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Our Better Portion.

Hebrews XI, 40. God having provided some better thing for us.

THE THIRTEENTH ANNUAL SERMON OF THE NEW
ENGLAND SOCIETY IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK,
PREACHED AT THE BRICK PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH, ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1912, BY THE
REVEREND WILLIAM PIERSON MERRILL, D.D.

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Our Better Portion.

Hebrews XI, 40. God having provided some better thing for us.

The Puritan of Old England and of New England was one of God's best gifts to the world. Few figures in history have been more faithful to the best that lay back of him, more prophetic of good to come after him. He re-incarnated the spirit of the great Hebrew prophets. The law of Moses, the ethical passion of Amos, the God-consciousness of Isaiah, the theocratic dreams of Ezekiel, came to life and took shape through the Puritan. And from him have come those mighty movements that make up modern social, political and religious life. To him religious liberty, separation of church and state, democracy, were dangerous notions: yet his spirit has made all these notions into facts. We need have no fear of honoring too highly that little company of iron-hearted men who stood for God and righteousness in the old and new world of their day.

The thinking world joins with us in reckoning these men among the greatest gifts of God to His world. It is not only the spirit of a son of New England, it is also the spirit of a careful historian, that speaks in the words of John Fiske, "It is not too much to say that in the seventeenth century the entire political future of mankind was staked upon the questions that were at issue in England. To keep the sacred flame of liberty alive required such a rare and wonderful concurrence of conditions that, had our forefathers then succumbed in the strife, it is hard to imagine how or where the failure could have been repaired." "To speak of Naseby and Marston Moor as merely English victories would be as absurd as to restrict the significance of Gettysburg to the State of Pennsylvania. If ever there were men who laid down their lives in the cause of all mankind, it was those grim old Ironsides whose watchwords were texts from Holy Writ, whose battle cries were hymns of praise;" "among the significant events which prophesied the final triumph of the English over the Roman idea, perhaps the most significant—the one which marks most incisively the dawning of a new era—was the migration of English Puritans across the Atlantic

Ocean, to repeat in a new environment and on a far grander scale the work which the forefathers had wrought in Britain."

In the face of such plain facts, in the presence of peculiar greatness to which we sons of New England gladly give the reverence of our hearts, the text just read may seem inappropriate, or even immodest. "God having provided some better thing for us,"—can that be true? Can we be better men than the Puritans, do better work? Has God given us a better chance than He gave them? Certainly that contradicts the usual way of looking at the matter. It is natural to look back with regret to the Puritan days and the Puritan spirit, to feel that the best that was there has somehow weakened or failed in the process of the years. The words may well come to us with something of the shock they produced when first they came to the descendants of the Hebrews, declaring that God had provided for the men of the first Christian Century something better than has been known by Moses and the kings and prophets of Israel's heroic days.

Of course it is obvious that God has provided better things for us than for the fathers, in the outward conditions of living. Could we borrow

the imagination of Hawthorne for an hour, and call back one of the sober, sturdy Pilgrim fathers, we would no doubt see him vastly impressed by the splendor and richness of modern life. Comparing our ships with the Mayflower, our docks with Plymouth Rock, our streets with the winding roads of a New England village, our buildings with the log cabins, he would confess with amazement that God has given us better things than He gave the fathers. And when you invited him, as you would of course, to the Annual Dinner of your Society, he would wonder at the profusion and wealth of modern living. It may be that his thoughts would turn to Belshazzar's feast, and that he would sit in gloom, or stalk from the room in severe condemnation; yet if he were of the more genial company that is associated with the name of Bradford and the early history of Plymouth he might acknowledge in all the richness of modern living the good gifts of God, and say, "Verily, God hath provided better things for you than ever we knew."

And yet, because he was a Puritan, he would look deeper. And because we are sons of the Puritans, we must get below the surface. We know well that when we turn and look at that

severe figure, outward conditions seem trivial; the difference between his homespun dress, simple fare, and bare meeting-house, and our rich life in home and church, looks very small. We catch something in the man's face, the revelation of a greatness in his soul, and in our hearts we raise the question, "Has God provided some *better thing* for us"? Are we ahead of the Puritan in the real goods of life?

What was the best possession of the Puritan, that which, more than any other gift, made him of supreme worth to the world, and gave distinction to his character? It was something which has so faded or failed in recent years that it is not easy for the children of this age to realize it. And so, when we speak of the Puritan, it is of his iron determination, his hatred of tyrants, his zeal for learning, his care for the Sabbath, his inspired idea of government by town-meeting, his rugged simplicity, that we speak. But below all these, infinitely more important in its power over his character and influence, was the one great possession—his sense of God. God was to him no mere logical necessity for his system of philosophy, no name necessary for the proper discharge of religious func-

tions. He saw God everywhere. He had caught once more, as few men before or since have caught it, the spirit of Isaiah, who moved about the streets of Jerusalem more conscious of the "eyes of the glory of God" than of the gaze of his fellow citizens. With iconoclastic zeal the Puritan fought against the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence. The mass was monstrous to him. But, whether or no he ever clearly phrased it so to himself, he hated the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Mass, because he gloried so in the real presence of God in his life and in the world. It was this sense of God that made him masterful and indomitable in the service of righteousness. He could not fear kings or great men, for he ever stood in the presence of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. John Knox was the despair of Mary Stuart, and Cromwell the nemesis of Charles Stuart, because Knox and Cromwell were men of God, to whom the greatest earthly pomp must seem petty. It was this sense of God that formed "that great impulse that drove them across the sea." They left their homes, and made new homes in the wilderness, at awful cost of joy and life, because they could not live without God, and the rulers would not let them live with Him. They

staked all on that great yearning for God. It was their sense of God that determined their ideals and standards, their ways of personal and community life. As one of their sons has said—“The impulse by which they were animated was a profoundly ethical impulse—the desire to lead godly lives, and to drive out sin from the community—the same ethical impulse which animates the glowing pages of Hebrew poets and prophets, and which has given to the history and literature of Israel their commanding influence in the world. The Greek, says Matthew Arnold, held that the perfection of happiness was to have one’s thoughts hit the mark; but the Hebrew held that it was to serve the Lord day and night.”

It would be easy and natural for us to feel that here at least God provided some better things for them, than for us. Before this mighty faith of theirs, simple but real and regnant, we bow in reverence, and with humble confession that we have not kept the noblest gift of our fathers. There is in us, as we view this great Puritan sense of God, something of the feeling of the Prodigal, “I am no more worthy to be called their son.” Have we anything in our modern life, for all its richness and splendor, anything *better* than

the strong sense of God which the early men of New England felt so profoundly? Have we anything one-half so good?

Perhaps not. There is painful need that we search ourselves to see if there was not something in that simple life and faith of the fathers to regain which would be worth the sacrifice of all our rich modern life.

And yet the text is true: "God having provided some better thing for us." If we are not better men, better servants of God, than our fathers, it is not because God did more for them than He does for us, but because we fail to use the far richer provision He makes for our inner life.

For it is simple fact that there is available for us to-day a richer, deeper, wider, more powerful, consciousness of God than was possible for Cromwell, or Milton, or Bradford or Hooker, to attain. We have a greater God of whom to be conscious, a God better known. Strong as was the God-consciousness of the Puritan, it was cramped and fettered within narrow forms and faiths and opportunities. Given the vivid God-sense of those men in the rich spiritual and social conditions of to-day, and the old prophesy would find fulfil-

ment, "Instead of the fathers shall be the children, whom thou shalt make princes in the earth."

It is high time we ceased laying the blame for our impotent lives, our ineffective faith, our retreat before God's enemies, to the times in which we live, saying that it is impossible to maintain the Puritan standards and ideals in the conditions of the present day. It is time we began to realize how much richer, wider, readier an opportunity God gives to men of God to-day than He gave to the men of the Mayflower; and that not merely nor chiefly in the external conditions of living, but in the possibilities of a God-conscious spiritual life. There is lying, ready to hand, the chance for such godly living as the fathers never imagined: all that is needed is that we be men enough to live with God to-day as they lived with God yesterday.

There is open to us a richer sense of God than the Puritan had. To him large realms of thought and art and emotion were closed, because God was not in them. He moved in a little world, because he thought that to move out of it would be to lose God. All honor to him that he would not go where God seemed to him not to be! That is the spirit most needed in all ages,—the

determination to let go anything rather than to lose hold on God. But to us has come a revelation that God is in all of life. It is sadly true that many of the sons of New England have gone into the wider life their fathers shunned, and have lost God as they left the narrower life. But it is gloriously true that one can move out from the little world in which the Puritan moved, into the spacious and wonderful countries of art, and science, and recreation, and find himself in the presence of a God of such beauty, truth, and joy, as could not live or be known in the narrower life. The Puritan was shut in with God; we are set free with God. If only our souls are great enough to use their freedom aright, we can have a sense of God, broad, rich, free from cant and unreality and conventionality, that shall do for us, and through us for the world, greater things than the Puritan's sense of God could accomplish.

God has provided for us a richer sense of the godly life than was possible for men of the Seventeenth Century. It may seem strange to assert that all the complexity of modern civilization, all the wealth and wonder of Twentieth Century life, all the startling and clashing movements of

democracy and of political and social advance, make possible the vision and realization of a richer ideal of godliness. Why, these are the very facts and forces which seem to hamper and weaken religion: these are what draw men and women from churches, and absorb the energies and thoughts that should go to the life of the soul, and make hard the way of God's prophets and priests. Yes, but by so much as the conditions of to-day make the godly life a struggle, by so much do they deepen and enrich it. What else is the meaning of that vision of the Holy City which glows from the last pages of the Bible, the city of God built up of the wealth and glory and honor of the nations? A nobler life of godliness is open to the man of God to-day than was open to the fathers. There is a verse in the great faith chapter which sets before us vividly in simple words the spirit in which the Pilgrims crossed the sea: "they desired a better country". But did you ever note the end of that verse? It seems written for us, as the earlier part for them. "They desire a better country: but God hath prepared for them a *city*".

Their ideal of godly living was to get away

from the main currents of human life into some little bay, where they could, at peace, live with God and as God would have them live. They saved their godliness by separating it. "They desired a better *country*." But, friends, it is time we awoke to the great truth that God is most to be found where men and their problems abound: that above the godliness that comes through seclusion rises the godliness that comes from living with God in the thick of human struggle. God gave the Pilgrims a better country. But he has provided some better thing for us: for He has given us a *city*.

" Where cross the crowded ways of life,
Where sound the cries of race and clan,
Above the noise of selfish strife,
We hear Thy voice, O Son of Man."

That voice calls us to a richer Christliness, a nobler godliness, than could ever be gained by saint, or mystic, or Puritan, of the past. For he who enters strongly into the social sympathies of to-day enters more widely and truly into the life of God. The Puritan was proud to call himself a "Separatist". The ideal of the man needed now

is in the words of Lawrence Oliphant, "A spiritually-minded man of the world". And a spiritually-minded man of the world has a richer realization of true godliness than any Separatist can experience.

God has given to us of to-day also a wider sphere,—immeasurably wider,—than was open to the men of God in the Seventeenth Century. Their horizon was the bounds of the parish. Ours is the world. They knew little or nothing of that which is the glory of religion to-day,—broad sympathy with men of all classes and all races. They found satisfaction not only in the fact that they belonged to the elect, but in the conviction that eternal misery awaited the reprobate. There is, no doubt, a danger in the merciful temper of modern religion, a danger that it degenerate into weakness, and lose the strength and truth of insistence on exorable moral law with its sure penalties and sanctions. But there is in the modern spirit of mercy also the possibility of a nobler and more gracious sense of God and of godliness, something better than the Puritan knew.

Friends, it is unworthy weakness, dishonoring our New England ancestry, and worse, dishonoring the Living God, our Father, to look back and

sigh for the old days, to think that those men had something denied to us, to imagine that we cannot be better men of God than they were. Christ has put in stinging words His estimate of the men whose reverence for the prophets takes shape only in building or decorating their tombs. It is futile, it is shameful, to think, "perhaps we could be such men as they, were we back where they were." Honor the great men, our fathers, rather, by thinking what they would be, were they here, in this greater world, amid these larger thoughts, with this richer life, which is ours. One of our own New England prophets has reminded us that the spirit of the Pilgrims is the spirit that looks forward not back.

“ 'Tis as easy to be heroes as to sit the idle slaves
Of a legendary virtue carved upon our father's
graves.

Worshippers of light ancestral make the present
light a crime ;—

Was the Mayflower launched by cowards, steered
by men behind their time ?

Turn those tracks toward Past or Future that
make Plymouth Rock sublime ?

They were men of present valor, stalwart old
iconoclasts,

Unconvinced by axe or gibbet that all virtue was
the Past's ;

But we make their truth our falsehood, thinking
that hath made us free,

Hoarding it in mouldy parchments, while our
tender spirits flee

The rude grasp of that great Impulse which drove
them across the sea ”.

“ That great impulse,”—there is the heart of the
matter. All the richness and possibility of our
modern life will not avail if we lack that compelling,
inspiring sense of God which was their life. But
the richness of our modern life does open to us new
and greater possibilities of character and influence,
if we have dominant in us the vivid sense of God.

And we can have it. God is near to the men of every age, to be known, and loved, and served, if they will. Imagine that little band of heroic men and women of God, set down here in the city of New York, as once they were set down on the bleak shores of Massachusetts—placed here in this city, as we, their sons, have been placed. Do you not know that the city would feel their presence, that all through the church, the civil government, the social life, of this city would go a dominating power of righteousness and truth, a determining purpose of godliness, that would be irresistible? They cannot be here: they served their own generation strongly and fell asleep. But it is time for the faith to arise in us, their sons, that we can do more than they did, more than they could do, for we are heirs of the good that was in them, and of richer good beside.

But the sense of God that was in them must be in us; and we can find it where they did, in the living and abiding word of God. The spiritual power of the Puritan, his vivid sense of God, did it not spring from a new approach to the long-neglected Word of God? Through many years men had forgotten the Word of God; the

spirit of the prophets and of the Son of Man was sealed in a closed book. The Puritan opened the Bible once more, found his way to those old fountains of inspiration, and the glory of God there revealed took possession of his soul. The world to-day will wait for the men of God it needs, "the spiritually-minded men of the world," who shall do for the world to-day what the Puritans did for their age—the world to-day will wait until the men of God to-day believe the great words of John Robinson in his last sermon to the Pilgrims in Holland, "God hath yet more light to break forth from His most Holy Word," and seek afresh in the newly opened Bible of this day the vivid sense of God without which "nothing is strong, nothing is holy," with which the men of God, though they be but a little company of pilgrims in the midst of a hostile and careless world, shall ever be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the remnant through which God will work out His mighty purpose of redemption.

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