

*GOD'S PERFECT LAW OUR DESPAIR AND OUR  
COMFORT.*

PSALM CXIX. 96.

THIS Psalm, as we may infer from its very structure, belongs to a late and somewhat degenerate period of Jewish literature. It is no fresh and spontaneous outburst of song; it does not well up from a full heart to musical lips as freely and melodiously as the notes of a bird. It has neither the fire nor the sweet natural simplicity of David's lyrical raptures. Artificial in structure, laboured in composition, a collection of proverbs rather than a flow of song, it is obviously the work of an age when more attention was paid to form than to substance, and art was superseding nature.

Indeed it is quite curious to observe with how many fetters the Poet has clogged the free and natural motions of his spirit, within what narrow limits he has compelled it to move. In place of singing in "full-throated ease," he sets himself to solve a difficult and complicated problem, to achieve a great literary feat. How could any man, whatever his gifts, hope to sing a sweet and sequent song under conditions so hard as these? There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet; and therefore there must be two and twenty sections in his Psalm. Each of these sections is to consist of eight verses, and every eight to begin with the same letter of the alphabet. First there must be eight initial Alephs, or A's, then eight initial Beths, or B's, and so on right away through the alphabet. In every verse, though there are a hundred and seventy-six of them (22 by 8), the

Divine Law must be mentioned, although the Poet's vocabulary contains at the most only ten synonyms for it,—as statutes, judgments, testimonies, precepts. And the Sacred Name, the name of Jehovah, must be brought into the Psalm exactly twenty-two times, once for each letter of the Alphabet. To fulfil these onerous conditions, which seem to render all freedom and mobility of thought simply impossible, and yet to introduce a separate and valuable thought into each verse of the Psalm, is a feat which, in its own way, is perhaps as great as was ever achieved by the wit of man.

But it is a kind of feat for which very rightly we feel little respect. A man *may* dance in fetters, no doubt, and so dance as to excite our wonder and admiration by his blended strength and dexterity; but how much better and more admirably would he have danced without them? And a poet who voluntarily clogs his natural vigour and grace with artificial and pedantic restrictions may so far master them as to compel our astonishment; but he cannot touch and move us like the poet who pours out his natural song without restraint, and moreover he diverts our thoughts from his song to himself; we admire his dexterity instead of yielding ourselves to the charm and power of his theme. This ingenious and elaborate acrostic, for example, is not to be compared for power and beauty with Psalm xix. Both have the same theme—the goodness and sweetness of the Divine Law; but David's song is bright and artless as the music of the grove, while the Psalm before us, when compared with that, sounds like an artificial declamation intoned by a rabbi or a priest.

In so far as the mere form and structure of the Psalm are concerned, one of the most useful purposes to which we could put it would be a controversial one. Nothing is more degrading to the Word of God than the verbal and mechanical theories of inspiration which still have some vogue in certain sections of the Church. And, whatever theory he may hold, how can any reasonable man maintain that *the structure*, the external form, of this Psalm is from God? It is easy to conceive of the Holy Ghost as *using* any form of literature, however debased, in order to teach men and do them good. But surely it is impossible to conceive of Him as *selecting* such forms; as moving a man to write an elaborate and complicated acrostic, to sacrifice nature to art, and sense to form, and spirit to letter; as impelling him to tie broken and disjointed thoughts together by a mere alphabetical thread. That even this unknown Psalmist was taught of God, that he received the truths embodied in his verse from heaven, we freely admit, we heartily believe; but who can doubt that he was left to choose his own form of utterance, or rather to adopt the Rabbinical forms of his age? who will venture to ascribe his alphabetical and other verbal dexterities to the inspiration of the Holy Ghost? What is true and good and noble in the Psalm we attribute to the God who inspired it; what is imperfect, ignoble, merely dexterous and ingenious, we attribute to the man who wrote it.

The peculiar form of the Psalm has one happy result; viz., that we may safely detach any verse from its context and consider it apart. In order to secure unity of form the Psalmist was compelled to sacrifice

unity of substance: he could not carry out his ingenious alphabetical device without looking to letters and words rather than to logical sequences of thought. Hence almost every verse is self-contained, and has little connection with those before and after it, save that of its initial letter. In short, the Psalm resembles a jeweller's chest, in which many valuable gems are arranged, not according to their several kinds, nor so as that their contrasting lustres may enhance their beauty, but simply according to a set of arbitrary trade symbols. You may take up any one of them and look at it apart; it will lose nothing by being separated from its companions; it may gain much by being held to the light.

In the sentence before us we have one such jewel—a gem of purest ray; a self-contained proverb, which, though it has the form and place of a verse in a Psalm, is really a separate and independent statement of a great truth. Its value is in itself; we gain nothing for it by a study of the context. Let us look at it by itself, then, and ask what it has to teach us.

*"I have seen an end of all perfection, but thy commandment is exceeding broad."* Do these words mean, as by their mere logical connection they seem to mean, that the Psalmist, in his long quest after perfection, had at last discovered that *nothing* was perfect, not even the Divine law? Does he intend to say, "After long and diligent search, the commandment of God is the best thing I have found; but even that is only 'very broad'—approaching perfection, but not attaining it"? No, he does not mean to deny the perfection of the Law that came by

Moses, though *we* may deny it, and *must* deny it. For the Law was only the shadow which the Gospel cast before. To us, therefore, the Law is not the most complete, not the perfect publication of the will of God. But the Jew had nothing better; and the whole tone of this Psalm shews that the rabbi who wrote it held it to be perfect beyond all compare.

Did he mean, then, to affirm that the Law *alone* was perfect? Did he intend to imply that, though he had looked for perfection in men, in nations, in modes and schools of thought, in his own heart and life, he had been disappointed again and again, driven to the conclusion that perfection was to be found only in that Divine law and ideal of life which stood so high above all performance? Doubtless, this was his meaning. He had seen the thoughts and conditions of men change and shift in many ways. He had hoped that by some of the changes and forms of discipline through which they were drawn, they might be raised to a perfect obedience to the Divine will. He had clung to this teacher and that, this saint and that, trusting that at last he had discovered a perfect man; but even in the wisest he had found some touch of folly, even in the purest some taint of sin. Possibly, too, he had indulged in similar hopes for himself, thinking, believing that when he had gained this point or that—when he was older, or wiser, when time had dulled the edge of his passions, or experience had simplified and raised his aims—he might rise into a mode of life more happily ordered, into a condition in which the imperfections of his character and service would be

removed. But, as in others, so in himself, he has been disappointed—disappointed more bitterly in himself than in his neighbours. He is conscious that imperfections still cleave to him; that he has both fallen short of his mark, and that his mark has risen still higher as he has approached it, until at last he is bereft of hope, and no longer expects to find that which is perfect, whether in himself or in the world. “I have seen an end of all perfection.”

Now, as we listen to him, it would be very easy to take a cynical tone, and say, “Why, what a thing is here! Here is a man of large and varied experience puling and puking like a green girl over a fact familiar to every thoughtful and observant mind! For who, after the first flush of youth has passed—who expects to find perfect men about him, or to have his conditions shaped to his mind? Let us have done with these impossible ideals and sentimental complaints, take men as we find them, and be thankful if we can secure a tolerable amount of comfort, and come fairly up to the current and standard morality of our time.”

It would be equally easy to take a weak sentimental tone, and say, “Ah, yes, how true that is! *I* have trusted men, and they have disappointed me. *I* have striven and searched for a perfection I could never reach. If for a time I have fancied I had found it in this friend or that, I have been bitterly undeceived. Let us quit this impossible quest, then. Let us sit still, and mourn over the irreclaimable weakness and wickedness of the world.”

It would be as easy as it would be foolish to take either of these tones, and at times, I suppose, most

of us do take both of them. But we have no encouragement to take them in the words of the Psalmist, nor even, if we wisely consider them, in the facts of our own experience.

We often assent to the Psalmist's verdict, "I have seen an end of all perfection," and yet, after all, do we heartily and practically assent to it? "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." However often we have been deceived, we still look forward with expectation, with what perhaps we call "a chastened expectation." Our life, we think, might so very easily be made happier and better than it is, so mere a trifle would lead in such large issues of content, that surely a time must be coming in which, not the wild dreams of our youth indeed, but the chastened and sober expectations of experience will be fulfilled. No change of outward conditions has made us what we fain would be hitherto, nor given us all we crave: but it would not take very much to content us now; and as we advance along the path of life—when we have gained the competence for which we have laboured, when we have achieved the task we long since prescribed ourselves, when we have conquered this bad habit or acquired that new relation—surely we shall reach what we have so long sought, and find our character and our conditions to our mind. Who, after all, wholly despairs of himself, or of the world? He does not despair of himself who is for ever listening to the flattering tale, that all will go well with him when he has educated and placed his children, when he has secured this or that opening for business, or is able to retire from business; when he has acquired

a little more money, or a little more leisure, or a little more health, or a little more knowledge, or a little more grace. Nor does he despair of the world who can still strive to teach it, and mend it, and pray for it, who can rebuke its follies, who is saddened by a sense of its miseries, or lifts so much as one of his fingers to the burdens under which his neighbours groan. The fact is that, despite the despairing and pessimist tone we sometimes affect, so far from feeling that we have seen an end of all perfection, most of us are still searching for it, and striving toward it: if we admit that the world has not seen it yet, we are only the more eager that the world should see it, the more sanguine that it will see it one day.

But though we cannot honestly say, in the cynical sense of the words, that we have seen an end of all perfection, there is a sense in which they are very true, and in which it is well that we should heartily adopt them. It behoves us—not despairingly, and still less satirically and scornfully, but humbly and patiently—to confess that we ourselves are not perfect, and therefore have no right to expect perfection in our neighbours. For beyond a doubt we are apt, as the illusions of life pass away, to abate our hopes for men and to slacken in our endeavours to better them and their conditions. We find that, at the best, we can do so little for them, and that often they are so little worthy of what we do, that we are tempted to refrain from doing even the little which lies within our power. Beyond a doubt, too, as the years pass, and we find that we ourselves are so little the better for all our endeavours after a better life, we are apt to abate our endeavours, to content ourselves

with aiming at a lower mark, to lose the enthusiasm which would once be content with nothing short of perfection. And, therefore, we need—especially if we are advancing in years—to get from the Psalmist's words whatever stimulus and encouragement they contain.

They offer us a double comfort and encouragement. We may read them in two ways: (1) "I have seen an end of all perfection; *for* thy commandment is exceeding broad;" and (2) "I have seen an end of all perfection, *but* thy commandment is exceeding broad." Read in the first way, they suggest the animating thought, that our haunting consciousness of imperfection springs from the bright and awful perfection of the Law we are bent on obeying, of the Ideal we have set before us. It is not because we are worse than those who are without law, or who are a law unto themselves, that we are restless and dissatisfied with ourselves; but because we measure both ourselves and our fellows by the lofty standards of God's commandment. It is because that commandment is so broad, that we cannot embrace it; it is because it is so high, that we cannot attain to it; it is because it is so perfect, that we cannot perfectly obey it.

The content, the entire self-satisfaction, of heathen races must often have supplied the travelled and pious Jew with a theme for wonder and reflection. Nor can *we* compare, for instance, the Greeks of the ancient heathen world, or even their purest moralists, or their most virtuous and noble men, with men of our own time, and not be struck by the radical difference in their moral attitude and tone. To the ancient Greek

the world was very fair, human life very beautiful, and full of enjoyment. There was nothing mystic, yearning, unsatisfied in his nature. He had discovered attainable ideals, and was content both with them and with himself. The sense of moral imperfection, of sin, was almost unknown to him. He did not know, even Socrates did not know, as Carlyle reminds us, that "there is no sin so damning as that same supercilious unconsciousness of sin." It was because their moral standard was in many respects so low as to permit their very best men to be guilty of acts which we cannot so much as name, that they were so easily satisfied—self-satisfied—content with themselves and their conditions, their aims and their achievements. Whereas the Christian of modern days, in proportion as he has the spirit of his Master, is dissatisfied with himself and with the moral conditions of men; he is for ever seeking and demanding something higher, nobler, more perfect: while the Greek stands gracefully at ease, in smiling self-content, the Christian is for ever straining forward to that which is before, confessing that he has not yet attained, that he is far from being perfect. And this amazing difference is purely due to the fact that the one has a Divine Law and a Divine Example before and above him, such as it never entered the heart of the other to conceive,—a perfect Law and an Example of all perfection. Therefore it is that he is dissatisfied, ill at ease; that he frets and strains at the hindrances and limitations which render his best deeds and endeavours imperfect; that he aspires toward another and a better life in which he may enter, through a per-

fect obedience, into a perfect and Divine content. If he says of himself, and of man, and of human life, "I have seen an end of all perfection," it is because, turning to God, he can add: "*for* thy commandment is exceeding broad."

But we may read the verse in another way, and still derive comfort and encouragement from it. We may say: "I have seen an end of all perfection in myself, and in the world; *but* thy commandment is exceeding broad: *that* is perfect, though *I* am imperfect, and in its perfection I find the promise of my own." For shall God give a law for human life, and that law remain for ever unfulfilled? Impossible! "The gifts of God are without repentance"—irreversible, never to be lessened or withdrawn. His purpose is not to be made of none effect by our weaknesses and sins. In the Law He has shewn us what He would have us be. And shall we never become what he would have us to be? Can the Law remain for ever without any life that corresponds to it and fulfils it? Nay, God will never take back the fair and perfect ideal of human life depicted in his Law, never retract his purpose to raise the life of man till it touches and fulfils that ideal. And so the very Law which is our despair is our comfort also, for if *that* be perfect *we* must become perfect; its perfection is the pledge of ours.

Nor have we only the comfort of a perfect Law. We have also the still greater comfort of a perfect Example—the example of Him who fulfilled all the righteousness of the Law, both for Himself and for us, that He might fulfil it *in* us. Besides "the broad commandment" we have "the Man in whom

was no sin," the Man whose perfection guarantees ours, if only we trust in Him and follow Him.

If, then, we must say with the Psalmist, "I have seen an end of all perfection, for thy commandment is exceeding broad;" we may also say, "I have seen that perfect law incarnated in the perfect life of Him who is my life; and therefore I know that, imperfect as I am in myself, I shall yet become perfect in Him."

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