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# "THE WILL OF GOD."

## A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE REV. CHARLES VOYSEY'S SERVICES, ST. GEORGE'S  
HALL, LANGHAM PLACE, AUGUST 16TH,\* 1874, BY

MR. HOPE MONCRIEFF.

The text was taken from Job 13 15., "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him ; but I will maintain my own ways before him."

He said---Perhaps there is no part of the Bible, at least of the Old Testament, which at the present day more engages the attention of thoughtful and feeling men, than the book of Job. An intense dramatic poem, an undoubted fragment of antiquity, a true picture of human life, a bold attempt to grapple with the greatest of problems, an anticipation of the main speculation of all philosophies, it appeals with equal force to our profoundest thoughts and to our keenest sympathies, annihilating for us time and space, lighting up the far past, as it were, with an electric flash, and showing us how on these Eastern plains the same souls were struggling with the same sorrows that haunt the dwellings of our own prosaic prosperity.

There is a time of life when such a book has little meaning for most of us, and we fasten rather on the words of promise and the hymns of praise, which form a much larger portion of the sacred literature of the world's childhood. In youth we are told most likely that religion will make us happy and prosperous, and while the sanguine temper of youth remains with us, we may think it is so, seeing all things in its rosy light and caring little to dwell on the sterner features of life. By and bye the sky grows duller, the wind colder, and, as the storms of fate burst fiercely upon us, no longer like April showers that pass away and leave the sunshine more sweet, we look round for help and shelter, and begin to understand how life is a pilgrimage, and to ask if anywhere we have an abiding city.

I am not speaking so much of petty selfish cares, as of the common sorrows that reveal themselves to generous natures, though to few of us are these sorrows more than dim and

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distant shadows, till our own eyes have been purified by tears. We see the lot of man, how he is born to trouble, how he is cut down like grass, how his strength is but labour and sorrow, how his beauty vanisheth like a dream. We see how one spends his days in wealth, yet in a moment goes down to the grave; how another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with pleasure. When we are young the wicked flourish before us and leave their substance to their babes; and before we are old we see the righteous forsaken and his seed begging bread. The prayers of young and old seem to vanish into the silent air. The shadows of the everlasting hills fall upon our graves; the stars shine down pitiless upon our woes; the sun mocks our short-lived toil, and all we, great and small, are swallowed up into the darkness and return no more. Where shall we find peace for the living and hope for the dead? How can we rest till we know if there be aught in which we may trust?

Such thoughts must come to every man, and come in the more terrible shapes, in proportion as he is brave and clear-seeing and tender of heart. And as our souls have been nourished on the sickly sweets with which popular religions too often tempt their votaries from the narrow path of truth, so now the sweets will turn to bitterness, and with fiercer despair we will cry out against our nature and question the righteousness of God.

This is said to be a sad age, as how should it not be, when men perhaps never before so clearly have realized the evils of existence? Our greatest living novelist is recognized as a true representative of her times, painting life as she finds it, and despising the tinsel with which inferior artists think it necessary to hide the blots and inequalities of nature. Minds most in harmony with the spirit of our age no longer relish the boisterous laugh of Fielding or the complacent smile of Richardson. Those who find in life nothing but matter and phenomena, equally with those who see the working of a Power which perhaps their awe-bound tongues can scarcely name, find something far other than amusement in stedfastly regarding the light and shadows that mingle into such mystic forms. So we turn with new interest to writings like the book of Job; and the same feeling is probably the explanation of a great development of that form of belief which centres round one who was a man of sorrows, oppressed and afflicted through sin.

This temper is partly, no doubt, the natural reaction from that of a former generation, too confident that Providence was at last beginning to abolish the conditions of existence, too proud in its increase of comfort and knowledge and virtue. But so far from its being caused by any want of religious feeling, as has also been said, this sadness of its reflective moods, amid its material prosperity and profusion of pleasures, is one of the most hopeful signs of our age. Far greater would be the danger, if it rejoiced to gain these worldly things, and feared not to lose its own soul!

The truth is that religion does not give what we call happiness. The common jewels of the world can be bought cheap, but if we wish to buy the pearl of great price, we must sell all that we have. Indeed, we too often care not to seek treasure in heaven till we have been beggared of our earthly riches.

"There is no God, the foolish saith,  
But none, there is no sorrow ;  
And nature oft the prayer of faith  
In utmost need must borrow.  
Eyes that the preacher hath not schooled  
By wayside graves are raised,  
And lips say, *God be pitiful,*  
That ne'er said, *God be praised.*"

The first step on the road of Salvation is to feel our need of it. The path is rough and thorny, and often we are like to faint by the way. The rest and the joy which we have been promised seem ever further from our reach. If faith were not strengthened by toil, we should be fain to throw away our burden, and turn back to the ignoble ease from which God's spirit called us forth into the wilderness. There is a sense in which we must die to life, if we would be born again. The kings and princes of the earth sit down to banquets of wine, but the prophets of God mourn in solitude for the sins of the people. Few are able to drink of the cup of God's anointed, or to be baptized with the baptism of the noblest sons of man. If any will come after me, says such a one, let him take up his cross and follow me.

So surely this sadness is no unhopeful sign in an age which has many goods laid up, and might well be tempted to eat and drink and make merry. I say unhesitatingly that it is not an utterly selfish age, and that the deepest roots of our sadness are not in our own sins and sorrows. Well says a great author, that no wise man can enjoy the feast of life

unless he sit at it blindfold. And now the spirit of God is opening our eyes so that we can no longer be so insensible as in times past to the welfare of our fellow creatures. We see more plainly the far-reaching consequences of sin, and the sufferings by which it must be atoned, how there is no salvation without shedding the richest blood and the bitterest tears. Less absorbed in the symptoms of our own maladies, we feel more intensely the world-long pangs that rend our common nature, and we yearn with a greater desire that all flesh may be made whole. We find less pleasure and comfort in our warm and well lighted temples, when we think of the millions who live and die without in spiritual cold and darkness. We take no joy in a God whom we cannot believe to be the loving Father of all ; and when so many of His children are wandering and perishing so far off, we may well sorrow among the riches which we possess so thanklessly and use so idly. How can we help being sad, if we have eyes to see and hearts to feel for the evils which have driven so many tender souls to the madness of disbelief and despair ?

When I speak of the spirit of the age, I speak of its higher development of moral sense. Far more irreligious is another tendency of the present day, which is perhaps oftener identified with what is taken for a religious spirit, and which manifests itself in a spurious joy and a baseless satisfaction. There is also among us a strong disposition to varnish over the stern side of God's dealings with man, so as to make religion pleasant and easy as far as possible. There is a disinclination to say that two and two make four, when it would be so much nicer if they would make five. A taste for pretty sentiments and neat dogmas, prevails in certain circles of the religious world. We see people, perhaps we feel ourselves, trying to soothe the pangs of natural doubt by spiritual anodynes which in time must be the death of the soul. We fawn upon heaven, as it were, and pretend to be thankful for dispensations against which we secretly rebel. The chaos of disjointed reasoning and foundationless conviction into which most of our churches have fallen, is permeated by a certain sentiment of luke-warm good-nature, half selfish and half friendly, which cannot fail to have a dissolving effect on whatever sound principles of belief may be left. There is already among some sects a competition as to which will supply religion cheapest, giving the greatest feeling of security and moral elevation for the smallest price of contrition and self-sacrifice. But such

bargains cannot be sound. In nature, as 'in honest trade, we get the worth of what we give, neither more nor less. It is all very well for the mean soul that knows not the cravings of heavenly hunger, yet is not unwilling to patronize a fashionable and inexpensive luxury, and thinks to make the best of both worlds, by purchasing the countless riches of the one with a poor tithe of our beloved gold. But the truly awakened heart cannot be satisfied thus. It will give the whole world to gain the truth, whether the truth be agreeable or no. Its meat and drink is to do God's will; its labour to learn His ways. It is at once humble towards heaven and upright towards itself. It bows before God, but for very reverence, will not do violence to the reason and conscience which bear witness of Him. Such a spirit may trouble the brightness of the idle hours of life; but only such a spirit is blessed in struggling with the secrets of the darkness.

This careless way of looking at evil is generally the mark of a slavish temper, in which light-hearted buffoonery alternates with abject crouching before a cruel power. See how our sectarian religionists try to propitiate their Maker by falsehoods against the moral nature which He has placed in them, and no less labour to silence the higher promptings of that nature by the pursuit of pleasures which are only the more deadly when they take the form of religious excitement. Compare this spirit with that in which Job met his troubles. No blinking at the sad realities of life; in such a case as his, we cannot shut our eyes and say peace when there is no peace, and talk of light when all around us is darkness. Yet no craven whining, no unmanly humility. He acknowledged the power of the Almighty, but he would maintain his ways before Him. He durst not commit moral suicide. He knew that only the soul which reverences itself can reverence its Maker. He only asked to see Him and to learn the ways of His love; against all seeming he would trust that God was not more cruel than himself. "Will he plead against me with his great power? No; but he would put strength in me." Thus spoke Job in the confidence of his own human righteousness, and this true faith was blessed, so that he could say, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee."

Remember how dark to this man was the world beyond the grave. Only in momentary flashes inspiration, if at all, was it lit up for him. I have been treating this book as an

English poem; but the meaning of the original is often obscure and the received rendering of some of the best known passages is more than questionable; our text, for example, probably owes the nobleness of its sentiment mainly to the translator, and the celebrated verse "I know that my Redeemer liveth," has no more authority from the Hebrew than "Search ye the Scriptures" has from the Greek. Think, then, of the faith which so lifted up its hands in the darkness and sought to feel the everlasting arms. Think, too, of these heathen men of old, to whom Heaven had not spoken so clearly as to us, who enjoyed this earthly life with a keenness which we can scarcely realize, but who may yet put us to shame by the courage with which they faced whatever they knew of doubt and dread, finding in this courage some dim hint of the divine strength. Think of the philosophers who strove to ascend into the highest heaven, as well as to descend into the deeper hell of nature, and were not seldom rewarded by glimpses of the unknown God. Think of the poets who brought the direst forces of life upon the stage, and, tracing sin and suffering as far as man's eye can reach, heard notes of triumph mingling in the funeral hymns. Does the half unconscious faith of these men not rebuke us in our too common moods of sluggish ease, which avenging nature so surely alternates with fever fits of unrest and long hours of hopeless despondency!

Have we no hopes which were hid from these men? The elevation of our moral vision, our new yearning to see God revealed as a faithful Creator, the more unselfish prayers with which we entreat Him that all the world may be saved—what are these but pledges of our salvation. As Job's own integrity was to him the guarantee of God's justice, so our pity may give us good assurance of his infinite mercy. Because we love, He must love, as because He lives, we shall live also. What though God's face seem to be hidden from us; what though we feel the power of the enemies of mankind, our trial is a triumph if we have still strength to bless the name of Him who afflicts us, and by our struggling faith do bear witness to His nature, in whose image we are made!

If we could only have faith! If we could only give up these anxieties as to our fate and commit ourselves into the hands of God, trusting that the Maker and Judge and Father of all the earth will do right to every soul that he has created. I do not speak of that selfish stunted faith which

declares it will be well with us, though not with others, and would explain away the horrors of such a creed by suggesting that love and justice mean one thing on earth and another in Heaven. To me this makes the riddle of life only more dark and more cruel. It kills my last hope. It mocks all my desires. I know nothing of goodness except through God, and nothing of God except through man's goodness. And I am amazed—even though it was once my own case—at the language of those men, who tell us that salvation is only promised to a part or a minority of mankind, and almost in the same breath exhort us to praise the name of the Lord who has so willed it, and to rejoice and be glad in His works. Far more natural and more noble the mood in which, like Job, we desire to reason with the Almighty, and would speak even to God of the miseries which He suffers to endure.

I hope, on another occasion, to make it abundantly clear that I am not advocating asceticism or putting spiritual megrims in place of true health. I am simply dwelling on the serious facts of life, and reminding you that there can be no solid comfort for us till we have looked them in the face and seen the worst of them. Deep and dark are the shadows that fall ever across our most sunny paths. Careless jester and cold cynic have in vain tried to laugh or sneer them away; scarcely less in vain have heathen philosopher and Christian saint striven to tear down the veil that wraps the eternal will of God. When all words of hope and comfort are spoken, there remains a trial and a mystery, before which the best and the wisest may well shrink and tremble. There are moments in all our lives when the flesh seems to fail us, and there appears no help for our need. No words of ours can dry the widow's tears or bring back the father's first-born dead. Only time heals such wounds—time and God's mercy; is it no other than His mercy which opens them afresh?

I cannot explain this mystery to you—I speak as for myself because I can speak no otherwise. Each one must wrestle for himself with God's power, who would learn the secrets of His will. Each one must bear his own burden to the shore of the dark river beyond which we think to hear snatches of the angels' songs, and in dreams to see the spotless streets of our Father's home. But this, at least, we may all see and take courage—that the Lord loves whom he chastens; and that He gives no richer gift to man than this sorrow which drives us to our knees.

Do you see that mountain side where green vineyards seem to mirror back the glad sunshine? Once, there, the red lava rolled in scorching torrents, and the smoke of destruction hid all the heaven with clouds of terror. Then came long years of silence and desolation, when we trod on crumbling ashes and colourless fields of dust. But nature put forth her healing power and blessed that which was barren, so that now all is fairer than before, and trees good for the food of man take deep root and find rich sustenance in this troubled soil, and sweet flowers smile in the crannies that once poured forth such foul flames and such bitter streams.

Even so, are God's ways not like man's ways. He gives sorrow in love, and in mercy He denies us joy. The fiercest storms which he sends on earth leave the seeds of peace and plenty behind. The heartless, the careless, the dwellers at ease, cry out in woeful agony when these storms burst upon them, and curse God among their ruined pleasures, and scattered riches. But the most weather-beaten souls are of good courage, for they tell us that the nearer they come to the darkness, the surer they are that the light of love is behind it, that from the deepest sorrow they are borne to the highest heights of faith; that when human health fails them, and tears drown the voice of human strength, then they are most enabled to praise the will of Eternal Goodness and to trust in Him, even at the gates of death.