

J.R. Miller:

Living Without Worry

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The Ministry of Suffering

Sooner or later, affliction and sorrow come to every Christian. Where is the life, unless it be among the very young, which has experienced no trial? We ought, therefore, to have true views about pain, about the divine reasons for sending it, and about the mission on which it comes. We ought to know, also, how to endure suffering so as to get from it the blessing which its hot hand brings to us.

While they do not solve all the mystery of human suffering, the Scriptures show, at least, that suffering is no accident in God's world--but is one of His messengers; and that it comes not as an enemy--but as a friend on an errand of blessing. The design of God, in all the afflictions which He sends upon His people--is to make them more holy, to advance their purification of character.

It is very clearly taught in the Word of God, that suffering is necessary in preparing sinful souls in this world, for heavenly glory. "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God." There is no easy way to glory. There is so much evil in us, even after we are born again, that nothing less than the discipline of pain, can cleanse our nature.

Tribulation is God's threshing, not to harm us or to destroy us--but to separate what is heavenly and spiritual in us--from what is earthly and fleshly. Nothing less than blows of pain will do this. The evil so clings to the holy; the golden wheat of godliness is so wrapped up in the strong chaff of the old life--that only the heavy flail of suffering can produce the separation. Perfection of character never can be attained, but through suffering. Holiness cannot be reached without cost. Those who would gain the lofty heights--must climb the cold, rough steeps which lead to them.

It is God's design, in all the pain which He sends--to make us more Christlike. His puts us in the fire of purification, until His own image shines reflected in the gold. His prunings mean greater fruitfulness. In whatever form the suffering comes--the purpose of the pain is merciful. In all our life in this world, God is saving us; and suffering is one of the chief agents which he employs. As Jesus said in one of his Beatitudes, "Blessed are they that mourn" for they shall be comforted." The blessing is not in the mourning--but in the comfort; that is, in the strengthening of the heart to endure the pain victoriously, and get help and better life out of it.

Said Paul: "We also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope." Romans 5:3-4. Suffering works out in us, qualities of Christian character which cannot be developed in any other way. "All chastening seems for the present to be not joyous" but grievous: yet afterward it yields peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness." The present grievousness of chastening is forgotten in its "afterward" of ripe fruitage, as winters cold and storm are forgotten in the summer's loveliness and harvest.

But there is a link in the chain, which we must not overlook. Not all afflictions make people better. Tribulation does not always work patience. Chastening does not always, even afterward, yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness. We all have seen people suffering who became only more impatient, irritable, ill-tempered, and selfish as they suffered. Many a life in the furnace of affliction loses all the beauty it ever had. It is not by any means universally true, that we are made more holy and Christlike, by pain. There are dangerous shoals skirting the deeps of affliction, and many frail barques are wrecked in the darkness. In no experience of life do most people need wise friendship and firm, loving guidance more than in their times of trouble.

This subject is of such vital importance that we should give it our most earnest thought, not dismissing it from our minds until we have learned how trial must be endured so as to get blessing from it. For one thing, we must make sure of our personal relation to Christ. Two bare trees stood side by side one early spring. The sun poured down its warm beams and soon one of them was crowned with bursting buds, and later with rich foliage; but the other was still bare. One tree had life, and the other was dead. Where there was life, the hot sun

called out beauty; where life was wanting, the effect of the heat was to make the tree appear even more completely dead. Affliction comes to two lives side by side; one life becomes more Christ-like, while the other withers in the heat. In the one, there is spiritual life; in the other, there is no life. There must be personal faith in Christâ€”or pain will not leave blessing.

Then again, the affliction must be received as God's messenger. We imagine that all angels wear radiant dress, and come to men with smiling face and gentle voice. Thus artists paint them. But truly they come oftentimes in very somber garb, and it is only when we receive them in faith, that they disclose to us their merciful aspect and mission.

We should therefore receive afflictions reverently, as sent from God. Even in our tears we should accept its message as divine. We may be assured that there is always some blessing for us, in pain's hot hand. There is some golden fruit, wrapped up in the rough husk. God designs to burn off some sins from us, in every fire through which he calls us to pass. Not to be able to accept from our Father's hand, the seed of pain, is to miss the fruits of blessing which can grow from no other sowing. We should give sorrow, when it comes, just as patient, loving welcome as we give joy; for it is from the same hand, and has the same errand to us. It is when we receive pain in this spirit that it blesses us. No one who murmurs under God's chastening hand, is ever made better by it.

Then, to get the benefit of the ministry of suffering, we must find true comfort. Many people suppose that if they can dry their tears, and resume again their old familiar course of life, they have been comforted. They think only of getting through the trial, and not of getting anything of help or blessing out of it. The true aim of suffering is to get from it--more purity of soul, and greater revelations of God's face, more of the love of Christ in the heart, and fresh strength for obedience and all duty. An old Psalm writer said: "Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now have I kept your word." That is true comfortâ€”holier, better living.

Out of every experience of pain, we ought to get something good. When we have passed through a season of suffering, and stand beyond it, there ought to be a new light in our eye, a new gentleness in our touch, a new sweetness in our voice, and a new hope in our heart. We ought not to permit our grief to flow long in bitter tearsâ€”but should turn it quickly into channels of earnest devotion and active usefulness. True comfort puts deep joy into the heart, and anoints the sufferer with a new baptism of grace and power.

One Christian woman wrote to another woman in deep grief: "The shadow of death will not always rest on your home; you will emerge from its obscurity into such light as they who have not sorrowed cannot know." This was true even of the earthly experience after sanctified sorrow; but it is true in a far deeper sense of the heavenly "afterward" of pain accepted as God's messenger. Not only will the sorrow of death be forgotten in the joy of heavenâ€”but the joy of heaven will be far deeper and richer because of earth's pain and sorrow.

Your Will Be Done

The whole liturgy of absolute consecration is written out in full in this one brief petition. It is a prayer that we may be made perfect and complete in all the will of God. This is the standard of living which our Lord lays down in almost every chapter of his gospel. There can be no lower condition of discipleship deduced from any of his teachings.

On a summer's evening, a boy stood in thoughtful mood intently gazing up into the calm, silent depths of the skies. His face wore an anxious, troubled look. His mother, drawing near, asked him what he was thinking of. "I was thinking," he replied, "how far off heaven is, and how hard it must be to get there." She was a wise mother, and out of the experience of her own heart she said, "Heaven must first come to you, my boy; heaven must first come into your heart." Never was truer word spoken. That was what Jesus meant when he said, "Except a man be born againâ€”he cannot see, or enter into, the kingdom of heaven." That was what he meant when he said again, "The kingdom of God is within you."

What makes heaven? Not its jeweled walls, and pearly gates, and streets of golden pavement, and crystal river, and burning splendorâ€”but its blessed obedience, its sweet holiness, its universal and unbroken accord with the divine will. Heaven, as a home, can never be entered by anyone in whose heart the spirit of heaven is not found. We are fitted for the blessedness of that home of glory just in the measure in which we have learned to do God's will on the earthâ€”as it is done in heaven.

Then, sometimes, the form of the obedience is passive. God's ways are not as our ways. His plans frequently move right through our plans in their stately marches. Ofttimes the petition of, "May your will be done" must be offered, if offered at all, when it means the relinquishment of the dearest treasures and fondest hopes of our hearts, or the patient, joyful endurance of the keenest sufferings and the sharpest self-denials. We are not only to do the will of God in our busy activitiesâ€”but to allow it to be done in us and respecting us, even when it crushes us to the very earth!

Do we quite understand this? It seems to me that it is something far more profound than many of us think. It is not mere acquiescence. This may be stoical and obstinate, or it may be despairing and hopeless. Neither temper is the true one. Nothing less is involved in the prayer, than the utter and absolute consecration of our lives and willsâ€”to the will of God.

A right understanding of this petition, is about the doctrine of prayer and its answer. We pray, and the answer does not come. In our bitter disappointment we say, "Has not God promised that if we askâ€”we shall receive?" Yesâ€”but Jesus himself prayed that the cup of his agonyâ€”the betrayal, the trial, the ignominy, the crucifixion, and all that nameless and mysterious woe which lay behind these apparent thingsâ€”might pass, and it did not pass. Paul prayed that his thorn in the flesh might be removed. All along the centuries mothers have been agonizing in prayer over their dying babes, crying to God that they might live; and even while they were praying, the shadow deepened over them, and the little hearts fluttered into the stillness of death. All through the Christian years, crushed hearts under heavy crosses of sorrow and shame, have been crying, "How long, O Lord, how long?" and the only answer has been a little more suffering added to the burden, another thorn in the crown of shame.

Are not prayers answered, then, at all? Certainly they are. Not a word that goes faith-winged up to God, fails to receive attention and answer. But ofttimes the answer that comes is not reliefâ€”but the spirit of acquiescence in God's will. The prayer, many, many times, only draws the trembling suppliant closer to God. The cup did not pass; but the will of Jesus was brought into such perfect accord with his Father's, that his piteous cries for relief died away in words of sweet, peaceful yielding. The thorn was not removedâ€”but Paul was enabled to keep it and forget it in glad acquiescence in his Master's wish. The child did not recoverâ€”but David was helped to rise, and wash away his tears, and worship God.

Do not think that every burden you ask God to removeâ€”he will remove; or that every favor you ask him to bestowâ€”he will bestow. He has never promised to do so. Moreover, the first wish in your praying is not to be to get the blessing or the relief you desire. This would be putting your own will before God's. It would be striking out this petition from the Lord's lesson in your praying. The first, the supreme wish should ever be that God's will, whatever it may be, may be done. We are to say, "This desire is very dear to me; I would like to have it granted; yet I cannot choose, and I put it into your hand. If it be your will, grant me my request. If not, withhold it from me, and help me sweetly and joyfully to acquiesce."

Your health is broken. It is right to pray for its restoration; but running all through your most earnest supplication, should be the songful, trustful, peaceful, "Nevertheless, not my willâ€”but yours, be done." You are a mother, and are struggling in prayer over a sick child. God will never blame you for the strength of your maternal affection, or for the clasping, clinging which that holds your darling in your bosom, and pleads that it be not taken from you. Love is right; mother-love is right, and of all things on earth is most like the mighty love of God's own heart. Prayer is right, no matter how intense or how earnest. It is right that you should want to keep that beautiful life. Yet, amid all your agony of desire, this should still be the supreme, the ruling wish, controlling all, subduing and softening all of nature's wild anguishâ€”that God's will may be done. In all your strong supplications, the refrain of Gethsemane must be heardâ€”"Not as I willâ€”but as you will."

The first thing always, before any unburdening of our own heart's load, before any laying down of crosses or averting of trials or sorrows, before any gratification of our own desiresâ€”is to be that God's will may be done. We are to have desiresâ€”but they are to be subordinate to God's desire, which must be far wiser and better than ours. We are to make plansâ€”but they are to be laid at God's feet, that he may either take them up into his own plan as parts thereof, or set them aside and give us better plans. Utter consecration, joyous, loving, intelligent, willing consecration to the will of God, is the standard of Christian living, which this petition sets up before us.

The Cost of Carelessness

How often do we hear as an excuse for some harm done or committed, "I did not mean to do it. I had no thought of causing any such trouble." Certainly "lack of thought" draws after it a great train of evils, and leaves behind it a broad trail of cost and sorrow. We see the results of carelessness in all departments of life, and in all degrees, from the most trivial, causing only inconvenience and confusion, to the most far reaching, casting a shadow into eternity.

A nurse fell down the stairs with an infant in her arms, and fifty years afterward there was a humpbacked man creeping along the streets. A child threw a piece of lemon peel on the sidewalk, and there was an accident an hour after, in which an old lady was severely injured; so severely that she will never be able to walk again. A switch-tender opened the wrong switch, and the heavy train dashed into a great building that stood at the end of the short side-track, and lives were lost amid the wreck. An operator gave a careless touch to his instrument, and there was a terrible collision on the rail. A boy shot an arrow from his bow; it went whizzing away from the string, and a comrade is blind for the rest of his life. A woman poured oil from a can into her stove to hasten her fire, and there was an explosion, and an outburst of flame, which burned down the building around her. A young man pointed a gun, in sport, at his best friend, playfully saying that he would shoot him, and one noble youth was carried to his grave, and another goes through life with an awful shadow of memory hanging over him, which quenches all his joy and makes all life dark for him. A druggist's clerk compounded the prescription in haste, and in an hour a sick girl was dying in terrible pain and convulsions, from the poison in the prescription.

A beautiful young lady danced at a party one chill midnight, and then raised a window in a side room to let the fresh air fan her hot cheeks; and in a little while they followed her to an untimely grave. What long chapters of accidents are every year recorded, all of which result from carelessness! A little careful thought on the part of the responsible people would have prevented all of them, with their attendant horrors and their long train of suffering and sorrow.

There are other illustrations. Millions of letters every year go wrong, fail to reach their destination, and find their way to the dead-letter office, because the writers carelessly misdirect them. A gentleman lost an overcoat. His suspicions fell on a neighbor, and a trap was laid to detect his guilt; but after a great deal of wicked feeling the coat was found precisely where the owner had left it. Many a servant is abused and wronged and cruelly treated, on charges with similar ground. A Boston man coming home in a drenching rain, felt for his watch at his doorstep, to see the time; but it was missing. He had been robbed. He remembered it all just a few doors back a man rubbed against him in passing. He was the thief. He flew after him, overtook him, raised his umbrella and demanded his watch, or he would strike. The terrified man handed it to him, and the good citizen went home, proud of his courage and success. The morning paper told of a bold highway robbery, a most daring affair. The robber lifted an enormous club, and was about to kill the quiet pedestrian. It happened just close by this gentleman's house. "That is strange," he said, as his wife read the account at breakfast; "I was robbed of my watch, and overtook the thief at that very spot, and recovered it." His wife assured him there must be some mistake, as he had left his watch at home the morning before, and she had since noticed a strange one on the bureau. So it turned out that he was the robber.

There is a great deal of the same lack of carefulness in other ways, whose consequences are not so manifest, and yet are no less painful and destructive. A man speaks light and careless words, perhaps in humorous mood, perhaps in impatience and irritation, and while the laughter goes around a heart is writhing in agony, pierced by the cruel barb. He did not mean to give pain to that tender friend; he would not do it intentionally for the world; but he has left a wound and a pang there, which no after kindness can altogether heal and soothe. There is a manifold ministry of pain and wrong, wrought thus by carelessly uttered words. Some people appear always to say the very things they ought not to say. Hawthorne says that awkwardness is a sin which has no forgiveness in heaven or on earth. And surely carelessness is laden with the guilt of countless griefs and sorrows, which no after-penitence can ever remove, or even palliate and soften.

A person's name is mentioned in a certain circle, or in a quiet conversation, and the most inexcusable liberties taken in speaking of him, his character, his business, and his acts. No one means to do him harm or injustice; and yet, in the guise of confidence, words are uttered which are like so many cruel stabs.

Few habits are more common than this; and yet what rights have we to say one defamatory word of another, or start, even by a hint, a suspicion of him? We may plead that we have no intention of injuring him but the pleas avails nothing. We are responsible not only for our deliberate, purposed acts but just as much so for the accidental and unconscious effects which go out from us. They say that every word spoken into the air goes quivering on, in undying reverberations, forever. Whatever we may say of this statement as a scientific fact we are well aware of the infinite and far-reaching consequences of the smallest words as moral forces.

The poet's fancy is not a mere play of imagination. The song we sing, and the word we speak—we shall indeed find again, from beginning to end, somewhere in the eternal future, stored away in the nooks and crannies of other lives, and influencing them for good or ill, for pain or pleasure.

There is no part of this life we are living, day by day, that is not vital with influence. We call certain things small and infinitesimal, and indeed they seem so; but when we remember that there is not one of them that may not set in motion a train of eternal consequences, dare we call anything insignificant? We are evermore touching other lives, oftener unconsciously than consciously, and our touch today may decide a destiny. Our silent example, as well as our words and deeds, is vital, and throbbing with influence. There is need, therefore, for the most unwearying watchfulness over every act and word, lest in a moment of unheeding, we start a train of consequences that may leave sorrow or ruin in its track forever.

Nowhere is this more important than in dealing with souls, as spiritual teachers and guides. Milton somewhere says, that bad advice may slay not only a life—but an immortality. Bad or careless religious counsel may wreck a soul's destiny. Should a teacher ever sit down before a class of immortal souls, looking up with confidence for guidance, without the most diligent and thoughtful preparation as to what to say to them? Carelessness anywhere else may be pardoned, sooner than here.

Jesus Consecrating All Life

In his passage through life, in all its phases of growth and development, Jesus sanctified all pure relationships and experiences. He sanctified childhood. Childhood has been sanctified, its joys sweetened, and its sacredness enhanced, by the human infancy of Jesus.

So he sanctified motherhood, since of a human mother, was born the incarnate God; since on a human mother's bosom he lay, clasping his tiny arms about her neck.

So he sanctified home. Whatever is truly sacred, pure, tender, and holy in our homes, comes from his life in this world. What a home that Nazareth home must have been! Think of that lovely, sinless, joyous life growing up there, through tender infancy—bright beautiful youth, noble, spotless manhood. One patient, gentle spirit in any home is enough to fill all the household life with unspeakable sweetness and peace. But think of Jesus, his wondrous beauty, his benignity, his self-forgetfulness, his prayerful piety, his divine purity, his joyous affectionateness, his unruffled calm. And ever since, Christianity has been a home religion. It purifies home joys, softens home sorrows, and sanctifies home relationships.

So Jesus blessed poverty, for he lived as a poor man. He blessed toil; for his own hands grew hard as he wrought. He blessed social life, for he grew in favor with his fellow-men; no stern ascetic—but mingling in the circles of his friends, and pouring the fragrance of his gracious character on all about him.

Then at length he went away from the privacy and quiet of the home, and for three years longer, touched life at all its higher and lower points. He met temptation's stern assaults, being tempted at all points like as we are. He learned very soon what it was to be hated: what it was to love intensely—and not to be loved in return; what it was to receive only scorn—for all his pitying compassion; what it was to want to bless and help others—and to have them turn away and refuse his gifts and help; what it was to be grieved and disappointed, and have men draw away from his influence, and slip down to ruin. He learned what it was to be rejected, even by his family. He knew what it was to be homeless and friendless, with an atmosphere of icy hate all about him. He knew what it was to be betrayed by one he had cherished for years as a friend, to be denied by another, to be forsaken by all, and to stand utterly alone in the center of the world's rage and cruelty.

I have merely touched upon these points in his human experience, to show that he has sanctified all life. He touched humanity at every point, from the tenderness and innocence of the new-born babe, to the lowest depth of sorrow and shame.

All of life is holy now. We all know how human love consecrates for us whatever it touches. You treasure a little picture; you keep it in your own room; gold would not buy it. It is neither beautiful nor valuable as a work of art; yet there is nothing in the galleries that has for your eye, such loveliness. It was your mother's; her hands made it. How sacred is a book whose pages a loving friend used to turn and read. How we prize anything that love has touched! How sacred are the paths affection's feet have pressed—the room, the chair, the pen, the table, the cup, the ring, made precious by love's memories! All of life is rendered sacred by the touch, the footprint,

the heart-thrill of Jesus.

It ought not to be so hard for us to live when we remember this. Whatever the experience, we know that Jesus once felt the same that we feel. This is nothing strange to him. He understands; he sympathizes; he knows who to help.

How to Get Help From Church Services

How to get from public church services the help they have to give to us is one of the most important practical questions to which attention can be turned. Private devotion is not enough; the honor of God and the needs of our spiritual nature alike, require associated worship. To neglect the public services, is to deprive ourselves of one of the greatest aids to religious culture. No doubt there are rich possibilities of spiritual help in these services, if we know how to find it. The question is worth considering.

It is quite possible to attend church services, even with commendable regularity, and yet receive no spiritual profit. There is no holy atmosphere in the house of God which is in itself medicinal or healthful to our souls. There is no filtration of grace into our hearts, which goes on unconsciously and without agency of our own, while we sit in our soft pew in the sanctuary. Forms of worship, whether plain or elaborate, are empty without the sincere homage and faith of loving hearts. They carry up to God just what we put into them; they bring down to us from God just what we, with prayer and faith, draw out of them. Two people may sit side by side, and take like part in the exercises of devotion; yet from one rises to God pure incense and an acceptable offering; and from the other the empty mockery of a heartless and formal service. The one goes away strengthened and blessed, and the other carries away but a cold, unblessed heart. Whatever the forms of public worship may be, the heart must be engaged, or the worship is vain and unprofitable.

To make this chapter as helpful as possible, a few definite suggestions are offered.

To begin with, thoughtful preparation for the church services will greatly increase their profitableness to those who engage in them. The very best ordinary preparation is a season of private devotion, before going to the sanctuary. The heart is thus cleansed of its worldly thoughts, is opened and warmed toward God, and is in a suitable condition to enter sincerely and earnestly into the public worship.

A reverent approach toward, and entrance into, God's house is a further aid to blessing in the services. We should at least know and consider well on what errand we are going to meet God to worship him and receive help for our own lives and should have our expectations aroused in anticipation of the communion with God and his people which we are so soon to enjoy, and our hearts eager with desire for the holy meeting. Our age is not reverent. Many people enter God's house with as little seriousness as if it were a concert or a literary entertainment, which they had come to hear. Such people are not prepared either to render acceptable worship, or to receive needed help. We shall find in God's house, just what we come spiritually prepared to find. God must be in the heart or we shall not see God in the exercises of worship. We shall never find in the sanctuary, that which we do not really seek and earnestly want to find. If we enter careless and indifferent, with no spirit of devotion we shall carry away no blessing. If we come with longing and earnest desire to meet God, and lay our burdens at his feet, to rest and refresh ourselves in his presence, and to receive new strength from him for duty we shall find all that we wish.

Another condition of help, is earnest personal interest in each part of the service. There is no blessing in our being merely among true worshipers, and in the presence of God. A throng was close around Christ one day but only one of them was healed; and she was healed because she reached out her trembling finger, and in faith touched the hem of Christ's garment. This history may be repeated any Sunday in any congregation. While the multitude throngs close about Christ, those alone who touch the hem of his robe will receive blessing. Even in public services, we do not worship in companies but as individuals. One sitting close beside us may hold delightful communion with God, and receive rich spiritual refreshment, while our heart remains like a dry, parched field, receiving not one drop of rain from the full overhanging clouds.

Then after the service, we should go away as thoughtfully and reverently as we came. The custom prevalent in some churches, of lingering a moment in silent prayer after the blessing is very beautiful and impressive. Church-aisle sociability, so often commended, no doubt has its pleasant side; but it certainly has its disadvantages and its grave dangers. We may greet each other cordially and affectionately in quite tones as we pass out, without spiritual harm; but too often the conversation runs either into criticism of the preacher or the

sermon, or off on trivial and worldly themes. In either case the good seed sown is picked up by the birds and devoured before it has had time to root! We had better go away quietly, pondering the great thoughts which the service has suggested to us, seeking to deepen in our hearts, the impressions made and to assimilate in our lives, the truths of God's Word which have fallen upon our ears.

From the church gate back again to the closet whence we set out is the best walk to take after the service has closed. A few moments of secret prayer will carry the blessings of the sanctuary so deep into our hearts that they will be thereafter part of our very life.

Then, in the busy week-days which follow, come the proofs of the helpful influences and blessings which have flowed into our lives in the Sunday services. The food which is eaten today is the strength of the laborer, the eloquence of the orator, the skill of the artisan, tomorrow. The spring sunshine and rain which fall upon the dry briery rose bush, reappear in due time in fragrant lovely roses. So sincere and true worship, in the quiet Sunday hours, will show itself in the beautiful character, the sweeter spirit, the brighter hope, the truer better living, and the holier consecration of the days of toil and struggle which make up the week.

The Value of Devotional Reading

All reading ought to be a means of grace. We should never read any book which will not leave in mind and heart some helpful, strengthening, or uplifting thought. This is not saying that we should never read any but distinctly Christian books. All truth is enriching. History, if rightly read, inspires adoring feeling. Books of science help us to think over again God's thoughts, and thus stimulate reverence. Poetry, if true and pure, is wondrously elevating, even though it may not treat of spiritual themes. Good fiction may teach us noble lessons in conduct, sketch for us the loftiest things in character, and inspire in us, "whatever things are true, whatever things are lovely." Even humor has its place as a means of grace. There are times when what a good man needs above all things is a hearty laugh. The man who writes truly witty things, has a mission. Thus there is no good book of any order, which may not have its place in helping us to grow in grace.

Yet there is a special class of books which may fitly be used as devotional helps. When we speak of devotions, we usually refer to the "silent times" which every earnest Christian must get into his days, even the busiest of his days. Much is said of the necessity of secret prayer. Perhaps not enough is said of the necessity of devotional reading as part of the exercise of devotion. It is not enough to speak to God to tell him of our needs, our dangers, our sins, our troubles; and to plead with him for help, for favor, for comfort. We must also let God talk to us. We must feed our souls. No pious exercise is complete, without the reading of some sentence or sentences which will start in the mind uplifting thoughts, give us a suggestion of a new lesson to be learned, show us a glimpse of spiritual beauty to be reached after, or speak to us a word that we may rest on in our weakness, or take as rod and staff in the valley.

Of course the Bible is always to be the first book in such exercise. It is never to be left out. A "silent time" with prayer, and yet without a verse or more of the simple Word of God, lacks an essential element. We must hear God speak to us while we speak to him. Perhaps the best of all devotional exercises is illustrated in the oft-told incident of Bengel. He was known to be much in prayer, to spend long seasons of time in his private devotions. Someone was curious to know something of the way he prayed, and hid himself in the good man's study one evening to watch him at his secret devotions. Bengel sat long at his table with his New Testament open before him. He read on quietly, yet uttered no word of prayer that the watcher could hear. Sometimes he would pause over a verse, and his face would glow and his eyes would be turned upward but he did not speak. At length the clock struck midnight, and then the saintly man clasped his hands on the open book, and said, "Dear Lord Jesus, we are on the same old terms." That was all the curious intruder heard. Yet for an hour or longer the loving heart had been holding sweet converse with Christ.

Such an hour is worth a thousand of the hurried, stereotyped "secret prayers" which many Christians make, oftentimes without any true devotion or real communing. When we sit down with our best friend, we do not merely ask a few favors, and make a few complaints, and utter a few groans, and then run away. We commune with our friend. We may ask no favor at all; rather we seek to have our hearts flow together in love, as we converse on themes that are sacred to us both. Secret prayer should not be merely an unburdening of our heart, a telling of our needs and desires to God. It should be far more than this. We should get quiet, that God may speak to us, that his love may flow into our heart, that his life may enter our soul.

The Bible is the first book of devotion, essential, indispensable, never to be left out of the closet library, never

to be unused in even the briefest time with God. But there are many other books which may be used with great profit besides and with the Bible. There are some men who have a peculiar gift for the interpreting of the Bible. They find the beautiful things in it, which many others do not seem to be able to find. They have facility in showing us the deeper meanings of the Scripture words. They elucidate the teachings of inspiration, in such a way as to make our hearts burn within us, as we read what they have written. Books of such writers are peculiarly helpful in the closet. If we read a chapter from one of them, or a few pages, or possibly one a paragraph or two, we shall have some scriptural truth shining with new beauty in our heart when we leave our closet, or we shall have a fresh impulse toward some important duty, or we shall have a vision of spiritual loveliness glowing before us which shall draw us toward more heavenly living; or, if we are in sorrow, we shall carry away some precious comfort which shall give us sweet peace.

Such devotional interpretation of the Scriptures is always helpful in the closet. It is strange how precious Bible truths will elude the eye of a reader, sometimes for years, though he read the chapters over and over again. Then one day, a few sentences in a sermon or in a book will lift them out of their hiding place, and they will flash in brilliant beauty. What we need in the way of interpretation for such reading of the Bible as will bless our livesâ€”is the application of its great teachings to common, daily, practical life. A paragraph which takes a Scripture text, and so opens it for us in the morning that all day long it helps us to live, becoming a true lamp to our feet, and a staff to lean upon when the way is roughâ€”is the very best devotional help we can possibly have. Most people need to have the Bible explained to themâ€”at least, they find great benefit in such real opening of its words.

Take an example. You read a few sentences which explain to you the meaning of the words: "Cast your burden upon the Lordâ€”and he shall sustain you." You are reminded that, in the margin of your reference Bible, "gift" is suggested as another reading for "burden." Then you are reminded further that in the Revised Version the marginal reading suggest a further amplification of the word, so that the phrase reads: "Cast what he has given you upon the Lord." So your burden, whatever it is, is something which God has given youâ€”a gift of God to you. Hence it is sacred, and carries folded up in it a blessing. This opening of the Scripture changes the whole aspect of your burden.

You are reminded furtherâ€”that there is no promise here that this burden will be taken away, the assurance is that you will be sustained in bearing it. This gift of God is a blessing, and you cannot afford to have it taken away from you. You must keep itâ€”but you will be enabled to bear it. One who finds such an opening of the text as this in his morning reading, has acquired food for a whole day, which will prove also an interpretation for life. Every chapter in the Bible is meant to help us to live, and there can be no better reading for private devotion than that which really opens the Scriptures for us.

Another class of devotional reading of great practical value is poetry. Some people always sing hymns as part of their private worship. If this is not practicable, the reading of good, uplifting hymns has great value as a means of spiritual culture. It warms the heart and kindles praise and adoration.

The chief thought to be emphasized here, is that we need to read as well as to pray; otherwise we shall not grow. The Bible is always the first book to be used. But most people need help in the interpretation of the Bibleâ€”so as to get from it the precious things which are folded up in its words. Hence there is always a place for books of the right kind, on the closet table.

The Value of Communion With God

Some of the saddest cries that wail out in the Psalms, are sighings for the joy of the divine presence, temporarily lost. And when we come to think of it, there is no other loss in all the range of possible losses, which is as great as the breaking of our communion with God. This is not the ordinary estimate. We speak with heavy heartâ€”of our earthly sorrows. When bereavements come, and our homes are emptied and our tender joys borne awayâ€”we think there is not grief like ours. Our lives are darkened, and very dreary does this earth appear to us as we walk its paths in deep loneliness. Then there are other lossesâ€”losses of friends by alienation; losses of property, of comforts, of health, of reputation.

But there is not one of all these, which is such a calamityâ€”as the loss of God's smile, the hiding of his face, or the interruption of our fellowship with him. Men sigh over their misfortunes which touch only their earthly circumstances, and forget that there is no misfortune like the decay of spirituality in their hearts. It would be well if all of us understood this. There are earthly misfortunes under which hearts remain all the while warm and

tender, like the flower-roots beneath the winter's snows, ready to burst into glorious bloom when the springtime comes. And there are worldly prosperities under which spiritual life withers and dies.

We do not know what God is to us "until, in some way, we lose the sense of his presence and the consciousness of his love. This is true of all our blessings. We do not know their value to us "until they are lost or imperiled. We do not prize health until it is shattered and broken, and we can never have it restored again. We do not recognize the richness and splendor of youth until it has fled, with all its glorious opportunities, and worlds cannot buy it back. We do not appreciate the comforts and blessings of Providence until we have been deprived of them, and are driven out of warm homes into the cold paths of a dreary world. We do not estimate the value of our facilities for education and improvement, until the period of these opportunities is gone, and we must enter the hard battle of life unfurnished and unequipped. We do not know how much our friends are to us "until they lie before us silent and cold. Ofttimes the vacant chair, or the deep, unbroken loneliness about us "is the first revealer of the worth of one we have never duly prized.

In like manner, we do not know the blessedness of fellowship with God until his face is darkened, or he seems to have withdrawn himself. Jesus never seemed so precious to the disciples "as when they had him no more. Two of his friends, indeed, never made an open confession of their love for him at all, until his body hung upon the cross. They had loved him secretly all along; but now, as they saw that he was dead, and they could never, as they supposed, do anything more for him, or enjoy his presence again "all their heart's love awoke in them, and they came boldly out and asked for his body, took it down tenderly in the sight of the multitude, and bore it away to loving burial. But for his death "they would never have known how much they loved him, nor how much he was to them!

And I am sure that David never knew what God and God's house were to his soul "until he was driven away from his home and city and could no more enter the sanctuary. As he fled away, it seemed as if his heart would break, and his deepest sorrow was not for the joys of home left behind, for throne and crown and palace and honors "but for the house of God, with its hallowed and blessed communion. All the other bitter griefs and sorrows of the hour were forgotten, or swallowed up, in this greatest of all his griefs "separation from God's presence. I do not believe that the privileges of divine fellowship were ever so precious to him before, while he enjoyed them without hindrance, as when he looked from his exile towards the holy place and could not return to it.

And does not the very commonness of our spiritual blessings conceal from us, their inestimable value to us? Luther somewhere says, "If in his gifts and benefits God were more sparing and close-handed, we would learn to be thankful." The very unbroken continuity of his favors "causes us to lose sight of the Giver, and to forget to prize the gifts themselves. If there were gaps somewhere, we would learn to appreciate the wealth of the divine goodness to us. Who is there among us all, who values highly enough "the tender summer of God's love which broods over us with infinite warmth evermore?

Do we value our privileges as Christians, and improve them "as we would if for a season, we would be deprived of them? Our church privileges, our open Bibles, our religious liberty, our Sunday teaching and communings, our hours of prayer "do we prize these blessings as we would "if we were suddenly torn away, by some cruel fortune, and cast in a land where all these are lacking? Do we appreciate our privileges of fellowship with God as we would "if his love would be withdrawn, and the light of his presence put out?

There is something very sad in the thought that we not only fail to value the rich blessings of God's love "but that we oftentimes thrust them from us, and refuse to take them, thereby wounding the divine heart and impoverishing our own souls. It would be very bitter if any of us should first be made really aware of the presence and grace of Christ "by his vanishing forever from our sight, after having stood at our locked and bolted doors, in wondrous patience, for long years. It would be a bitter thing to learn the glorious blessedness of the things of God's mercy and love "only by seeing them depart forever beyond our reach.

There is another phase of this subject, which ought to bring much comfort to those who are called to suffer earthly losses. If we have God left to us "no other loss is irreparable! A gentleman came home one evening with a heavy heart, and said that he had lost everything he had. Bankruptcy had overtaken him. "We are utterly beggared!" he said. "All is gone "there is nothing left!" His little girl of five years, crept up on his knee, and, looking earnestly into his despairing face, said, "Why, papa, you have mamma and me left." Yes, what is the loss of money, stores, houses, costly furniture, musical instruments and works of art "while love remains?

There is surely enough in God's love, to compensate a thousand times for every earthly deprivation! Our lives may be stripped bare "home, friends, riches, comforts, every sweet voice of love, every note of joy "and we

may be driven out from brightness and music and tenderness and shelter into the cold ways of sorrow; and yet if we have God himself left—ought it not to suffice? Are not all earth's blessings gifts from God to us? And is he not able to give us again all that we have lost? Yes, is he not himself infinitely more than all his gifts? If we have him, have we not all things in him?

Therefore it is, that so often we do not learn the depth and riches of God's love, and the sweetness of his presence—until other joys vanish out of our hands, and other loved presences fade away out of sight. The loss of temporal things empties our hearts—to receive unseen and eternal things. The sweeping away of earthly hopes reveals the glory of our heart's refuge in God. Someone has beautifully said, "Our refuges are like the nests of birds; in summer they are hidden among the green leaves—but in winter they are seen among the naked branches." Worldly losses but strip off the foliage, and show us our heart's warm nest in the bosom of God!

The Birthday of the New World

The world is growing old. We date time from the birth of Jesus Christ, as if there had been no years before he was born. The truth is, there were many long centuries before that time—no one knows how many. But somehow centuries without Christ do not count for much. The years seem like long rows of ciphers, with no numeral preceding them to give them value. At least, from the day Christ was born into this world—all things had a new meaning.

Perhaps we do not think often of the real significance of the abbreviations A.D., which we use continually in noting time. They tell us that the years in which we are living and all the years that have passed since Jesus was born are years of our Lord. They are years of his stay in this world. The birth of Jesus was indeed a new beginning of time. From that day forward there was something in this world that never had been in it before. It was not merely new teaching, although "no man ever spoke like this man." The words of Jesus have been seeds of blessing, all these nineteen centuries. It was not merely the life of a great man, like other men whose names have immortal honor, whose influence is imperishable. The birth of Jesus Christ was the coming of God into this world. We all stand with uncovered head beside the manger in the little town of Bethlehem, for he who sleeps his first sleep there, is Emmanuel—God with us. That is why we write Anno Domini in all our dates. These are years of our Lord. Whatever of good, beauty, joy, and hope there was in the centuries before Jesus was born, it was indeed a new beginning of time when he came.

We need not say that this was not God's world before Christ came. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Nor is it true that he was not in it then. The Old Testament tells of divine appearances. But they were rare, and gave scarcely more than glimpses of ineffable presence. There were divine revealings—but they were only flashes or gleams of glory. We do well to reckon time from the birth of Jesus Christ, for in his incarnation all the fullness of the divine life was brought down among men.

We may say, for example, that love was given a new meaning when Jesus came into this world. Of course, there was love here before. Mothers loved their children. Friend loved friend. Some of the rarest friendships of history, belong in the centuries before the beginning of the Christian era. But Jesus illustrated in his life, the love which reaches out beyond all lines of kinship and natural affection. "What do you do more than others?" was the test question the Master put to his disciples. Anybody can love his friends, and be kind to those who are kind to him, and graciously greet those who greet him. Even the heathen loved in this way. Jesus said, "I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you; that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." Forgiving injuries is not an expression of natural affection—but the love which Jesus taught prays, "Forgive us—as we forgive others."

The ancient law said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"; Christ law of love requires, not "as yourself," but more than we love ourselves. We are to give our own life, if need be, in love's service. The parable of the Good Samaritan is our Lord's own illustration of the way we are to love our neighbor. He may be an enemy—it was so in the story—but the man who did us a cruel wrong yesterday, if we find him in need today—is our neighbor. The love we are to show is not merely pity—but help to the uttermost, whatever the cost may be.

But a lofty teaching was not all that Jesus brought to earth. People might have said that no one could live up to the standards which he gave, that no one could realize the splendid ideals of his teaching. But Jesus lived up to his own standards, and realized every one of his own ideals. He brought into the world, not merely new interpretations of the duty of loving—he brought love itself! Some scientific men, in trying to account for the

beginning of vegetable life in this world, have suggested that possibly some fragment of a bursting planet may have been hurled to our globe, bringing with it its roots and seeds, and that thus life began here. We need not give the fancy any thoughtâ€”but it illustrates the way love came to our earth. Out of heaven came One who himself was the infinite and eternal Love. In bringing life, he brought loveâ€”for life is love, and love is life. All the love that is in this world today, and all that has been here since Christ was born, was kindled from the one flame which burned in the heart of Jesus.

For not only was he the very love of God brought to earth in the incarnationâ€”but he came to give that same love to others, to put it into the heart of everyone who would believe on him. It is not impossible for men, therefore, to attain the lofty standards of living which Jesus gave for his friends. He came not to teach lessons merelyâ€”but to give lifeâ€”and to give it abundantly.

Everyone who touched Jesus, carried away in his own heart a new warmth, which by and by transformed his life. Then everyone whose life was kindled at this flame of love, in turn kindled other lives. So the work has gone on through these nineteen centuries. Through all human strifes and contentions, amid cruelty, injustice, and oppression, love has wrought persistently, winning its victories. Everyone who endures wrong patiently, who keeps his heart sweet under harshness or insultâ€”is helping in the triumph of love. Everyone who does a kindly deed, makes the wintry air a little warmer.

It is such deeds as these, which are the truest interpretation of the love which had its earthly incarnation that first Christmas night. We can best prepare for the coming of the kingdom of Christ in its full glory, by letting love have its victories in us over all that might make us bitter or resentfulâ€”the love which bears all things and endures all things, and by doing ever the gentle deeds which comfort lonely hearts and relieve suffering and distress.

We can make Christmas worthy of its sacred meaning, only by love. We need not seek far for opportunitiesâ€”all about us are those whose hearts we can warm, whose lives we can inspire and enrich, simply by bringing to them the love of Christ.

Christmas After Christmas Day

What becomes of Christmas, when the day is gone? It is the gladdest day of the year. It is celebrated in all Christian lands. The churches observe it, sometimes with great pomp and splendor, with stately music and elaborate ceremonial, sometimes in simple, homely worship. It is kept in homes, with happy greetings and good wishes, and universal giving of gifts. Everyone, even the miser, grows generous at the Christmas time. Men who are ordinarily cold and unmoved toward human need, wax warm-hearted in these glad days. People everywhere rise to a high tide of kindly feeling. There is scarcely a home anywhere, however lowly, which the Christmas sentiment does not reach with its kindliness. Public institutionsâ€”orphanages, hospitals, homes, prisons, refuges, reformatoriesâ€”all feel themselves touched as by a breath of heaven, for the one day.

What becomes of all the joy when Christmas is over? Does it stay in the life of the community afterward? Do we have it in our homes the next day and the next week? Do we feel it in the atmosphere of our churches? Does it stay in the hearts of people in general? Do the carols sing on next day? Does the generous kindness continue in the people's hearts? Does the love in homes rich and poor abide through the winter?

Two or three years ago, in one of our cities, an Oriental was giving his impressions of our American Christmas. He said that for weeks before Christmas, people's faces seemed to have an unusual light in them. They were all bright and shining. Everyone seemed unusually kindly and courteous. Everyone was more thoughtful, more desirous of giving pleasure than had been his accustomed. Men who at other season of the year had been stern, unapproachable, were now genial, hearty, easy to approach. Those who ordinarily were stingy, not responding to calls for charity, had become, for the time, generous and charitable. Those who had been in the habit of doing base things, when they entered the warm Christmas zone seemed like new men, as if a new spirit possessed them. And the Oriental said it would be a good thing if all the charm of the Christmas spirit, could be made to project itself into the New Year.

This is really the problem to be solved. Christmas ought not to be one day only in the yearâ€”it should be all the days through the year. We may as well confess that the solution has not yet been realized. Almost immediately after Christmas, we fall back into a selfish way of living which is far below the high tide to which we rose at Christmas. There is a picture which shows the scene of our Lord's crucifixion in the afternoon of that terrible

day. The crowd is gone, the crosses are empty, and all is silent. In the background is seen a donkey nibbling at a piece of withered palm branch. This was all that was left of the joy and enthusiasm of Psalm Sunday.

Is it not much the same with the beautiful life of Christmas? Five days afterward, will not the world have gone back to its old coldness, selfishness, and hardness? Will not the newspapers have resumed the story of wrong, injustice, greed, and crime, just as if there had been no Christmas, with its one day's peace and good will? Shall we not have again about us, within a few days, the old competition, wrangling, strife and bitterness among men? The sweet flowers of Christmas will soon be found trampled in the dust by the same feet which, this Christmas, are standing by the cradle of the Christ-child.

How can we keep the Christmas spirit with us after the day has passed on the calendar? We cannot legislate a continuation of Christmas good will. We cannot extend it by passing resolutions. We cannot hold it in the world's life by lecturing and exhorting on the subject. Yet there ought to be some way of making Christmas last more than one day. It is too beautiful to be allowed to fade out after only one brief day's stay in the world. What can we do to extend it? We can begin by keeping the beautiful vision in our own life.

There is a story of a young woman who had been with an outing party all day. In the morning, as she left her home, almost unconsciously she had slipped a branch of sweetbrier into her dress. She altogether forgot that it was there. All day, wherever she went with her friends, she and others smelled the spicy fragrance—but none knew whence it came. Yet that night, when she went to her room there was the handful of sweetbrier tucked away in her dress, where she had put it in the morning, and where, unconsciously, she had carried it all day.

The secret was revealed. It is when we have the sweetness in our own life, that we begin to be a sweetener of other lives. We cannot depend upon others for our Christ-likeness, but if we have it in our own heart we will impart it to those about us. We cannot find sweetness on every path that our feet must press. Sometimes we must be among uncongenial people, people whose lives are not loving, with whom it is not easy to live cordially in close relations. The only way to be sure of making all our course in life a path of sweetness is to have the fragrance in ourselves. Then on bleakest roads, where not a flower blooms, we still shall walk in perfumed air—the perfume being in our hearts. It is our own heart which makes our world. We find everywhere what we take with us. If our lives are gentle, patient, loving—we find gentleness, patience, lovingness everywhere. But if our hearts are bitter, jealous, suspicious—we find bitterness, jealousy, suspicion, on every path.

Shall we not strive to make Christmas a continual festival, and not merely the festival of one day? This does not mean a constant celebration of the outer life of Christmas—but a continuance of its spirit.

Henry Van Dyke puts it thus: "Are you willing to stoop down to consider the needs and the desires of little children; to remember the weakness and loneliness of people who are growing old; to stop asking how much your friends love you, and ask yourself whether you love them enough; to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear in mind—the things that other people have to bear on their hearts; to try to understand what those who live in the same house with you really want, without waiting for them to tell you; to trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke; to make a grave for your ugly thoughts, and a garden for your kindly feelings, with the gate open? Are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas."

And when we are doing these things every day, Christmas will have fulfilled its mission.

The Problem of Christian Old Age

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day!" 2 Corinthians 4:16. Paul has a cheering thought about the undecaying inner life. The outward man, he says, always decays—but the inner man is renewed day by day. This teaching is full of comfort for those who are advancing in years. The problem of Christian old age—is to keep the heart young and full of all youth's joy, however feeble and broken the body may become. We need to be most watchful lest we allow our life to lose its zest and deteriorate in its quality, when old age begins to creep in. Hopes of achievement appear to be ended for us—our work is almost done, we think. Sometimes people, as they grow old, become less sweet, less beautiful in spirit. Troubles, disasters, and misfortunes have made the days hard and painful for them. Perhaps health is broken, and suffering is added to the other elements which make old age unhappy.

Renan, in one of his books, recalls an old legend of buried city on the coast of Brittany. With its homes, public

buildings, churches and thronged streetsâ€”it sank instantly into the sea. The legend says that the city's life goes on as before, down beneath the waves. The fishermen, when in calm weather they row over the place, think they sometimes can see the gleaming tips of the church spires deep in the water, and fancy they can hear the chiming of the bells in the old belfries and even the murmur of the city's noises.

There are men who in their old age seem to have an experience like this. Their life of youthful hopes, dreams, successes, loves and joys, has been sunk out of sight, submerged in misfortunes and adversities, and has vanished altogether. Nothing remains of it all but a memory. In their discouragement they often think sadly of their past, and seem to hear the echoes of the old songs of hope and joy, and to catch visions of the old beauty and splendor. But that is all. Nothing real is left. Their spirits have grown hopeless and bitter. Guthrie, as he grew feeble, spoke of his bald head, his trembling steps, his dullness of hearing, his dimness of eye.

But this is not worthy living, for those who are immortal, who were born to be children of God. The hard things are not meant to mar our lifeâ€”they are meant to make us only the braver, the worthier, and the nobler. It is not meant that the infirmities of old age shall break through into our inner life; that should grow all the more beautifulâ€”the more the outer life is broken. The shattering of the old mortal tent, should reveal more and more of the glory of the divine life which dwells within.

Do you ever think, you who are growing old, that old age ought really to be the very best of life? We are too apt to settle down to the feeling, that with our infirmities, we cannot any longer live beautifully, worthily, usefully, or actively. But this is not the true way to think of old age. We should reach our best then in every way.

Old age should be the bestâ€”the very best, of all life! It should be the most beautiful, with the flaws mended, the faults cured, the mistakes corrected, the lessons learned. Youth is full of immaturity. Midlife is full of toil and care, strife and ambition. Old age should be as the autumn with its golden fruit. We ought to be better Christians than ever we have been before; more submissive to God's will; more content, more patient and gentle, kindlier and more lovingâ€”when we grow old. We are drawing nearer to heaven every dayâ€”and our visions of the Father's house should be clearer and brighter. Old age is the time of harvest; it should not be marked by emptiness and decayâ€”but by richer fruitfulness and more gracious beauty. It may be lonely, with so many gone of those who used to cluster about the lifeâ€”but the loneliness will not be for long, for it is drawing nearer continually to all the great company of godly friends, waiting in heaven.

Old age may be feebleâ€”but the marks of feebleness are really foretokens of glory. Old people have no reason for sadnessâ€”they are really in their best days! Let them be sure to live now at their best. Paul was growing old when he wrote of his enthusiastic vision of beauty yet to be attainedâ€”but we hear no note of depression or weariness in him. He did not think of his life as done. He showed no consciousness that he had passed the highest reach of living. He was still forgetting the past and reaching forth, because he knew that the best was yet before him. His outward man was feeble, h