

## A Father's Discipline.

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"For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness." Heb. 12 : 10.

Few words of Scripture have been oftener than these laid as a healing balm on wounded hearts. They may be long unnoticed on the page, like a lighthouse in calm sunshine, but sooner or later the stormy night falls, and then the bright beam flashes out and is welcome. They go very deep into the meaning of life as discipline; they tell us how much better God's discipline is than that of the most loving and wise of parents, and they give that superiority as a reason for our yielding more entire and cheerful obedience to Him than we do to such.

Now, to grasp the full meaning of these words, we have to notice that the earthly and the heavenly disciplines are described in four contrasted clauses, which are arranged in what students call inverted parallelism—that is to say, the first clause corresponds to the fourth, and the second to the third. "For a few days" pairs off with "that we might be partakers of His holiness." Now, that does not seem a contrast at first sight; but notice that the "for" in the former clause is not the "for" of duration, but direction. It does not tell us the space during which the chastisement or discipline lasts, but the end towards which it is pointed. The earthly parent's discipline trains a boy or girl for circumstances, pursuits, occupations, professions, all of which terminate with the brief span of life. God's training is for an eternal day. It would be quite irrelevant to bring in here any reference to the length of time during which an earthly father's discipline lasts, but it is in full consonance with the writer's intention to dwell upon the limited scope of the one, and the wide and eternal purpose of the other.

Then, as for the other contrast—"for their own pleasure," or, as the Revised Version reads it, "as seemed good to them"—"but He for our profit." Elements of personal peculiarity, whim, passion, limited and possibly erroneous conceptions of what is the right thing to do for the child, enter into the training of the wisest and most loving amongst us; and we often make a mistake and do harm when we think we are doing good. But God's training is all from a simple and unerring regard to the benefit of His child. Thus, the guiding principle of the two disciplines are contrasted in the two central clauses.

Now, these are very threadbare, common-place and old-fashioned thoughts; but, perhaps, they are so familiar that they have not their proper power over us; and I wish to try in this sermon, if I can, to get more into us, by one or two very plain remarks.

I. I would ask you to note, first, the grand, deep, general conception here firmly laid hold of, of life as only intelligible when it is regarded as education or discipline.

He corrects, chastens, trains, educates. That is the deepest word about everything that befalls us. Now, there are involved in that two or three very obvious thoughts, which would make us all calmer and nobler and stronger, if they were vividly and vitally present to us day by day.

The first is that all which befalls us has a will behind it and is co-operant to an end. Life is not a heap of unconnected incidents, like a number of links flung down on the ground, but the links are a chain, and the chain has a staple. It is not a law without a law-giver that shapes men's lives. It is not a blind, impersonal Chance that presides over it. Why, these very meteors that astronomers expect in autumn to be flying and flashing through the sky in apparent disorder, all obey law. Our lives, in like manner, are embodied thoughts of God's, in as far as the incidents which befall in them are concerned. We may mar, may fight against, may contradict the presiding Divine purpose; but yet behind the wild dance of flashing and transitory lights that go careering all over the sky, there guides, not an impersonal Power, but a living, loving Will. He, not it; He, not they—men, circumstances, what people call second causes—He corrects, and He does it for a great purpose.

Ah! if we believed that, and not merely said it, from the teeth outwards, but if it were a living conviction with us, do you not think our lives would tower up into a nobleness, and settle themselves down into tranquillity all strange to them today?

But, then, further, there is the other thought to be grasped, that all our days we are here in a state of pupilage. The world is God's nursery. There are many mansions in the Father's house; and this earth is where He keeps the little ones. That is the true meaning of everything that befalls us. It is education. Work would not be worth doing if it were not. Life is given to us to teach us how to live, to exercise our powers, to give us habits and facilities of working. We are like boys in a training ship that lies for most of the time in harbor, and now and then goes out upon some short and easy cruise; not for the sake of getting anywhere in particular, but for the sake of exercising the lads in seamanship. There is no meaning worthy of us—to say nothing of God—in anything that we do, unless it is looked upon as schooling. We all say we believe that. Alas! I am afraid very many of us forget it.

But that conception of the meaning of each event that befalls us carries with it the conception of the whole of this life, as being an education towards another. I do not understand how any man can bear to live here, and to do all his painful work, unless he thinks that by it he is getting ready for the life beyond; and that "nothing can bereave him of the force he made his own, being here." The rough ore is turned into steel by being

"Plunged in baths of hissing tears,  
And heated hot with hopes and fears,  
And battered with the shocks of doom."

And then—what then? Is an instrument, thus fashioned and tempered and polished, destined to be broken and "thrown as rubbish into the void?" Certainly not. If this life is education, as is obvious upon its face, then there is a place where we shall exercise the facilities that we have acquired here, and manifest in loftier forms the characters which here we have made our own.

Now, brethren, if we carry these thoughts with us habitually, what a difference it will make upon everything that befalls us! You hear men often maudering and murmuring about the mysteries of the pain and sorrow and suffering of this world, wondering if there is any loving Will behind it all. That perplexed questioning goes on the hypothesis that life is meant mainly for enjoyment or for material good. If we once apprehend in its all-applicable range this simple truth, that life is a discipline, we should have less difficulty in understanding what people call the mysteries of Providence. I do not say it would interpret everything, but it would interpret an immense deal. It would make us eager, as each event came, to find out its special mission and what it was meant to do for us. It would dignify trifles, and bring down the overwhelming magnitude of the so-called great events, and would make lords of ourselves, and lords of circumstances, and ready the last drop of possible advantage out of each thing that befell us. Life is a Father's discipline.

II. Note the guiding principle of that discipline.

"They . . . as seemed good to them." I have already said that, even in the most wise and unselfish training by an earthly parent, there will mingle subjective elements, peculiarities of view and thought, and sometimes passion and whim and other ingredients, which detract from the value of all such training. The guiding principle for each earthly parent can only be his conception of what is for the good of his child, even at the best; and oftentimes that is not purely the guide by which the parent's discipline is directed. So the text turns us away from all these incompletenesses, and tells us, "He for our profit"—with no side-long look to anything else, and with an entirely wise knowledge of what is best for us, so that the result will be always and only for our good. This is the point of view from which every Christian man ought to look upon all that befalls him.

What follows? This, plainly: there is no such thing as evil except the evil of sin. All that comes is good—of various sorts and various complexions, but all generically the same. The inundation comes up over the fields, and men are in despair. It goes down; and then, like the slime left from the Nile in flood, there is better soil for the fertilizing of our fields. Storms keep sea and air from stagnating. All that men call evil, in the material world, has in it a soul of good.

That is an old, old commonplace; but, like the other one, of which I have been speaking, it is more often professed than realized, and we need to be brought back to the recognition of it more entirely than we ordinarily are. If it be that all of my life is paternal discipline, and that God makes no mistakes, then I can embrace whatever comes to me, and be sure that in it I shall find that which will be for my good.

Ah, brethren, it is easy to say so when things go well; but, surely, when the night falls is the time for the stars to shine. That gracious word should shine upon some of us in today's perplexities, and pains, and disappointments, and sorrows—"He for our profit."

Now, that great thought does not in the least deny the fact that pain and sorrow, and so-called evil, are very real. There is no false stoicism in Christianity. The mission of our troubles would not be effected unless they did trouble us. The good that we get from a sorrow would not be realized unless we did sorrow. "Weep for yourselves," said the Master, "and for your children." It is right that we should write with pain. It is right that we should yield to the impressions that are made upon us by calamities. But it is not right that we should fail to discern in them this gracious thought—"for our profit." God sends us many love-tokens, and amongst them are the great and the little annoyances and pains that beset our lives, and on each of them, if we would look, we should see written, in His own hand, this inscription: "For your good." Do not let us have our eyes so full of tears that we cannot see, or our hearts so full of regrets that we cannot accept that sweet, strong message.

The guiding principle of all that befalls us is God's unerring knowledge of what will do us good. That will not prevent, and is not meant to prevent, the arrow from wounding, but it does wipe the poison off the arrow, and diminish the pain, and should diminish the tears.

III. Lastly, here we see the great aim of all the discipline.

The earthly parent trains his son or her daughter, for earthly occupations. These last a little while. God trains us for an eternal end; "that we should be partakers of His holiness." The one object which is congruous with a man's nature, and is stamped on his whole being, as its only adequate end, is that he should be like God. Holiness is the Scriptural shorthand expression for all that in the Divine nature which separates God from, and lifts Him above the creature; and in that aspect of the word the gulf can never be lessened nor bridged between us and Him. But it also is the expression for the moral purity and perfection of that Divine nature which separates Him from the creatures far more really than do the metaphysical attributes that belong to His infinitude and eternity; and in that aspect the great hope that is given to us is that we may rise nearer and nearer to that perfect whiteness of purity, and though we cannot share in His essential, changeless being, may "walk"—as befits our limited and changeable natures—"in the light, as He"—as befits His boundless and eternal being—"is in the light." That is the only end which it is worthy of a man, being what he is, to propose to himself as the issue of his earthly experience. If I fail in that, whatever else I have accomplished, I fail in everything. I may have made myself rich, cultured, learned, famous, refined, prosperous; but if I have not at least begun to be like God in purity, in will, in heart, then my whole career has missed the purpose for which I was made, and for which all the discipline of life has been lavished upon me. Fail there, and wherever you succeed, you are a failure. Succeed there, and wherever you fail, you are a success.

That great and only worthy end may be reached by the ministration of circumstances and the discipline through which God passes us. These are not the only ways by which He makes us partakers of His holiness, as we well know. There is the work of that Divine Spirit who is granted to every believer to breathe into him the holy breath of an immortal and incorruptible life. To work along with these there is the influence that is brought to bear upon us by the circumstances in which we are placed and the duties which we have to perform. These may all help us to be nearer and liker to God.

That is the intention of our sorrows. They will wean us; they will refine us; they will blow us to His breast, as the strong wind might sweep a man into some refuge from itself. I am sure that among my hearers there are some who can thankfully attest that they were brought nearer to God by some short, sharp sorrow than by many long days of prosperity. What Absalom, in his wayward, impulsive way, did with Joab is like what God sometimes does with His sons. Joab would not come to Absalom's palace, so Absalom set his corn on fire; and then Joab came. So God sometimes burns our harvests that we may go to Him.

But the sorrow that is meant to bring us nearer to Him may be in vain. The same circumstances may produce opposite effects.

I dare say there are people listening to me now who have been made hard and sullen and bitter and paralyzed for good work because they have some heavy burden or some wound that life can never heal, to be carried or to ache. Ah, brethren, we are often like ship-wrecked crews, of whom some are driven by the danger to their knees, and some are driven to the spirit-casks. Take care that you do not waste your sorrows; that you do not let the precious gifts of disappointment, pain, loss, loneliness, ill health, or similar afflictions that come in your daily life, mar you instead of mending you. See that they send you nearer to God, and not that they drive you farther from Him. See that they make you more anxious to have the durable riches and righteousness which no man can take from you, than to grasp at what may yet remain of fleeting earthly joys.

So, brethren, let us try to school ourselves into the habitual and operative conviction that life is discipline. Let us yield ourselves to the loving will of the unerring Father, the perfect Love. Let us beware of getting no good from what is charged to the brim with good. And let us see to it that out of the many fleeting circumstances of life we gather and keep the eternal fruit of being partakers of His holiness. May it never have to be said of any of us that we wasted the mercies which were judgments too, and found no good in the things that our tortured hearts felt to be also evils; lest God should have to wail over any of us, "In vain have I smitten your children; they have received no correction!"

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The Pekin correspondent of the London Standard says: Today (Monday) the Empress Dowager openly relieved the Emperor of all real power. The ministers take their instructions directly from her, and Li Hung Chang practically supercedes the Tsung-Li-Yamen. It is rumored that Sir Claude MacDonald, the British minister, before Tsung-Li-Yamen accused Li Hung Chang of betraying China to Russia, and it is said that Li Hung Chang has threatened to demand the recall of Sir Claude MacDonald.

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