

## Scriptures and Doctrine :: BLESSED AND TRAGIC UNCONSCIOUSNESS

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### BLESSED AND TRAGIC UNCONSCIOUSNESS

By  
Alexander Maclaren

...Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him.—EXODUS xxxiv. 29.

...And Samson wist not that the Lord had departed from him.—JUDGES xvi. 20.

The recurrence of the same phrase in two such opposite connections is very striking. Moses, fresh from the mountain of vision, where he had gazed on as much of the glory of God as was accessible to man, caught some gleam of the light which he adoringly beheld; and a strange radiance sat on his face, unseen by himself, but visible to all others. So, supreme beauty of character comes from beholding God and talking with Him; and the bearer of it is unconscious of it.

Samson, fresh from his coarse debauch, and shorn of the locks which he had vowed to keep, strides out into the air, and tries his former feats; but his strength has left him because the Lord has left him; and the Lord has left him because, in his fleshly animalism, he has left the Lord. Like, but most unlike, Moses, he knows not his weakness. So strength, like beauty, is dependent upon contact with God, and may ebb away when that is broken, and the man may be all unaware of his weakness till he tries his power, and ignominiously fails.

These two contrasted pictures, the one so mysteriously grand and the other so tragic, may well help to illustrate for us truths that should be burned into our minds and our memories.

I. Note, then, the first thought which they both teach us, that beauty and strength come from communion with God.

In both the cases with which we are dealing these were of a merely material sort. The light on Moses' face and the strength in Samson's arm were, at the highest, but types of something far higher and nobler than themselves. But still, the presence of the one and the departure of the other alike teach us the conditions on which we may possess both in noble form, and the certainty of losing them if we lose hold of God.

Moses' experience teaches us that the loftiest beauty of character comes from communion with God. That is the use that the Apostle makes of this remarkable incident in 2 Cor. iii, where he takes the light that shone from Moses' face as being the symbol of the better lustre that gleams from all those who 'behold (or reflect) the glory of the Lord' with unveiled faces, and, by beholding, are 'changed into the likeness' of that on which they gaze with adoration and longing. The great law to which, almost exclusively, Christianity commits the perfecting of individual character is this: Look at Him till you become like Him, and in beholding, be changed. 'Tell me the company a man keeps, and I will tell you his character,' says the old proverb. And what is true on the lower levels of daily life, that most men become assimilated to the complexion of those around them, especially if they admire or love them, is the great principle whereby worship, which is desire and longing and admiration in the superlative degree, stamps the image of the worshipped upon the character of the worshipper. 'They followed after vanity, and have become vain,' says one of the prophets, gathering up into a sentence the whole philosophy of the degradation of humanity by reason of idolatry and the worship of false gods. 'They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.' The law works upwards as well as downwards, for whom we worship we declare to be infinitely good; whom we worship we long to be like; whom we worship we shall certainly imitate.

Thus, brethren, the practical, plain lesson that comes from this thought is simply this: If you want to be pure and good, n

oble and gentle, sweet and tender; if you desire to be delivered from your own weaknesses and selfish, sinful idiosyncrasies, the way to secure your desire is, 'Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.' Contemplation, which is love and longing, is the parent of all effort that succeeds. Contemplation of God in Christ is the master-key that opens this door, and makes it possible for the lowliest and the foulest amongst us to cherish unpretentious hopes of being like Him 'if we see Him as He is revealed here, and perfectly like Him when yonder we see Him 'as He is.'

There have been in the past, and there are today, thousands of simple souls, shut out by lowliness of position and other circumstances from all the refining and ennobling influences of which the world makes so much, who yet in character and bearing, ay, and sometimes in the very look of their meek faces, are living witnesses how mighty to transform a nature is the power of loving gazing upon Jesus Christ. All of us who have had much to do with Christians of the humbler classes know that. There is no influence to refine and beautify men like that of living near Jesus Christ, and walking in the light of that Beauty which is 'the effulgence of the divine glory and the express image of His Person.'

And in like manner as beauty so strength comes from communion with God and laying hold on Him. We can only think of Samson as a 'saint' in a very modified fashion, and present him as an example in a very limited degree. His dependence upon divine power was rude, and divorced from elevation of character and morality, but howsoever imperfect, fragmentary, and I might almost say to our more trained eyes, grotesque, it looks, yet there was a reality in it; and when the man was faithless to his vow, and allowed the crafty harlot's scissors to shear from his head the token of his consecration, it was because the reality of the consecration, rude and external as that consecration was, both in itself and in its consequences, had passed away from him.

And so we may learn the lesson, taught at once by the flashing face of the lawgiver and the enfeebled force of the hero, that the two poles of perfectness in humanity, so often divorced from one another—beauty and strength—have one common source, and depend for their loftiest position upon the same thing. God possesses both in supremest degree, being the Almighty and the All-fair; and we possess them in limited, but yet possibly progressive, measure, through dependence upon Him. The true force of character, and the true power for work, and every real strength which is not disguised weakness, 'a lath painted to look like iron,' come on condition of our keeping close by God. The Fountain is open for you all; see to it that you resort thither.

Continued:

**Re: BLESSED AND TRAGIC UNCONSCIOUSNESS - posted by pastorfrin, on: 2009/1/25 12:45**

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' . . . Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him.—EXODUS xxxiv. 29.

' . . . And Samson wist not that the Lord had departed from him.—JUDGES xvi. 20.

II. And now the second thought of my text is that the bearer of the radiance is unconscious of it.

'Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone.' In all regions of life, the consummate apex and crowning charm of excellence is unconsciousness of excellence. Whenever a man begins to imagine that he is good, he begins to be bad; and every virtue and beauty of character is robbed of some portion of its attractive fairness when the man who bears it knows, or fancies, that he possesses it. The charm of childhood is its perfect unconsciousness, and the man has to win back the child's heritage, and become 'as a little child,' if he would enter into and dwell in the 'Kingdom of Heaven.' And so in the loftiest region of all, that of the religious life, you may be sure that the more a man is like Christ, the less he knows it; and the better he is, the less he suspects it. The reasons why that is so, point, at the same time, to the ways by which we may attain to this blessed self-oblivion. So let me put just in a word or two some simple, practical thoughts.

Let us, then, try to lose ourselves in Jesus Christ. That way of self-oblivion is emancipation and blessedness and power. It is safe for us to leave all thoughts of our miserable selves behind us, if instead of them we have the thought of that great, sweet, dear Lord, filling mind and heart. A man walking on a tight-rope will be far more likely to fall, if he is looking at his toes, than if he is looking at the point to which he is going. If we fix our eyes on Jesus, then we can safely look, neither to our feet nor to the gulfs; but straight at Him gazing, we shall straight to Him advance. 'Looking off' from ourselves 'unto Jesus' is safe; looking off anywhere else is peril. Seek that self-oblivion which comes from self being swallowed up in the thought of the Lord.

And again, I would say, think constantly and longingly of the unattained. 'Brethren! I count not myself to have apprehended. Endless aspiration and a stinging consciousness of present imperfection are the loftiest states of man here below. The beholders down in the valley, when they look up, may see our figures against the skyline, and fancy us at the summit, but our loftier elevation reveals untrodden heights beyond; and we have only risen so high in order to discern more clearly how much higher we have to rise. Dissatisfaction with the present is the condition of excellence in all pursuits of life, and in the Christian life even more eminently than in all others, because the goal to be attained is in its very nature infinite; and therefore ensures the blessed certainty of continual progress, accompanied here, indeed, with the sting and bite of a sense of imperfection, but one day to be only sweetness, as we think of how much there is yet to be won in addition to the perfection of the present.

So, dear friends, the best way to keep ourselves unconscious of present attainments is to set our faces forward, and to make 'all experience' as 'an arch wherethrough gleams that untraveled world to which we move.' 'Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone.'

The third practical suggestion that I would make is, cultivate a clear sense of your own imperfections. We do not need to try to learn our goodness. That will suggest itself to us only too clearly; but what we do need is to have a very clear sense of our shortcomings and failures, our faults of temper, our faults of desire, our faults in our relations to our fellows, and all the other evils that still buzz and sting and poison our blood. Has not the best of us enough of these to knock all the conceit out of us? A true man will never be so much ashamed of himself as when he is praised, for it will always send him to look into the deep places of his heart, and there will be a swarm of ugly, creeping things under the stones there, if he will only turn them up and look beneath. So let us lose ourselves in Christ, let us set our faces to the unattained future, let us clearly understand our own faults and sins.

III. Thirdly, the strong man made weak is unconscious of his weakness.

I do not mean here to touch at all upon the general thought that, by its very nature, all evil tends to make us insensitive to its presence. Conscience becomes dull by practice of sin and by neglect of conscience, until that which at first was as sensitive as the palm of a little child's hand becomes as if it were 'seared with a hot iron.' The foulness of the atmosphere of a crowded hall is not perceived by the people in it. It needs a man to come in from the outer air to detect it. We can accustom ourselves to any mephitic and poisonous atmosphere, and many of us live in one all our days, and do not know that there is any need of ventilation or that the air is not perfectly sweet. The 'deceitfulness' of sin is its great weapon.

But what I desire to point out is an even sadder thing than that—namely, that Christian people may lose their strength because they let go their hold upon God, and know nothing about it. Spiritual declension, all unconscious of its own existence, is the very history of hundreds of nominal Christians amongst us, and, I dare say, of some of us. The very fact that you do not suppose the statement to have the least application to yourself is perhaps the very sign that it does apply. When the lifeblood is pouring out of a man, he faints before he dies. The swoon of unconsciousness is the condition of some professing Christians. Frost-bitten limbs are quite comfortable, and only tingle when circulation is coming back. I remember a great elm-tree, the pride of an avenue in the south, that had spread its branches for more years than the oldest man could count, and stood, leafy and green. Not until a winter storm came one night and laid it low with a crash did anybody suspect what everybody saw in the morning—that the heart was eaten out of it, and nothing left but a shell of bark. Some Christian people are like that; they manage to grow leaves, and even some fruit, but when the storm comes they will go down, because the heart has been out of their religion for years. 'Samson wist not that the Lord was departed from him.'

And so, brother, because there are so many things that mask the ebbing away of a Christian life, and because our own self-love and habits come in to hide declension, let me earnestly exhort you and myself to watch ourselves very narrowly. Unconsciousness does not mean ignorant presumption or presumptuous ignorance. It is difficult to make an estimate of ourselves by poking into our own sentiments and supposed feelings and convictions, and the estimate is likely to be wrong. There is a better way than that. Two things tell what a man is—one, what he wants, and the other, what he does. As the will is, the man is. Where do the currents of your desires set? If you watch their flow, you may be pretty sure whether your religious life is an ebbing or a rising tide. The other way to ascertain what we are is rigidly to examine and judge what we do. 'Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord.' Actions are the true test of a man. Conduct is the best revelation of character, especially in regard to ourselves. So let us 'watch and be sober'—sober in our estimate of ourselves, and determined to find every lurking evil, and to drag it forth into the light.

Again, let me say, let us ask God to help us. 'Search me, O God! and try me.' We shall never rightly understand what

we are, unless we spread ourselves out before Him and crave that Divine Spirit, who is 'the candle of the Lord,' to be carried ever in our hands into the secret recesses of our sinful hearts. 'Anoint thine eyes with eye salve that thou mayest see,' and get the eye salve by communion with God, who will supply thee a standard by which to try thy poor, stained, ragged righteousness. The collyrium, the eye salve, may be, will be, painful when it is rubbed into the lids, but it will clear the sight; and the first work of Him, whose dearest name is Comforter, is to convince of sin.

And, last of all, let us keep near to Jesus Christ, near enough to Him to feel His touch, to hear His voice, to see His face, and to carry down with us into the valley some radiance on our countenances which may tell even the world, that we have been up where the Light lives and reigns.

'Because thou sayest, I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing, and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye salve, that thou mayest see.'

Alexander Maclaren, Expositions of Holy Scripture