

Habits of the Interior Life.

BY PROFESSOR THE REV. J. S. BANKS, D.D., LEEDS.

THE stirring events now taking place at Salonica (the ancient Thessalonica) draw our thoughts to the two Epistles, which were the first in point of time of St. Paul's Epistles. The story of the beginning of the Church in Thessalonica is told in Ac 17. The result of Paul's three weeks' ministry in the synagogue there was the adhesion 'of a great multitude' of Greek proselytes and 'not a few honourable women.' After the rough experience of Philippi this success filled Paul's heart with joy. A great and effectual door was opened, but it was as suddenly closed by the bigots who drove Paul and his companions first to Berea, then to Athens, and again vented their spite in persecuting the new converts. We see the concern of the apostle in the fact that he sent Timothy from Athens to Thessalonica to encourage the Church to firmness in the time of trial (1 Th 3²). Many passages in the two Epistles evidence the apostle's affection for his converts and confidence in their sincerity and high character, and not least the standard of Christian life he sets before them in 1 Th 5¹⁶⁻¹⁸. The exhortations to the early Christians of Thessalonica are of universal application.

The striking point in the passage is that the emphasis rests on the adverbs. All Christians with their faith in God's character and promises rejoice and pray and give thanks, but not all do this always. It is here that the difference between the weak and the strong, the imperfect and the perfect, comes in. It is not enough to rejoice and pray and give thanks. Earnest, thoroughgoing Christianity is seen in the qualifying words, 'always without ceasing, in everything.' In the original the emphatic words come first. We are reminded of the blessing on the man that 'doeth righteousness at all times.' In other words, the joy and prayer and thankfulness of the Christian life are to be habitual, not occasional and haphazard. We know the difference this makes in ordinary life. Punctuality and diligence in the scholar and workman, obedience in the child, truth and fidelity in all, must be habits; otherwise confidence is impossible. Thoroughness in the religious life is equally essential. Bishop Butler reminds us that habits are never formed by indulg-

ing in sentimental reflexion and dreaming, but by repeated acts. In this way Christian joy and prayer and thanks, which are often intermittent and spasmodic, become habits of the soul.

'Always rejoice.' Joy is to be habitual in a Christian. How is this possible? By remembering and acting on the belief that the grounds of joy are unchanging, while the trials of faith are transient in their effects. By faith in the divine message the Thessalonian Christians had become children of God in the highest sense; they were forgiven, born again, new creatures in Christ Jesus, possessors of a new life and power and hope. They had entered into a new and near relation to God, and God stood in a new relation to them. These are not passing but permanent experiences. 'Children of God' is not an honorary phrase, an empty title, but the most real and enduring of all dignities in earth or heaven. The only possible effect is joy. It is most significant that in Scripture 'Blessed' is always the term used of the good, in the Psalter everywhere and in the Gospel—Ps 1, Mt 5, 'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the wicked'; 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' In the whole of this passage Paul is uttering his own experience: 'We rejoice in tribulations also,' words which express the mind of countless hosts of patient sufferers. The Psalter abounds in anthems of praise; Ps 103 may stand for all, although Ps 32 is even more exuberant. What Christian will not join the Psalmist in the matter and the fervour of his song? 'Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.' The psalm closes in a great outburst of joy, 'Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice ye righteous, and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart.' 'In the Lord' anticipates Paul's exhortation to the Philippian Christians, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.'

No wonder that in Christian days the river of praise runs with a deeper, broader flow. The *Te Deum* is both an anthem of thanksgiving worthy of the greatest of the psalmists, and a noble confession of faith. The Church's singers are a vast multitude—Bernard, Luther, Tersteegen,

C. Wesley, Watts, Bonar, are among the leaders. The unknown singers alone are a great host. Watts excels in hallelujahs: 'Praise ye the Lord, 'tis good to raise.' 'I'll praise my Maker while I've breath.' 'Before Jehovah's awful throne.'

Prayer is also to be a Christian habit. It is inwoven in the texture of Christian thought and practice. It scarcely bulks larger in the New Testament than in the Old. Then, as since, it was the soul of worship, the means of divine fellowship, the Jacob's ladder of divine communion; and the New Covenant continues the strain. The subject is ever to the front in the Gospels and Epistles. To pray 'without ceasing' in words is of course impossible. The use of the phrase shows that the essence of prayer was always found in the inner desire of the heart, the soul's fervent breathing after God, so perfectly expressed in Ps 63, 'My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee.' Prayer is the most spiritual act of man; in it the Lord's words are most perfectly fulfilled, 'They that worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' Mental prayer, if not the highest, is a very high form of prayer. It has been carried to great excess by some mystics and Quietists, so-called, in France and Spain. Still it is often the only form of prayer possible and is never unblest. Montgomery's words are true and pointed, 'Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed'; and again, 'Prayer is the Christian's vital breath, the Christian's native air.' The Christian soul lives by prayer, as the body by breathing. St. James's words are true to experience, 'The prayer of a righteous man availeth much in its working,' or, as the passage has been rendered, 'the energized (=inspired) prayer of a righteous man is of great force.' No idle breath, but a master force in the spiritual life. Jesus made no

greater promises than those made to prayer (Mt. 7, Jn 15). The association of prayer with the Holy Spirit is significant (Ro 8²⁶, Eph 6¹⁸, Jude 20). Jesus spoke a parable to enforce the truth that 'men ought always to pray and not to faint,' a truth which Paul was quick to repeat as essential to the practical Christian life. 'Without ceasing' is the mark of the prayer that never fails.

Thanksgiving is also to be habitual. The apostle does not say 'for everything' but 'in everything.' There are many things for which we cannot give thanks, but we can be thankful in their despite. However many the adverse experiences of life, the favourable are always more; there is always more of the bright than the dark. A psalmist's experience was 'Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart.' While the Lord reigns, goodness and righteousness can never be finally put to shame. A Christian has abundant justification for believing that the bright side of life is the truest to reality. Clouds hide but do not blot out the sun. Hard things are written of optimism. There was never a greater optimist than Paul. He defies evil at its worst. 'We are more than conquerors,' super-victorious. 'Where sin abounded, grace abounded more exceedingly.' The cross is not the last word; resurrection, triumph, and joy are to follow. 'To them that love God all things work together for good.' 'Our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory.' What contrasts—affliction, glory,—light, weight—for the moment, eternal—more and more exceedingly! Paul is a master of words, but even on his lips words fail to describe the greatness of the Christian hope. John also writes, 'It is not yet made manifest what we shall be'; 'In everything give thanks.'

Literature.

THE RUSSIAN AS A STORY-TELLER.

ONE of the most surprising and at the same time most fruitful gains of the war is the approach we are making to the Russian mind. It was a distant and dreadful mystery before the war; admittedly not well known, and complacently considered to be better so. It is true we had begun to read

some of the most popular of the Russian novelists, but we only wondered the more at the distance between us.

But the war has brought us near. Some of our men have lived with the Russian soldier, and found it possible. The psychology of the ordinary Russian peasant has been declared to be quite simple and sometimes admirable. And even the