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A COMPLETE LIFE.

“ I said, O my God, take me not away in the midst of my days : Thy years are throughout all generations.”—PSALM cii. 24.

THIS is a prayer which springs from the bosom of the Old Testament, and it bears the impress of its time. Life and immortality had not yet been brought to light ; and long life in the land which the Lord their God had given them was a special promise made to these ancient saints. The prayer looks to that promise. The man asks that he may not be cut off prematurely from the work and enjoyment of life in this world. It is thus the request for a complete life. But he is a believing man who submits his wish to the will of God, and who is ready to accept life in the form in which God orders it. He feels that there can be no real life without God, but that with Him it is certain to have a perfect and happy issue. In such a prayer, then, a future and eternal life is implied. The desire for it is struggling in the man's soul, though the full vision of it has not yet opened before him. When the Gospel comes, and shows us eternal life in Jesus Christ, it merely unfolds into flower and fruit the germ which is already contained here. We shall avail ourselves of the light of the Gospel to explain what the meaning of this prayer is, and on what ground it is urged. Our subject briefly stated, then, is—A Complete Life, and the Plea for it.

I. When is it that a Life may be said to be Complete ?

Here we may observe, that while length of life in this world is not the chief blessing of the New Testament, there is nothing wrong in desiring it, and that, when well used, it may have on it special marks of God's wisdom and kindness. The love of life is natural, for God has given us a strong attachment to the world where our eyes have first opened on this beautiful earth and pleasant sunlight. He has surrounded us with families and friends, whose love makes

existence sweet. There are duties to be performed in which we feel we are needed, and spiritual interests to be fixed and promoted before we enter with full acquiescence on the great and untried scenes that lie beyond. Length of days, like every other possession, like power, or wealth, or intellect, is a gift to be employed in God's service—the woof on which a good man may weave valuable material, and many rich and fair colours. And yet we must remember that long life has not always been granted to some of God's truest friends. Even in the Old Testament there is the lesson that a complete life does not need to be a prolonged one ; the very first death recorded, that of Abel the righteous, was sudden and premature. Enoch lived but a short time on earth compared with his contemporaries, and Elijah was called away before his natural powers had failed. It is enough to recall Abijah the son of Jeroboam, and the good Josiah, and to mention, above all, that our Lord and Master, the central life of God's entire Word, was cut off long ere He had reached the mid-time of His days. It is necessary, then, in speaking of a complete life, to find those elements that will suit either him who has come to his grave in a full age, or the young who have been taken away in the beginning of their days. We thank God that in His Word we can find a goal where the old and the young may meet in a complete and perfect life.

The first thing needed to gain this is that a man should have lived long enough to secure God's favour. Until he has found this he has not attained the great end for which life has been given to an intelligent and responsible creature. Whatever else a man may possess in this world—its power, its fame, its riches, its learning—if he has not entered into the favour of God, if he is not living in His fellowship, he has not seen life. Its palace gate has not been opened to him, its light has not visited his eye, its pulse has not begun to beat in his heart. He is less the possessor of what he

calls his own than Belshazzar was of his kingdom when his dethronement was being written on his palace wall ; as little as a dead Pharaoh in his pyramid was lord of the treasures of Egypt. The favour of God alone can make anything on earth truly ours, and truly good ; can give, to what is good, permanence, and render it a foretaste of things infinitely better. Whensoever a man dies without this, he is taken away in the midst of his days, hurried out of existence before he has secured its one grand prize. Death draws the curtain at midnight and breaks his dream : “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee ; then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided ? ” But if God’s favour has been gained, we can rejoice in the blessed equality of all who reach it. “The child dies an hundred years old ; ” the youth comes to his grave “in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in, in his season.” We lament early Christian deaths as untimely, but, in that favour of God which is life, every term attains maturity. Some find the gate of heaven by a short path, while others enter after long years of toil and travel. While some of us continue careful and cumbered about many things—an honourable work if we do not complain of it—there are those who go in and sit down at once at the feet of Christ, when they have found “the one thing needful, the good part which shall not be taken away.” Let me ask myself, Can I say that death shall find my life thus complete ? There is but one way of assurance. It is through laying hold of that Saviour of whom it is said, “Ye are complete in Him ; ” who offers Himself freely to our acceptance with the words, “He that findeth Me, findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord.”

A complete life has this in it still further, that it has done God and His world some service. We are here not merely to find God’s favour, but to do God’s work, to be followers of Christ, who said, “I must work the works of Him who sent Me, while it is day.” His was the one great perfect

life, which never spared a labour, never missed an opportunity, and looking back on which He could say so calmly, "It is finished." How far we are from filling up that model! How ready, while the bridegroom tarries, to slumber and sleep, and awake with a start because we have let the supreme moment take us unawares! And, therefore, there are degrees of completeness even in Christian lives. They all reach the haven, but some of them with fuller sail and richer freight. The salvation in the great day will be to all God's people of free grace, and yet we must believe that its rest will be sweeter to the wearied labourer, and the enjoyment greater to him who brings home sheaves which are the fruit of tears and toil. "They joy before Him according to the joy of the harvest." But withal, and in view of those who have reaped long and largely, it is a comfort to think that no true Christian life is passed in vain. God will not terminate it till it can appear before Him in Christ's own spirit, "Behold, I and the children whom Thou hast given Me." Stephen's Christian life was short, and yet what ends it gained! The dying thief's was still shorter, but how many sermons his words have preached to dying men! The child that Christ takes into His arms, through death, from its mother's bosom, can be made to draw the heart to the heavenly kingdom, and when we can do no work, but only lie passive in His keeping, we may be fulfilling purposes of far-reaching wisdom and mercy. It is a view of the coming judgment as wonderfully tender as sublime, that what Christians forget, Christ remembers, and reckons up, as done to Himself—the cup of cold water given in His name. It may stir us up, if we are indolent, to be active; it may persuade us, if we are weak and helpless, to lie resignedly still; it may encourage us to cast over our imperfect past His perfect righteousness, and to dedicate our feeble all to His service, when we have the assurance that whether the life be long

or short, He will make it "neither barren nor unfruitful in the day of the Lord Jesus."

The next thing we mention in a complete life is that it should close with submission to the call of God. Even a good man may not always be ready for this. Warm hearts and active natures are sometimes so interested in the friends and work around them, that it is hard to find an open place for parting. The speaker in this psalm felt it so, and Hezekiah likewise when he wept sore against the door of death. Yet God has His own way of making such as these resigned, and He doubtless does it in the secret of His presence, when we cannot hear their words of consent. But it is more pleasant to us when we hear from the lips, or see from the bearing, the act of self-surrender. Joseph reached it when he said so simply and quietly, "I die, and God will surely visit you;" and Moses, when leaving his great labour and wish unfinished, he looked up and touched completeness in that word, "Thou art a Rock, Thy work is perfect." We have lived long enough when we can tranquilly give up the problem we have been working at to God, that He may complete it—when we can rest assured that He will still be a God to us, and to our friends, though He makes death for awhile divide our paths; and that His way to the triumph of His cause can be over the graves of His servants, with a banner that never droops though the hands of all of us relax their hold. This submission may be gained through the long experience of the Christian life; it may be witnessed in the quiet peace with which the setting sun falls aslant on the softened look and silver hair, but it is granted often to those who close their eyes on a beautiful dawn, or bright noonday, as unrepiningly as if they had seen all God's goodness in the land of the living. There is a dew of youth that exhales in sunlight, as there is a dew of nightfall that waits for the morning. It comes, like God's dew, always from a clear sky, and tells of His com-

pleted work. The man is not torn from life but loosed. He signs his own name beneath God's discharge, and goes to other work which is ready for him. The great Roman general gathered his robes round him, under the strokes of his enemies, covered his face, and sank like a conqueror rather than a victim. But in that same Rome there was a nobler farewell to life when the Apostle said, "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand;" and when he invited all to share in it "who love Christ's appearing." For still, when any one has learned at God's call to gather in human desires and hopes, and to put them in His hand, and has been seen, not with covered but open face, to meet the last enemy, his life is complete, for he is ready and willing to die.

The last thing we mention in a complete life is that it should look forward to a continual life with God. Without this, all we have spoken of would be incomplete. What estimate can I set on God's favour if it lifts me up to the view of Divine loving-kindness, only to let me fall into nothingness? What deep interest can I be taking in the cause of truth and righteousness, if I have no care about seeing its progress and triumph? And how can I be ready to give up my earthly life at God's call, if I am bidding an eternal farewell to God Himself? Would it not be of all things the most imperfect and unnatural that a man should be a friend of God, and take delight in approaching to Him, and conversing with His thoughts as they speak to us in His Word and in His works, and that the man should feel, at every moment, that all this can be broken off for ever? that he should have a view of a universe of truth and beauty and goodness, opening up through parting clouds—of a divine purpose working to a far-off end which he knows and feels must come, and that he should lay down his head in the dust of utter forgetfulness, and be willing to have it so? Then, the higher the form of life the more miserable

its issue. There are many bitter farewells in our world, but we can bear them all if we do not need to bid farewell to God; for to live with Him is to preserve the hope which shall restore all we meanwhile lose. But the thought of such a farewell has in it the proof that its reality is impossible. Where God shows His face, opens His heart, to a man, it is the seal of eternal life. This gift and calling of God is without repentance. And herein we have the assurance of the final completeness of a life. There is room here for rectifying all that is wrong, for supplying all that is wanting, for doing to us above all that we ask or think. It meets the longest life and the shortest with the same promise of perfection. Our night taper lasts long enough if it lets in the eternal day. "He asked life of Thee, and Thou gavest it him, even length of days for ever and ever."

II. We come now to consider the Plea for a Complete Life which this prayer contains.

The Psalmist contrasts his days with God's years, his being cut off in the midst of his days with those years that are throughout all generations. There is deep pathos in it, a sense of his own utter frailty and evanescence. And yet in the heart of it there is faith and hope. It is an appeal to God as the possessor of a complete life in the most absolute sense, the inhabitant and owner of eternity. "Thou hast Thine own perfect and everlasting existence; give to Thy creature a share in it, according to his nature. He thirsts for life and comes to the fountain of it. Here in Thy world, or elsewhere, if it may be, let him live in Thy universe and look up to Thyself." In putting this plea beside the prayer, we do not in any way strain the meaning of the passage. Let any one read this psalm attentively, and he will feel that this is its entire bearing. We have a man to whom life, as he sees it, behind and around him, is broken and disappointing. His body, his spirit, his earthly relationships, the cause of God

so dear to his heart, are falling to decay. What can he do but turn to God Himself? What but hold fast by His eternity and unchanging purpose? In the mind of an ancient believer the prayer had reference, first and most clearly, to this present world; in our view it has widened to the full expectation of a world to come. But, by whomsoever presented, it expresses the instinctive aversion of man to give up a conscious and personal existence. It is a cry from the profoundest depths of the soul to be preserved from extinction, and it is a cry to its Maker founded on His nature as the living, everlasting God. Let us look at some thoughts implied in this plea.

1. The eternal life of God suggests the thought of His power to grant this request. He is the possessor of independent and everlasting existence, and can share it with His creatures as seems good to Him. "He only hath immortality," that is, He only, as no one else. It belongs to Him, underived, unconditioned, held by no will, ruled by no law out of Himself. But, as we see, He is a generous giver; it is His nature to be not only living, but life-giving. In His hand is the breath of all that lives, and the soul of all mankind. And they take from Him not so much as the showers of the earth do from the waters of the ocean, or the rays of the sun from the brightness of his orb; for these draw from the substance of their source, but the creatures of God derive being from His will, and leave Him unchanged and unchangeable. No one can rise to this view of God, without feeling that it is in His power to bestow life in higher and more enduring forms than any that are seen around us. Would it not be a most unnatural and irrational limitation of the Eternal Source of being to affirm that He can give origin only to kinds and measures of life such as appear in this world, that He can be the parent merely of creatures that die? If this world shows us the extent of His ability to be the Giver of life, it

may be said that death more than life is the sign of His workmanship. The graves have long since far outnumbered the living inhabitants; and existence, in the highest modes in which we are acquainted with it, is so brief, so troubled, so occupied with thoughts of its own preservation and fears of its extinction, that life can scarcely be enjoyed in the anticipation of the loss of it. An eternal and conscious Author of the world must surely have ability to pass beyond the limits of our narrow experience, and must have some means of answering the cry of His intelligent creatures that "they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." This cry, so deep, so constant, whence does it come if it is not of His own prompting, and shall not the everlasting God be able to satisfy the desires He suggests? When we think of it thus, the tokens of His quickening and preserving power in nature come to sustain us. We can look not at the side of death but of life in them, at sunrises and springs and perpetual renewals, and we can reason that He who gives life in such wonderful profusion, can bestow it in still more glorious and permanent forms. "O Lord, Thou preservest man and beast. Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings. For with Thee is the fountain of life; in Thy light shall we see light."

2. The eternal being of God suggests the thought of His immutability to secure the request. The unchangeableness of God in the midst of all the changes of our life is a deep source of comfort. Those ancient saints dwelt upon it more than we seem to do, and they were made very strong by it. It consoled them in the absence of the clear view of their own immortality; it was the soil in which the seed of it lay, and to which we should still seek to carry down the roots of our faith. Beneath this shifting face of things, where we look on endless change, there is a great Life that is not only the source but the sustenance of ours, a life

that is not blind and purposeless, but conscious and wise. It is not merely a Life, but an ever-living One, and it is in His bosom that we are born and live and die. We have many deaths before we come to the last—some of them which seem sorer than even the last can be—deaths of desires, deaths of hopes, deaths of friends. And yet, if we have carried them to God, there has come, from these deaths, a life, some new and higher hope, some deeper and richer possession of the soul. Amid these changes we have felt that we were taking in something unchanging, felt, at least, that there was something unchanging which could be taken in. And this may give us the hope that the last change will have a like result, the last death a corresponding life to us. We may have the confidence of this if we realize the thought of an ever-living God, who not only gave being to our souls, but holds them in His hand, and puts into them desires after Himself. All the changes, whether of life or death, cannot affect our relation to Him, except in bringing us nearer. Without an eternal God, what refuge would there be for troubled souls? When the sea is tempest-tossed, we flee to land; when the land quakes, we look to heaven; when all things are dissolved, then to Him who says, "I am the Lord, I change not." We may lie quietly down in our little earthly homes when we have the overarching sky of God's hand above us, the shadow of the Almighty; and we may lie down hopefully in our graves, when we commit ourselves to an unchanging God. "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

3. Still further, the thought of God's eternal being suggests His Divine consistency as an encouragement to this request. He has done so much that we may infer He will, if we ask Him, do still more. Man's wish for immortality does not, as some say, spring from a mere animal craving, from the love of living on, but from his being made able to

conceive of an endless existence. The lower creatures have no such desire, because they have no such conception. But man can conceive of endless existence as in the possession of one great personal Being, and may plead for it on the ground that he has been made capable of looking forward to it. It could not be his Maker's design to tantalize him with a vision of what is for ever unattainable, to show him the glory of an endless life, and then to say to him, "This shall never be thine—no more of life for thee than this drop with which I now touch thy lips, and which awakens in thee the thirst to live on." What a universe would such a thought present to us! a God who drinks of the golden cup of immortality all alone, in full view of creatures whom He tempts with its sparkle, to whom He shakes some scattered drops from the brim, while they beg for more that they may not die, and beg in vain! For, let it be considered, that the life they ask, if it be a true request, is not a mere life of animal existence. There are ties formed here between soul and soul that cry out for an eternity to be renewed in, and better never to have known hearts so tender and true than to feel that we have bidden them an everlasting farewell. There are questions raised about the problems of being, the wisdom, the justice, the goodness of the arrangements of this universe, which our little life cannot answer, and which knock with an imperious demand at the eternal gate. Above all, there are the aspirations of the spirit after the infinite Friend and Father, for which we thank Him most, if He has stirred them within us, and which we know to be deep realities, longings that draw down Divine bequests, communings which find an answer from a Spirit higher than our own. Are these never to close upon their object, and become something more than glimpses and foretastes?

Let us think, then, with ourselves in this way: I feel when I am in my best moments that these things are to be

the perfection of my nature, if I ever reach it. But I cannot reach it without an immortality. Will not the being who presents me with this aim, and has formed me capable of conceiving of an immortality, grant me the immortality without which the aim can never be reached? When I contemplate Him, I see that His eternity is the enclosing zone, the compact and mighty girdle of all His attributes, without which they would be scattered, conflicting forces, aimless and chaotic and fruitless. And what eternity is to God, immortality is to man. It is the indispensable requisite to the unity and completeness of his being. If, then, God has made Himself my highest standard, His unalterable truth and righteousness and goodness the goal towards which I should press, may I not expect that the course will be opened which leads to the goal? Without this, His attributes would be, for His children, the perpetual object of their despairing gaze. We may plead surely that He who has given us such a Divine plan of life should in His consistency make the term of our life commensurate with it. "O my God, take me not away in the midst of my days: Thy years are throughout all generations."

Last of all, let us say that God's eternal being is a plea for this request, because it suggests His Divine compassion for us. Those men who think they exalt God by making Him indifferent to humanity are as far wrong in their philosophy as in their divinity. They speak of Him as so high above us in His infinite nature that He regards us no more than we do the short-lived insects of a summer evening, or the drifting leaves on the autumn winds. But the greatest natures are the most sensitively tender, and a true man has a feeling akin to sympathy for the insect of a day, a touch of pity when he sees the yellow leaf; if not for itself, yet for what it signifies. Great natures are made not more limited by their greatness, but more comprehensive; and the eternity of God does not shut out the

thoughts and trials of human lives, but brings them more within His merciful regard. It is thus the Bible puts it, and it finds an echo in our hearts. "He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust." Frail man! "He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passeth away, and cometh not again." When we feel a touch of tenderness to the feeble creatures around us, to the bird or butterfly that sings its song, and flutters its hour, and dies, let us not imagine we are more compassionate than God. Every spark of mercy is from His hearth. And when He has put into our souls a sense of a higher life, and a cry for its fulness in Himself, let us not believe He will treat us worse than the beasts that perish, that He will meet their wants in His great liberality and leave ours in endless disappointment.

When we converse with such thoughts as these, when we feel that, short-lived and imperfect as we are, we can conceive of God's eternity, comprehend something of His consistency and compassion, our future life becomes not so much a thing of doubt. It is when we dwell only in dust that dust seems all. And we let the spirit waken and rise to God, it feels its kinship with His eternal nature, till we can say with the prophet, "Art not thou from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? we shall not die." It is not always that we can realize these truths, but, in the proportion in which we do, we feel them to be the power and blessedness of life. If we have not learned them at all, the shadow of the solemn words of Scripture falls from this world upon eternity, "Without God, without hope." "He is light, and in Him is no darkness at all;" but without Him, the future is "a land of darkness, as darkness itself." The only way to have the hope of a blessed immortality is to have something in our souls which we can reasonably wish to be made immortal, something that is worthy to survive death and earth and time; that is, something of

God within us now. As we live with him here, we have the assurance of living with Him for ever. Where He gives Himself, He gives a share in that eternity which is His home.

We would not leave the subject without saying a word about the full answer to this request. We have been dealing with a question which to some extent involves the answer; and it is well that it should be put in every point of view, in order that, when the answer is finally given, it may be felt to be sufficient. This, indeed, may be one reason why God left the wise men of the old heathen world to deal with this problem on a mere human basis, and why He put it in such different ways into the hearts of His ancient saints by His Holy Spirit—"If a man die, shall he live again?"

It was, no doubt, to fix attention on the great answer, and on Him who has given it. It will require time for this answer to work its way into the world's heart, as it required time to mature the question. But we who profess to be Christians should feel already how it meets the case. Our Saviour Jesus Christ has appeared "to abolish death, and bring life and immortality to light through His Gospel." His earthly history shows us what a complete life is, a life led in no imaginary sphere, but amid the duties and temptations, the pains and sorrows, which daily press upon us. And it was followed by a death which puts us in a position to aim at His life. When we receive it in its Divine meaning, "the Lord our Righteousness," it covers all the sinful past which paralyzes our endeavour, offers us a free pardon that we may serve God as His reconciled children, and secures that Holy Spirit who is the Giver of life, and who works all our works in us. And, what is most wonderful, while He was accomplishing all this, it was in a way that never removes Him out of the reach of our experience and sympathy. He was performing a work beyond our power, and yet walking the path we have to tread. The cry of

frail dying man in these psalms passed through His heart and lips. He met death in the midst of His days, felt, as truly as we feel, its forebodings and bitterness, "offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared." We may say that the struggles of His people in past ages crying for eternal life were breathed into them by Christ's own Spirit, and that then He entered man's world to gather these prayers into His own heart, and secure their answer. The Old Testament is man feeling after God, the New is God finding man, and He who is the Leader in both, who breathes the question into man's heart, and then answers it, is that Eternal Son "whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." And, now, the sharer of our dying nature, the sympathiser with its cries, the bearer of its sins, has become the Lord of eternal life. "Lord, to whom shall we go?" Let a man, let any man, come in humble faith and cast on Him the burden of guilt, and he will receive a Divine power from Christ Himself that will make his present life the beginning and the pledge of an everlasting one. Though the beginning be small, the latter end shall greatly increase; and when death comes, the prayer, "O my God, take me not away in the midst of my days," will be changed into, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation." "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

JOHN KER.
