

EARTHLY CARE  
A Heavenly Discipline  
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Nothing is more frequently felt and spoken of as a hindrance to the inward life of devotion, than the "cares of life;" and even upon the showing of our Lord himself, the cares of the world are the thorns that choke the word, and render it unfruitful.

And yet, if this is a necessary and inevitable result of worldly cares, why does the providence of God so order things that they form so large and unavoidable a part of every human experience? Why is the physical system of man framed with such daily, oft-returning wants? Why has God arranged an outward system, which is a constant diversion from the inward—a weight on its wheels—a burden on its wings—and then commanded a strict and rigid inwardness and spirituality? Why has he placed us where the things that are seen and temporal must unavoidably have so much of our thoughts, and time, and care, and yet told us, "Set your affections on things above, and not on things on the earth;" "Love not the world, neither the things in the world?" And why does one of our brightest examples of Christian experience, as it should be, say, "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen eternal?"

The Bible tells us that our whole existence here is *disciplinary*: that his whole physical system, by which our spirit is connected with all the joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, and wants which form a part of it, is designed as an education to fit the soul for its immortality. Hence, as worldly care form the greater part of the staple of every human life, there must be some mode of viewing and meeting it, which converts it from an enemy of spirituality into a means of grace and spiritual advancement.

Why, then, do we so often hear the lamentation, "It seems to me as if I could advance to the higher stages of Christian life, if it were not for the pressure of my business, and the multitude of my worldly cares?" Is it not God, O Christian! who in his providence, has laid these cares upon thee, and permits no escape from them? If God's great undivided object is thy spiritual improvement, is not there some misapprehension or wrong use of these cares, if they do not tend to advance it? It is not even as if a scholar should say, I could advance in science were it not for all the time and care which lessons, and books, and lectures require?

How, then, shall earthly care become heavenly discipline? How shall the disposition of the weight be altered so as to press the spirit upward towards God, instead of downward and away? How shall the pillar of cloud which rises between us and Him, become one of fire, to reflect upon us constantly the light of his countenance, and to guide us over the sands of life's desert?

It appears to us that the great radical difficulty lies in a wrong belief. There is not a genuine and real belief of the presence and agency of God in the minor events and details of life, which is necessary to change them from secular cares into spiritual blessings.

It is true there is much loose talk about an overruling Providence; and yet, if fairly stated, the belief of a great many Christians might be thus expressed: God has organized and set in operation certain general laws of matter and mind, which work out the particular results of life, and over these laws he exercises a general supervision and care, so that all the great affairs of the world are carried on after the counsel

of his own will: and, in a certain *general* sense, all things are working together for good to those that love God. But when some simple-minded and child-like Christian really proceeds to refer all the *smaller* events of life to God's immediate care and agency, there is a smile of incredulity—and it is thought that the good brother displays more Christian feeling than sound philosophy.

But as the life of every individual is made up of fractions and minute atoms—as these things, which go to affect habits and character, are small and hourly recurring, it comes to pass, that a belief in Providence so very wide and general is altogether inefficient for consecrating and rendering sacred the great body of what comes in contact with the mind in the experience of life. Only once in years does the Christian, with this kind of belief, hear the voice of the Lord speaking to him. When the hand of death is laid on his child, or the bolt strikes down the brother by his side; then, indeed, he feels that God is drawing near; he listens humbly for the inward voice that shall explain the meaning and need of this discipline.

When, by some unforeseen occurrence, the whole of his earthly property is swept away, and he becomes a poor man, this even, in his eyes, assumes sufficient magnitude to have come from God, and to have a design and meaning; but when smaller comforts are removed, smaller losses are encountered, and the petty every-day vexations and annoyances of life press about him, he recognizes no God, and hears no voice, and sees no design. Hence John Newton says, “Many Christians, who bear the loss of a child or the destruction of all their property with the most heroic Christian fortitude, are entirely vanquished and overcome by the breaking of a dish, or the blunders of a servant, and show so unchristian a spirit, that we cannot but wonder at them.”

So when the breath of slander, or the pressure of human injustice, comes so heavily on a man, as really to threaten loss of character, and destruction of his temporal interests: he seems forced to recognize the hand and voice of God through the veil of human agencies, and in time-honoured words to say—

When men of spite against me join,  
They are the sword, the hand is thine.

But the smaller injustice, and fault-finding, which meets every one more or less in the daily intercourse of life—the overheard remark—the implied censure—too petty perhaps to be even spoken of—these daily-recurring sources of disquietude and unhappiness are not referred to God's providence, nor considered as a part of his probation and discipline. Those thousand vexations which come upon us through the unreasonableness, the carelessness, the various constitutional failings or ill adaptedness of others to our peculiarities of character, form a very large item of the disquietudes of life, and yet how very few look beyond the human agent, and feel that these are trials coming from God.

Yet it is true, in many cases, that these so-called minor vexations form the greater part, and, in some cases, the only discipline of life; and to those who do not view them as individually ordered or permitted by God, and coming upon them by design, their affliction really “cometh of the dust,” and their trouble springs “out of the ground;” it is sanctified and relieved by no Divine presence and aid, but born alone, and in a mere human spirit, and by mere human reliances; it acts on the mind as a constant diversion and hinderance, instead of moral discipline.

Hence, too, arises a coldness, and generality, and wandering of mind in prayer. The things that are on the heart, that are distracting the mind, that have filled the heart so full that there is no room for anything else, are all considered too small and undignified to come within the pale of a prayer: and so, with a wandering mind and a distracted heart, the Christian offers up his prayer for things which he thinks he *ought* to want, and makes no mention of those which he really *does* want. He prays that God would pour out his Spirit on the heathen, and convert the world, and build up his kingdom every where,

when perhaps a whole set of little anxieties and wants and vexations are so distracting his thoughts, that he hardly knows what he has been saying.

A faithless servant is wasting his property, a careless or blundering workman has spoiled a lot of goods, a child is vexatious or unruly, a friend has made promises and failed to keep them, an acquaintance has made unjust or satirical remarks, some new furniture has been damaged or ruined by carelessness in the household; but all this trouble forms no subject matter for prayer, though there it is all the while lying like lead on the heart, and keeping it down so that it has no power to expand and take in any thing else.

But were God in Christ known and regarded as the soul's familiar Friend, were every trouble of the heart, as it rises, breathed into His bosom; were it felt that there is not one of the smallest of life's troubles that has not been permitted by Him, and *permitted for specific good purpose to the soul*, how much more heart-work would there be in prayer; how constant, how daily might it become, how it might settle and clear the atmosphere of the soul, how it might so dispose and lay away many anxieties which now take up their place there, that there might be room for the higher themes and considerations of religion!

Many sensitive and fastidious natures are worn away by the constant friction of what are called little troubles. Without any great affliction, they feel that all the flower and sweetness of their life is faded; their eye grows dim, their cheek careworn, and their spirit loses hope and elasticity, and becomes bowed with premature age; and in the midst of tangible and physical comfort, they are restless and unhappy. The constant under-current of little cares and vexations, which is slowly wearing out the finer springs of life, is seen by no one; scarcely ever do they speak of these things to their nearest friends. Yet were there a friend, of a spirit so discerning as to feel and sympathize in all these things, how much of this repressed electric restlessness would pass off through such a sympathizing mind.

Yet among human friends this is all but impossible, for minds are so diverse that what is a trial and a care to one, is a matter of sport and amusement to another, and all the inner world breathed into a human ear, only excites a surprised or contemptuous pity. To whom then shall the soul turn—who will *feel* that to be affliction, which each spirit *knows* to be so? If the soul shut itself within itself, it becomes morbid; the fine chords of the mind and nerves, but constant wear, become jarring and discordant: hence fretfulness, discontent, and habitual irritability steal over the sincere Christian.

But to the Christian who really believes in the agency of God in the smallest events of life, confides in his love and makes his sympathy his refuge, the thousand minute cares and perplexities of life become each one a fine affiliating bond between the soul and its God. Christ is known, not by abstract definition, and by high-raised conceptions of the soul's aspiring hours, but known as a man knoweth his friend; he is known by the hourly wants he supplies—known by every care with which he momentarily sympathises, every apprehension which relieves, every temptation which he enables us to surmount.

We learn to know Christ as the infant child learns to know its mother and father, by all the helplessness and all the dependence which are incident to this commencement of our moral existence; and as we go on thus year by year, and find in every changing situation, in every reverse, in every trouble, from the lightest sorrow to those which wring our soul from its depths, that he is equally present, and that his gracious aid is equally adequate, our faith seems gradually almost to change to sight, and Christ's sympathy, his love and care, seem to us more real than any other source of reliance; and multiplied cares and trials are only new avenues of acquaintance between us and Heaven.

Suppose, in some bright vision unfolding to our view, in tranquil evening or solemn midnight, the glorified form of some departed friend should appear to us with the announcement, "This year is to be to you one of special probation and discipline, with reference to perfecting you for a heavenly state.

Weigh well and consider every incident of your daily life, for not one is to fall out by accident, but each one shall be a finished and indispensable link in a bright chain that is to draw you upward to the skies.”

With what new eyes should we now look on our daily lot! and if we found in it not a single change—the same old cares, the same perplexities, the same uninteresting drudgeries still—with what new meaning would every incident be invested, and with what other and sublimer spirit could we meet them! Yet, if announced by one rising from the dead with the visible glory of a spiritual world, this truth could be asserted no more clearly and distinctly than Jesus Christ has stated it already.

Not a sparrow falleth to the ground without our Father—not one of them is forgotten by him; and we are of more value than many sparrows—yea, even the hairs of our head are all numbered. Not till belief in these declarations, in their most literal sense, becomes the calm and settled habit of the soul, is life ever redeemed and made full of interest, meaning, and Divine significance. Not till then do its grovelling wants, its wearing cares, its stinging vexations, become to us ministering spirits—each one, by a silent but certain agency, fitting us for a higher and perfect sphere.

Nearer, my God, to Thee,  
Nearer to Thee!  
Ee'n though it be a cross  
That raiseth me;  
Still all my song shall be,  
Nearer, my god, to Thee  
Nearer to Thee!

Though like a wanderer,  
The sun gone down,  
Darkness comes over me,  
My rest a stone,  
Yet in my dreams I'd be,  
Nearer, my God, to Thee,—  
Nearer to Thee!

There let my way appear,  
Steps unto Heav'n;  
All that thou sendest me  
In mercy giv'n';  
Angels to beckon me,  
Nearer, my God, to Thee,—  
Nearer to Thee!