

The Divine Compassion of GOD



HORATIUS BONAR (1808-1889)

DIVINE COMPASSION

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DIVINE COMPASSION

“It repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.”

—Genesis 6:6

The manner in which God here acknowledges man as His handiwork is specially to be noted. The words are, “It repented the Lord that he had made man upon earth.” It is not said generally, “that man had been made”; but definitely, that “he had made man.” He had spoken of man in his primeval goodness, as coming from His hand; so now He does not fail to remind us that it is this same man, this very race, that has now become so worthless and hateful.

He might have drawn a veil over this point, so as to prevent our being so vividly reminded that man was truly His own workmanship. But He does not. Nay, He brings the sad fact before us—a fact that seems to reflect upon His own skill and power. He does not disavow creation. He does not disown man. He does not speak or act as one ashamed to be known as the Maker of one so miserably apostate, so incurably depraved. Even when making known man’s extremity of guilt, He openly owns him as His creature. He does not keep silence on the matter, as one desirous that it should be forgotten or unnoticed. He brings it directly forward, as if to call attention to the fact.

When man fails in some great or favourite project—as when an architect plans and builds a palace, which, by reason of some essential defect, almost immediately tumbles down—he is anxious that its failure should not be proclaimed, and that the work thus ruined should never be known as his. He cannot bear the reproach which is sure to fall upon him; he shrinks from the responsibility which has been incurred; he cannot afford to lose the reputation he may have gained.

But with God there are no such feelings; no such desire of concealment; no desire to shake off the responsibility devolving¹ on Him as Creator. He can afford to bear man’s petty censure; He can afford to have it said, “Behold the work of thy hands.” He is not concerned to keep back anything from His creatures, as if their blame or praise could affect Him. Hence it is that we discern something altogether unlike man, something truly God-like, in that simple form of expression here, “It repented the Lord that he had made man upon the earth.”

¹ **devolving** – rolling downward or onward.

1. God's Words about Man

Marvelous words indeed; words such as no man could have ventured to use respecting God; words too strong and bold for any one to have employed but God Himself! Let us look calmly into them, for they are too full of solemn meaning to be lightly passed over, or generalized into a vague expression of God's hatred of sin, or explained away into a mere figure used by God after the manner of men.

In endeavouring to discover what the words do mean, let us first inquire what they do not mean.

Firstly, they do not mean that God's purpose had been frustrated.

That purpose shall stand, for it is the perfect combination of infinite wisdom and power. It is not within the limits of possibility that the creature should thwart the purpose of the Creator. It cannot fail. It must be carried out, though at times its movements may seem checked, or even become apparently retrogressive. To suppose aught else, would be to say that the will of the creature was stronger than the will of the Creator; and that the folly of the creature had baffled the wisdom of the Creator.

Secondly, they do not mean that an unexpected crisis had arisen. With man it may be so. A crisis may come to him unexpectedly, so as entirely to disconcert himself and defeat his schemes. With God there can be nothing unexpected, nothing sudden, nothing unforeseen or unprovided for. The whole future, with its endless turns and intricacies, lies before Him, as open and as clear as the past. No evil, however great, shoots up unpermitted or unlooked for. Neither Satan's wiles nor man's apostasy; neither the rejection of Noah's warnings, nor the spread of sin, nor the ruin of the race, were unexpected evils.

Thirdly, they do not mean that God is subject to like passions and changes as we are. He does not vary as we vary, nor repent as we repent. Instability is the property of the creature, not of the Creator. Frailty is for man, not for God. There is no vacillation,² no fluctuation in Him. That He does feel, we know. If He did not, He would not be God. But His feeling is not weakness. That He alters His procedure we know, but not as we alter ours. There is no caprice³ in His emotion or His acting. All is the serenity of highest wisdom, which cannot be taken by surprise, nor blinded by anger, nor rendered unavailing by fickleness, or facility,⁴ or arbitrary will.

Fourthly, they do not mean that He has ceased to care for His creatures. Wrath, indeed, has gone out against the transgressor; the righteous wrath of the righteous, though loving, God; and "the soul that sinneth it shall die" (Eze 18:4). Yet, neither man himself, nor his habitation, the earth, has been overlooked by God, far less hated and spurned. The words intimate neither the coldness nor the dislike of the Creator toward the creature. It is something very widely different which they convey; a sadder, tenderer feeling; a feeling in which, not indifference, but profound compassion, is the prevailing

² **vacillation** – indecisiveness.

³ **caprice** – sudden unexpected change of action or mind.

⁴ **facility** – ease of doing or making.

element. They do not intimate the quenching of His love, nor even imply coldness or distance. They are not the utterance of resentment, as if pity had now been extinguished, and the fondness of affection been supplanted by the fierceness of revenge.

But still, it may be asked, How are the words to be reconciled with the character of God as the all-knowing Jehovah, seeing the end from the beginning, and ordering everything from eternity, according to the counsel of His will? To clear up this, let me remark—

One, that God is represented to us here, as looking at events or facts, simply as they are, without reference to the past or future at all. He isolates or separates them from all connection with His own purpose; and looking at them simply as they stand alone, He declares what He thinks and feels. In so far as they stood connected with His own vast purpose, which age after age was evolving, He did not repent, or change His mind, or wish them undone; but, in so far as they were exhibitions of human wickedness or wretchedness, He did grieve, and He did repent. For let us remember that there must ever be two kinds of feelings in such matters—one called up by looking at each event by itself, and another by looking at it as part of a mighty plan, which, in its origination and developments, is from eternity to eternity.

Two, that God's purposes do not alter God's estimate of events, or His feelings respecting individuals and their conduct. It was by the "determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Act 2:23) that Christ was betrayed and slain, yet that did not affect God's estimate of the crime committed by them that slew Him. God's allowing man to fall did not make God the approver of his sin; it did not make Him the less to hate and to grieve over the sin whose permission had been foreseen and decreed. Each action or event is a link in God's mighty purpose, yet it must be weighed separately in the balances, and judged according to the perfect standard of right and wrong.

Three, that God is looking at the scene just as a man would look at it, and expressing Himself just as a man would have done, in such circumstances. He takes the place of a finite being; hears with finite ears, looks with finite eyes, and utters the sentiments of a finite heart. He sees all the present misery and ruin which the scene presents, and they affect Him according to their nature; and as they affect Him, so does He speak, in the words of man. For the feelings implanted in man must, to some extent, be the same as those existing in the bosom of God. Man was made in God's image in respect of his feelings as truly as in respect of his understanding; the human heart is the counterpart of the divine, just as Israel's earthly tabernacle was the copy of that which is above. Hence it is that God so often uses the language of human feeling. It is not merely that God is condescending to man (though this is true), but it is also because the heart of man, being fashioned after that of God, the language that gives utterance to the feelings of the former, will, in a greater or less degree, according to circumstances, give utterance to the feelings of the latter. God's love, hatred, wrath, pity, joy, grief, are all real; and they are, in kind, the same as man's, only there is no sin in them; so that we may say, that all the feelings of man that are holy, or that can be called forth without sin, do exist in God.

But now let us look at the words of our text—"repenting" and "grieving at the heart."

Repent—the word frequently occurs in the same connection as in our text: Exodus 32:14, “The Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people” (see also 1Sa 15:11,35; Jer 26:13,19). In these and other like passages, it denotes that change of mind which is produced towards an object by an alteration of circumstances. Nor is this inconsistent with unchangeableness in God. It is true that He is without variableness or shadow of turning; there is no caprice or vacillation in Him. But His unchangeableness is not a mere arbitrary principle, a thing which makes Him feel the same towards a person, however he may change from good to evil, or from bad to worse. It does not mean that His proceedings are unchangeable, though it does mean that His purposes are so; nay, the very change of His proceedings may be the result and manifestation of the unchangeableness of His purposes. When Adam fell, God changed His mind towards him from favour to displeasure; yet that was just the result of His unchangeableness. When a sinner repents, God changes His mind toward him; yet, this is not changeableness; nay, it is the carrying out of His unchangeableness. His “changing,” in such cases, is the display of His holiness and wisdom. Were He not to change, it would be mere arbitrariness; it would not be wisdom, but foolishness. His “repentance” is not only the true and necessary expression of holy feeling, but it is part of His unchangeable purpose.

Grieve—the word used in reference to man, is found in such places as the following: 2 Samuel 19:2, “The king was grieved for his son”; in reference to God, in such as the following: Psalm 78:40, “How oft did they provoke him in the wilderness, and grieve him in the desert!” and Isaiah 63:10, “They rebelled and vexed” (Hebrew: *grieved*) “his Holy Spirit.” In these passages the word denotes simply and truly what we call “grief”; and then, in the passage before us, as if to deepen the intensity of the expression, and to show how thoroughly real was the feeling indicated, it is added, “at his heart.” The grief spoken of is as true as it is profound. It is not the grief of words. It is not the grief of fancy or sentiment. It is true sorrow of heart. How this can be, in the bosom of the blessed One, it is not easy to show. How He can remain unruffled and unbroken, in His infinite tranquility of being, while “grieved at heart” because of His rebellious creatures, is difficult to explain. How His heaven can abide as bright as ever, without a shade over its dwellings, or sackcloth upon its dwellers, while He is mourning over the ruin of a world and the wretchedness of a guilty child, we cannot say. We take the words as we find them, especially as it is but one out of the many similar utterances of which Scripture is full—utterances all confirmed and reiterated by the Son of God, when He wept over the doomed and apostate Jerusalem.

Yet, after all, what greater difficulty should we find in understanding this sorrowful commiseration⁵ for the lost, than in comprehending the joy with which all heaven is made to resound because of even one sinner saved? Shall heaven ring with gladness when one soul is plucked from the devouring fire; and must it be passive when millions plunge into the everlasting burnings? Is salvation a thing so very blessed as to occasion new joy in the bosom of God, and be the occasion of a new song; and is damnation such a trifle as to be beheld unmoved? Is the saved soul’s deliverance, and recovery of sonship,

⁵ **commiseration** – feeling or showing sorrow or pity for.

so glorious, as to draw forth the utterance of the divine complacency⁶ “in the presence of the angels”; and shall the sinner’s ruin, the lost soul’s funeral, call forth no feeling at all? Would this be true perfection? Passivity and insensibility were not the perfection of Him Who wept over doomed Jerusalem; can they be the perfection of Godhead?

2. God’s Grief Regarding Man

“It repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.”—Genesis 6:6

We come now to ask, why did the Lord thus grieve at His heart?

Firstly, He grieved to see the change which sin had made in the work of His hands. Once it was “very good,” and in this He had rejoiced. Now, how altered! So altered that it could hardly be recognised as the same. Creation was a wreck. The world lay in ruins. Man’s glory had departed. The fair image of his Maker was gone! How could the Creator behold so sad a change, and not be “grieved at his heart”? How could He look upon the sin, the ruin, the darkness, the defilement, and not feel? God cannot be indifferent to the desolation which sin produces, even when righteousness constrains Him not to interfere for its prevention, but only for its punishment. Yes, He feels it, He mourns over it, all the more, because mercy has reached its utmost limit, and righteousness demands the forthputting of His almightiness to avenge, and not to save. It may seem strange that a Being of infinite power should grieve over that which the exercise of almightiness could have prevented. But let us not forget that there is righteousness as well as almightiness in God, and that, while His power can be limited or restrained by nothing out of Himself, it is and must be limited by His other perfections, so that His almightiness cannot accomplish anything that is unrighteous. When, therefore, His power has reached its righteous limits, and can no longer be put forth towards the sinner, then it is that He is grieved at heart. He is grieved that sin has got to such a height that the works of His own hands must be destroyed, that they must be put away from His sight as an unclean thing.

Secondly, He grieved at the dishonour thus brought upon Himself. It was, indeed, but a temporary dishonour; it was one which He would soon repair; but still, it was an obscuration⁷ of His own fair character; it was a clouding of His glory; it was an eclipse, however transient.⁸ It was like a wound inflicted by a most unlooked-for hand, which, however quickly healed, could not but be sorely felt. How could He but be grieved at heart at being thus dishonoured by those whom He had made to glorify Him—dishonoured by a favourite child—dishonoured by those who, He might well expect would have been specially sensitive on such a point, peculiarly tender and jealous of His honour.

⁶ **complacency** – pleasure; satisfaction; gratification.

⁷ **obscuration** – a darkening.

⁸ **transient** – passing away with time, not permanent; temporary.

Thirdly, He grieved at man's misery. Man had not been made for misery. Happiness, like a rich jewel, had been entrusted to him. He had flung it away, as worthless and undesirable. Not only had he taken no pains to retain the treasure, but he had laboured to alienate it. He had offered it for sale to every passer by; nay, he had cast it from him as vile. He had plunged himself into misery. He had refused to be happy. He had not only said to evil, "Evil, be thou my good"; but he had said to sorrow, "Sorrow, be thou my joy." This wretchedness filled his soul, and overshadowed this once blessed earth. How, then, could God but grieve? He is the infinitely blessed God; He knows what blessedness is, and what the want of it must be. Could He, then, fail to be grieved at His heart? He grieves over the sinner's wretchedness, as Jesus wept over Jerusalem. These fears and that grief are the same. "How often would I have gathered thee" (Mat 23:37). "If thou hadst known" (Luk 19:42). "O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments!" (Isa 48:18). "Ye will not come to me that ye might have life" (Joh 5:40). Such are some of the utterances of this divine grief. And then He saw the eternity of man's wretchedness. It was no lifetime's sorrow that lay before man. It was an eternal woe. The infinite eye of Jehovah looked through that whole eternity, realized its bitterness and anguish—saw the torment, the darkness, the worm, the fire, the second death. And seeing these, He was grieved at His heart. For He has no pleasure in man's sorrow, either the sorrow of an hour, or the sorrow of a whole eternity. It is no joy to Him that man should be wretched. Nay, it grieves Him at His heart. Fury is not in Him. Vengeance is His strange work. His joy is to bless, not to curse; to save, not to destroy. He takes an oath before the universe that He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they should turn and live.

Fourthly, He grieved that now He must be the inflicter of man's misery. No alternative remains. There had, for long years, been an alternative. He could be gracious; He could be long-suffering. He could pardon; or, if not actually pardon, He could suspend the gathering vengeance, He could delay the stroke. But now this alternative is denied. Such was the accumulation of sin; such was its hatefulness; such were its aggravations, that grace can no longer hold out against righteousness. Long-suffering has exhausted itself, and judgment must take its course. If matters are allowed to go on as they have been going, the Law will become a dead letter, the divine holiness will be called in question, the faithfulness of God in His threatenings will be suspected. Nay, the very power of Jehovah will be denied—as if it were insufficient either to restrain the evil from arising, or to crush it when it has risen to such a pitch. Mercy had long prevailed against judgment; now judgment prevails against mercy. Grace had done wonders for the sinner. To do more would be to subvert righteousness, and to tamper with the awfulness of Law.

As the gracious Father, He had hitherto delayed the vengeance; but now, as the righteous Judge, He must interpose. He has long lingered in His love, yearning over His rebellious children; He can linger no more. His strange⁹ work must be done, at whatever sacrifice, either to Himself or to man. He must not only withhold the good, He must visit with the evil, and He must do it Himself. He, the Maker, must be the destroyer too.

⁹ **strange** – odd; unusual; irregular.

Man must be given up! He has gone beyond the limit within which grace can be righteously exercised. He has made it impossible for God to bless him. He has put it out of God's power to do anything more in his behalf. He has made it a matter of righteous necessity that God should execute vengeance upon him. God wanted to bless, man has compelled Him to curse. God wanted to save, man has compelled Him to destroy. Condemnation, wrath, ruin, wretchedness for ever, must now be man's portion! The vessel which God had made, and meant for honour and for gladness, must become a vessel of shame, eternal shame, filled with gall and wormwood! No wonder that it grieved Him at His heart!

However incomprehensible the subject may be, still these words of our text are plain. We would not explain them away. We would not dilute them, or rob them of that solemn tenderness, to which they give such mournful utterance. We would not add to them; but neither would we take from them. And surely they do affirm that God's grief is both sincere and deep. It is a Creator's grief. It is a Father's grief. It is grief such as afterwards uttered itself, over Israel, in such words as, "How shall I give thee up, O Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee up, O Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah, how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together" (Hos 11:8). It is grief such as, at a still later day, gave vent to itself in Christ's tears over Jerusalem. And is not all that reality? Was there ever reality like it? Yet all this does not make hell less true, nor the everlasting burnings less terrible.

Many seem to suppose that, because God has not passions such as we have; that because He is not liable to emotions like ours; that because there are no such swellings and subsidings of feverish excitement, interfering with the infinite serenity and blessedness of His divine being, that therefore God does not feel. That it would be degrading Him to suppose that He can be affected, in the remotest degree, by the alternations of joy or sorrow—especially in so far as the condition of His creatures can be conceived as being the source of either.

It is not so. This would be indifference, not serenity. It would make Jehovah not the God Who is revealed to us in the Man Christ Jesus. It would make Him inferior to His creatures in all those tender affections which constitute so noble a part of our being. It would invest Him with the insensibility of Stoicism.¹⁰ But with Him Whom we call our God, there is no such insensibility, no such Stoicism. He is love. He is the God of all grace. He is merciful and gracious, long-suffering, slow to anger, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. He so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son. It is written of Him, that "his soul was grieved for the miseries of Israel" (Jud 10:16); that "in all their affliction he was afflicted" (Isa 63:9). He stoops over us in the fondness of parental love. He yearns over us. He longs to see us happy. He delights to bless. His strange work is to curse. Nay, He is the very fountainhead of love. All the affections of man's soul are but the copy of His; faint indeed and dim, yet truly the copy, the counterpart, the earthly likeness of the heavenly reality. Man's heart is, in all

¹⁰ **Stoicism** – Greek philosophical system advocating indifference to pleasure or pain.

the affections that are holy, the very transcript of God's. In God is the birthplace of all feeling, and shall He not feel? With Him is the well-spring of all affection, and shall He be cold, and divested of all loving sympathies? Shall He give to man such powers of emotion, constituting the divinest part of our nature, and shall He himself be unmoved and immovable? He is the Father of spirits, and shall He so entirely differ from the spirits that He has made? He made them in His own image; and is that image nothing but unsympathizing callousness? Is it but the ice, or the rock, or the iron? He sent His Son to be the revelation of His mind and heart; and do we not see, from that Son, how deeply the Father feels? Do we not see in Him, Who is His perfect image, what is the Creator's sympathy for His creatures in their joys and sorrows? Do we not see in Him, with what strength He can hate the sin, and yet love, nay, weep over, the sinner? Ay, and does not the Holy Spirit also unfold His feelings? And do we not read of that Spirit being resisted, vexed, grieved, as if sorrowing over our coldness, our neglect, our unbelief, our ungodliness?

What, then, can these things mean, but that our God truly and deeply feels? There can, indeed, be nothing carnal, nothing allied to imperfection or weakness, in such sensibility; but to suppose Him to be devoid of feeling, as we too often do, is to deny Him to be perfectly and truly God! Ah! It is only when we learn how profoundly He feels, that we know aright the character of that God with Whom we have to do. It is only when we realize how sincerely He yearns, and pities, and joys, and grieves, and loves, that we understand that revelation which He has made of Himself in the Gospel of His grace, and in the Person of His Incarnate Son. Nor till then do we feel the unutterable malignity of sin, as being a grieving of God, a vexing of His loving Spirit, and become rightly alive to the depravity of our own rebellious natures. It is only then that we can cordially enter into God's condemnation of the evil, and sympathize with Him in that which makes Him grieve. Never, till we give Him credit for feeling as He says He does, can we really long for deliverance from that which is not only the abominable thing which He hates, but that thing of evil and sorrow over which He so sincerely mourns. It is this which gives such power to God's expostulations with the sinner, and His appeals to the sinner's conscience and heart. We are apt to treat these utterances of God as mere words of course, or, at least, as words which, however gracious in themselves, could not be supposed to embody the feelings of Him from Whom they come. It is far otherwise. God not only means what He says, but He feels what He says. He is not unconcerned about our condition, or indifferent to the reception or rejection of His messages. When He says, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked," He utters the deep feeling of His heart. When He says, "How shall I give thee up?" He shows us how He feels. When He says, "O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments," He tells us how He feels. And when His only-begotten Son, in the days of His flesh, said to the unbelieving Jews, "Ye will not come unto me, that ye might have life," He showed us how truly, in this respect, the Father and the Son are One, And that to each poor child of earth, however erring, however dark, however unbelieving, however rebellious, He is stretching out His hands in love, and, not the less sincerely, because, to tens of thousands, He is stretching out these hands in vain.

3. God's Ways and Man's Ways

"Therefore, O thou son of man, speak unto the house of Israel; Thus ye speak, saying, If our transgressions and our sins be upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live? Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel"—Ezekiel 33:10-11

Let us beware of putting a human and finite construction upon things divine and infinite. We need to keep these words in mind, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (compare Isa 55:9). God's character stands out as the contrast of man's, even as light is the contrast of darkness, as paradise is the contrast of the waste howling wilderness.

First, what a contrast are God's thoughts of man to man's thoughts of God! God is seen yearning over His poor wanderer with the profoundest compassion, cherishing thoughts of peace and friendship towards him; man is seen suspecting God, looking on Him as a hard master, an austere man, reaping where He has not sown, and gathering where He has not strawed.

Second, how opposite are God's feelings towards man to man's feelings respecting God! The one love, the other hatred; the one kindness and goodwill, the other enmity!

Third, how different God's estimate of man from man's estimate of God! God's estimate of the value of man is the price He paid for him—His own Son; man's estimate of God is the price he offered for the Son of God—thirty pieces of silver.

Forth, how unlike God's purposes to man's! God says to man, "Live"; man says to God, Let Him die the death; crucify Him; this is the Heir; come, let us kill Him.

Fifth, how far asunder¹¹ are God's ways from man's! God's are all towards man, in the direction of reconciliation; man's are all away from God, repelling His fellowship, and heedless of His favour.

Such is the contrast presented in these two verses. In the former (10th), we have the state of man's heart in reference to God; in the latter, the state of God's heart in reference to man. Let us take up in succession these two points.

One. The state of man's heart in reference to God. This 10th verse clearly refers to Israel's revengeful murmurings against Jehovah. God had visited them both with warning and entreaty, with threats and invitations. These being utterly slighted, judgment smote them. Still God continues entreating and inviting. The judgments are not removed, but the gracious messages remain; nay, are multiplied. This was the state of things which drew forth the rebellious mutterings of our text. Messages of mercy, in the midst of judgments, were what they could neither comprehend nor endure. It was this that raised

¹¹ **asunder** – apart or separate in direction or purpose.

their enmity to its utmost pitch of blasphemous defiance. They did not, they would not, see how perfectly consistent these were with each other; the grace not contradicting the judgment, nor the judgment canceling the grace, but both together forming a blessed and marvelous combination of goodness and severity. But they set the one against the other as if they were irreconcilable, and the one the mockery of the other. They murmured, they fretted, they caviled,¹² they sneered: "If our transgressions be upon us, and we are pining away under them, how should we then live! That is, You tell us of life; You promise us life; yet we find judgment lying on us in full weight. We find ourselves pining, perishing, consuming away. Is it not mockery to speak to us of life? Is not the message of life a falsehood; and is not God insincere in sending it? Surely, if we do perish, we are not to blame. Let Him bear the blame Who is wounding us to death, and yet mocking us with the promise of life!" Desperate and daring words! How fearful to hear the creature thus blaspheming, to see him fighting against the God that made him, especially when that God is entreating him in all the tenderness of divine love, yearning over him in all the lingering fondness of paternal pity and unextinguished grace! It is in this way that the sinner murmurs still. It is thus that he reasons against God, struggling with the Almighty, contending with His power, rushing against the thick bosses¹³ of His buckler.¹⁴

He murmurs against God for not giving him life. He hears the promise of life, yet feels that he has none; and he asks, Why am I thus? God promises life. He proclaims His willingness to give it. I have no life. Is He not mocking me? Christ promises rest. I have none. Can He be sincere? I have been doing all I can—striving, praying, reading books, amending my ways, using means; still there is no peace, no life for me. Can the message be a true one?

Nay, more, he casts the whole blame of his death on God. He says, I see that I must just die; there is no help for it; the blame is not mine, but God's. Death may be my portion hereafter; but how can I help dying? How can I help sinning? If sin and death are my lot, let God see to it. My fallen nature, my education, my circumstances, my temptations—these are my excuses. Thus he accuses God of his sin, and of his doom. He has done all he can, and God will not give him life; must not God be the sole author of his ruin? To this we answer, No; God is not the author of a man's sin, or of his death. He is pure of their blood. The evil is not of God, but of man. If they perish, the guilt is all their own. For mark, the sin is their own, wholly their own. No one forces them to sin. God does not force them to sin, and Satan cannot force them. Their sin is their own, in the fullest sense. But more: it is wholly they who are to blame for their not being delivered: for the real and true reason why they are not delivered is that they will not take life in God's way, and upon God's terms. They may be willing enough to have it, but not in God's way. They insist on paying for it, or meriting it, or doing something towards its attainment, or at least towards rendering themselves not wholly unworthy of its being conferred upon them. And when God tells them that it is bought already,

¹² **caviled** – resorted to trivial faultfinding; quibbled.

¹³ **bosses** – knobs or studs fastened to a flat surface.

¹⁴ **buckler** – a small, round shield held on the arm.

and cannot be bought over by them, that it cannot be earned by them, that if they will not take it free they cannot have it at all, they turn round upon Him. And, in the fierce rage and dark rebellion of disappointed pride, urged on and embittered by the deep anguish of their wretched souls, exclaim, It is all a mockery, a deception! As if it were some relief to them, in their anguish, to find God insincere, and to be able to fling upon Him the blame of their perdition.¹⁵

There may be some here thus putting life away from them. You feel your need of it; you are wretched under a sense of the want of it; and yet you are refusing it. You will not have it after all; for the terms do not please you. This life becomes yours, not by toiling or struggling, but simply by receiving the divine testimony concerning it—by listening to the voice of Him Who, while He says, “Ye will not come to me that ye might have life,” says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Joh 14:6). “He that believeth on me, though he were dead, yet shall he live” (Joh 11:25). Could the blessing be cheaper? Could it be had on easier, simpler terms? Could it be brought nearer, or could you be made more entirely welcome to it? It is not by climbing some inaccessible hill, or treading your darksome way through some tangled forest; it is just by sitting down where you are at this moment, and drinking of that well of living water that is bursting up freshly at your side.

The life of a sinner, as such, can only end in the second death. If it is to end in gladness, and to run on into the life everlasting, it must be begun over again. The evil does not lie merely in the leaves and branches of the tree, but in the stem and root; the sap is tainted, and unless that is healed, all efforts at improvement are vain. It was this, evidently, that the Lord meant to tell Nicodemus, when He startled him with the awful words, “Ye must be born again.” Our whole life must be treated as utterly evil, our spiritual life-blood thoroughly corrupted, and no remedy can be of any use save that which goes to the very source. The sinner’s life must be recommenced from its very first outset. It is not merely to be gone over and retouched; but it is begun anew, as if it had never existed before. “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, *except a man be born again*, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Joh 3:3).

It is the disbelief or forgetfulness of this that produces so much false religion, so many abortions, so many half-discipleships, so many shipwrecks of faith. The religion of form and rite, of lukewarmness and compromise, of sentiment and fashion, of intellect and philosophy, has begun somewhere short of this—short of the birth from above. It may have gone back a considerable way, but not to the very beginning. It may have dug a little way down, to reach some kind of foundation, but not deep enough to reach the one sure foundation laid in Zion. In this it falls short, and therefore totally fails. It does not matter how long the cable may be; if it be but one foot too short, it is useless. So it does not matter how greatly a man may change his life, or how religious he may make it. Unless he begin it all over again; unless he be “*born of the Spirit*,” it profits nothing. The one authentic commencement of religion in the soul of a man is the being born again, “not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and

¹⁵ **perdition** – damnation; loss of the soul.

abideth for ever” (1Pe 1:23). And, as it was connection with the death of the first Adam that wrought our ruin, so it is connection with the resurrection of the second Adam that works restoration and blessedness. “We are begotten again unto a lively hope, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1Pe 1:3).

That well-known apostle of the last century, John Berridge (1716-1793), wrote his own epitaph some years before his death; and in it he left his solemn testimony on this point. It is a sermon in itself. “Here lie the earthly remains of John Berridge, late vicar of Everton, an itinerant servant of Jesus Christ, who loved his Master and His work; and after running on His errands many years, was called up to wait on Him above. Reader! Art Thou Born Again? No salvation without a new birth.”

Unready sinner! Yonder is the Judge, and the throne, and the gathering crowd, waiting their sentence! Hear the shout, and the trumpet, and the thunder, and the voice of Majesty! Are you looking out, or are you asleep? Are you preparing, or are you resolved to risk everything, and brave the Judge of all? What is time worth? What is gain, or pleasure, or sin, or earth worth? Nothing. What is the soul worth? What are heaven, and God, and Christ, and the kingdom, and the glory, worth? Everything. And yet these are nothing to you! One piece of earth’s gold, one acre of land, one smile of gay companionship, one wreath of the world’s honour, one day of time’s power and greatness, you would prefer to all that is divine and eternal! O madness of the human heart, how unsearchable and incurable! O spell of sin, how potent and enthralling! O snare of the evil one, how blinding, how fatal, how successful!

Two. Having thus seen, from the tenth verse, the state of man’s heart in reference to God, let us mark the state of God’s heart in reference to man, as we find it brought out in the eleventh verse: “As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?”

It is thus that God meets Israel’s hard thoughts concerning Him. Instead of being provoked to anger by this most daring rebelliousness, He answers their suspicious unbelief by a reiteration of His words of grace. How patient, how long-suffering, how condescending! Instead of executing vengeance, He renews the assurances of His most unfeigned¹⁶ and affectionate interest in their welfare. Unmoved by their horrid taunts and charges of insincerity, He approaches them in the posture of a friend; He repeats the declaration of His gracious mind; He adds new, and larger, and fuller asseverations of His unwearied and inexhaustible compassion. Nay, in order to efface every suspicion, and anticipate every form and shade of unbelief, He adds His oath—His oath as the living God—that by two immutable things in which it was impossible for God to lie, they might have the most deliberate assurance of His gracious mind, and the remotest possibility of such a charge against Himself as that of insincerity to be provided against.

God has thus in the most solemn way declared to us His loving intentions. He has laid bare the inmost thoughts of His heart. He tells us that these thoughts are the very

¹⁶ **unfeigned** – genuine; real; sincere.

opposite of ours; that His desire is not to curse, but to bless; not to destroy, but to save. And what an oath is this! It is not the oath of a man, but of the eternal God; of Him who liveth for ever and ever. As if His word might be called in question, He adds His oath. He swears by Himself, because He could swear by no greater: He swears by His own life—the greatest of all realities, the most certain of all certainties. “As surely as I am—as surely as I am Jehovah—so certainly I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.” What an infinite certainty is this! “An oath for confirmation is,” the apostle says, “an end of all strife” (Heb 6:16). So should this oath be to the sinner an end of all suspicion, of all doubt, as to the gracious mind of God. How anxious must Jehovah be to meet and remove all your jealous fears—to convince you that He is not the false being which you take Him to be—that He is sincere in His desires to bless you! O sinner, what could you have more than this? If this will not make you ashamed of your unbelief, what will? If this will not convince you of God’s honesty and true-hearted yearning over you, what will or can? Ah, how unfeigned, as well as how infinite, are His thoughts of grace towards you! And is there not something in this gracious commiseration, so solemnly affirmed upon oath, fitted irresistibly to attract and win the most jealous and unbelieving heart?

4. God’s Declaration to Man

Let us consider now the substance of this divine declaration thus made on oath, and recorded for the sinner’s use in all ages. It is a twofold declaration: In the first part of it God denies the imputation¹⁷ cast upon Him, of seeking the sinner’s death; in the second, He declares Himself to be most sincerely desirous of his life.

Firstly, He has no pleasure in their death. This does not imply that the wicked shall not die. No. The wicked shall be turned into hell. Millions have already perished; millions more shall perish. There is the second death, the death beyond which there is no life for the impenitent—the unquenchable fire, the everlasting burnings. But still it remains true that God has no pleasure in man’s death. He did not kindle hell in order to gratify His revenge. He does not cast sinners headlong into its endless flames in order to get vent to His blind fury. No. He has no pleasure in their death. He will finally condemn the unbelieving, but not because He delights to do so, but because He is the righteous Lord that loveth righteousness. Whatever your treacherous heart may say, whatever your jealous suspicions may whisper, it remains a truth for ever true—a truth affirmed upon oath—that God has no pleasure in your death! Are you seeking to escape eternal death? It is well. But do you think that God is trying to thwart you? Nay, He is as desirous of this as you can be, only His desires run in a righteous channel, and He can only give vent to them in a righteous way. He is not bent upon your ruin. Was the father bent upon the ruin of his prodigal? Was the shepherd intent upon the destruction of his stray sheep? Was the Son of God delighting in the desolation of Jerusalem when He wept over it? Or was the God of Israel bent upon the misery of His people when He said, “How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee up, Israel? how shall I make thee as

¹⁷ **imputation** —(something) charged to one’s account.

Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? Mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together.” The God that made you is not your deadly enemy. The God in Whom you live, and move, and have your being, has no pleasure in your death. He did not send His Son to destroy, but to save; He did not nail Him to the tree that you might die, but live; He did not send His Holy Spirit to seal your perdition, but to pluck you as a brand from the burning.

Secondly, His desire is, that the wicked should turn and live. As in the first clause of this oath He denied the imputation cast upon Him, that He had pleasure in the sinner’s death, so, in this second part, He declares His wish that they should turn and live. This declaration is the expression of a thoroughly honest desire on the part of God. It is not the language of insincere profession, or of feigned earnestness. There is nothing here of exaggeration or random utterance. Each word bears the impress of ingenuous¹⁸ truthfulness. God means what He says when He affirms, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they should turn and live.” It is to life—life everlasting—that He points your eye, sinner. It is of life that He desires to make you partaker. And surely it is life that you need. For what one word more fully or more terribly describes your present state than death? You are dead! Dead, not like the stone or the rock; that would at least be freedom from torment. Dead, not like the withered leaf or the uprooted tree; that would at least be unconsciousness of loss, and ignorance of what might have been won. But you are dead to all that is worth living for, and yet alive to all that makes life a burden and a woe. Yours is a death whose present form is the utter absence of everything that God calls peace or blessedness, whose future form is the undying worm, the weeping, and the wailing, and the gnashing of teeth. You are dead to that which you were created for, as well as to Him who created you. You live in pleasure on the earth, yet you are dead! You smile, and sport, and dance, and revel, and make merry; yet you are dead! For the life in which God is not; the life of which He is not the spring and centre, is utter death! And that is misery to you—misery now, misery in the long, long ages to come!

Ah! surely, then, it is life that you need—such a life as will fill that soul of yours with gladness—such a life as shall not merely shed sunshine around you, but shall pour its joyous freshness into every region of your spirit, and fill every recess of your immortal being with the joy unspeakable and full of glory.

It is such a life that God desires you to possess. It was to bestow upon you such a life that He gave up His Son. It is that such a life might find entrance into you, that He is striving with you by His Spirit. And it is that, without another hour’s delay, you might become possessors of such a life, that He sends to you once more this message of life—so unequivocal, so genuine, so pitiful.¹⁹

Do you say, If God wants me to live, why does He not at once give me life? In other words, why does He not force life upon my acceptance, and burst through every barrier? I ask in return, Is God bound to take your way in giving life? I ask again, Do you really suppose that a person is not sincere in his kindness, because he does not carry out that

¹⁸ **ingenuous** – frank; open; candid.

¹⁹ **pitiful** – full of pity or compassion.

kindness by every means, lawful or unlawful? Is it not possible that there may be a limit to that kindness compatible with the most perfect sincerity? You admit that God does not wish you to be ungodly; yet you are ungodly; might you not as well say, God must really desire me to be ungodly, else I should not be so? Nay, you admit that God wishes you to be holy, just as He wishes all His creatures to be holy. Should you think of saying, God does not desire me to be holy, else He would make me holy. God must have pleasure in my unholiness, else He would not permit me to remain in it. Surely this would be false reasoning as well as daring profanity. Not less so is it when you argue, God cannot really desire to bless me, else He would bless me. God cannot desire me to live, else He would give me life.

There may be difficulty for finite man to reconcile the two things—our want of life and God's desire that we should possess it; but there is no difficulty and no doubt as to the blessed fact itself. God's desire is that we should turn and live! Not all the sophistry²⁰ of unbelief, nor all the malignant falsehoods of the evil one, can shake or alter this mighty, this most glorious truth. God's desire, His undisguised and cordial wish, is, that the wicked should not die, but live! He has spoken it, He has repeated it; He has sealed it with His own most solemn oath; and woe be to the sinner who, giving way to the subtle suggestions of his own jealous heart, refuses to take God at His word, hesitates to give Him credit for speaking the plain truth when He lifts up his Hand to heaven and swears, "As I live, saith the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but rather that he should turn from his ways and live."

The expostulation, with which all this closes, is one of the most urgent importunity²¹ on the part of God, proving yet more fully His real desire to bless. It is like one vehemently enforcing an invitation upon an unwilling listener—making a last effort to save the heedless or resisting sinner. He lifts up His voice, He stretches out His hand, He exhorts, He commands, He expostulates, He entreats, "Turn ye, turn ye, from your evil ways; for why will ye die?" Must not He Who thus reasons and remonstrates with the sinner, repeating and re-repeating His entreaties, enforcing and urging home His message with every kind of loving argument, as well as with every form of solemn appeal—must not He be truly in earnest? Is it within the remotest bounds of possibility or conceivability that He is insincere; that He does not really mean what He says?

The ways from which He calls on them to turn are named by Him "evil ways"; and what He calls evil must be truly so—hateful in His eyes, as well as ruinous to the soul. The end of these ways He pronounces to be death; so that sinners must either turn or die. It is the broad way which leadeth down to death on which they are walking, and there is no hope of escaping unless they retrace their steps. As certainly as their bodies shall return to dust, so certainly shall their souls have their portion in the second death, and their dwelling-place in the eternal tomb of the fiery lake, where, instead of the worm of earth preying upon their lifeless flesh, there shall be the worm that never dies, gnawing their spirits. And making them feel that all that has hitherto been known of death on

²⁰ **sophistry** – unsound or misleading but clever reasoning.

²¹ **importunity** – persistence in requesting or demanding.

earth—its pangs, its throes, its horrors, its separations—has been but a type of what is coming. That the reality contained in that word DEATH had never before been imagined—nor, indeed, can be—till the Judge’s sentence has cut them off from God for ever, and flung around them the darkness of the endless midnight; till hell has closed its gate upon them, and made damnation sure!

But then there is another way, whose end is life; and the life, which forms the termination of the one, is as certain as the death which forms the termination of the other. It is on this way that God so earnestly desires to see them walking. However wide astray they have gone, and however near the confines of the second death they may have come, He beckons them back with His gracious hand, and beseeches them with His most loving voice, “Come now, and let us reason together” (Isa 1:18). Nay, more, He commands them to turn. It is not mere liberty to retrace your steps that He gives you; He lays His command upon you; and it is at your peril if you disobey. “Am I at liberty to come to God?” you ask perhaps. At liberty to come! Is that the way you put it? At liberty to obey His direct command! Do you ask, Am I at liberty to keep the Sabbath? Am I at liberty to honour my father and mother? Am I at liberty to forbear swearing, or stealing, or coveting? Who asks such questions as these? And shall any sinner upon earth—even the ungodliest that ever forsook God and walked in his lusts, and trampled on the cross, and quenched the Spirit—shall any on this side of the second death presume to ask, Am I at liberty to return to God? At liberty! *You dare not do otherwise*. There is all the obligation that a command can give; there is a necessity laid upon you, an immediate necessity, a necessity from which nothing can loose you, a necessity arising out of the very righteousness of that God Who is commanding you to quit your unrighteousness, a necessity springing from the certain doom that awaits you if you turn not. Yes; there is a necessity, one of the greatest of all necessities, laid on you by God, to turn and live!

God expostulates with you, and asks, Why will ye die? Have you any reason to give for preferring death, or for supposing that you must just die, and that you cannot help it, and that the blame is not yours, but God’s? Must you die? Must you really die? Is there no help? There was, indeed, once a reason for your dying, a reason which made dying inevitable—the ancient law of the universe: “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” But now the Son of God has come, and He has taken up that law, and has so fulfilled and honoured it by dying Himself, that the same inevitable necessity for your dying no longer exists. It was once only righteous that you should die; now it is as righteous that you should live. Righteous death—that was once our doom; now righteous life is the gift which God presents to you. Life upon righteous terms; life in a way that honours righteousness; life through a channel as holy as it is free: it is this that is now announced to you, and it is in reference to this that God asks, Why will ye die?

Is life not desirable? Can a soul be in love with death? Or is death so inevitable that it is vain for you to flee from it? Or is there some barrier in your way? Or is God not really willing to remove the death, and to bestow the life? Are these the reasons? Or what answer do you mean to make to God’s question, so urgently, so importunately put and pressed home on you, “Why will ye die?”