

Summum Bonum.

A SERMON.

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“There be many that say, Who will show us any good? Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us.”—Ps. iv. 6.

IN the history of ancient Greece we read of two sages, one of whom was called the Weeping and the other the Laughing Philosopher. Both were deep students of human nature; but, as they looked out upon the strange spectacle of human life, they saw totally different sides of it. The one saw nothing but the dark side, and spoke of the woe of the world so constantly that he earned the lugubrious title by which he was called; whilst the other always looked at the bright side of things, and found such endless amusement in the behaviour of his fellow-creatures, that he got the gay title by which he is remembered.

These ancient sages have their disciples still in the world, conscious and unconscious. Some people take the most gloomy views of existence. They think life a poor affair, mankind a shabby lot, and the world a kind of dog-hutch, where you live in misery and die at last like a rat in a hole. On the other hand, there are people of precisely the opposite humour. Whenever their sky is overcast with a dark cloud, they look out for the silver lining; they think highly of human nature in general, and with satisfaction of themselves in particular; and, on the whole, they are persuaded that this is a very good world, and life a very desirable thing.

Everyone must know plenty of people belonging to both these schools of practical philosophy. It depends very largely, I suppose, on natural temperament to which of the two any person belongs; for some of us are naturally melancholy, while others are naturally sanguine. Partly, too, it may depend on fortune: an early disappointment or the treachery of a supposed friend may poison a man's mind to all healthy influences; whereas those into whose soul the iron has never entered are disposed to think lightly of the sufferings of others.

Somewhat analogous to this division of mankind is that contained in our text. Only it goes far deeper. This verse speaks of a dissatisfaction with life which is consistent with a great deal of gaiety

on the surface, and of a satisfaction which may be felt in spite of much misfortune in one's circumstances and even some melancholy of disposition. Let us consider, first, the restless human heart, and secondly, the heart at rest.

I. THE RESTLESS HEART.

“There be many that say, Who will show us any good?” If this was true in the days of David, it is, I fear, still truer now; for the complexity of modern life has increased the restlessness of man. If even among the quiet woods and hills of Judæa this sad cry arose, it is to be heard far more frequently in the streets of London and the busy towns of the nineteenth century.

It is the cry of the hungry and thirsty human heart, which has not yet found in the world anything to satisfy it. You see the young, with this cry on their lips, starting out in quest of some supreme good, which is to fulfil all their longings, no doubt of finding it having yet crossed their minds; because the world seems large enough and life long enough to meet the heaviest demands. You hear the middle-aged raising the same cry, after their first expectations have been disappointed, and when their need is getting urgent, because their time is short. You hear it coming from the lips of the aged in tones of scorn, “Who will show us any good? there is no satisfying good; the world is a delusion, and mankind a sham.”

There is a picture which you may have seen, by one of our foremost artists, called the Pursuit of Pleasure, in which pleasure is represented as an airy winged figure of dazzling beauty, floating just above the ground, turning her enchanting face towards those who are in pursuit of her; but still retreating from them, as she draws them on. In the forefront of her pursuers are the young with flushed faces and confident eyes, almost touching with their outstretched hands the fringes of her robe. Further behind are those who have been longer in pursuit; they are falling back in the race, and there is the dread of disappointment in their eyes; but their

determination is all the stronger not to miss the prize. In the rear are those following in despair; and some have stumbled and fallen, and are being trodden upon as the mad pursuit rushes by. Is it not too true? Who can say, My desires are fulfilled, and I am satisfied? If the blinds were drawn up from the windows of our hearts, what would be seen within? The pain of desires which have found no fulfilment, the disappointment of hopes once cherished but abandoned now, the dread of coming change, which may strew the ground with the fair fabric of our prosperity. So difficult is it to catch the butterfly of happiness, and it is still more difficult to keep it.

This restlessness of the heart is seen in the craving for excitement, which is so universal at the present time. This must be the real explanation of the evils of our drinking customs, of which we hear and see so much. What is the reason that the mad liking for intoxication is so widespread? Temperance reformers attribute it to the multiplication of temptations, and throw the responsibility on those who make and sell strong drink. But there is more in it than this. There must be an enormous amount of dull misery and dissatisfaction in men's hearts, when they will spend their money and imperil their happiness for something which can make them forget for a little who they are and what is their condition. At the opposite end of the social scale the distractions with which the idle classes try to kill time are an equally amazing evidence of the same state of mind. There are thousands in this country who, with all the resources which wealth and influence can give, are wearying themselves with attempts to find some good which can make them feel that it is worth while to live, and yet the result is next to nothing. They work hard at their pleasure, turning night into day and violating all the rules of nature and health in their devotion to its pursuit. Yet what is the fruit of it all? There is no other section of society in which there are so many asking, "Who will show us any good?"

Among those who devote themselves to business, is there not the same restlessness? You see it in the envy with which one class looks upon another, and one competitor regards another, in the battle of life. Each believes that his neighbour is getting too much of the good which all are striving for, and he grudges his good luck; only everyone is sure that the desirable lot has not fallen to himself. The

rich capitalist believes the secret to be hidden in the homes of his workpeople, who, he says, are so well paid and have no cares. But the poor are equally sure it is not with them: they think it must be guarded within the park railings and behind the lawns and flower-beds of the wealthy. Each continent believes that it must be in possession of the other. You see a man, irritated with the wrongs and disappointments of his own country, but quite sure he will find the secret beyond seas, under a different form of government and in a society organised on different principles. But, when he embarks in the emigrant ship, the little imp of care leaps off the quay behind him and hides among his luggage; and, when he shoulders his portmanteau on the other side, there is the spectre perched atop of it. We change our latitude, but we do not change our mind.

Or, finally, is the secret to be found among those who are reckoned the wise, if it is not either in the scenes of pleasure or in the gains of the market-place? The man who lives retired from both the excitements of society and the cares of business, lapped in the calm of study and holding communion only with the wise and solemn conclaves of the dead—surely he has found the good which eludes all others? Read the literature of the day and see. Why, they are sagely discussing whether life is worth living; and there is a growing school of thinkers who teach that ours is the worst of all possible worlds, and that there is no reward which can compensate for carrying the burden of life so long. Even the newer poetry, which ought to be the solace and the marching music of the generation, is pitched on the dreariest minor key, and may well be characterised as the repetition, with a hundred fantastic variations, of the question, "Who will show us any good?"

Thus the men of thought and the men of action and the men of leisure arrive by different ways at the same result. They are seeking some great good which will satisfy the heart, but they have not found it; and they are going about asking, Who will show us it? And then life is so short. Now or never you must find the secret. A very few years and other feet will be hurrying where ours are now, and the very echoes of ours will have died away for ever. Are we to live and die without once clasping our fingers over the prize, without once getting our hearts filled to the brim?

II. THE HEART AT REST.

"Lord, lift upon us the light of Thy countenance." Our text, though short, is very dramatic. It represents one standing in the market-place, in the midst of the crowd who are pushing and bustling hither and thither, with this one cry on their lips, "Who will show us any good?" but he, listening to them, looks calmly upwards and, as the mouthpiece of a few solitary and unnoticed ones among the multitude, says, "Lord, lift upon us the light of Thy countenance." He is not asking, "Who will show us any good?" for he knows the secret they are in quest of, he has found the supreme good, and he has nothing else to desire but this—that more and more God would lift on him and those for whom he speaks the light of His countenance; for this is the secret.

What does it mean? The phrase is a very Oriental one. It is derived from the experience of an Eastern court. The light of the countenance is the expression which it wears when it is pleased. There is a kind of radiance which lights up the features under feelings of satisfaction and pleasure, but fades away and leaves them sunless and gloomy under feelings of dislike, or hatred, or anger. The wives and courtiers of an absolute Oriental monarch used to watch with anxiety, when they approached his presence, for the expression which his countenance might wear. If his face was gloomy, as his eyes fell on them, it boded them evil; but, if he lifted up his head with pleasure beaming from its features at their approach, this was a sign of hope. It is from this that the metaphor of our text is taken; and the meaning of it is, that the secret of true happiness is to enjoy the favour and love of God.

The figure of speech is not, indeed, one for which we care. Its associations are alien and perhaps distasteful to us. But it is not difficult to translate it into its New Testament equivalents. We know on what conditions God is now well-pleased with the children of men. He is always well-pleased with Christ, and with all whom He sees in Christ. This, therefore, in the language of modern and Christian experience, is the solution of the problem—to have Christ, and ever more of Christ.

How is this the solution? How, in other words, does Christ give the heart rest?

1. He does so by taking it off itself. One

reason why so many are restless is that they are absorbed in themselves. It is a strange law of nature that, while all seek instinctively for happiness, no one will ever find it who makes it a direct object of pursuit. A person continually occupied with himself is doomed to misery, just as anyone who continues to listen to the beating of his heart or to count his own breathings, will soon be the prey of hypochondria. Those who so utterly despair of finding any good in the world that they lose their reason or take away their own life are always persons absorbed in themselves. And thousands who do not fall so far, but are pining in misery, with the world every day growing blacker around them and their thoughts of their fellow-creatures becoming every day more bitter, owe their despair to the concentration of their thoughts upon themselves. What they need is to become absorbed in some external interest and do some good to somebody. This is the true medicine of a mind diseased. A single act of self-denial will cause the blue to appear in the darkest sky; and an hour spent in cheering some bereaved heart will dissipate the gathering despair of a life. Now, this is what Christ calls us to. He draws us out of ourselves, and gives us a task and an interest in doing good to others. When the kindness and love of God are revealed to the heart, when the self-sacrifice of Christ becomes the great theme of our joy and hope, a similar disposition is begotten in us: we love all those whom God loves and for whom Christ died, and we are ready to serve them, because Christ has said, Inasmuch as ye do it to the least of these, ye do it unto Me. You cannot help thinking well of mankind when you are trying to do them good, and you can never despise any soul if you believe Christ has esteemed it worthy of His life.

2. But the secret of this rest lies still deeper. Not only does Christ draw the heart off itself, but He also gives it an object large enough to satisfy its desires. In one sense the misery of this world is its glory. The brutes satisfy themselves in the trough, and have no more than they desire. But man captures the rarest and richest joys, and, when he has consumed them, he is hungry still. It is because his heart has been made too big for the largest satisfactions the world can supply. God made it to be filled with Himself, and it finds no rest till it rests in Him. But the soul which has chosen the favour and love of God for its

portion possesses God. It possesses the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Who can estimate all that this implies? How can anyone with such a heritage go about moaning and puling, "Who can show us any good?" No, "the voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tabernacles of the righteous;" "the shout of a King is in their midst." Can you conceive a Christian debating the question with himself whether life is worth living? All the resources of earth and heaven, of time and eternity, are at the disposal of Him to whose hands he has committed his happiness. The human heart is large and hungry; but Christ can fill it, and He can keep it full.

3. This is a satisfaction which will never fail, but become deeper and more precious at the very stage when all other satisfactions are failing. It is not a wise view of religion which represents it as a substitute for all the good things by which life is enlarged and enriched—such as knowledge, love, health, work, and success. Rather is religion the sunny atmosphere in which all these things are to be enjoyed. It alters the atmosphere. A thoughtful man, however many satisfactions life may yield him, cannot help being haunted by vast and appalling fears, if he knows in his heart that he is not at peace with God. And fear poisons pleasure. No doubt there are good things in this world apart from God, which are capable of giving the hungry heart rest for a time. But will it last? Just in proportion as your nature is strong and large, it is certain that it will not last. Will not youth, with its flow of animal spirits and its capacity of investing everything with the glamour of its own light, pass away? Will not the strength of manhood be broken and its activities brought to a standstill? Will not friendships be dissolved by the changes of time, and our nearest and

dearest pass away into that silent land whither we cannot follow them? Will not dreary old age strip the tree of its blossoms and arrest the pageant of maturity? Will not our last illness and the day of our death arrive? Shall we not have to face the day of account and the long prospect of eternity? What will avail us then, if we know not God in Christ? The heart will go into eternity, still crying in despair, "Who will show us any good?" But the heart which has found the secret and the prize of life in the favour and the love of God, as these are laid up in Christ Jesus, discovers its possession to be more and more precious just as it enters upon these solemn passages. As one who has seen much of illness and of death—who has often had to stand by the side of men and women in those crises of life when the supports on which they lean are put to the test—I bear witness that the love of God in Christ does avail then; God does not forsake His own; He lifts upon them the light of His countenance; and only then do they fully understand how wise is the choice which they have made, and how precious is the heritage which they possess.

Do you possess this heritage? Have you discovered the secret of life? Even that voice which rose above the crowd in the Psalmist's time did not speak only in its own name: it spoke in the name of at least a few, and it spoke with confidence and conviction. Since then the number of witnesses has swollen, till now their voice is like the sound of many waters, as it comes rolling over the centuries. Can you doubt that they have actually found the secret? You know what it is. Will you not lay an appropriating hand on it to-day—"This God is our God for ever and ever; He will be our Guide even unto death?"

Jeremiah's Use of the Figure of the Potter.

THE interesting paper of Professor Waddy Moss in September, on "Jeremiah's Use of the Figure of the Potter" (ch. xviii.), assumes that we have a lesson here as to God's dealings with *individual* men. Is there any evidence of this? The prophet expressly and throughout says it is concerning a *nation* and concerning a *kingdom*. It is a trite observation that promises and threats to them must

have to do with this present life, because we have no reason to think that they shall exist in the life to come. If there is repentance (or the opposite) it must have its effects now or never. On the case of Jonah's prophecy to Nineveh and its contingency, I have spoken in my volume on the Six Intermediate Minor Prophets, *Clark's Bible Handbooks*.

But does this apply to individuals? Certainly I do not find any case of a prophecy upon individuals pronounced by Jeremiah being reversed.

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