

Reverence before the Almighty has always proved itself most deep and most true with those who stand nearest to the Lord. While on the other hand they who have never entered into secret fellowship with God, have become more and more devoid of all salutary fear, awe and reverence before the Lord our God. In many cases they even profane his Holiness by reckless and thoughtless use of his Name as an expletive.

It is grace, and grace alone, that the High and Lofty One takes his finite creature into his confidence, enters into secret fellowship with him, admits him into his tent and visits him in his heart. And they alone enjoy the delight of this sacred privilege, who receive it in a thankful and worshipful spirit. They have the promise that they will be translated one day from this earthly into the heavenly state, in order that in the high and lofty Fatherhouse of God, they may dwell forever with the Lord.

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“BEFORE I WAS AFFLICTED I  
WENT ASTRAY.”

There is also an entirely personal knowledge of God which comes to us through the ebb and flood tides of sorrow and of joy. But this must not be exaggerated. The idea that disappointment and sorrow as a rule open the soul to God, and that suffering always makes perfect, is loudly contradicted by experience. Undoubtedly great disasters, which strike heavily and suddenly, such as pestilence, storms that threaten shipwreck, destructive earthquakes, danger of death in sudden illness, remind the thoughtless for a

moment, that there is a God with whom we have to do. But as soon as the danger is past, it takes but a little while for the faint impression to wear away. After a deliverance from pestilence, for instance, unblushing worldliness has frequently shown itself more godless than before. Everything was all right again. One was almost ashamed that at heart he had been afraid. But now one was master of himself again, and would improve his chance to enjoy life, before the possible return of similar ill luck. Or where they did not take so wide a swing as this, and dissipation was carefully avoided, the return after disaster to old-time self-sufficiency was almost systematic, and life was lived again, if not directly *opposed to, yet without, God.*

And this was not always the worst. Great adversities have frequently led souls, that shared a general belief, into atheism. It was firmly held, that if in the hour of need God were but invoked, deliverance was sure. At the sickbed of husband or child the prayer arose: O, God, save them. But when this prayer evidently brought no relief, and inexorable death dragged the loved one into the grave, the whole soul rose up in rebellion. If, prayer brings no help in distress, there is no God. Or if there is a God, he can be no God of love, and in bitterness of soul life is lived in rebellion against God.

Suffering truly makes perfect, but only when grace is known in the heart, and not with the unregenerate child of the world. In sooth, suffering can be a means in the hand of God to bring a wanderer to a stand, and to conversion, but

even then conversion is effected by the work of Divine grace in the soul, and suffering in connection with this is merely an accidental means of aid. As Job sat among the ashes his wife did not hesitate to say to him; "Curse God, and die," And it is only the soul, which like that of the Psalmist, is a subject of heavenly grace, that is able, after deliverance from trouble, to confess before God: "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now, being instructed, I keep thy word" (Ps. 119:67).

In joyous and prosperous times conditions are still worse. As a rule they who live at ease are farther estranged from God, than they who have to work for daily bread. The sharply drawn antithesis between the rich man and poor Lazarus has been verified in all ages and among all peoples. Radiant beauty, abounding health, unbroken prosperity in one's career or business, great happiness at home, abundance of material wealth, so that care and trouble were unknown, have almost never seemed able to foster true godliness. They rather fortified a man in his self-sufficiency, in the high estimate of his own self, and drew the soul away from God, rather than that by them the soul felt itself drawn toward him. Such has been the case with individual persons, with whole families and nations. When there was peace, and national power grew so that the people revelled in wealth, they went with equal pace almost always spiritually backwards. When the Dutch had to fight hard and long for spiritual liberty, religion and public morals stood high. But when in the 18th century gold streamed in from every side, and wealth became the law of

life, the nation became decadent. The mighty world-empire of Rome fared the same way. Sobriety and restraint made it great, until luxury and love of pleasure began from within, what barbaric invasions from without brought to a finish. Even of South Africa it may be asked, if the gold from its mines which suddenly cast treasures into the laps of the people, did not hasten its present estate.

There have been persons, families, and whole generations, which from gratitude for material blessings became more tenderly united to God. But this was only because grace preceded and accompanied prosperity. Solomon remains the historic type of how even with God's children prosperity can work a spiritual decline. They are strong legs that can carry wealth, says the proverb. And the exception is rare in which Satan does not succeed in the abuse of our prosperity against him from whom it comes.

In joy and sorrow both however most helpful means are offered to obtain deeper knowledge of God; negatively in joy, positively in sorrow. When in examining his ways the child of God discerns that in days of joy and plenty he incurs the risk of becoming mechanical in prayer, of fostering pride, of building more confidence on himself than on God, and of being less persistent in his secret communion with God, it will turn, if he is sincere, the trend of his mind and heart. As strongly as his heart inclined before at times towards the goods of this world, he will now begin to be afraid of them. It becomes clear to him that God and worldly wealth do not agree, but rather antagonize each other. He feels that wealth

itself is not at fault, for there was wealth in Paradise, and there is nothing but wealth in the Fatherhouse above, but that sin in our heart poisons our wealth, and creates a power that is hostile to God.

In this way God becomes more spiritual to him, and in God, who is a spirit, he learns by contrast to understand better than before the price, the significance and the worth of the treasure of the spiritual life. There have been men and women among the saints of God who in the midst of wealth have become richer in God, and have been merely stewards of the goods entrusted to their care in his Name, for the good of his church and of his poor. The impulse to do good sprang not infrequently from the fear, lest their wealth should draw them away from God.

But greater is the knowledge of God which is learned in times of deep sorrow, when there was previous spiritual knowledge of God in the heart. Grievous affliction breaks the highness of self. It makes us realize that there are powers over which we have no control, and which can violently attack our strength, our lot in life, our family, our prospects of the future, and the loves of our heart. We may call these powers death, sickness, slander, anger, hatred, or what we like. But when they come upon us, and succeed in threatening or in breaking up our happiness, we feel that they stand before us as powers in hostile array, that they are independent of us, and that they have far more power over us than we over them. And this revelation of power is a revelation of the real power, which God has over us and over the world.

As long as life runs a smooth course we know

about God, we worship him, and his spiritual power is felt in the inner life of the soul. But it is an altogether different matter when the power of God is seen in the material, outward life. For it is in this that affliction makes a breach. It breaks it, and you see and feel and handle the power, that comes into the life from without, working havoc and distress. There is no power with us to face it. And in our powerlessness we discover that there is real power in God alone, which great and strong is able to bring deliverance, and to repulse the evil that is arrayed against us.

Thus life becomes an arena in which these destructive powers work against us and our God, and the saving power of God enters into the combat on our side. At first we continue to take part ourselves, but when it becomes most fierce, we are incapacitated, at length we become altogether passive, and we feel and perceive that God and his angels fight for our salvation. When they are snares of sin, by which Satan seeks to foil us, this conflict is most exalted, most holy. In the end we feel that all the angels and all the devils watch intently to see, what will gain the day in the soul; the power of sin or the power of God.

This conflict may also bear an exalted character with sorrow in the outward life, as by means of new affliction Satan seeks to do us harm, and when in the end, by God's help, we may sing of victory. For by this very struggle the soul learns to understand more fully than ever before, that in the thing which Satan brings upon us, the appointment of God's love is carried out; that it

is the purifying process of the melting-pot; the separating process of the winnowing fan; the unfolding process of the power of faith; the inspiring process of our spiritual heroism; the loosening process of ties which we prized more highly than the tie which binds us to God; the equipment with the whole armor of God against still greater temptations to come; the anchoring of the soul to the higher world; and the humbling of self within us, in order that even in the heart, God alone may be great.

And then it is no longer the question of highest importance, whether we are delivered from our trouble, or whether we are overcome by it. If God brings deliverance, there is outward triumph, which at times is sorely needed to exhibit the splendor of the supreme power of the Lord over death and pestilence, over slander and anger, over Satan and fortune. But this deliverance is not the main thing. If the exhibition of the supremacy of God is deferred to the life to come, we must rest content. The chief matter at stake is, that the gold, that was darkened, may glisten again; that we shall come forth from the fiery trial with greater spiritual riches than we ever had before; that Satan shall be the loser by us and that God shall be the gainer; that God shall more clearly and more intimately be revealed to the soul in his reality, and that, as from the soul of David, so from our soul, may rise the word of testimony: "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now have I kept thy word." All glory to Thy Name.

“WITH THEE THERE IS FORGIVENESS,  
“THAT THOU MAYEST BE FEARED.”

There is still another way that leads to knowledge of God. It is one that cannot be dealt with save with most delicate care. We mean the awful way that leads through the depths of sin. A single word of Jesus indicates it at once. To Simon the Pharisee he said: “To whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little” (Luke 7:47). With this word our Lord places two persons in contrast with each other. On one side the most honorable citizen of Nain, Simon, his host. And on the other side a woman, who was known in the little town as one of ill repute, a public sinner, as was the case. As her sins were many, she had been forgiven more, and consequently she loved more. The virtuous Simon, on the other hand, who had sinned less, was forgiven less, and consequently he loved less.

If love for Christ is one of the richest sources, from which vital knowledge of God flows out towards us, for this woman, the way of deep sin thanks to the larger forgiveness, was the means to attain fuller knowledge of God. He who only strives after book-knowledge of God, can not understand this, and will never be able to put up with this vigorous word of Jesus. He on the other hand who knows from experience that warm, and upbuilding knowledge of God is fed and carried most effectively by love for God, accepts this word of Jesus gratefully, even though it makes him shudder.

The contrast between the dark nature of sin