

it was the mission of Amos to tell that men were not ready for this kingdom. His province was to reveal to the human soul its need of preparation. He had to proclaim that men could only get rid of the gnawing of worldly care by taking on another care which was not worldly. If they would be released from their personal burden, they must bow their heads to an impersonal one—the burden of humanity. God was about to reveal Himself in his deepest and essential nature; but that nature was love. No man could see the revelation unless he himself had love in his soul. Therefore to the world of selfishness, the prophet cried, Prepare! He called upon men to make themselves ready for the vision of a life which was a contrast to *their* lives. He told them that if the divine life came to them at that moment, it would come to them as darkness and not light, it would be an enigma which they could not solve. He bade them prepare for the vision by the destruction of their old ideal, by the bruising of the serpent, by the crucifixion of the flesh; and he told them that, in the abandonment of that which constituted their selfish joy, they would behold in its veritable glory, the “day of the Lord.”

GEORGE MATHESON.

THE FEAR OF FATHER ISAAC.

GENESIS xxxi. 53.

IN our Authorised Version the last clause of this Verse is rendered, “And Jacob sware by *the fear* of his father Isaac.” The rendering is accurate enough, and would convey the true sense of the passage were the word “fear” printed with a capital F. While Laban sware, at the Heap of Witness, to keep faith with Jacob by “the God of Abraham,” *i.e.*, Jehovah, and “the God of Nahor,” *i.e.*, the

idol worshipped by their common ancestor, Jacob swore to keep faith with Laban by "the *Fear* of Isaac," or, as in Verse 42, by "the Eloah of Abraham *and* the Fear of Isaac." That is to say, "the Fear," "the Dreadful One," "the Terror," was Isaac's name for the very God who was "the Friend," or "the Strength and Shield," of his father Abraham, and whom even his son Jacob worshipped as "the Shepherd," or "the Rock" of Israel.

Each of the patriarchs had his own name for the Divine Ruler of the universe; and Isaac's name for him was "the Fear." So habitual was this name to him that, not his children only, but his far-away cousins in their distant ancestral seat were familiar with it; so sacred was it that when Jacob would pledge himself to the suspicious Laban by his most binding oath, he swears to him by "the Fear of his father Isaac."

The conception of the Divine Character implied in that Name, repugnant as it may be to us, was quite in accordance with the idiosyncrasy of the man. For Isaac, although the son of one of the bravest and greatest of men, was himself of a quiet, meditative, and even timid temperament. For the first forty years of his life he seems to have remained in his mother's tent, ruled by the proud and resolute will of Sarah, "the Princess," if also cherished and protected by her love. And when, in after years, he had to choose his own course and was free to follow his own will, he seems to have had little will left. He drifts with circumstances. He is timid and yielding, so timid that again and again he gives up his most precious possessions—the deep costly wells which he had dug and built by the labour of years—rather than strive for them with any neighbouring herdsman who coveted them. Pensive and timorous, he had a keen eye for the dark and haunted shadows of life; and while Abraham walked with God as with a Friend, Isaac prostrated himself before "the Fear"

that sat on the throne of the universe, with an awe, if not with a terror, too deep for words. His name for God at once harmonizes with, and reveals, the character of the man.

To us it may seem as if this Name better befitted some grim and wicked idol than the gracious and benignant Lord, the Father of all mercies, the God of all comfort, to whom we owe every good gift and perfect boon, and in whom there is no darkness at all. We have seen his glory, full of grace and truth, in the Man Christ Jesus; seen Him come into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved; seen Him raise the fallen, quicken the dead, seek the lost until He found them; seen Him shew Himself the Friend of sinners and the Redeemer of them that were bound, even though He had to sink into the darkness of death, and descend into Hades itself, in order that He might save them from their sins and deliver them from their bondage. In Christ Jesus the Father of an infinite majesty has shewn us that He is never so happy as when He is forgiving our sins, bearing our infirmities, winning us to righteousness and charity. And hence it might reasonably be thought that the conception embodied in "the Fear of father Isaac" would be simply an impossible conception to us, that our only emotion toward God would be one of reverent and grateful love.

And yet is it so? I doubt it. I doubt whether after all, if things were but called by their proper names, the God and Father of *Christendom* would not be known as *the Fear* of Christendom. I doubt whether, under all the gracious names we lavish on Him, our deepest emotion toward Him is not one of awe, of terror, of fear only faintly touched with hope. Nay, I doubt whether even those of us who do really think of Him as Love, and maintain that in his love He is ever seeking, and must ever continue to seek, the salvation of men, do not *feel* that He is not even seeking our own salvation, and that there is very little hope

that even we, despite our larger creed, shall come to a good end. What assurance have most of us that we are really safe from sin and condemnation, death and hell? what rooted and ineradicable conviction that, under the guidance and influence of the Divine Teacher and Redeemer of the world, the world is growing wiser and better from age to age? what confident and triumphant expectation that, in the body or out of the body, we shall live to see all races and kindreds of men rejoicing in the pure and tender rule of Christ, serving Him with boundless devotion, serving one another with boundless love?

It is not only in Catholic Europe, where God the Father, where even Christ the Saviour, is deemed so awful and implacable to men that mother Mary must intercede with Him for the sinful and needy; nor is it only in Calvinistic America, where "the plan of salvation" includes only an elect minority of the race, that this awful "fear" of God lingers on. Neither is it only by our fathers of bygone generations that God has been conceived of as an Enemy who has been converted into a Friend—for the elect—by a sacrifice so stupendous as to out-run the reach of human thought. But here in England, and even among those who faintly trust the larger hope, the germ of this frightful misconception still lives and thrives, insomuch that, while we *think* of God as Love, our most habitual *feeling* toward Him is, in many cases, a nameless fear of his power or of his anger.

Now an emotion so general, and so persistent, must have some ground in reason. And, of course, so soon as we analyse and consider it, we perceive that this trembling fear of a Divine Terror—as degrading to God as it is to us—is but a bastard form of that wholesome reverence which we owe to Him. Because God is great, He *is* greatly to be feared. Conscious of our mortal limitations and our weakness, even we, who are his offspring, cannot but

reverence his power. Conscious of our guilt, even we, who are his redeemed and reconciled children, cannot but reverence his purity. And this due and becoming reverence, this wholesome fear of One so great and so good, easily degenerates into a paralysing or helpless dread which makes Him our Terror rather than our Hope and our Strength. For the simple fact is that for the most part we have not really, or have not fully and cordially, received the good news, the grace and truth, which came by Jesus Christ. We have not learned the great lesson He came to teach, that the very Power of God is our refuge and defence; that in his very Purity lies our only hope of redemption from impurity and guilt; that by his goodness we are to be made good. We forget that it is to the weak He offers the Divine Strength; that it is to the weary and the heavy-laden He offers a Divine rest: we forget that He came to call, not the righteous, but sinners, to Himself, and to draw them to Himself by offering them both pardon for and salvation from their sins. Familiar as the words are to us, they have not carried the truths and hopes with which they are fraught into the central fountains from which all our thoughts and passions well up. We have got them into our creed, but we have not got them into our hearts and lives: or why are we any longer oppressed by that fear of God which hath torment?

Yet that, despite our better knowledge, we *are* still oppressed by this tormenting and degrading fear, hardly needs proof, so conscious are we of it, so deeply and habitually and painfully conscious. But if any proof be needed, we may find it in the fact that our sense of weakness does not, instantly and invariably, lead us to take shelter in the Divine Strength, nor our sense of sin lead us, instantly and invariably, to put our trust in Him who is the Saviour from all sin. When, for example, we meet with any check—any loss, grief, bereavement—which feel-

ingly persuades us of our weakness amidst the great forces which drive us to and fro, with our will and against our will; when we are made to feel how slender is our control over our own health, our own prosperity, or even our own life, with which of us is any such check only an incentive to cast ourselves, without pause and without misgiving, on the care of Him who holds all the forces of life and death in the hollow of his hands? in which of us does it but quicken an instinctive and habitual conviction that He who compels all things to work for good, is working out good for us by the very grief, losses, pains which we are called to endure?

As a general theorem, as a dogma in our creed, we all hold that God is good, and that his kindly Providence covers every fact and incident of our life. But, practically, in the disappointment or trouble of the passing day—when we lose health of body or power of mind, when the value of our property lessens or our business declines, when, from any cause, the wheels of life run heavily and the outlook is dark—which of us recognizes the gracious hand of God in such facts and incidents as these, or hears his fatherly voice bidding us still trust in Him and assuring us that all is well? Instead of making the Almighty our Refuge and Strength in these hours of conscious weakness, do we not rather suffer the old grim dread of Him, and of his dealings with mankind, to revive in our hearts, and look up with terror to see a Divine Terror frowning upon us from heaven itself? And if we do, what is all this but a proof that, if we can trust in God while all things go smoothly with us and we have no great need, or no great sense of our need, of his help, no sooner do the currents of our life begin to run awry, and our need of Him become deep and great, than we lose trust in Him, and the Love which sits on the throne of heaven is transformed into the Fear of father Isaac? In other

words, we believe in the gracious providence of God so long as it is remote from our personal experience or veiled from our personal consciousness, but the very moment it touches and disturbs our lives—disturbing them, like the angel who troubled the waters of the Bethesda fountain, only to quicken in them new powers of health—we begin to distrust and dread that Providence, and lose our God just when we need Him most.

Or, again, when the sense of sin is awakened within us, and grows keen and poignant, does *that* instantly lead us to the Friend and Saviour of sinners? do we at once betake ourselves to Him who taketh away the sin of the world? Theoretically; no doubt, our sense of sin grows strong as we realize more and more fully the holiness of God, and the exceeding greatness of his love for us. And, practically, to a few rare and elect souls, it is true that they attain their profoundest consciousness of spiritual infirmity and guilt when they are wrapt in intimate communion with Him whose pure and awful eyes cannot look on iniquity; when, therefore, they can cast themselves without fear or hesitation on the Love which is more than all our sins and can cleanse us from every stain of guilt. But if I am to speak, as a common man, to common men, must I not say that *our* most painful and penetrating consciousness of guilt is roused by the penal consequences of our sins? Is it not when we are suffering for, and by, our transgressions that we feel our transgressions most keenly? Is it not then that the fire we have kindled by them begins to burn within and upon us? If, for example, although we sincerely believe in God, and worship Him as our reconciled Father in Christ Jesus, and take some delight in the study of his Word and will, we have long indulged a too worldly spirit, and have cared more for business and politics than for the interior economy and wealth of the soul, more for a good reputation among men

than for the honour which cometh from God, more for a faithful and generous observance of the rules and customs of the little world immediately around us than to lift our lives into accord with the Divine law and ideal: is it not when the world or our power of handling it begins to fail us, when success and the praise of men can no longer satisfy us, that we commonly find out our sin, and mourn over it, and wish that we could recall the past and mould it to a different and higher shape? Is it not, in plain words, when the punishment of our sin comes upon us that we grow profoundly and painfully conscious of our sin?

What wonder, then, if our sins breed fear and despair in us rather than contrition? What wonder if we take our punishments as signs of the Divine anger rather than as proofs of God's correcting and redeeming love, and are filled with dread of Him when most we need to trust Him in order that, strong in faith, we may break away from the chain of our sins? When a Christian man cries, "*My sin* has found me out!" instead of crying, "*God*, who has long been seeking me, has found me at last, and is making me to know my sin, that He may save me from my sin!" it is only too likely that God may become a Terror, and even *the* Terror, to him for a time, and that he may fall in fear before One to whom he ought to look up in penitence and faith.

What we want, if we are ever to break away from the cold and degrading restraints of mere fear is, of course, a simpler, a more sincere and vital, faith in the God, in the *Love*, Christ came to reveal; a more settled and active conviction that God is in very deed the Love which Christ declared Him to be, and not the Fear which Isaac dreaded Him to be. And surely it might help us to rise into this faith were we more habitually to dwell on two thoughts which are of the very stuff and substance of the Gospel; the one, that what seem to us the very failures of the

Divine Care for us are special illustrations of that Care ; and the other, that the very punishments which wait on sin are among the appointed and most efficient means of saving us from sin.

It is, as I have already said, when we meet with losses, pains, disappointments, griefs, bereavements, that we feel as though God's providence had failed and He had ceased to care for us. Yet, if we have sat at the feet of Christ, we ought to know that all these "misfortunes," as we call them, are really a special summons to put our trust in God, since they come to remind us of our dependence on Him, to prove us and put us to the test whether we *can* trust in Him when there is nothing else to sustain us, and to incite us to care for the best things most,—for the things of the soul more than for the things of the body, for the things which are unseen and eternal more than for the things which are seen and temporal. When all goes easily with us we are apt to forget God, whom we *must* remember if we are to truly live at all ; and therefore He suffers the smooth current of our lives to be ruffled with adverse winds that put us in mind of Him and of our need of Him. When we are rich in health, in possessions, in friends, we are apt to settle down comfortably in our place, to grow content with ourselves and our surroundings, and suffer our spiritual life and energy to decline till we compel God, for very love, to pull our cushions from under us, to take away the comforts which effeminate us, and to push us out into the cold but bracing air of adversity that our spirit may recover its tone ; that, instead of resting in present ease, we may press forward to the better things He has prepared for us. I need not cite texts to prove that this is the meaning of God's providential discipline for many of us ; we *know* that it is his meaning, that it is declared to be his meaning from one end of the Bible to the other. And therefore we know

that we should take every loss, every stroke of adversity, as a proof of God's goodwill for us, as at once a summons and an incentive to a more unworldly, a higher and better, life. And if we are men and have discourse of reason, if we are Christian men and have a Divine ideal before us, we shall and must come at last to feel that, just as "fifty years of Europe are better than a cycle of Cathay," so a life ever rising to meet a Divine call and to touch a Divine ideal is infinitely better than a life "cradled on its lees," rocking to and fro over its baser elements and familiar comforts, but making no progress, achieving no ascent. We must and shall learn to welcome the strokes and shocks of change from which we gather a Divine behest to go forward, and in that behest a promise of Divine help.

So, too, if once we feel that the punishments which wait on sin are among the most efficient means of saving us from our sins, we shall be reconciled, and more than reconciled, to the very afflictions which wound us most sharply and are most apt to induce fear and despair. And why should we not feel it? The New Testament is full of the promise that, here or hereafter, we shall receive the due reward, as of our good deeds, so also of every bad deed that we have done; and we know how, at this point at least, Science and Philosophy confirm the promise of Scripture, affirming, in many ways, that our future life must be a continuation and development of the life we now live in the flesh. I say *the promise* of Scripture, observe, not the threatening. For, if we have at all entered into the spirit of the Gospel, we know that every Divine law works for our good. We can even *see* that the law which binds punishment to sin must and does work for our good, by making us sensible of our sins and eager to renounce them. Thank God we cannot do evil without suffering from the evil we have done! Thank God the more we are bent on being good, and the more of goodness we have attained by his help, the

more keenly we suffer from any evil deed we do! For how should we be cleansed from evil except by the pain which at once convinces us of its presence and purges it away? We suffer that we may be strong. Bane and antidote go together. Sin, the poison, is checked and counteracted by the pain it excites. And this pain drives us to the great Physician, of whom we are apt to think but seldom in our hours of ease; while, when we are oppressed and agonized with the punitive results of the evil we have done, we fly to Him who alone can save us from its taints, and who very commonly saves us from its infections by letting us taste the deadly misery it breeds.

So that just as every apparent failure of Providence is an illustration of the Providence which watches over us with unceasing care, and a summons to rely upon it, so also every fall from grace, every punishment that follows sin, is an invitation to us to betake ourselves afresh to the Saviour from all sin and uncleanness; a proof that, by the very law which binds pain to sin, He is already at work for our salvation; and a promise that He will never cease from that work until He has made us every whit whole, every whit clean.

What else, indeed, has God to do, the God whose glory we behold in the face of Jesus Christ, what else *can* be his aim for us, but to save us from the evil He hates, and to establish and perfect us in the goodness He loves? Yet did we but believe this to be his aim, all our fears would be at an end; every moment of conscious weakness would but drive us to the Almighty for strength, and every moment of conscious sin to the All-pure for pardon and salvation.

To many this life of unbroken faith may seem too high, if not for mortal man, at least for *them*, so long as they are beneath the sky. If that be so, yet even for those who forbode that their trust in the Providence of God and their

faith in the salvation of God must be clouded with many fears, there is this comfort: God will not refuse even *their* faith, broken and hesitating though it be, albeit He cannot save them, at least from their fear and the torments of their fear, while their faith is hesitating and broken. He did not turn away from Isaac, even though He was only the Fear of Isaac; and He will not turn away from us, even though our love for Him be blended with many fears.

But let no man conclude that he cannot be saved even from fear until he reaches the world to come. God is neither unwilling nor unable to save even the most timid and apprehensive from it even here and now, if only, trusting in Him, we seek to have fear cast out by love. And it is worth an effort—worth a patient and strenuous effort. For how noble and how tranquil is the life to which He invites us, and into which He will assuredly raise and deliver us, if only we permit! Think what it must be “not to hate anything but sin; to be full of love to every creature; to be frightened at nothing; to be sure that all things will turn to good; not to mind pain or loss, because it is our Father’s will: to know that nothing—no, not if the earth was to be burned up, or the waters come and drown us—nothing could part us from God who loves us, and who fills our souls with peace and joy, because we are sure that whatever He wills is holy, just, and good.”¹ To be saved from all fear, all care, all pain, all loss, all sin; to see our Father’s will in everything that befalls us, and therefore to find everything “very good,”—this is the reward, this the blessedness, of those who believe in the Love revealed in Christ Jesus, rather than in the Fear before whom father Isaac trembled all his days.

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¹ George Eliot.