

III

Man Versus Nature

The Enmity of Nature

WE have concluded that resistance to the onslaughts of Satan is not merely permissible. It is commanded.

We will now take up the next question, a slightly more complicated one: What should our attitude be toward the troubles which come upon us from natural sources—the sicknesses, the suffering, the destruction, the common daily reverses as well as the great and sudden calamities? Should we meekly accept them and surrender to their power over us? Or is it God's will that we resist them in His Name, and defend ourselves against them?

First of all let us once again confess, humbly and devoutly, that "nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father"—a confession which includes the everyday occurrences as well as the extraordinary, a confession which asserts positively and unquestionably that everything is in God's hand and that without His will the powers of nature cannot so much as stir.

God is God. Let us ever *keep* Him God in our thoughts and considerations. All the devotion and all the true piety of our confession is based upon the exalted concept that God is *absolutely* God. We *dare* to believe that. He has counted us worthy to uphold that supreme teaching of His Word.

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Clearly, that confession negates all possibility of separating daily common hardships from great calamities, as if the first came upon us by chance and only the latter were "providential" or God-sent.

Whatever threat or danger or destruction may come upon us from nature, we must accept it as coming from God, directed toward us and inflicted upon us by Him. There cannot be any exception, not even the smallest.

Recall once more what happened immediately after the Fall.

The Lord told Adam and Eve plainly that nature would from then on be a fearful power, an enemy, even an enemy unto death.

When God made man, He crowned him lord of creation, ruler of all nature. "Replenish the earth, and subdue it!" With that injunction man was given authority to discover earth's hidden riches and use them and control them. He was given dominion over all.

But how tragically different that becomes after the Fall! Earth is now commanded to bring forth thorns and thistles for man, to refuse him its fruits, to make man wrestle for his daily bread, and finally, when man is worn and weary of the struggle, to conquer him and return him to dust. Nature henceforth the conqueror! All of that is implied in God's word to Adam: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return." And there is an added poignancy in His word to the woman,

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“I will greatly multiply thy pain and thy conception; in pain thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee/”

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There are two truths implied in this curse upon the earth for man’s sake. The first is this, that neither man nor woman can escape suffering. It is unavoidable. Any attempt to build about ourselves an imaginary paradise from which all sorrow has been charmed away is self-deception, and is also contrary to the will of God. For He has ordained that man shall suffer.

And the second is equally evident—man must not merely resign himself to his fate. He is rather called upon to be the more active, to struggle valiantly against the powers that would destroy him.

Man might be inclined to think: “Since I have to die some day and return to dust, it may as well be now. Why should I struggle with these thorns and thistles? Why should I sow and labor for a harvest? I shall simply let myself starve to death.” But God commands him to work, to labor, to battle with nature, to wrest from the earth the food it no longer gives willingly to nurture his life and prolong it. And the woman may not say, “I will escape the sorrow and pain; I will not bear children!” For though nature will resist the coming of new life, making childbirth difficult and painful, woman is called to wrest that new life from nature, be it with pain and agony.

The man and woman who bravely and courageously take up the struggle against the earth which would withhold its life-giving food and against the womb which would withhold the new life stirring within it, they are comforted with the

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assurance of God's blessing. But the lazy man who refuses to labor, and the weakling woman who refuses to accept her lot of suffering, forfeit that blessing.

The struggle against nature, then, is not a struggle to escape pain and suffering or to banish suffering from one's life. But it is a struggle in holy faith, knowing that we *cannot* escape suffering, that it *must* be our lot, and also knowing that through suffering the glory of God will shine more resplendently in the lives of men.

Resisting Nature's Enmity

There is an almost unquenchable longing in man's being to avoid pain; we instinctively yearn to banish suffering from the earth, if possible.

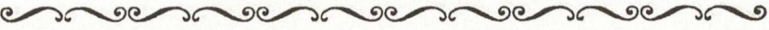
But that tendency of the human heart is sinful. It is as if man thought himself worthy of all good, as if sorrow and trouble were an offence against his innocence.

Consequently suffering does not move man to prayer, but incites to anger, to a fist-shaking attitude of "I'll conquer nature! I'll not let her master me!" Then every new medical discovery is hailed as a new weapon against the supremacy of nature. And when at last men must admit that, after all, death is inescapable, they hold up their proud heads, making a vain glory of death. "A final, wonderful, blessed experience!"

That, they think, is far more heroic than the Christian's cry of rejoicing, "O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory?"

By nature man resents pain and trouble. It angers him. He protests that it is unfair, and he does all in his power to keep it out of his life. And when it nevertheless enters, he

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is disillusioned. He becomes depressed and pessimistic. He may grit his teeth and bear it in stoical silence. Perhaps he tries to laugh it off. Or he feigns a certain satisfaction in endurance and a glorying in death.

To think and act so is to murmur against God.

The Word of God gives not the slightest ground for resentment against sickness and trouble. And by God's grace His people feel a strong aversion to that attitude. Oh, there may be moments when we, too, feel bitter because of the suffering that falls to our lot. Which of us does not at times fail? But the Holy Spirit within us witnesses against the momentary protest, and we are displeased with ourselves because of it.

Suffering is not escapable. We cannot banish it from our lives. That is beyond the power of man. We build dikes, tunnels, and dams; we invent telegraph and radio. But this is not a conquering of nature, nor does man thereby *prove how great he is*. Let a little volcanic tremor shake the earth, and where, O man, is your vaunted strength?

Man's conquest of nature rather consists in this, that when nature strives to undermine our efforts, to crush our hopes, to plunge us into misery and suffering, to return man to dust, then the Spirit of God within us spurs us on, gives us courage, hope and true heroism. He does not let us grow weary and faint and despairing. He strengthens us in and through that very suffering, that we may show before men and angels and demons how unconquerable is the man whose faith is in God. "Have faith as a mustard seed, and you shall bid the mountains remove into the sea."

It is indeed God's will that man shall wrestle against nature, and shall wrest a living from nature.

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In the many everyday little things we are constantly doing just that—in weeding our garden, in clothing ourselves, in averting death by means of food and drink and the general care of our bodies, until God Himself shall lay us in the dust.

In Old Testament days God taught His people many rules of clothing and cleanliness. Cleanliness is nothing less than another form of resistance to nature, a washing away of the soil and stain that tends to drag us to earth and infect us with disease.

God Himself commanded Noah to build the ark in preparation against the coming flood. And the rest of mankind was lost in the flood because they would not believe, and therefore would not avail themselves of the means of escape.

The Scriptures speak again and again of shelter in the time of storm, and protection against the raging elements. The seeking of such shelter is not condemned; instead, it is frequently mentioned as a symbol of man's seeking safety with God. Against the burning summer sun we seek shade, and when the blighting winter frosts come we make ourselves comfortable in our homes with fires and blankets.

Providing against future needs is as much a part of the struggle. And so are preventive measures. The Israelites were bidden to fence their roofs and stairways lest anyone fall. They dug pools on Zion's hills to preserve water for times of drought. And Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy corn from strangers in the time of famine.

Nowhere in Scripture do we find passive submission commended or recommended. Rather, there is a stimulation to put forth all our strength, to strive courageously against the destructive forces of nature, to protect life, to seek safety, to take preventative measures against trouble that is coming, or

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avert it if possible. Noah provided food for himself and for the animals in the ark. David defended himself and his flock against bear and lion, heroically fighting both.

And in regard to sickness, the Bible teaches the same preventative and protective attitude.

One of the most dreadful diseases among Israel was leprosy. The Lord did not let this dreadful scourge reign unchecked among His people. He gave detailed commands for diagnosis, treatment, isolation and disinfection.

When Israel was still in the wilderness, there were already apothecaries who made healing ointments. There was even an apothecaries' guild in Jerusalem. Hezekiah was treated with figs at the command of God. Jesus Himself said, "Those who are ill need a physician"—which clearly indicates that the skill of a physician is a gift of God's mercy. Luke, the evangelist-physician, whose pen has given us the beautiful details of the mysteries of Christ's birth, has hallowed the medical profession by appearing in the book of God as one of His special servants.

It is without doubt, then, that the herbs, many of them even poisonous, were intended for man's use against sickness. This implies that it is our duty to fight the ravages of diseases. There can be no other conclusion than this: God wills that we shall struggle, with the courage of faith and the strength of prayer, against every natural force that threatens health and life.

Epidemics and plagues are not excluded. Famine, too, is a scourge of God, and with pestilence frequently an aftermath of war. But Joseph was brought to Egypt, under the gracious provision of God, to prepare corn for the famine years. Prevention and precaution are not excluded, but included in the struggle against the enmity of nature.

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We may and must conclude that in general the afflictions which come upon us from nature, as well as those which Satan brings upon us, have one purpose—they are sent *in order that* we shall defend ourselves and protect our dear ones, in order that as we thus struggle on with courage, with zeal, heroically, we may through it all reveal the depth and the strength of our faith.

But the Word of God condemns unconditionally all seeking of medical help which excludes a seeking of the Lord, all use of preventatives and cures which disregards God, which fails to acknowledge Him as the giver of both the remedy and the wisdom to apply it. He who struggles against sickness and suffering without humbling himself in prayer and supplication before God, brings upon himself the curse of God. Not only the curse of Eden but a second curse comes upon the man who in foolish pride believes himself wise enough and strong enough and great enough to harness and subdue and control nature.

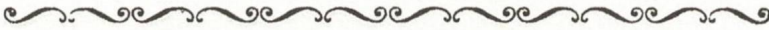
God's people have always protested against such godlessness, and they must continue to do so.

For the most meekly submissive Christian when he refuses medical aid because of true devotion to God, though he lacks understanding and is narrow in his conceptions, is nevertheless wiser and nobler than the man who, deeming himself too learned to believe in God, takes his medicine with the thought, *"I shall conquer this sickness!"*

No, we are not masters. We are creatures, wholly dependent, small, weak and helpless. All that we do is sin except it be done in faith.

In faith I put a lightning rod on my house; and when it catches the lightning from God's storm-clouds, to lead it

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away harmless, I thank God that I and my dear ones have escaped the danger. But without faith I have no surety. I cannot trust a ferry to carry me safely across the river, for God can cause a disaster which plunges me and my dear ones into death.

It is the will of God that, trusting Him, we protect our lives and the lives of our dear ones from all danger. He who fails to do what he can to rescue life is guilty of murder. He who neglects his own health or does not protect himself with the remedies which God provides, becomes guilty of suicide.