

TROUBLE NECESSARY **TO FORM CHARACTER**

"Why art thou cast down, my soul," David enquires, *"why with vexing thoughts art thou disquieted in me?"* All of us, when we have been long enough in this world, know something of vexing thoughts and of being cast down. It is inevitable, even with those who say *"Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."* How much more with those who have accepted the divine invitation to *"come out from among"* such, and to *"work out salvation"* in the refusal of *"all ungodliness and worldly lusts,"* and the endeavour to *"live soberly and righteously and godly in this present world."* This class, to which we are aiming to belong, will certainly find the words of Christ true if they are at all faithful to the part that belongs to them as the friends of God. He said,

"Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake."

"The world will hate you because ye are not of the world."

We naturally try to preserve the good feeling of the world, for no man likes the bad feeling of any class. We cannot succeed if we act the part of those who know God and obey the gospel in all its requirements. And our failure means the experience of much that is intensely disagreeable—painful. Who likes to be regarded with aversion?

Now the dislike entertained by worldly people for those who are in earnest about Christ is a prolific source of "vexing thoughts" and "cast-down" moods. At the beginning of the journey when the blood is young, and fancy roseate, it may act the other way. We have all seen the tip-toe enthusiasm of the man who glories in being a martyr. But the time comes with the *"patient continuance"* in a course where all is faith and nothing sight, and when the energies of flesh and blood begin to flag, when we have to rally ourselves, as David did, and to remind ourselves that we have no real cause for the vexing thoughts or the cast down state which oppress us. The things that cause these experiences are all right in their place.

We have been reading,

"For everything there is a season and a time."

There is a time for the darkness and the confusion of mortal experience that causes the vexing thoughts. This is the time, at this present moment, with us.

"There is a time to be born," says Solomon. Certainly, we have had that. *"There is a time to die."* Yes, that will come in due course, if the Lord's coming intervene not. Meanwhile, we are in the interval between, and this interval is designedly one of evil. This is *"the present evil world."* We cannot get away from the evil of it.

"In the world ye shall have tribulation."

Let us accept this. There is great power in recognising the nature of the time. We can bear it better than if we lose hold of reasonable discernment in the case. We are liable to be too much depressed by the evil if we lose sight of the place it has in the Word of God. For it has a place, it has a mission. There is a time for it. The day will come when this time will be no longer, but when the earth will be a universal habitation of light and joy. But at present that day has not come. It is the time for evil.

There is a need for evil. How else can we be prepared for the beyond? Consider. The beyond is a state of perfection based upon character first—such character as is acceptable to God. How can character be developed without circumstances of evil? Take the leading features of the character with which God is well pleased.

"Without faith it is impossible to please God."

How could faith be developed except by a time when there is nothing to be seen? Faith cannot be exercised when sight is present. Faith needs darkness. It needs a time when the appearances are all the wrong way—when it would seem as if there were no God, and as if man were master of the world; when it would seem as if there were no Kingdom coming, but as if life on earth would be an endless round of buying and selling and building and planting and eating and drinking and marrying and sleeping. Just now is such a time. It is our opportunity. Faith will no longer be possible when God breaks silence, and causes His glory to appear in the coming of Christ. Faith will be a precious thing to be found in possession of when that joyous moment arrives, but how could we have it without the

very state of things which time and again fills our souls with sadness, causing us to exclaim with David,

“Why art thou cast down, O my soul?”

So in the matter of obedience. We could not be exercised in this, without the circumstances putting its reality to the test. The value of obedience lies in that decidedness (as we might call it) which triumphs over both forgetfulness and difficulty. Eye-service is obedience, and there is a certain value in eye-service, but it is not very great. It is a far way below the kind of obedience that is to be the basis of exaltation to immortality. The obedience that is to give us a place in creation for ever, has to be thorough. For that reason the circumstances of test are severe. It could not be tested, or even developed without them. The formation of character requires the evil that we meanwhile find so grievous. The character that God approves is the choosing of the good in the midst of the evil. For example, in the matter of truth, we are commanded to speak every man the truth to his neighbour. How can our obedience in this matter be put to the proof except by being placed in circumstances where the truth is inconvenient and where a lie is to our advantage? A liar will speak the truth when it is a matter of indifference. He will speak truly as to the weather or the persons he has seen in the street; but when he wants to buy, he cries down a good article; or sell, he will speak falsely as to where he got it and what is its value. It is in the latter instances that his true character is made manifest. So we require to be placed in circumstances where the truth is against us to be proved in the matter of this command, and these circumstances must in their nature be disagreeable. But in view of what is aimed at, a wise man will hail the circumstances, and will not suffer truth to depart from his mouth.

So also with the command to be merciful. How should we ever have a chance of our character being formed on this point if all were always joyful and well with everyone? It requires evil—sore evil—and perfect liberty of choice on our part. We must be left just entirely to ourselves, face to face with suffering people, with no apparent eye to oversee. Things must be of such a grievous complexion that it will seem of no profit to us, but the reverse—no pleasure to us but the other feeling, to exercise “the quality of mercy.” The man who has God before him—who acts on the command, *“Be thou in the fear of Yahweh all the day long”* does not forget Him at such a moment, but shows mercy as he hopes to obtain mercy. The world thinks this a weakness; and, if we forget that the world is a foolish world, we may be influenced by their opinion and catch up their feeling. Let us be on our guard. The world passeth away, as John says. Its impressions are not worth a wise man’s consideration. There is no greater truth than this, and there is no more astounding obtuseness than the universal inability to realise it. Every day the little bubbles that go to make up the common froth-life of the world are collapsing here, collapsing there, one after the other, every day, and will go round them all, and yet the rest live on as if no such finish were waiting them. In a hundred years they will have all gone out, and the world has passed away. If it be said: “He that doeth the will of God” passeth away too, we have to say: “Not so, friend, it appears so for the moment, but it is only an appearance. The man who does the will of God stands related to a law that will cause him to re-emerge from the temporary death-collapse and stand forth again in a new world, from which all the things that vex him now will have disappeared. In this, he will abide for ever, and his translation from the collapse of death to this glorious re-emergence will appear but as a moment to him.” With the world, it is not so. They die and are gone, and any waiting in reserve for them in the event of their being responsible will be to find (apparently as soon as they have gone) that the God they forgot is a reality, and that the judgment they laughed at is a terrible truth, and that the great salvation which they had treated as an idle tale in the day of light and opportunity is a matter of fact, so glorious that *“eye hath not (yet) seen nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive it.”*

The day of our trouble, then, will be a day of trouble. We cannot change it into anything else while it lasts; and it will last as long as its mission requires it to last. But there is a possibility of getting through it lightly and getting through it heavily. The way to get through it lightly is just to expect it and to recognise the work it is intended to work in us, and the opportunity it is intended to afford us. This will enable us to bear Paul company when he said:

“Wherefore we glory in tribulation also, knowing that tribulation worketh patience,”
and again:

“Our light affliction which is but for a moment worketh out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”

The way to get through it heavily is to forget that life is now a transient and an evil thing: to set your affections on things that are now on the earth; to look on and love the things that are seen for the time; to forget the things that are before, and to press with the worldly throng toward the prizes of the present world, looking unto your various successful neighbours who, having gained them, carry a high head and appear to flourish as the green bay tree. The attempt to combine any such policy as this with *“the high calling of God that is in Christ Jesus”* will be found not only a failure, but a grievous failure—a failure bringing grief now and woe at the finish.

“Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

“He that saveth his life shall lose it.”

The words of Christ are true, however much men may forget them. The part of wisdom is to accept them and work them out at whatever sacrifice. Let us never forget that Christ finds the world at his coming *“as it was in the days of Noah.”* There were not many *“found righteous”* then.

“If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”

These things the Word testifies and enquires, as you know.

But now a sense of our deficiencies may call for the Scripture that is suitable in other directions. Some of us may be liable to fear too much. It is safe to fear; but it is impossible to fear too much. God Himself stoops to us from heaven in this matter.

“Say to them that are of a fearful heart, be strong; fear not: Behold your God will come . . . and save you.”

“He will save all the meek of the earth.”

You feel distressed at your shortcomings. This is right, but don't let it go the length of despair. Remember that Paul felt thoroughly out of love with himself on account of the evil that was present with him.

“The things that I would not, I do . . . O, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me?”

Remember that *“there is forgiveness in God”* for them that humble themselves before Him in love and thanksgiving and obedience.

“As the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy towards them that fear Him.”

It is the express voice of the Spirit that says to us:

“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

This has no reference, of course, to the indifferent or the negligent, or the disobedient. God will not look to such. He tells us to whom He will look.

“To this man will I look, to the humble and the contrite and the broken in spirit.”

To this class He will look, and this is the class that is sometimes liable to fear too much. We are commanded to be perfect; we are commanded to sin not; yet it is not in human nature to be perfect, and *“there liveth not a man that sinneth not.”* What then?

“If any (such) man sin, we have an advocate with the Father,” “who ever liveth to make intercession for us according to the will of God.”

But why are we commanded to attain the unattainable? Because the higher we aim, the higher we reach. We put copper-plate at the head of the child's copy for the child to copy; but do we put him out of school because his imitation is poor? No; we have patience, we know he will do better by and by, and that if he makes no progress, he will punish himself in the low place he will fix for himself afterwards. So the Lord commands high things, *“even our perfection,”* but He forgives our failings if our endeavours are in all docility and earnest perseverance.

“We have an high priest.”

We must never forget this. In this both Adam and Jesus were differently placed. They had no intercessor. They were face to face with the strict demands of law, failure in which in the least would be fatal; but we have a glorified high priest, *“by whom we have access by faith into this grace (favour) in which we stand.”* By grace we are saved. It is a matter of favour, and therefore of forgiveness, for Christ's sake. What we have to look to is the conditions of the favour, for favour has also its conditions. Faith is its first condition. Our faith is *“counted for righteousness.”* Ye fearful ones, forget not that God is pleased with your faith, and esteems you righteous on this account alone.

Wherein His poor, loving children fail, they sorrow and make confession, and are helped, for, *“like as a father pitieth his children, so Yahweh pitieth them that fear Him.”*

“Wherefore lift up the hands that hang down, and confirm the feeble knees and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way.”

Our fight with evil is only short in each individual case. It is long for the whole family, because, in the barren state of the human race, it takes a long time to develop a multitude that no man can number, who, out of great tribulation, will victoriously come at the last. But the battle of the whole exists not for any one member of the body. We have only our own day. The head alone is contemporary with the struggles and prayers of the whole multitude of his brethren; and he is made strong for the shepherd work. The others fight their own fight and win their own race—a brief conflict of three score and ten at the outside—and then lay down their burdens and their toils, with the sweet consolation that the Lord will take care of his own glorious work, and wake them from the sound and short rest of the grave to rejoice with him on the arrival of the morning of the salvation which will usher in eternal day.

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