"So Hazael went to meet him and took a present with him, of every good thing of Damascus, forty camel-loads; and he came and stood before him, and said, Your son Ben-haded king of Syria has sent me to you, saying, Shall I recover from this disease? And Elisha said to him, Go, say to him, You shall certainly recover. However Yahweh has shown me that he will really die. And he settled his countenance steadfastly, until he was ashamed; and the man of God wept. And Hazael said, Why is my lord weeping? And he answered, Because I know the evil that you will do to the children of Israel: their strongholds you will set on fire, and their young men you will kill with the sword; and you will dash their children, and rip open their women with child. And Hazael said, But what, is your servant a dog, that he should do this great thing? And Elisha answered, Yahweh has shown me that you shall be king over Syria. So he departed from Elisha, and came to his master, who said to him, What did Elisha say to you? And he answered, He told me you would surely recover. And it came to pass on the morrow, that he took a thick cloth, and dipped it in water, and spread it over his face so that he died; and Hazael reigned in his stead." 2 Kings 8:9-15.

This is a strange, wild story. That Damascene monarchy [had] burst into sudden power, warlike and commercial; for the two things went together in those days. As is usually the case, Hazael the successful soldier becomes ambitious. His sword seems to be the real sceptre, and he will have the dominion. Many years before this, Elijah had anointed him to be king over Syria. That had wrought upon him and stirred ambition in him. Elijah's other appointments, coeval with his own, had already taken effect; Jehu was king of Israel, Elisha was prophet, and he [Hazael] only had not attained the dignity to which he had been designated.

He comes now with his message from the king of Damascus to Elisha. No doubt he had been often contrasting his own vigor with the decrepit, nominal king, and many a time had thought of the anointing, and had nursed ambitious hopes, which gradually turned to dark resolves.

He hoped, no doubt, that Ben-hadad was mortally sick, and it must have been a cruel, crushing disappointment when he heard that there was nothing deadly in the illness. Another hope was gone from him. The throne seemed further off than ever. I suppose that, at that instant, there sprang in his heart the resolve that he would kill Ben-hadad. The recoil of disappointment spurred Hazael to the resolution which he then and there took. It had been gathering form, no doubt, through some years, but now it became definite and settled. While his face glowed with the new determination, and his lips clenched themselves in the firmness of his purpose, the even voice of the prophet went on, 'however he shall certainly die,' and the eye of the man of God searched him till he turned away ashamed because aware that his inmost heart was read.

Then there followed the prophet's weeping and the solemn announcement of what Hazael would do when he had climbed to the throne. He shrank in real horror from the thought of such enormity of sin. 'Is thy servant a dog that he should do such a thing?' Elisha sternly answers: 'The Lord hath showed me that thou shalt be king over Syria.' The certainty is that in his character occasion will develop evil. The certainty is that a course begun by such crime will be of a piece, and consistent with itself.

This conversation with Elisha seems to have accelerated Hazael's purpose, as if the prediction were to his mind a justification of his means of fulfilling it. How like Macbeth he is!--the successful soldier, stirred by supernatural monitions of a greatness which he should achieve, and at last a murderer.

This narrative opens to us some of the solemn, dark places of human life, of men's hearts, of
God's ways. Let us look at some of the lessons which lie here.

1. Man's responsibility for the sin which God foresees.

It seems as if the prophet's words had much to do in exciting the ambitious desires which led to the crime. Hazael's purpose of executing the deed is clearly known to the prophet. His ascending the throne is part of the divine purpose. He could find excuses for his guilt, and fling the responsibility for firing his ambition on the divine messenger. It may be asked--What sort of God is this who works on the mind of a man by exciting promises, and having done so, and having it fixed in His purposes that the man is to do the crime, yet treats it when done as guilt?

But now, whatever you may say, or whatever excuses Hazael might have found for himself, here is just in its most naked form that which is true about all sin. God foresees it all. God puts men into circumstances where they will fall, God presents to them things which they will make temptations. God takes the consequences of their wrongdoing and works them into His great scheme. That is undeniable on one side, and on the other it is as undeniable that God's foreseeing leaves men free. God's putting men into circumstances where they fall is not His tempting them. God's non-prevention of sin is not permission to sin. God's overruling the consequences of sin is not His condoning of sin as part of the scheme of His providence. Man is free. Man is responsible. God hates sin. God foresees and permits sin. It is all a terrible mystery, but the facts are as undeniable as the mystery of their co-existence is inscrutable.

2. The slumbering possibilities of sin.

Hazael indignantly protests against the thought that he should do such a thing. There is conscience left in him yet. His example suggests how little any of us know what it is in us to be or to do. We are all of us a mystery to ourselves. Slumbering powers lie in us. We are like quiescent volcanoes. So much in us lies dormant, needing occasion for its development, like seeds that may sleep for centuries. That is true in regard to both the good and the bad in us. Life reveals us to ourselves. We learn to know ourselves by our actions better than by mental self-inspection.

All sin is one in essence, and may pass into diverse forms according to circumstances. Of course characters differ, but the root of sin is in us all. We are largely good because not tempted, as a house may well stand firm when there are no floods. By the nature of the case, thorough self-knowledge is impossible.

Sin has the power of blinding us to its presence. It comes in a cloud as the old gods were fabled to do. The lungs get accustomed to a vitiated atmosphere, and scarcely are conscious of oppression till they cease to play.

All this should teach us lessons of wary walking and humility--we are good because we have not been tried; lessons of charity and brotherly kindness--every thief in the hulks, every prostitute on the streets, is our brother and sister, and they prove their fraternity by their sin. 'Whatever man has done man may do.' 'Nihil humanum alienum a me puto.' 'Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.'

3. The fatal necessity by which sin repeats itself in aggravated forms.

See how Hazael is drifted into his worst crimes. His first one leads on by fell necessity to others. A man who has done no sin is conceivable, but a man who has done only one is impossible. Did you ever see a dam bursting or breaking down? Through a little crack comes one drop. Will it stop there, the gap or the trickle? No! The drop has widened the crack, it has softened the earth around, it has cleared away some impediments. So another and
another follow ever more rapidly until the waters pour out in a flood and the retaining embankment is swept away.

No sin 'is dead, being alone.' The demon brings seven other devils worse than himself. The reason for that aggravation is plain. There is, first, habit. There is, second, growing inclination. There is, third, weakened restraint. There is, fourth, a craving for excitement to still conscience. There is, fifth, the necessity of the man's position. There is, sixth, the strange love of consistency which tones all life down or up to one tint, as near as may be. There comes at last despair.

But not merely does every sin tend to repeat itself and to draw others after it. It tends to repeat itself in aggravated forms. There is growth, the law of increase as well as of perpetuity. The seed produces 'some sixty and some a hundredfold.'

And so the slaughtered soldiers and desolated homesteads of Israel were the sequel of the cloth on Ben-hadad's face. The secret of much enormous crime is the kind of relief from conscience which is found in committing a yet greater sin. The Furies drive with whips of scorpions, and the poor wretch goes plunging and kicking deeper and deeper in the mire, further and further from the path. So you can never say, 'I will only do this one wrong thing.'

We see here how powerless against sin are all restraints. The prophecy did not prevent Hazael from his sins. The clear sense that they were sins did not prevent him. The horror-struck shudder of conscience did not prevent him. It was soon gagged.

Hear, then, the conclusion of the whole matter. Christ reveals us to ourselves. Christ breaks the chain of sin, makes a new beginning, cuts off the entail, reverses the irreversible, erases the indelible, cancels the irrevocable, forgives all the faultful past, and by the power of His love in the soul works a mightier miracle than changing the Ethiopian's skin. He teaches them who are accustomed to evil to do well, and though sins be as scarlet makes them white as snow. He gives us a cleansed past and a bright future, and out of all our sins and wasted years makes pardoned sinners and glorified, perfected saints.