

# God's Gentleness and Man's Greatness.

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## "Thy Gentleness Hath Made me Great." Psalm xviii, 35.

These words speak to us of a God who takes an interest in the growth of individual character. David here addresses the Being who throughout his eventful life had stooped down to win him from his low grovelling aims and bring him to a noble manhood. The Hebrew poet was not blind to other aspects of the Divine nature, but he knew that frail, struggling mortals draw the sweetest consolation from the thought of the infinite tenderness displayed in the dealings of Almighty God. In the Bible we have many vivid descriptions of creative skill, providing wisdom and legislative justice; but there are also pathetic presentations of the loving Fatherhood which seeks with gentle persistency the redemption of the wayward child. We are accustomed to think of God as the great machinist who contrived and who sustains the eternal order of this great world, or as the stern judge who presides over the destinies of nations and metes out to sin its merited punishment. These conceptions of God are both true and important and ought not to be ignored, but we must not allow them to hide from us those tender traits of God's character which possess such power to subdue and sway our wayward hearts.

The words of this text are few and simple, but they embody a beautiful and inspiring thought of God. They teach us that God takes an interest in men. Not only does the great Creator control the stars in their courses, not only does He watch and guide the changeful movements of national life, but each one of us can say with the full confidence that we are proclaiming an everlasting truth: "I am poor and needy, yet the Lord thinketh upon me." Our struggles, our hopes, our fears, our failures, our successes, are all marked by Him who sways the sceptre of universal dominion. Experiences so subtle as to defy expression, temptations so spiritual that they almost escape our attention, defeats so bitter that they bring despair, these are all open to the eyes of our God. The whole scope and purpose of our life receives His sympathetic attention, and He views all our circumstances in relation to our character. He deals with my personal life, He desires to destroy the devilish which has taken such deep root in my nature, and develop the good which he has implanted, but which is still so feeble and fitful. This is the thought in which the Hebrew king delighted; it is one upon which we cannot meditate too earnestly or too long. Some want to hear that God will charge Himself with the outward course of their life, protecting them from dangers and carrying them into comfortable circumstances: but it is a nobler thing to cherish the thought of One whose deepest concern is with our spiritual life and moral character. This is a sublime thought.

Our Heavenly Father is not content that we should be small and weak, stunted in our spiritual life. By the revelation of His mercy He would stimulate us to that high and holy effort through which we can become pure and strong. Can you tell me of any good,

noble-minded man who is satisfied so long as his son continues to be dull, ignorant and vicious? No! Such a father, although he is hedged about by all the imperfections of human nature, will passionately pray that his child may enter into the healthful experience of a higher life. How much more then is this true of the "Everlasting Father." He looks with unchanging compassion upon fallen men. He knows how prone we are to drift downwards or settle into stagnation; and the aim of all his dealings is to quicken our aspirations and draw us towards Himself. Too often we look upon the things that are seen and neglect the unseen realities of the spirit life. When we think of men we are most likely to occupy our minds with thoughts of their worldly positions and prospects; we allow ourselves to be engrossed by mere circumstances, but God is interested in the real self. He sees that we are preparing for eternal destiny, and so He offers us the resources of His own life that we may build up a character which shall abide in strength and beauty. This conception of the Divine care and compassion should break down our formality and stir our hearts to their deepest depths. How can we treat such loving thoughtfulness with such cold careless unbelief? Henceforth let us try to get at least a glimpse of what is meant by this wonderful saying: "Thy gentleness has made me great."

### What is True Gentleness?

This question in a mere academic discussion would be likely to beget a great variety of replies, as it is one that is apt to call into play our individual peculiarities of thought and feeling. However, as we are trying to expound a text of Holy Scripture, it would be unseemly for us to spend the time simply setting forth our own ideal of a noble character. Our business is rather to make as clear as possible what is God's teaching with respect to human greatness, as opposed to the fancies of vain ambition; what is the Christian conception, as contrasted with common, worldly notions.

Among the ancient Greeks that man was accounted a great man who could produce a fine piece of sculpture, a splendid speech, a magnificent drama, or a brilliant poem. They worshipped beauty and genius, and in estimating human character too often allowed mere intellectual cleverness to take the supreme place. In the Rome of olden time, he was the great man who sprang up in sudden emergencies and swayed the populace by the influence of overmastering eloquence, or who by superior military skill led the armies of the Imperial City against the foe, and rolling back the tide of invasion gathered the fruits of glorious victory. The religion of Rome was political and military; consequently they deified the cunning senator and successful soldier, allowing remarkable talent in these directions to hide a multitude of sins. The only excuse we can make is that these nations had not the full clear light which comes from the life of Christ. But may we not venture to say that the worldly conception of the

great man is practically the same? Is not homage often paid to striking physical and mental qualities, even when they are joined with fragrant moral impurity? I am not going to depreciate any of the great gifts of body or mind which God has so generously bestowed upon men. But I do most earnestly protest against the idolatry of mere cleverness; of the cunning which schemes in defiance of honesty; the talent which invests wickedness with a halo of romantic beauty; the genius which throws a veil of bewildering brilliance over gross sensuality. Christianity does not despise the music of poetry, the beauty of artistic achievement or the marvellous ability of statesmanlike effort; but it teaches us to measure the value of these by the kind of moral influence they exert among men.

The Bible brings into prominence the most important and yet the most neglected element of greatness, that is, moral principle. It shows that many things which we value highly are rendered worthless by degrading selfishness and corrupting passion. It takes the glitter off many earthly honors, and shows the rottenness which lies beneath an attractive cover. Many murmur at God's revelation because it pours upon the petty rivalries and contentions of earth the sublime all searching light of eternity. Before this glorious flood of sunlight our gilded baubles are like the tiny specks of dust floating in the sunbeam. If we take the Bible for our guide, we must believe that the godly man is the great man, he who acknowledges the supremacy of truth and lives in communion with his God. Such a man, wherever his lot may be cast, or whatever may be the outward circumstances of his life, possesses within himself the divine power which alone makes men truly great. In harmony with this statement we find that the heroes of the Bible are men who "walked with God;" men who did great things because they saw Him who is invisible; men who sang songs of wondrous beauty; men who ruled nations and bowed before the "King of Kings." The book also tells of heroes in humble life, shepherds who trusted in the Divine Shepherd, fishermen who became fishers of men, and tent-makers who preached of houses not made with hands. The element of greatness was the same in all, a consciousness of weakness, and a striving after divine strength. The truth has never made men feeble, but has ever given the noblest strength; strength to resist temptation, strength to stand before fierce persecution, strength to denounce the vices of princes, strength to brave the most terrible outbursts of popular fury. These powers have ever come from the uplifting influence of real godliness.

We all feel that greatness implies more than mere innocence or ignorance of sin. We do not call a child great, however much we may be charmed by its amiable and kindly disposition. Greatness refers to a ripeness of experience and maturity of character which are beyond the reach of childhood. In the character of the Godly man there is a beautiful combination of knowledge and simplicity. As