

THREE LEVELS OF LIFE

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear." Psalm 46:1.

Our inability to live at our best can be traced to our reliance upon the wrong kind of power. We are greatly impressed with that type of power which gets things done in our workaday world. We see how it removes mountains, changes the face of the earth, contains rivers and lakes, crushes hostile armies, lays waste great cities, and builds skyscrapers which reach arrogantly toward the skies. By this very same power we also seek to do things within ourselves, but we invariably fail. We follow the mistaken judgment that since this sort of power gets things done in some realms that it gets all things done, but it does not. It may influence or convince the mind, but it will never move the heart. It can command obedience, but it can never win affection. It can win wars, but it can never secure peace. It can build a house, but it can never fashion a home. It can break a life, but it can never break a habit. If we are to have the strength to live on the proper level of life as we should, we must go to the right source and obtain the right sort of power. Therefore, let us remember that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Life on the highest plane is a wonderful power in the world. Joy fills it; love possesses it; blessings follow it; men seek it. It is forever calling us upward and onward to higher achievement.

The house of life has three stories. Some of us still live on the first floor. Most of us have climbed to the second floor. Others of us live on the third floor. Many run up and down the stairs.

I. The Level Of Instinct.

Those on the first floor of life live by instinct, impulse, and force. There life is a struggle and it is ever a case of the survival of the fittest. It is the law of the jungle, where the weak go down and the swiftest win the race. With desire as the rule, life is ruthless; no quarter is asked or given. Alas, more of life than we are willing to admit, even in what we call civilization, is lived on this level.

The level of instinct is where we want our own way and get it so far as we can. If you want to take something that somebody else has earned, if you want expensive wearing apparel, or if you want somebody else's husband or wife, you go after them and, if you are able, you get them. One who lives on this level takes a business away from another if he can. Or if a person, who lives on this level, wants the companion of another, he or she gets that companion if he or she can do so. They prove that they belong in part to the animal kingdom, for the animals behave this way quite often. If such people can please themselves by indulging their desires, they do not hesitate to do so. That is living on the level of instinct.

II. The Level Of Conscience.

Those on the second floor of life live by obligation, moral law, and the beginnings of reason. There is "a stop in the mind," as John Woolman would say; something which arrests him and compels him to pass moral judgments on his thoughts and his actions. He sees dimly that selfishness is short thinking and defeats itself. Those who live on this level will not break up the home of another to gratify a personal desire or because of a love of power. They see that those who break up a home are actually

striking at the security of every home, including their own. At this level people live and let live, at least for the protection of themselves.

The level of conscience is where we have a code, a decent set of ideals that decent people live up to and are happy to do so. We do not "gyp" other people, we do not indulge expensive personal tastes, we live an honorable life, we share our possessions with those who are more needy than we are, and we strive to fulfil our social and community obligations. What more can anyone ask, we say, than that we should have decent ideals and try to live up to them?

God placed that something which we call "conscience" in every individual He created. Within man is a voice crying out "You ought." The conscience can only impress the obligation to do what the judgment has already decided to be right. If the judgment is wrong in its decision, it cannot always be right to do what conscience approves. Conscience has been defined as "the inward judgment of the soul, by which our actions are tried and acquitted or condemned." It is limited by the standard of its knowledge. Conscience assesses right and wrong. It prompts a person to do right, warns him against doing wrong, and accuses him if he does wrong. Conscience includes a perception of a choice between right and wrong, a feeling that right should be done and that wrong out not to be done, a complacency in the doing of what is right and a disquietude in the doing of that which is wrong. Conscience is the secret testimony of the soul, whereby it approves things that are good, and condemns those that are evil. It is that voice which says "don't" when one starts to do wrong. It cannot be bought, it cannot be sold, and it cannot be given away to anybody else. Don't abuse your conscience, because it does not take very long to get it out of order.

Since childhood we have heard the saying, "Let your conscience be your guide." We talk glibly about letting our consciences be our guides as if the human conscience could tell us exactly what we ought or ought not to do. Conscience is not an infallible guide in any such sense.

Many times conscience dictates one thing to one person and a different thing for another person or group of people. The conscience of the Hindu lashes him if he breaks caste; the Christian's conscience lashes him unless he utterly destroys the caste system. The conscience of the Moham-medan woman dictates that she veil her face; the Christian woman's conscience dictates that so far as she is concerned for her to veil her face is unnecessary, unsanitary and wrong. The truth of the matter is that we expect too much of conscience. This is always the case when we expect conscience to tell us exactly what to do when all it can infallibly do is to insist, "Do right, you ought to do right, you must do right." Each of us certainly has a duty to his conscience. It is the duty of each one to enlighten his conscience. He needs to adjust it to the highest and best standard of right. It is not enough to say, "Follow your conscience," or "Let your conscience be your guide." It is not enough for a navigator to follow his compass. It is essential that he know his compass is pointing to the north. It is not enough for you to go by your watch. You must be sure that it is set by the right time. Conscience must be set by the highest and best standard. It is our duty to obey conscience when it complies with the Word of God, the leading of the Spirit of God, truth and right.

III. The Level Of Grace.

Those on the third floor of life live by grace. Many have never known this third level of life. Conscience tries to bring religion down into

the actual affairs of life. Grace lifts our affairs up to the level of religion. Grace substitutes the power of God for self-effort. It turns our lives over to Him, and asks Him to make known to us what He would have us to do. Grace changes our interests, desires, intentions and actions. On the level of instinct we live by desire; on the level of conscience we live by duty; on the level of grace, desire and duty more nearly coincide. When God's grace becomes real to us, it is because we have experienced that change which only God can bring about.

God can and does make His will known to us. For instance, you may have five dollars in your pocket. Instinct tells you to spend it on yourself, perhaps for something that would even be injurious to you. Conscience tells you not to do this, but to keep it for a better purpose. But God would have you to pray about how you are going to use that money and be governed by what He reveals to you that He wants you to do with it. Abraham Lincoln said, "I have had so many evidences of His direction, so many instances when I have been controlled by some other power than my own will, that I cannot doubt that this power comes from above. I frequently see my way clear to a decision when I am conscious that I have not sufficient facts upon which to found it. But I cannot recall one instance in which I have followed my own judgment, founded upon such a decision, when the results were unsatisfactory. I am satisfied that, when the Almighty wants me to do, or not to do a particular thing, He finds a way of letting me know it."

Christ is just as eager to get people up from the level of conscience to the level of grace as He is to get people up from the level of instinct to the level of grace. There are many duty-driven, unlovely people who live by conscience and self-effort. When they succeed in reaching their ideals they become proud of themselves, but in so far as they fail they become disappointed, discouraged and despairing. The Pharisees were people who lived largely by conscientious scruples, without ever giving their hearts to God in abandon and freedom. When you let go, and let God come into your life, there will come with Him a flood of relief and power. He wants you to have and enjoy a rich and free life. Christ wants you to move up from the level of conscience and self-effort to the level of grace and living by the help of God.

Perhaps some young person in this service may be thinking about marriage. Maybe you are asking yourself, "Should I marry? If so, should I marry this particular person?" Instinct tells you to marry the person who is physically and emotionally congenial to you. Conscience tells you to marry the person with character who can meet your ideals and hold your admiration. There is truth in both viewpoints. But grace tells you to pray about the matter and discover the will of the Lord for you; to be sure that the one with whom you are contemplating marriage believes in God and wants to make fundamental and small decisions in accordance with God's will for his or her life, and is eager that marriage and the home be based on Christian faith and principle.

A man may be on his way to make a business transaction. He knows the temptation to moral compromise is real and must be faced. What shall he do? Instinct tells him to forget his ideals, for it is a case where business is business, or a matter of dog-eat-dog. Conscience tells him to stand up for what he knows is right, and not to give in to compromise in such a spirit that perhaps no one will want to take the way of compromise, for they will see in this man's faith and courage that God has a right way of deciding everything.

On the third floor or level in the house of life the light is brighter and the outlook is wider. For this reason we can see more clearly, as well as at a greater distance. Those who live on this level do not have any desire to injure anybody; they do not consider merely their own gain or power or prestige, but the common good. On this floor people do not just live and let live, but they live and help others to live as they should.

What a tragedy it is that so many live part of their lives on one floor or level and part on another level! John Bowring wrote the stately and beloved hymn, "In the Cross of Christ I Glory." In it he said:

"In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

When the woes of life o'ertake me,
Hopes deceive, and fears annoy,
Never shall the cross forsake me:
Lo! it glows with peace and joy.

When the sun of bliss is beaming
Light and love upon my way,
From the cross the radiance streaming
Adds more luster to the day.

Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that thro' all time abide."

Yet the same man forced opium on the Chinese people at the point of British guns. What is even more strange, Bowring saw no discrepancy between his sincere private piety and his public atrocity. He had a blind spot; he was not consciously and intentionally a hypocrite. He had an astigmatism and did not see clearly what he was doing. He wrote his hymn on the third floor of life, and then went downstairs to do his dirty work. So often today we see people doing the same sort of thing. So often we see a man of nobility, culture, and even piety doing in politics what he would be ashamed to do on his own and in other realms of life. It is this fact which causes the very word "politics" to stink to high heaven.

The level of instinct, in international affairs, is the level of might; and when men and nations live on that level war results. The level of conscience, in international relations, is the level of right; it is far higher than the level of might. But there is a level of grace in international relations; it is the level on which men accept the will of God as binding upon them and upon their nations. Only as we find God's will can we find the basis of enduring peace. Man's wisdom alone cannot bring peace on earth, nor maintain it. Only as God rules the hearts of men and the life of nations can we find that righteousness which is the only foundation of peace. We must bring our desires, and even our conceptions of duty, under the scrutiny of God. One of the most profound bits of political philosophy was recorded in those few short words of William Penn: "Men must be governed by God, or they will be ruled by tyrants."

Instinct means I do what I want to do; conscience means I do what I ought to do; but grace means I do what God wants me to do, and what He enables me to do. On which of these levels of life are you living? Where do you live? Downstairs or upstairs? Do you live on the first floor of life, where instinct gropes in the dark, or on the third floor, where at night we can see the great stars obeying the will of God?

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear." In this glorious text God's protection is promised. "God is our refuge." In the loving care of God is the place of safety and security for every soul in doubt, danger or distress. Accept His promise of protection. In this text God's power is pledged. "God is our strength." God offers His power to His children. His power is unlimited, and He will ever be the strength of His people. Furthermore, in this text God's presence is proclaimed in the words, "a very present help in trouble." On the basis of experience, we know that God is all we need. He will be with us under all circumstances. He will never leave us. He will never fail us. He will always take care of us. "Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name."