

TO BE NEAR UNTO GOD

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“IT IS GOOD FOR ME TO BE NEAR
UNTO GOD.”

When in holy ecstasy the Psalmist sings: “I love the Lord, because He hath heard my voice and my supplication,” he pours out his whole soul in his song, but the love can not be analyzed. To have love for God is a different and a much weaker thing than to be able to say: “I love God.” There is love for native land, for the beauties of nature and for the creations of art. From tenderness of heart we have love for suffering humanity. We are attracted by things that are pure, true and of good report. And along this line of thought almost every honest soul can say that he has love for God, and that this love exceeds all other loves. Because from him and through him all loveable things are, and He is the highest good.

Love for God may be fine sentiment. It may be sincere and capable of inspiring holy enthusiasm, while the soul is still a stranger to fellowship with the eternal, and ignorant of the secret walk with God. The great God may still not be your God. Your heart may still not be attuned to the passionate outburst of delight: I love the Lord. For love of God in general is so largely love for the idea of God, love for the Fountain of life, the Source of all good, the Watcher of Israel who never slumbers; in brief, love for him who, whatever else changes, abides the same eternally.

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But when the heart can say: I love the Lord, the idea of the Eternal becomes personified. Then God becomes the Shepherd who leads us, the Father who spiritually begat us, the covenant-God to whom we sustain the covenant relation, the Friend who offers us friendship, the Lord whom we serve, the God of our trust, who is no longer merely God, but our God.

For many years we may have had love for God in general and never have known him. He is only known when love for him takes on a personal character; when we meet him in the pathway of life; when He becomes a person in contrast with our own; when we enter into conscious, vital and personal relation with him, so that He is our Father and we his children; not merely one of his children, but his child in a special way, in a personal relation different from that of his other children, even the closest relation conceivable in heaven and on earth; He, our Father, our shepherd, our bosom-friend and our God.

He who has not entered into this can not understand it. It extends farther than his reach. If, however, he is religiously inclined, he soon realizes, on hearing about it, that if he might have this love, it would be sweeter than that of which he is now conscious. It makes him feel that he lacks something and so may arouse in him a desire for it. It may make him crave what would be so beautiful to possess. This craving may prepare him for better things. If there is to be contact with God, it proceeds from both sides. God draws near to us, and we to him. First afar off, then closer by, until distance falls away and we meet each other. The blessedness of this moment can

never be told in words. We then come near unto God, and this comprises all the blessedness of believing.

He who has not learned this secret may say with his lips: It is good for me to hold me fast by God (Ps. 73:27 Prayer-Book version), but he can not grasp it. So he passes it by as though it meant in general a pious frame of mind apart from feeling the burning within of the spark of true personal love. He worships God, he prays for grace, but has no genuine love. But "To Be Near Unto God" means such nearness to God as to see him with the eyes, to be aware of his presence in the heart, to hear him with the ear, and to have every barrier removed that thus far kept him aloof. "To Be Near Unto God" means to be near him in one of two ways: either to feel as though we were caught up into heaven, or as though God had come down to us in our loneliness, sorrow or joy. The very word "near" implies that there is much that separates us from God, and makes us solitary. When God is far away from us and we from him, it makes us desolate. It also implies that we are not contented; that we can not endure it; that our whole heart goes out after him, and will not rest until the last barrier is removed. For only when God is near unto us and we are near unto him is there blessedness again, which nothing can exceed, since it is unspeakably good "To Be Near Unto God." This exceeding blessedness can only be enjoyed at rare moments here, but in the life to come it shall endure. For in the Father's house above, we shall be near unto God forever and forever.

The world ruthlessly crosses our efforts along

this line. Though it was not right, and never can be, we understand what went on in the heart of those who sought escape from the world, in cell or hermitage, for the sake of unbroken fellowship with God. It might have been efficacious, if in withdrawing from the world they had been able to leave the world behind. But we carry it in our heart. Wherever we go it goes with us. There are no monastic walls so thick, or places in forests so distant, but Satan has means to reach them. To shut oneself out from the world moreover, for the sake of a closer walk with God, is to seek on earth what can only be our portion in heaven. We may escape many things in doing it. The eye may no more see much vanity. But existence becomes abnormal. Life becomes narrow. Human nature is reduced to small dimensions. There is no imperative task on hand, no calling in life, no exertion of all one's powers. Conflict is avoided. Victory tarries.

But "To Be Near Unto God" in the midst of busy avocations yields its sweetest blessedness when it is cultivated in the face of sin and the world, as an oasis in the desert of life. And they whom the world has tried in most cruel ways to draw away from God have achieved highest honors and blessings. In spite of obstacles and worldly opposition they continued to have trysts with God, Jacob at Peniel, Moses in Horeb, David when Shimei cursed him, Paul when the people rose in uproar against him. In the heat of conflict "To Be Near Unto God" is blessed.

And apart from conflict with the world, the flesh and the devil, when clouds of adversity gather overhead, when the heart bleeds with wound upon

wound, when the fig tree does not blossom, and the vine will yield no fruit, then with Habakkuk to rejoice in the Lord, because His blessed presence is more enjoyed in adversity than in seasons of material prosperity,—this is the lesson of history in all ages.

But the ways of the world are cruel. Its cruelties have assumed finer forms, but this refinement has made them more intolerable. In former days there was much that reminded people of the sanctities of life, that made them think of higher things, and kept eternity before their eyes. All this is mostly gone. In the busy life of the world today there is little to keep in memory the things that are holy and eternal. In public life all thought of God is ignored. In some places church-bells are no more rung. Few days of prayer are appointed. God's name is no more spoken. No *memento mori* any more reminds us of death. Cemeteries are turned into parks. Sacred things are scorned. That which in private conversation and in the public press gives tone to theories is the delusion that heaven reaches no higher than the stars, that death ends all, that life without God is more apt to bring prosperity than life in the fear of the Lord. The habit of doing without God in public life puts itself as a stream between God and the God-fearing soul. To hold fast by God, against the current of this stream, takes strong faith.

This modern cruelty of the world offers special dangers to our young people and children. But let us have courage. All things are known to God. In tender compassion He will draw near to us, and to our dear ones, that we and they may be near

unto him. But in that case, satisfaction with half measures must not be tolerated. If we do, vague love for a far-away God will more than ever fail us. The free and untrammelled life, that joyfully proclaims: I love the Lord, alone can save. For it does not remain standing afar off, but seeks access to the immediate presence of God, in personal contact of soul with the Eternal.

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“THE SOULS WHICH I HAVE MADE.”

There is a peculiar charm about the thing which we have made. Not because of any intrinsic value it may have, but just because we have made it. The new beginner at the art of portrait-painting, who practices his art by copying celebrated originals, will think more of his own copy than of the more excellent original. Flowers which the young lad plucks from his own little garden are much more interesting to him than the bouquet from the florist. The country gentleman prefers vegetables from his own grounds or hothouse, even if less fine, to the produce imported from abroad. He who writes for the press deems his own article, published in some monthly or quarterly, the best of the edition. This holds good in every department of life. Produce raised ourselves interests us greatly. Cattle bred on our own stock farm is preferred to any other. We are more happy in the house which we have built.

Of course, this implies some self-complacency, which especially in youth is apt to breed conceit. We grant that preference for our own work can go too far, as when from sheer egotism it makes us