

position of life whatsoever, never labor apart from God, but always in his creation and in his service.

Then to be near unto God, the fellowship with the Eternal, the secret walk with him who knoweth the heart, is no sweet-smelling savor by the side of life, but the breath of life itself, spreading its sweet perfume upon your whole existence. Then in everything you are glad, because the majesty and the grace of God breathes upon you from everything and in everything. Then, in everything, you pray, not with the lips, but in the heart, because, in whatsoever you do, you feel your deep dependence upon his Almighty power. Then in everything you give thanks, because all trouble is outcome of his grace. And every adversity is intended to stimulate you, with the aid of ever more grace, to greater exertion of strength. Then everything will be done heartily, i. e. not mechanically, not slavishly, not of necessity, but willingly and gladly, because in this way you are permitted to do it in his service. And thus you attain that high level of existence where godliness and fulfillment of duty are one, because whatsoever you do, in quiet and restful nearness unto God, you are permitted to do as to the Lord.

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“HOW EXCELLENT IS THY NAME IN
ALL THE EARTH.”

One of the last hallelujah psalms closes with the mention of the children of Israel, as “the

people that is near unto God." It says in full: "He hath exalted the horn of his people, the praise of all his saints; even of the children of Israel, a people near unto him" (Psalm 148:14). The distinction that is here made is, that not only the individual soul may find itself in closer fellowship, in more intimate communion, in more constant walk with God, but also that this, in a much vaguer sense, of course, may be true under given circumstances of a large number of persons, and even of a whole people.

To a certain extent this can be said of a rural population in distinction from the population of cities. The story of "the temple of uncarved wood" remains herewith under sentence of its own unreality. For in its hypocrisy it never was anything else than the poetic, pious talk of those who would rather take a walk on Sunday than go to church. We mean the fact, which has been observed in almost every country, that the rural population, taken as a whole, has remained more devoted to religion than the great masses of city people, at least among what are called protestant that have become estranged from all home religion and from public worship. It can even be said that this serious phenomenon increases in proportion to the increase of city population.

This does not mean to say that in these great cities there is no remnant of devout people. These city people, indeed, are sometimes very influential, and in many ways their piety is of a higher type than rural piety, especially in strength of purpose

and elasticity. This is the result of greater friction and of more intense competition. He who in such cities still cherished the sacred traditions of the fathers, did so under protest. He had to suffer for it, and to struggle in behalf of it. But he who maintained himself in the conflict, came out of it better disciplined, fortified and strengthened, and felt himself better equipped against unbelief and indifferentism. But apart from these relatively always small exceptions, it can not be denied that in rural districts reverence for religion is more firmly rooted, and that in city life this reverence wanes; especially where there are great industries, much commerce, and much speculation at the exchange. Indeed, among factory owners and hands, among merchants and office clerks, among members of the exchange and capitalists there are also truly pious children of God, but they are white ravens among the black flock.

That which co-operated to bring this about is manifold. What with weather and wind, harvests and failure of crops, with cattle and land plagues, people in rural districts are far more directly dependent upon the works of God than people in the cities. With respect to industrial interests, and mechanical inventions man is the more prominent agent who exercises power. In rural districts temptation also is less brutally on exhibition. Evenings there are shorter and people rise earlier. People know each other more personally, which makes the discipline of public opinion more effective. The membership of a church is smaller,

which allows the supervision of the church to be more general. And so there are many causes that co-operate, but among these the principal cause always is: Life in the country itself, and the consequent influence of nature, of the visible creation of God which surrounds the countryman. From this it can be inferred that he who seeks to be near unto God loses a notable capacity, when he does not open eye and ear to the impression of the nearness of God, which the visible creation can impart.

The need of this opening of eye and ear is evident from the large number of city people who in summer go to the country, but who go only for pleasure and fresh air, and return as estranged from God as when they started. But as a matter of fact, the city man misses nature. Parks and boulevards offer some compensation, but the great masses, especially working people, only return home at dark. The starry heavens truly also glisten above our cities, but among those who walk the busy streets in the evening, who lifts his eyes on high to see who has created all these things, who bringeth out their hosts by number, and calleth them by name?

In our villages nature is all around, whether it is desired or not. It forces itself upon the inhabitants. In cities, on the other hand, people are shut off from nature and only they who seek it above or outside of the town find it. In the country God's voice addresses us from within and from

without. In the city alone from within, while the human voice makes itself loudly heard in all sorts of ways to hush the voice of the Lord, even in his starry heaven and in his thunder. They who are advanced in years, and whose life's task is done, not infrequently seek the country again to make good what they have lost. In most cases, however, susceptibility to understand nature has been lost, and so they remain isolated from their surroundings.

Now, compare this with Scripture. Man has his origin in a glorious paradise, where all nature addresses him in a pure language of God. Even after the fall so much excellence remains in broken nature that the invisible things of God are understood from created things, both his eternal power and divinity (Romans 1:20). "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day abundantly uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no people or land, where this voice of God is not heard" (Psalm 19). Excellent is his name in all the earth. The voice of the Lord is upon the waters. The God of glory thundereth. The voice of the Lord is powerful. The voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedars, even the cedars of Lebanon (Psalms 29). And so it goes on through all the Psalms. Read and read again Psalm 104. And at the end of the Psalter we have a striking description of nature in Psalms 147 and 148. And even before the Book of the

Psalms is Job with his wondrous descriptions of the Behemoth, the horse and the pleiades. It is all one mighty call in the greatness and beauty of nature to behold the glory of God.

And when in Scripture we come to the preaching of the Son of Man, it is again the self-same call: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow!" "Behold the fowls of the air;" it is light thrown upon the mysteries of the Kingdom borrowed from what is seen in the sower and the shepherds; and at the close of his ministry there is the touching comparison of Jerusalem with the hen that gathers her chickens under her wings. The glow of nature scintillates throughout all of Revelation. God's ancient people was a rural people. The holy land, which God had appointed for his people, was then, though no longer now, a fertile field of unequalled beauty. The new earth under the new heaven shall be a return of paradise. The wilderness shall blossom as the rose. And when our times are familiar with the glorification of the artist-painter, because of the beautiful scenes which, with depths of color and life, he works before our eyes—what dullness of the spiritual eye it betrays when at the same time it is blind to the thousand-fold more enchanting glory in the handiwork of our God, who is the chiefest artist of all.

It affects one strangely, therefore, to find so little, if any, appreciation of the beautiful in nature among Christian people. Undoubtedly the voice of the herald of Peace far excels the many

voices of nature. "In his temple," says the Psalmist, after having described the power of God in nature, "in his temple doth everyone speak of his glory" (Psalm 29:9). And in the Hallelujah song of Psalm 147 it is said that Israel is highly exalted above primitive peoples, because the Lord hath made known his word unto Jacob. And in closing it declares: "He hath not dealt so with any nation: Neither have the heathen knowledge of his laws." In the congregation of believers, where the word is rightly proclaimed, there is a spiritual beauty which far outshines the beauty of nature.

But shall we be onesided on this account and allow the half to be lost? According to our confession God is known in two ways. Surely from his Word, but also from the creatures, which are letters in the book of creation, to make us know the might and majesty of God. Christian conferences, devotional meetings, devotional books, are all very excellent, but must on this account the great book of creation remain closed to the eye of the soul? It all goes for the sake of impressions, impressions on the collodion-plate of the heart. For the sake of impressions which far excel the impressions of daily life, and those which we receive from men.

We may not, and will not, live under the impression that the Divine can ever be reduced to the measure of the human. We will not lower and lessen God after our dimensions, but lift up ourselves to the measure of the majesty of God. Not

a God after our image, but we created after the image of God. And this you will not get from books, and not from travel, and not from acquaintance with men. For all this only confines you to the limit and to the measure of our small proportions, and is altogether different from a rising or a setting of God's sun; altogether different from the flash of lightning or from the thunder that rolls in the clouds; altogether different from the glory of the starry skies that arch themselves above you; altogether different from the great forests, or the lion that roars for prey.

In nature we have the sublime, and in the sublime we have the Divine utterance of what is superlatively beautiful and glorious. The high and the lofty: even a majesty which infinitely surpassed the small dimensions of human economy and of human works, so that you may know and understand that you are not in touch with the bungling works of man, but with the glorious, sublime art of the Creator of heaven and of earth. Truly, the beautiful in nature can not disclose to you the way of salvation, and its spiritual mysteries. For this purpose God in compassion has given you his Gospel. But what the outshining of God's majesty and divinity in nature effects is: that it binds and expands and elevates all your ideas to an higher sphere than what your sight can give you; that it lifts you up from the insignificant-human to the Divinely-great; in brief: to what is exalted! And that in this way it brings the High and Lofty One nearer unto you.

"THOU TRIEST MINE HEART, THAT IT
IS WITH THEE."

Many causes can interrupt the secret walk with God. The most mysterious to the pious mind is, that God withdraws his face, in order, by the want of it, to make you thirst more strongly after it. The most common is, that earthly interests so engage the attention and keep it absorbed that the soul is ensnared by them. And the most offensive to the soul is that actual sin came in the way, which not only broke your fellowship with God, but continued to prevent the return to the nearness of the Holy One.

Actual sin alone has mention here. A word, a deed, of which you felt, when you faced it, that it would be a sin to you, and which you failed to evade. A sinful tendency, a sinful mood, especially a sinful desire, can seriously affect the fellowship with God, but the working of it is different. For on this side of the grave this sinful inclination will stay by us, but provided it is not cherished, this by itself will not prevent the secret walk with God. The secret walk with God is always in Christ, from which it is evident that we do not come to God as one who is holy, but as one who in himself is a sinner. But it is different with a sin that has been committed. Then there was consent, permission and the doing of it. Then at once the light of God's benign countenance was gone. Then on the side of God it become dark,