

The Forlorn Son—the Grounds why he came Home, and his Prayer.

“ And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.”—LUKE xv. 14–19.



BECAUSE, beloved in the Lord, to believe that we have such a father as honours us to be His sons, and [because] if the state of adoption and of the adopted children of God were well known, it would be more thought of nor¹ by the most part it is, we would² think more upon it than we do. It is no small matter of a bastard of hell to be made a heir and a son of heaven; of one who has no claim to Christ to be made one who has free right to Him. And if it be not so, it is our own fault, for our Lord excludes none from Him who are within the visible Kirk. His offer of mercy and reconciliation is so broad

¹ Than.

² Should.

and large, that they are in a woful and miserable case, who live in a land, or country, or congregation, or city, where Christ shines in the gospel, and yet they are not the better of Him. What a condemnation will it be that when the parable of the lost and forlorn son is preached to a lost world and a lost people, his going away and his returning again, and his father's receiving him, and yet they will not return!

Consider what is in God, and what is in the creature ; and this is indeed the main lesson that we should set to to learn, to know our Creator, and what is in Him, that He has made all things and all things subsist by Him. And then, upon the other hand, to know sin and misery, to know ourselves, to know the bentness of our wicked hearts unto sin, [hearts] which run away from the Lord days without number. And if so be that we could rightly acquaint ourselves with these, then we would be made to acknowledge our own wanderings, and we would be made to come unto a liking of God ; if we could win ¹ to that, all were done that should be done. And then our preaching, and praying, and praising, and reading, and conference, exhortation, &c., would have a blessed effect with it, and we would still be seeking to know more till we came to the enjoying of the Lord Himself. And when thou hast gotten Christ Himself, and thou art in Him, O then, sinner, thou art at home ; but never till then.

Now we have to consider : (1) upon what ground it is that the forlorn son came home ; (2) what is his prayer when he comes to his father.

¹ Attain to.

Now, for the ground whereupon he is stirred up to come home. It is clear enough in the words going before. He is in want, and at the point of tyning¹ for hunger. He thought himself to be in a miserable estate, and that made him to take up a new resolution, and then when he comes home, he seeks not to be in the rowme² that he should be in, that his father would make him a son in the house, but that he would make him as one of his hired servants. The motive that the Lord used to bring home this forlorn son is his want and his affliction, as we read in Hos. v. 15: "I will go and return unto My place till they acknowledge their offence and seek My face; in their affliction they will seek Me early." That is one of the Lord's ordinary means of wooing His own children. He woos them in the furnace of affliction when they may neither fend nor fee³ as it were. Even when it is with him as it was with Manasseh, 2 Chron. xxxiii. 11, 12: "The Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him in fetters, and carried him to Babylon. And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly." He and the people sinned against the Lord, and therefore the Lord sent enemies against them, and he is taken and carried away captive to Babylon. And when he was so fettered there that he could not win away, then, in his affliction, he humbled himself, and sought the Lord. Deut. xxx. 1-3: "And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I

¹ Perishing.² Place.³ Support nor hire themselves.

have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath driven thee, and shalt return unto the Lord thy God, and shalt obey His voice according to all that I command thee this day, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all nations, whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee." Hos. ii. 14, 15: "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope;" that is, in the midst of great affliction I will speak unto her heart, and that ordinarily is the time when the Lord uses to do so. And there is a reason given for this, Prov. xxix. 15: "The rod and reproof," says the Spirit of God there, "give wisdom." If ever men do well at all, they will do well when the hand of God is upon them. Those that are not humbled by the Lord's visitations, what will humble them? It is true the Word of God uses this form of speaking, that "His word humbles" the heart; and sometimes it will do so. But such is the crookedness of our nature, that the most part they are not brought in to the Lord till the iron sinews that are in their neck be broken, and [He] souple¹ our stiff-neckedness.

Use. In all our afflictions let us speer² home to our Lord and husband, and say with the prophet: "It was better with me when I was under his guiding nor³ ever

¹ French *souple*; S. English *supple*, make flexible.

² Ask the way home.

³ Than.

it has been since." Let us strive to make that use of all the Lord's visitations, to acknowledge that it is God's messenger seeking you to turn home to Him again, because thou hast been a runaway. But do all that the Lord strikes, turn to Him by the straike¹ that come upon them? No, certainly; there are many that fall further away from the Lord after they have been stricken. The Lord says of His people, Isa. i. 5: "Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more." That is one of the ills that lie upon our nature, that many, when the hand of God lights on them to strike, it strikes them dead, and they wot not what He either says or does, but they are further from God nor² before, and when it is so, the Lord will tire of visiting such, and will seek them no more.

A second ill that comes of visitations to some is: Holiness in seeking God in the day of their visitation; and yet it is not holiness from the heart, but only from the teeth, forward. And therefore all the holiness and humiliation that we have under a cross, it should be well examined, because there are many while the hand of the Lord is upon them any way, they carry themselves humble like, and hing³ their head as a bulrush; they will speak words humbly to God, and yet for all that they have but a lying heart; for their purpose in seeking the Lord and in humbling, is only that they may get the cross removed. We should beware with that, for it will beguile us when the cross is away.

How many are there in the world who will say in their sickness, "If the Lord will restore them again to

¹ Strokes.

² Than.

³ Hang.

their health, they shall be sure not to be the old man." They will vow to forsake their ill ways, and to take up a new course of life, and they are delivered from their disease, and yet afterwards they become as wicked and profane as ever they were before; and some worse. The ground of this comes from a false heart that gives God fair words while they are under His hand, and yet as soon as the rod is removed they, Pharaoh-like, harden their heart, and turn to their old bias again. And so blinded are they, who thus seem to turn to God when His hand is on them, that when it is off they turn away again.

And there is a third sort also in whom God wastes many crosses, and they are nothing the better; but they remain as proud as ever they were. Such are iron that no fire will soften, such as will neither wash nor wring; for all the pains can be taken, they will neither bow nor break. The Lord loses all the pains He wares² upon such. The dross is not taken from them for all that the Lord does to them. Albeit He cast them into the furnace, they remain still as they were at the first.

And then, lastly, there are some who take a wrong course under their affliction to be rid of it. They take not such a course as this son does to come home to his father that he may help him, but they use indirect and sinful means to win out of the fang³ thereof. And such are in all their crosses like a stranger going to ride⁴ a water, he takes the wrong ford, and falls in a weel,⁵ and drowns there. The right gate⁶ under any cross, if it be of taking anything from you, is, with Job, to say, "The

¹ If.² Expend.³ Grip.⁴ Go through.⁵ Eddy, whirlpool.⁶ Way.

Lord has given, the Lord has taken. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

The right way to win ¹ through the fuird ² of that water and be safe, is to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, and He will lift us up, to see the world's vanity and the sovereignty of the Lord, the Creator, to consider that man is but flesh, but God is a Spirit, and if His straike ³ be so heavy even in this life, O! what must the pains and torments that He inflicts on soul and body in hell be? If it be so great a pain to be four and twenty hours pained under the disease of gout or gravel, O! what torment must it be to be tormented in hell both in soul and body for ever in hell both night and day, no rest there; and to have that to close all with, never to be delivered out of that pain and torment. If we were wise we might learn meikle ⁴ of God in our crosses, if we would come to Himself by them and acknowledge that it is our Father that strikes us, and not an enemy, halfings ⁵ against His will, remembering always that He "delights not in the death of a sinner;" that He is not shooting ⁶ them away whom He strikes, but, by the contrary, makes them welcome who come to Him, and to consider, as it is, Lam. iii. 33, that He punishes or afflicts not willingly.

The first part of this forlorn son's prayer is: "*Make me as one of thy hired servants.*"

Look now where a converted sinner desires to sit. God needs to put him no lower than he puts himself. That is the vantage ⁷ of humiliation where it comes

¹ Get.² Ford.³ Strokes.⁴ Much.⁵ Partly.⁶ Thrusting.⁷ Advantage.

truly. It lays him upon the ground, the Lord working with this visitation to let him see himself. He acknowledges that he is the most unworthy in all his father's house, acknowledges that he is unworthy of his father's company or of his presence; acknowledges it is much more than he deserves if he be handled by his father as a servant, let be¹ to be used as a son. Always this is a mark of a converted sinner when he is brought to think little of himself. As soon as the Lord began to show Himself to Peter, he became humble in his own eyes, and says: "Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man." The centurion's word to Christ: "It is a shame to see such a Lord under my roof who am so unworthy. Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldest come under my roof; but speak the word only, and my servant shall be whole." A truly converted sinner knows not how laigh² to set himself. If there were a pain and torment greater nor³ the pain and torment of hell, he would acknowledge it to be his deserving, and that it is procured by him at the Lord's hands. How great a word speaks the Apostle of himself, Eph. iii. 8: "To me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." When he considers that God had made him an apostle and a preacher of the gospel, and applies that to himself. "To me who am less than the least of all saints," &c. : great Paul that calls himself little, and not only so but less, not only less than apostles, but less than saints, than any who are begun to be sanctified, ay, less than

¹ Far less.² Low.³ Than.

all saints, and less than the least of all saints. O! how low is that soul that sees itself well who has gotten a sight of its own vileness and so of its deserving.

Let us learn, then, to know that this is a mark of such as are in love with Christ. They think less of themselves than they can do of any other. Pride is not a mark of the children of God. There is a staff of pride in every one of us by nature as the Prophet Ezekiel speaks. And whoever they be who will be higher nor¹ God will have them (as there be many in the world), they are far from the strain this son is at. Humiliation: O! but it be a great grace, and pride is a sin of great parents, but it is a miserable ill. Pride was born in heaven, and it fell out of heaven; but it could never win there sinsyne.² The Lord "resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble." The Lord says of him who is proud that He is his enemy. Woe! to that man whom God knows far off as an enemy.

And therefore learn this lesson to strike sail to Christ, and, for that effect, to know what sinful dust and ashes are. Consider if the Lord would turn thy outside out thou would be forced to say: "I am no more worthy to be called Thy son, make me as one of Thy hired servants," and acknowledge this of thyself.

Was this a good petition of his? Every way. See upon what ground he says this: "I have sinned *against heaven and before Thee.*" And upon that he brings in that conclusion.

It is a great matter if our humiliation be not a hindrance both to faith and prayer. Because thou hast

¹ Than.

² Since that time.

sinned against heaven and earth, should thou therefore conclude, that thou wilt not seek to be one of God's sons, nor to be one of the children of God. Many times we are so low in our own eyes, that we pray to the Lord for that which we deserve, but not for that which we desire. But let us acknowledge our wrong in this, and seek as meikle ¹ from the Lord as we would be at, and not which we desire. He declines indeed to be esteemed a servant, or to be thought the basest of the servants, and yet he dare not seek to be in the room of a son. But when ye pray to the Lord this way seek for that which it becomes Him to give, and not for that it becomes your baseness and guiltiness to receive. Know to whom it is that ye are speaking. Ye are speaking to one who can make a son of a slave of hell, as well and as easily, as He can make a servant of him.

It is a great matter to be humbled, and yet to believe, both at one time. Ofttimes the one of these hinders the other, as Peter being humbled in his own eyes, says: "Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man." It had not been telling ² him that the Lord had gone from him according to his prayer. But being humbled, follow not his example in this, but pray rather: "Lord, let me stay with Thee, for I am a sinful man," for no company is so good for him that has that disease as to be with Him who is the physician. And that woman who had the bloody issue being thus humbled in her own eyes, she seeks only to touch the hem of His garment. Had it been a sin for her to have sought to kiss His feet or His face? No, certainly. But her humble faith thought it very meikle ¹

¹ Much.

² Been for his good

if she should get leave to come that¹ near such a Lord as to touch the hem of His garment. But the humbled soul may come nearer Christ nor² she. It will be welcome to come nearer even to kiss His sweet mouth; for the best chair in heaven is prepared for such as are humble. O, what our Lord esteemed of that woman, who esteemed herself but a dog, and was content to feed with the dogs upon the crumbs that fell from the children's table! He says of her, "I have not found such faith, no, not in Israel."

A humble faith it is certainly, a high and a great faith, and a soul that thinks little of itself, O! what the Lord thinks of it. And therefore let us not be [led] that way to measure God's goodness by our wickedness. That is a false compass to measure our Lord with. Whatever thou be, wert thou never so sinful and wicked, yet the Lord is the Lord. That woman that is spoken of, Luke vii. 38, who did wash Christ's feet with her tears, and wipe them with the hairs of her head, she would [have] been welcome to come hither to embrace Him, and kiss His mouth. Ay, the more humble thou art, so much nearer art thou to thy Lord. Once learn this lesson, to think little of thyself; and when it comes to that, thou art within sight of Christ. When thou art humble, thou art within Christ's breath, and it shall blow upon you. Go not over³ far away from the Lord in thy humility. Learn to seek more of Him nor² thy deserving dytes⁴ thee to seek. It is an ill-dyted prayer that is dyted according to our deservings. But let us learn to dyte⁵ our prayers according to the Lord's

¹ So.² Than.³ Too.⁴ Directs.⁵ Direct.

mercy, and the riches of His free grace. To seek a drop of grace at the Lord's hands, because it is no more that we deserve? No, we deserve not that; and therefore seek a sea of grace from the Lord. Albeit, according to our deservings, it sets ¹ us to get little. Yet it sets Him well to give meikle.²

Seek no less than Christ Himself, and heaven, and the remission of sins, joy of the Holy Ghost, peace of conscience, &c. Seek that which is given only to the sons of God and the heirs of heaven, and be not satisfied with that which is given to servants. Ay, the greedier thy prayers be, thou art the more welcome to the Lord, for He cannot endure pinched, narrow prayers. He is not content that thou should seek less than He minds to give, and is willing to give you. He is not like that king who said, "Ask of me what thou wilt unto the half of my kingdom, and I will give it unto you." Seek no half a kingdom of the Lord, but seek a whole kingdom. And therefore learn this lesson: Not to make your prayers over ³ narrow, but seek great things from the Lord contrary to that which Jeremiah (chap. xlv. 5) says to his servant Baruch; seek great things, even the greatest things that are in the Lord's coffers, for He is as able to give heaven as He is to give an acre of land or a drink of water. He is as able to give glory as He is to give grace. He is able to give the Spirit which He promises, by the prophet Joel ii. 28, to pour out, the spirit of prophecy that your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams. Be not narrow in seeking from the Lord, to seek over ³ little

¹ Is becoming us.² Much.³ Too.

of Him. We are oftentimes too straitened in seeking from the Lord. The Lord is not troubled night and day with our prayers in seeking great things. And because we seek but little of the Lord therefore it is that many times we receive but little at His hands. But learn continually to seek more and more from the Lord, and tempt the Lord's liberality, as it were, in asking great things of Him, and then thou shalt get thy desire. And wite¹ thyself if thou receive little at His hands, for it is only because thou art narrow in thy seeking.

Now, howbeit he put himself out of his own room,² yet still he keeps God into his room,² for he calls Him "Father." That is good and right humiliation indeed, that holds the Lord always where He should be, as ye may see Dan. ix. 8-9, Daniel confesses, "To us belong confusion of face as at this day, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers. But to the Lord our God belong mercies and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him." That is right work. Let the Lord always be righteous and glorious, albeit shame and confusion should be written in great letters upon our faces. Let the Lord always be high and magnified, and all others put low that He may be high, as the Kirk acknowledges, Isa. lxiii. 16, "Doubtless thou art our Father though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not. Thou, O Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer; Thy name is from everlasting." Albeit we be named apostates, and are not worthy to be called the sons of Abraham; yet Thou art worthy to be called our Father, for Thy name is called upon by us. So it is said also

¹ Blame.

² Place.

Jer. xiv. 7-9, "O Lord, though our iniquities testify against us, do Thou it for Thy name's sake: for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against Thee, for they put themselves very low," and then in the eighth verse, they say, "O the hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in the time of trouble, why shouldest Thou be as a stranger in the land?" Their God is made the hope of Israel and the Saviour thereof in time of trouble. But for themselves they acknowledge, "Our backslidings are many, and we have sinned against Thee." This is the way that the Lord would have His children to carry themselves, always to put God in His room,¹ to make Him a Father, albeit I should be no son.

Now, is not this contradiction? If one call Him a Father to him, then he must be a son? Yes, it is true. But happy they who can set God on high, and can set themselves low, that He may be high. Happy they who can give the Lord that which is His due, if it were with the loss of all that they have in the world. Ware² upon God and give out for Him, albeit it were to tyne³ all that thou hast in the world, and thou shalt be no tyner⁴ when all is done. Thy husband, albeit he were dead in another country, yet let this content you that it is God who has done it, and acknowledge He is worthy of all that thou hast if it were meikle more. And this is the reasoning of a humbled soul, to exalt God as high as heaven; and if thou could get Him far up above the heavens to set Him there, and thou thyself to sit as low as hell.

¹ Place.² Lay out.³ Lose.⁴ Loser.

This must answer a doubt that many of the children of God have, and it is this, say they: "Whatever God be in Himself, yet I wot not if I have any claim to Him to call Him my Lord and my Father. If ye have no better reason for that, "that ye wot not if He be your Lord or your Father," but that because ye are sinful, then it is but the forlorn son's logic, and it holds not in all. But rather say this: "If I were a slave of the devil, a child of wrath and perdition, yet I know He is in heaven and is a Father, and I will look unto Him as to a Father, notwithstanding of all my transgressions, for this is a part of His glory to make them welcome, and to forgive them their iniquities and transgressions who have run away and misspent all, played the harlot with many lovers, when they return unto Him again. It is not possible that our narrow thoughts can comprehend this Lord. And this indeed is the very ground of our sinning, because we measure our Lord by ourselves. Because thou hast a false heart therefore thou thinkest so of the Lord also. Because we are varying and changeable, we expone our Lord to be of that same kind. Because we cannot forgive great wrongs that are done against us, therefore we expone ¹ so of Him also. Never any shall have a solid and constant faith who look not over themselves and over their deservings to God, who considers not whatever our provocations and undeservings be, yet He is near unto all those who seek unto Him in truth.

O that we may learn to have right thoughts of Christ our Lord, not to measure Him by our short ell-wand, but

¹ Consider.

by His large measure that He is in Himself. And to this Lord, to Christ's Father and our Father in Him, to Himself and the Holy Spirit, one incomprehensible Godhead be praise for ever.—Amen.