

The Forlorn Son—he was Lost and is Found.

“For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.”—LUKE XV. 24-28.



THEY have no less nor¹ cause, beloved in our Lord, to be glad and to rejoice, whenever a wandering sinner comes home to Christ Jesus, who is so cheerful a receiver of them, who is so willing to receive them, and is so heartsome and kind to all His own who have any grace to claim kyndness² to Him. And we see there is good ground for rejoicing and mirth, at the home-coming of a wandering sinner here. And wherefore we should rejoice also, when our Lord He rejoices, and makes such mirth. When He is so glad at the home-coming of a sinner, the sinner himself whom this most concerns should much more rejoice, and be glad. And our Lord He gives a very good reason for this gladness and re-

¹ Than.

² Relationship.

joicing, "for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

Now the last part of the parable is, How the elder brother—eldest or in possession, and so repute [d] eldest—took with the Lord's kind dealing towards his younger brother. The text says, "And when he drew near the house, he heard music and dancing," and knew not what it meant, as the natural man knows not what it is to come to Christ, and how welcome a sinner is to Jesus. They know not how sweet the Lord's breath is unto those who have been long away from the Lord and get grace to come home to Him again. And the elder son calling for one of the servants, he speers,¹ what meant that more than ordinary mirth that was among them? The servant answers, "Thy brother is come, and thy Father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound." And the son was angry, and would not go into the house. And the rest of the chapter is spent in a conference between the angry son and a kind and meek father. But we see the son that had an ill eye because his father's heart was good, and [was] the gentle and loving father; he was angry that his father had received the younger brother into his house again. There is nothing that makes a hypocrite's heart more sad than when God welcomes home a sinner to Himself. And the father again, as if he had done a fault, he speaks to his angry son in calm words, and gives a reason of his making mirth, and why he dealt so kindly with his younger son, and made so meikle² of him; "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have

¹ Asks.

² Much.

is thine. It was meet that we should make merry and be glad, for this thy brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found." That is a matter of joy in heaven to the Lord and to the blessed angels, and the Lord avows that He is content at the home-coming of a sinner, howbeit the eyes of the wicked world dow¹ not endure it.

Now there be two excellent reasons given in the twenty-fourth verse, wherefore the Lord is glad and rejoices at the home-coming of the forlorn son. "This my son was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found." There is a change made upon him. "My son is translated from death to life; he was lost, but now he is found." That is a matter of rejoicing to be avowed before the world when a sinner that was dead becomes living; when a sinner that was running away from the Lord turns home again to Him and is found of Him. And this is a cause of rejoicing to the Father and the whole house that the Lord has gotten home a lost bairn and a forlorn son that was running away from him formerly.

See now what is said of his estate before he come home to his father. Before he was dead and lost in an uncow² country; dead, and yet hungry, and would eat husks, and not long since he was coming home, and acknowledging to his father: "I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants;" and was ragged, and naked, and bare, and you know the woful gate³ that he was in. How then was he dead?

¹ Can.

² Strange.

³ State.

for all these be actions of life. But, whatever a natural man does we may say he is dead, for all thir¹ actions of life he does are not the actions of the life of God; for he has not that life, and so he is spiritually dead and knows not the case he is in while it is so. And that is the estate of all those who are not within the kingdom of the Son of God, albeit they eat, drink, sleep, walk, laugh, &c., and go about all the businesses of this life, and work the works of sin as living men, yet in the Lord's estimation they are nothing else but dead men.

The best works of the unregenerate who are not born again by the water and the Spirit, they are but only works of dead men. And therefore never go to question if the heathen and those that never heard of Christ can do works good in the sight of God, as the patrons of nature have been careful to defend things done by them as good. All the actions of natural men are dead actions before the Lord, and the best thing they can be called is only to call them well-farded² sins. For actions are only good in God's estimation that can be called good from all the four causes. First, that are good in regard of the author of them; second, in regard of the matter; third, good in regard of the form or manner of doing them; and fourth, in regard of the end wherefore they are done. And if an action want any of these that it be not good in all these respects, then it is imperfect in the sight of God, and so ill. And therefore the Apostle says, Rom. xiv. 23, "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." Now all the works of men, while they are in the state of nature, they are done without faith, and so

¹ There.

² Painted.

they are sin. Look but to two things in the works of the natural man, and you will see all of them to be sin.

Works that come not from faith, if that the first motion of them comes not from the renewed man, these works are sin, as ye may see, Heb. xi. 6: "Without faith it is impossible to please God." Let all the world distinguish as they will, it is a thing impossible that a man can do works to please God and procure life eternal unless he have faith, and the works be done in faith; which cannot be said of the natural man. Let all the world distinguish in this as they will, the Word of God warrants us to say this. Make the works of the natural man as fair and as beautiful as ye will in your eyes, and never so life-like, yet the Lord esteems them to be no other but dead and sinful works.

And then look to the end of all that the natural man does, and in that they are wrong also. Nay, but, says one who takes their defence, they intend not always an ill end in all they do, who are not in Christ, for they do not all to the honour of an idol or a wicked god, or for the honour of the creature. But the Spirit of God says, 1 Cor. x. 31, "Whether ye eat or ye drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." Where a work wants this intention, and the doer of the work aims not at this, albeit he should give his body to be burnt in the fire, and bestow all his goods on the poor, yet the Lord says this of him, that he is no other but a sounding brass, and a tinkling cymbal. It is a work of sin and is not done in obedience to God, but He is therein disobeyed.

And for that they refer not the end of all that they do to the honour of an idol-god; albeit it were so, as they

allege, there are none who profess to give religious worship to anything but virtually he refers the last end of all he does thereto. But be it so, that he does not refer it to an idol; yet because he refers not the last end of all his actions to God, and makes not Him his last end, it is certain he must have another last end to which he refers all he does; for all reasonable creatures, even devils and wicked men, they do all that they do out of a conceit to attain happiness, and therefore their wicked end must either be the Creator or the creature. But if it be confessed, as the adversaries themselves do confess, that the last end is not the Creator, because they understand him not in the Mediator Christ Jesus, then the creature must be their last end, and that certainly is idolatry. To make the creature, either the first author of anything, or to make it the last end of anything, it is to put the creature in the rowme¹ of God. For a man to do things for his credit, honour, his friend, &c., having no other end for what he does, is a work of a dead soul, and the Lord will not accept thereof as acceptable to Him.

One *use* of this is to see that the hearing of God's Word by the natural man, receiving the sacraments, reading, praying, &c., he will get no thanks for these, neither are they acceptable to God, so long as he is not in Christ. All these things that thou doest being out of Christ, will be but small bulk in the Lord's eyes in that day when thou shalt be judged of the Lord by thy works. And therefore careful should we be that we may be found in Christ, that our persons may be accepted in

¹ Place.

Him. And your persons being accepted in Christ, then the Lord will also accept of your works. But other-ways all that the natural man does is wickedness; his prayer is sin and abomination before the Lord. When he is about prayer that is not in Christ, the smell of his sacrifice is unsavoury to the Lord. He cannot endure such prayers, and therefore great need have we to be assured that we are in Christ, that our works may not be dead but living works.

Observe while he says, "*This my son was dead,*" there is the estate of the natural man before he come to Christ. Eph. ii. 2, the apostle says: "And were by nature the children of wrath even as others." "But God for His rich mercy wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ." Has not the natural man a soul, and can he not perform the works of nature? A man in nature is not naturally dead, but he is spiritually dead.

There are three things that a man in nature, touching his spiritual life, has not. And first, the natural man has not life itself; second, he has not reason; and, third, He has not sense or the use of his senses. These are all joined with life where it is; yet he wants them. And

First: I say he wants life itself, and all the natural motions thereof; and yet for all that he is hearing the Word and singing Psalms, and reading, &c. And yet these are not works of life in him. And he is praying. Now will a dead man do so? Yes; a man spiritually dead may do all these things so as he does them. All that the natural man does has nothing but an outside

with it. The Lord sees the stinking bones of a dead corpse under all these. He sees seven abominations in such a man, and so He sees all abominations in him.

Second: The man in nature, he has no reason nor the reasonable presence of a living man. This may seem not to be very true-like. He is a governor of a city or a country side, and knows the laws very well, and he is a trim bookman. Can such a man be a dead man? Yes; all that such a man, who is in nature, does, is the work of a dead man; for there is never a word that he speaks, or a conclusion he makes, that is heaven-like, and therefore the work is dead. The very main end of all that he does is the world. It is that he may provide for him and his, that he may get honours, pleasure, court,¹ &c., and the things of the world. All his words, thoughts, actions, run upon this pin, the things of this present world. All his logic and strongest arguments for anything he does even in reforming the matters of the house of God are taken from this: "It will hazard my life and my office in the world, if I join not in such things." This is plainly the reasoning of a dead man.

Third: Those who are only natural they want the sense of life. They know not what that is, to have a soul wounded with sin, because of this, and so are just like the drunken man that Solomon speaks of (Prov. xxiii. 35)—when he is drunk with wine, every one goes by and beats him with rods, and he knows not that they do so till the wine be out of his head, and he wakes out of his dream; then the strokes he has gotten make him sore and crazed. Even so will it be with them who are in the

¹ Influence.

state of nature, when they are wakened out of their dream. O! the blasphemous oaths will lie heavy on him then, and the harlotry of the harlot will be a sore burden to him; and he who has loved the creature more than God, who is the Creator, such a man will never feel his wounds till he be brought to the Physician Christ, and the Lord once translate him out of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son, that he be brought from death to life. But then he feels all the sore strokes he has gotten all his time by sin. The first fall Adam got by sin dang¹ him dead and all his posterity, and made him and his to want the life of God and His image wherewith they were endowed, from all mankind for ever in themselves.

Can this be, that one act of sin which works morally, can take away all the habitual justice and righteousness that are in man by nature? They who oppose the truth of God deny that man could lose by his transgression, but only by the decree of God that it should be so. But if sin be well looked to, it has two set of actions in it. The one is moral and the other is physical. Morally sin, even *reatus*,² deserves that, because of it, the sinner should be deprived of life; and then physically, the blot of sin puts out the image of God. And if any man will speer³ how the first fall of Adam should put the life of God out of all mankind for all eternity? I answer, albeit we could give no natural reason, or any reason of logic or physick for this, yet this is sufficient for proof of it, that the Word of God says, the natural man cannot understand the things that are

¹ Struck.

² Guilt of it.

³ Ask.

of God, for they are foolishness unto him, and Christ says (John vi. 44), "No man can come unto Me unless the Father which hath sent Me draw him." These and many other places say unto us clearly that, albeit we know no other reason, yet this is enough to tell us that man, in the state of nature, he is a corrupt creature, and sees not God, and is not for Him, that he loves not God in that estate, nor can love Him; and this is the woful estate of every man so long as he remains in that case.

Now the *use* of this is: If so be that the natural man be so, how comes it to pass then that there be so many who will not be convinced that it is so with them? how comes it that it is so hard a task for a minister to convince a natural man that he has a hard heart, and that he is in a state of sin, and that all by nature are ignorant of God? This only is the cause, that all by nature are dead in sins and trespasses, and being dead cannot be brought to know they are so. No. Ye know all the art and logic in the world used to persuade or convince a dead man, that is in the grave, of the estate¹ of his body, that it is dead and under corruption, will not convince him to know that it is so, because he neither hears nor sees what they do or say to him. Even so is it here with the man remaining still in the state of nature; he cannot be brought unto the faith of a hell to believe this, that "that day I came first into the world, I came in it an heir [of] hell." The natural man cannot be brought to believe this. The comparison holds well here between the natural man and the man that is buried in the grave; there are lilies and flowers growing out of

¹ State or condition.

the grave, but it smells filthily within. Little knows the man that is in nature what an ill smell he would cast if he were tane ¹ up and discovered. A man living in the state of nature, and so in the state of sin, he may be well busked,² and have a good smell outwardly, be an honest married man in his own house, not deceiving or wronging his neighbours, not a shedder of blood, and yet he is only a man buried in a grave when all is done, and some flowers growing above the grave. But when God takes him out of his grave, and lets him see the case that he is in, then all his sins begin to stink. When he is wakened, then he counts all these things that formerly the world and he himself esteemed much of to be but dung, as we may see example in the Apostle Paul, Phil. iii. 7 : He counted that to be a Pharisee, to be come of the royal tribe, &c., to be but loss and dung for Christ. So we may see a man shall never get a right sight of the miserable estate he is in till first the Lord opens his grave that by nature he lies in. And, that being done, he shall then be forced to say : “Once I was dead, but now I am alive ; once I was blind, but now I see ; I was once lost, but now I am found. Once I was a stranger and an enemy to God, but now, Lord be thanked, who has taken in a poor forlorn dyvour ³ to Christ, and has made me to know what is His will.”

The other reason his father gives for his kind usage is, “*He was lost, and is found.*” That is the property of a man in the state of sin. He is a lost man, that is, he is such a thing as may be lost, or wander from the right owner without his knowledge, and may be torn of wild

¹ Taken.² Adorned.³ Bankrupt.

beasts—a sinner in the state of nature. O! but there be many loose-handed devils to steal him away. In 1 John v. 18, the Apostle says, “He that is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not.” The man that is in the state of nature is not held up as he that is born of God is. The Apostle says of himself, “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day” (2 Tim. i. 12). So that while a man is once in the state of grace God becomes his keeper, but so long as a man is in the state of nature he is a tint¹ creature, and he is ready to be turned away with any kind of religion; like unto those of whom the Apostle speaks (Heb. xiii. 9), who are carried about with divers and strange doctrines, and have not the heart established in grace, a comparison that is borrowed from ships, that every tide and every blast of wind that blows will blow and turn them as they come upon them, because she wants a rudder to keep her sure. So a man in the state of nature will receive any new gust in religion. Any wind or tide that comes from Satan and his instruments carries him away from his Lord. And the Apostle Peter (2 Pet. iii. 17) has a word to this purpose borrowed from beasts: “See that ye be not led away with the error of the wicked and fall from your own steadfastness.” It is an easy thing for Satan to drive a man away from religion, who follows only that religion which a king loves best, and who places his happiness in court. Certainly it is easy to drive such from any point of faith. And therefore the

¹ Lcst.

Word of God uses this comparison ordinarily to compare lost sinners to wandering sheep. David says, "I am gone astray like a lost sheep." And Matt. x. 5, 6, when Christ there is sending out His disciples to preach the gospel, and telling them what they shall first preach, He says: "Go not in the way of the Samaritans, but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." All these and many others say that a man in the state of nature is a man easily carried away with every wind of doctrine. Like the word Eliphaz has to Job xv. 12: "Wherefore doth thine heart carry thee away, and what do thine eyes wink at?" To be like one in an uncouth country, or house.

Let us learn here to know how ill we are kept while we are in the state of nature, ready to be led away with court, honour, the love of the world, and to be stolen from the Lord. Has not the devil made sin to the natural man like new wine that is sweet in the down-going, that runs into his head who drinks it, and or he wit² it steals away his wit from him, and his feet, and deprives him of the use of all his senses? So while a man remains in the state of sin, he drinks his new wine till he be stolen off his feet.

But when is the sinner well kept? Never till he comè into Christ's house and kingdom, for there he gets a new Lord, and there are new laws there; he gets a new tutor then that will answer for him. This is a sufficient reason, albeit there were no moe³ to prove that fra⁴ once we come in Christ's tutory,⁵ that we are

¹ Strange.

² Ere he knows.

³ More.

⁴ From the time.

⁵ Under Christ's tutorage.

given over to Him, we cannot fall away again; for whoever they be that are given to Christ they are not their own, but they are bought with a price. We cannot keep ourselves well. We are always running away from our Lord. But when Christ our Lord comes and takes us home in His keeping, then are we sure; and never till then. For then we are our Lord's jewels, of whom our Lord says (Mal. iii. 17): "And they shall be Mine in that day when I make up My jewels." There is no man who commits himself unto Christ, who ventures his life and all for Christ's cause and for religion, [but] He will answer for all that are given to Him. And when He renders up the kingdom to His Father, He will make such compt¹ of them as that which we read, John xvii. 12, where He says: "Of all that Thou hast given Me have I lost none, but the child of perdition; that the Scripture might be fulfilled." There is no man lost by Christ but he who is a lost man in God's eternal decree.

Now when the older brother comes home to the house, he hears melody and joy and meikle² mirth in his father's house, and he knows not what it means. And therefore he calls one of the servants, and asks what these things meant.

The text it will clear this point unto us, that the father of the house—the Lord and His angels—they are glad at the home-coming of a sinner, for there was rejoicing and dancing at the home-coming of His forlorn son, and it must be a good spring³ that gars⁴ him dance. Indeed He is very blith⁵ when a lost sinner

¹ Account.

² Much.

⁴ Causes.

³ A quick and lively tune upon an instrument.

⁵ Happy.

comes home to Him, and He makes a psalm of joy upon it. And this was the matter of Christ's joy at this time, that a forlorn sinner is come home. This is a matter of no small comfort to such as have a mind home toward Christ, that their home-coming will gar¹ the Lord rejoice. Is this modesty in Christ to dance? I am sure it is love gars² Him to do it; and the apostle says love does nothing that is unseemly. The Word of God expresses to us in many pithy words the joy and rejoicing that the Lord our God has for the declaration both of mercy and justice upon mankind. As, first, for expression of God's affection when justice comes to seize upon the sinner who would have none of the Lord's counsel, nor hear none of His reproof, it is said, "The Lord laughs at his calamity, and mocks when his fear cometh" (Prov. i. 26). Laughter is not to the Lord an expression of affection as it is to man; but because this is one of the many ends that the Lord intends and aims at in the making of mankind, the declaration of the glory of His justice in so many as break their neck upon Christ, the Lord will "laugh at the calamity of such, and mock when their fears come." And then for the expression of the Lord's love and joy at the home-coming of a sinner, which is the declaration of the glory of the Lord's mercy in them who are appointed heirs of salvation, what expressions are these? Isa. lxii. 5: "As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee." Zeph. iii. 17: "The Lord thy God will rejoice over thee with joy, He will rest in His love, He will joy over thee with singing." And in

¹ Cause.

² Causes.

Solomon's Song viii. 6 there is an expression the Kirk has to this purpose, speaking to her beloved: "Set me as a seal upon thy hand, and as a signet upon thine arm." That which we wear between our breasts, because the breast is near the heart, and we love that well; and that which we make a chain and bracelet to our arm, we love it well. Now the Kirk prays that the Lord would make her so to Him, expressing this far unto us how excellent, how sweet, how lovely, all the Lord's elect and His lost ones, when they are found again, are to Him. And there is an expression not unlike unto this, Cant. iv. 9: "Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck."

All this says this much unto us, that whatever can be in the father to contribute for the good of the bairns^r he has begotten, or what affection can be in the mother towards the fruit of her womb, all these are in the Lord towards His children, but in Him after an infinite manner, and are inimitable. They are in Him without any change or any imperfection at all; for the Lord needs no-wise to rejoice in this, for it adds nothing to Him, yet He expresses Himself this way to declare how greatly He rejoices in them who are saved when they come home to Him.

And also this serves to reprove that woful opinion of some who say that man's condemnation falls out against the will of God. No; certainly all that is in God is omnipotent, and so is His will omnipotent also. What He wills it comes to pass. The enemies of the grace of

^r Children.

God bring¹ in God weeping, full of sorrow and natural affection towards men, because He is condemned not according to His will. But if it were so, they would make God to be far from that infinite perfection the Word of God ascribes to Him; Eph. i. 5:—He does whatsoever He will in heaven and in earth that we should be to the praise of His glory.

If the Lord make so meikle of honouring a sinner, that He accounts it to be the matter of His joy and rejoicing, O! that we and these who are yet in the black estate of nature, could be induced to believe, what joy it would be to our Lord, that we would repent, and believe in Him and His gospel! The natural man he knows not that the Lord rejoices at his home-coming, and will not believe the Lord's oath for it: "As I live, says the Lord, I delight not in the death of a sinner, but rather that he should repent, and be saved" (Ezek. xviii. 33). He rejoices at the home-coming of a sinner. Make God blith,² and come home to Him and seek His face, repent of your ill-ways, and so make the Lord dance and sing that He has gotten home one who was running away from Him. Come home to the Lord and repent of sin that there may be a psalm over thy repentance in heaven. They are called a "destroyed" people (Hos. xiii. 9) to whom the Lord shows their sins, to make them mourn for them the more. O! that is the sweetest sight God can give to a sinner. When they been running to the devil and applauding themselves in their own ways, afterward to see them come greeting³ home to the Lord, touched in their conscience with rebukes

¹ Represent.² Happy.³ Weeping.

and challenges for sins ; O, that is a matter of God's mirth, and a delicate ¹ to Him. Learn to know this and have other thoughts of godliness than ever yet ye have had, to account them blessed who see their sins and by the discovery of them are driven to the Lord. And to this Lord who is the remedy of sin ; to the Father of Christ and our Father ; and the blessed Spirit who sanctifies and cleanses us from sin, we render all praise and glory for ever.—Amen.

¹ A delicious joy. "And with their delicates my taste let me not satisfy," Psa. cxli. 4, Scotch Metrical Version.