a long breath, but remained as silent as ever, lost in thought, or in some wilderness of emotions. I did not know what to make of her. Evidently she was sober. At first I had thought she was angry, but her voice did not sound like it, in the few syllables which she had uttered. I could not leave her, for she stood motionless by the door, in such a position that I could not open it without swinging it against her, to push her out of the way. She held me her prisoner.

I knew not what to say; but concluded to make another attempt to find what was occupying her thoughts. Said I:

“Mrs. B—, I wish you would tell me what makes you so unhappy. I should think you would tell me; I have always been a friend to you, and I think you have reason to confide in me.”

“I know you have,” said she, as unmoved and solemn as ever.”

“Then tell me what is the matter? what troubles you?”

“I am a great sinner!” said she, slowly and with deep solemnity.

“That is true, and a much greater sinner than you think.”

“I am such a sinner!” said she, with a countenance as fixed and cold as marble.

“Yes, I am glad you have found it out; for now you will see the necessity of fleeing to that Saviour, of whom I have spoken to you so many times, as your only ground of hope.”

“I am undone forever!” said she, with a look of cold, fixed despair.”

You would be, if there was no mercy in God, and no Christ Jesus to save. But God is able and willing to save all sinners who repent of sin and forsake it, and put all their trust in Christ.”

“I have sinned a great while!”

“And God has borne with you a great while, simply because He is ‘not willing’ that you ‘should perish, but come to repentance.’ Have you been praying to God to save you?”

“Yes, I prayed a long time last night; and I have been praying this morning till you came in.”

“What did you pray for?”

“I prayed that God would forgive me.”

“And do you think He will?”

“I am afraid not! I am a very great sinner.”

“Jesus Christ, madam, is a very great Saviour, He will save all that come to Him in faith. The greatness of your sins cannot ruin you, if you will but repent of them and forsake them, trusting to the great Redeemer of sinners for pardon, through His atoning blood. ‘The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.’”

“Will God have mercy upon me now, after all I have done?” said she, (for the first time lifting her eyes upon me, with a beseeching look.)

“Yes, He will; He says He will. “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

“I have been an awful sinner! I am a poor creature, unworthy of anything but God’s curse!”

“True, all true, madam; but Christ is infinitely worthy, has borne the punishment due to sinners, and is willing to save you.”

“I wish I could think so,” said she, with the same fixed and despairing look.”

“You may think so; God thinks so!”

“There is no mercy for me any longer!”

“So you think, but God thinks differently. You and He do not think alike. He thinks right, and you think wrong. You must fling away your

own thoughts and act on His. And that is what He means in that expression in Isaiah, 'let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.' Your thoughts, madam, your very sincerest and soberest thoughts, are to be forsaken. Your thoughts are wrong. Fling them away, and use God's thoughts. His thoughts are right. You think differently from Him, and therefore your thoughts are not to govern you. 'Let the unrighteous forsake his thoughts.' You think wrong about God, and wrong about yourself, and wrong about sin, and wrong about forgiveness. I do not mean that you think yourself a greater sinner than you are, for you have not yet seen the half of your guilt and danger; but you think wrong about God's readiness to forgive you. Remember that He says, 'Let the unrighteous forsake his thoughts.' And then, a little after, He says again, 'my thoughts are not your thoughts,' and goes on to say, 'for as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts.' What does He mean by all this? He means that it does not belong to you to tell what God will do or will not do. If you undertake to tell, you will be sure to tell wrong, because you think wrong. You must let Him tell what He will do. And He is telling in that very passage about the forgiveness which you say you cannot think there is for you: 'Let him return unto the Lord and He will have mercy upon him.' But the sinner does not think so; and therefore God says it over again, as if He would beat it into the poor sinner's heart, 'let him return unto our God, for He will abundantly pardon.'" (She shook her head with a slow desponding motion, as I went on.) "You do not think so, but God does. He tells you 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.' Your thoughts this minute are, 'I am a great sinner.' God's thoughts are, 'I will have mercy upon her.' Your thoughts are, 'I have sinned too long to be forgiven.' God's thoughts are, 'I will abundantly pardon her.' I should like to show you that whole chapter. I want to read it to you. Have you got a Bible, Mrs. B—?"

Without uttering a word, she slowly moved from the door to the other side of the room, placed a chair beneath a high shelf, that was made of a single rough board, and hung up on rude wooden brackets, almost up to the wooden ceiling of the room. She then stepped up upon the chair, and reaching her hand upon the shelf, felt along till she found it, and took down her Bible. She stood upon the chair, and gazed upon it as she held it in her hand, with a fixed look. when she slowly stepped down from the chair holding her Bible in her hand, and stopped and gazed upon it, motionless, and without uttering a word. It was covered all over with dust, soot and cobwebs, appearing as if it had not been handled for years. I thought her heart smote her, as she held it unopened and looked down upon it. I thought I could “see the iron enter into her soul.” I did not disturb her. I was willing she should meditate and remember. There she stood, motionless as a stone, with her eyes fixed upon her Bible, and I did not think it was best for me to say anything to her,—the dusty, dusty webbed Bible was speaking! The tears gushed from the eyes, and fell in quick drops upon its blackened lid. Slowly she lifted her tattered apron, and wiped off the tears and the dust, and deliberately turning towards me she extended to me the book—“there is my Bible!” said she, with a bitterness of accent that I shall never forget. She turned from me, with both hands lifted her dusty, ragged apron to her face, and wept aloud.

I could not but weep too. It was a scene surpassing, I am sure the genius of any painter.

When she had become a little composed, I requested her to sit down by me, and then directing her eye to the expressions, I read and explained to her the fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah. I attempted some farther conversation with her, but she did not seem so much inclined to talk as to listen. At her request I prayed with her; and when I was about to leave her, I enquired:

“How long have you been in this state of mind, Mrs. B—, feeling that you are such a sinner?”

“Since last night.”

“What led you to feel so last night?”

“It was a little book that I read.”

“What book was it?”

“Sixteen short Sermons.”

“Whose sermons were they?”

“I don’t know. I came across the book somewhere about the house. I don’t know where it came from.”

“I mean who wrote the Sermons?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where is the book? I should like to see it.”

“It is not here. I lent it this morning to Mrs. A—” (a near neighbor).

“Did Mrs. A— want to read it herself?”

“Yes. She was in here, and would make me tell her what was the matter with me; and after I told her, she said she wanted to read the Sermons too, So I lent it to her, a little while before you came in.”

Taking leave of Mrs. B—, I went immediately to call on Mrs. A—. I found her in tears. She had become alarmed about her condition, as a sinner against God. She frankly expressed to me her convictions and fears, adding with great emphasis, “what shall I do?” Of course I conversed with her and explained the way of salvation. But she said nothing about the book, until, as I was about to leave her, I enquired what it was that had inclined her to attend to her salvation. “It was a little book that Mrs. B— lent me this morning,” said she; and taking it from under her Bible that lay on the table, she put it into my hand. Then I discovered that it was a Tract, bearing the title, “Sixteen short Sermons,” one of the publications of the American Tract Society, which I had entirely forgotten if I had ever read it, so that I did not recognize it by the title.

After this, I often visited Mrs. B—, and had many an interesting conversation with her. In one of these conversations, she referred gently and humbly to her daughter, and not, as I had formerly heard her, with manifest anger and ill-will. She said, “I should like to see her,—I have not seen her for many months; but, I suppose, it hurts the poor child’s feelings to come home, and find us—as we have been. I hope we shall not

always be so." I immediately went to see her daughter; and alone, and ill as delicate a manner as I could, I told her of her mother's altered feelings, and suggested the propriety of her going to see her. She wept bitterly and long. It was almost impossible to comfort her at all; and before I left her, I found it was not her mortification and shame about her mother, so much as her anxiety about her own salvation, which caused her distress. She had already heard of her mother's seriousness, and that was one of the causes of her own. But she did not go to see her mother. I pointed her to Christ as well as I could, and left her.

A few days after this, I called upon the daughter again. I went to tell her of her mother's happy hope in Christ, which she had just expressed to me for the first time; and to my no small joy and surprise, I found that the daughter had been led to the same sweet hope also. "Now," said she, the tears of joy coursing down her youthful and beautiful cheeks, "now, I can go to see my mother."

She did go. She opened the door, and found the old woman alone. "My mother," said she,—and she could say no more. In an instant they were clasped in each other's arms, both bathed in tears of unutterable joy.

That humble dwelling soon became as neat, as grace had made its inmates happy. The daughter went home. She aided her mother in all her domestic duties, with a glad and grateful heart. She made their house as attractive as it had been repulsive. She made clothes for the younger children, and having assisted her mother to dress them up in a neat and respectable manner, the old woman attended them herself to the Sabbath school, and requested to have their names put down, "for," said she, "they will always be here every Sabbath, if you will be so kind as to teach them the Bible."

That house and its inmates were very different in June, from what they had been in February. Neatness and peace reigned, where there had been filthiness, and clamor, and contention, through year after year of misery. The whole appearance of the woman was changed. She did not look like the same being. She became dignified, lady-like, intelligent, easy

in her manners, and, though always solemn, she was uniformly contented and happy. "It seems to me," said she, "that I need but one thing more, and my cup is full: if my husband would only quit his ways, and turn to God, it seems to me we should be happy enough." But he never did. He continued his intemperance. I exerted all my skill to persuade him to forsake his ruinous course; but I met him thirteen years afterwards, staggering in the street.

Eight months after the time when I found this woman so suddenly awakened to a sense of her situation, by "a little book that she had read," I baptized both her and her daughter, and they were received into the church the same day. Mrs. A—, her neighbor, who borrowed the book, was received and baptized at the same time. When the old woman presented herself in the church for the reception of baptism, her old neighbors and friends, who had been acquainted with her for a score of years, did not know who she was,—her appearance was so altered;—and I found it difficult the next day to make them believe that it was verily their old neighbor, whom they had pitied and despaired of so long.

There was nothing of any marked peculiarity in this woman's religious experience, unless it was her deep humility; her iron determination manifest always from the very beginning of her conviction; and after her conversion, her unbounded gratitude to God. "Who could have thought," said she, "that God would have mercy upon such a creature as I!"

That "little book," the "Sixteen Short Sermons," lent from house to house through the neighborhood, did good service in that season of a revival of religion, which I have always supposed originated from its influence, more than from any other one thing. However this may have been (and I believe there is a great deal of foolish error abroad among the churches in attempting to account for revivals of religion, and trace their origin), the name of Mrs. B—stands recorded in my private book, the very first name in the list of the hopeful converts to Christ in that revival—a list containing more than Two Hundred and Fifty names.

As long as I continued to be her Pastor, Mrs. B—always appeared to me to be a humble and happy Christian. There was uniformly an air of deep solemnity about her, of profound humility, and a cast of mournfulness too, whenever she adverted to her past life, or the time of her hopeful conversion. The remembrance of what she was, seems to have thrown a sombre shade over her character. Twenty years have passed away, and she still lives, enjoying the Christian confidence and affection of her church.

I have sometimes called upon her, since I ceased to be her Pastor, and removed to another and distant place. At one time I visited her after an interval of thirteen years. I did not expect she would know me. I knocked at the door—she invited me in—and taking a seat I asked some business-like questions about two or three of her neighbors. She responded readily to my questions, but kept her eyes fixed upon me, with a kind of curious and doubtful inquisitiveness. This questioning and answering and inspecting continued for several minutes, till I supposed that the nature of my questions had thoroughly concealed my identity. Finally I asked her,—

“Have you got a Bible?”

Adjusting her spectacles to her eyes with both her hands, she replied,—

“Ain’t you priest Spencer? Them are the same eyes that used to look right through me. How do you do? I am glad to see you.”

“I am no priest,” said I.

“Well, we used to call ministers so when I was young. It is just like you to come and see me. But I didn’t expect it.”

I inquired whether she still kept her “Sixteen Short Sermons.”

“O, yes,” said she, “that is next to the Bible.”

I told her that I should like to have that same book, and asked if she would be willing to give it to me. Said she,—

“I will give you anything else I’ve got; but I should be unwilling to spare that, unless I could get another just like it. I read it over every little while.”

She produced the same old tract, which I had seen in her house more than seventeen years before. It bore the marks of age, and of much service. It had become almost illegible by use, and time, and dust. "It has been all around the neighborhood," said she. "I have lent it to a great many folks; and sometimes I have had hard work to hunt it up, and get it back home again."

I gave her two new ones of the same sort, and also the whole bound volume which contains it; and after carefully examining the two, leaf by leaf, "to see if they were just like it," as she said, she finally consented to part with her old, time-worn, rusty tract. "I thought," said she, "I never should part with that book,—but these new ones are better; I can read them easier, and I can lend them to more folks. Some people will read these, who would not read one so dirty and old as that."

I felt half guilty for taking her old companion, and was sorry I had ever asked for it. As I parted with her and came away, I noticed that her eyes kept fixed upon the "Sixteen Short Sermons," that I held in my hand. I hope yet to be permitted to return it to her.

There were two things in the character of this woman worthy of very special notice,—her determination and her dependence. So firmly was she fixed in her resolution to abandon the habit, which had so long been her sin, and the cause of her misery, that after her first seriousness on that memorable night, she never once tasted the cup of her shame. She would not see anybody else do it,—she would not go where it was,—she would cross the street to avoid passing the door where it was sold,—she would not even look at it. And so entire was her dependence on God to keep her from it, that she gave the memorable description of her course,—
"drink anything? no! if I ever think of it, I immediately go to prayer." I recommend her example to every reader of this book:—"drink anything? no! if you ever think of it, immediately go to prayer."