

*DAVID'S TESTIMONY TO THE DIVINE  
GOODNESS.*

PSALM xxxiv. 8.

As their gods are, so are men. If they make a god after their own likeness, as they commonly do, he quickly repays the compliment by re-making them in his own image. That to which men look up, which they worship and adore, cannot fail to influence their thoughts, their character, their life, and to influence them most profoundly. And hence no question is so important to us as this: What is God? And of all the questions we ask concerning Him none is so important as, Is He good or bad?

Nor is the answer to this question either easy or certain so long as we are left to infer the character of God from his works. For if the natural world is fair, nevertheless its beauty is marred by many defects; and if the laws by which it is governed are for the most part beneficent, they nevertheless bear so many signs of calm indifference to human welfare, or even of a fierce unrelenting cruelty, that the mere student of Nature, seeing her "red in tooth and claw," is compelled either to question the goodness of God or to admit that, if He be good, He can hardly be omnipotent. And if we turn from Nature to Man, still the answer to our question is but a dubious one. For in Man, as in Nature, we find much that is evil, if also much that is good, and can hardly forbear from asking: If God be good, why did He make us thus—so frail, so fallible, so sinful, and therefore so miserable?

No man who looks thoughtfully around him and within can fail at times to feel, as Plato felt, that he needs some wiser and more certain guidance than his own if he is ever to learn what God really is; that God Himself must speak to him and shew Himself to him if he is to be sure that God is good, friendly, accessible. Nay, more: even if we believe

that God *has* spoken to us and shewn Himself to us, that we have seen Him in Christ Jesus and found Him altogether good, yet at times, when the burden of all this unintelligible and self-contradictory world lies heavily upon us, or when our own life is darkened by some misery to which there seems neither relief nor end, we lose our assurance; we falter where we firmly trod: God seems to shroud Himself in some inaccessible heaven, to retire behind thick clouds we cannot penetrate, to become dubious to us once more, so that we can no longer see or say that He is good.

At such times as this—times only too familiar to all who sincerely aim to be followers and friends of God—it is an unspeakable relief and comfort to hear any voice which assures us, in clear and cordial tones, that God *is* good despite our doubts and fears, that the sun of his love is shining down on the world, though it be hidden from us by the dark clouds that hang about our hearts. And if the voice be that of a man such as we are, yet better and wiser than we are, and wiser and better very mainly because he has passed through many such experiences as that by which we are troubled and has found out what they mean, then surely he can give us not comfort only, but the very succour that we most need.

And this is precisely the comfort and the succour which David offers us in this Psalm. He comes to us in the time of our weakness and unbelief, and affirms it as a fact which he has verified for himself, verified so often and in so many ways as to render doubt impossible, that the Lord is good.

Now almost any man who speaks from deep conviction profoundly influences our thoughts and emotions. As a rule, perhaps, we do not realize as we might and ought the immense part which sincere and intense conviction plays in the world, and in forming the mind and conduct of the world. But, so soon as we consider the point, we know

that if any man speak earnestly to us he impresses us, however set we may be against the conclusion to which he would lead us. He may not be eloquent of tongue, nor profound in thought; his very logic may be halting and imperfect; but if he speak to us with unwavering assurance or with passionate emotion, if in any way he make us feel that he is uttering convictions which are dearer to him than life, we cannot but be moved by his earnestness; and if we still oppose ourselves to his conclusions, the temper of our opposition is gravely modified; while, if we lean toward them, the weight of his conviction is almost sure to turn the balance in their favour. Moral earnestness, intensity of conviction, is a great power for shaping the character and conduct of the world. And if, when we sit in darkness, doubting truth itself to be a liar, any man should come to us, and assure us out of his very heart that God is good, and make us feel that he is quite sure of it, quite sure too that we also shall be sure of it before long, we can hardly fail to be in some measure relieved and comforted.

But if the man were a poet, and a great poet, and a poet the main haunt and region of whose song was the ways of God with men; if, knowing that he had a far keener insight into the mysteries of life than we ourselves, we listened to him with reverence, and with a disposition to believe that what *he* said must be true; if, moreover, he was as much better than we are as wiser, and we looked up to him as one of the noblest and purest spirits that e'er wore flesh about him; if, still further, this poet and saint were much more largely and variously experienced than ourselves in the sorrows and joys of time, and, above all, much more familiar with that very region of doubt and distress through which we were passing; and if, finally, he were not only uttering the conclusion to which his own insight and wisdom had led him and which his own wide and varied experience had confirmed, but was, as we believed, inspired

of God, so that he was giving us God's testimony as well as his own: if we credited him with the genius of the poet, the holiness of a saint, the prophetic wisdom to which old experience doth attain, and the inspiration of the Almighty, could we fail to be deeply impressed by his assurance that the Lord is good, and to be greatly comforted and strengthened by it? Would not the darkness in which we sat flee before his cheerful and victorious presence?

Well, but David was all that I have described, and more. Confessedly he stands in the front rank of those poets who have devoted themselves to the study of the ethical aspects and problems of human life, and was able to interpret the inner world of character and motive and passion with a precision and a delicacy, a truth and power, never surpassed. Confessedly also, despite the grievous transgression he so bitterly rued, he was a man after God's own heart; a man whose goodness was not of the narrow, ascetic, forbidding type which repels men, but of that large, cordial, and manly type which is most winning and attractive. Nor can we well doubt that his experience was wider and more varied than ours, embraced more radical vicissitudes, swept a larger circle, covered more distant extremes. And not only did he run through the whole gamut of human experience, but at the very time he sung this Psalm he was involved in those clouds of undeserved loss, pain, reproach, under which we too often lose our faith in the goodness of God. He was a fugitive from the face of the king he had so loyally served, hiding in the rock-fortress of Adullam, not knowing where to look for daily bread. It would have been pardonable if, under stress of so hard and unmerited a fate, he had brooded over it till the goodness of God had become as dubious to him as it often becomes to us under the lesser strain of trials not to be compared with his. But it is from the very hiding-place of his adversity that he comes forth, with manly and

cheerful courage, to assure us that the Lord is good, and to dwell enjoyingly on the blessedness of the man who trusts in Him. Such a testimony, given by such a man, at such a moment, may well touch and reassure our hearts. What are our powers of insight as compared with his? or what our troubles as compared with his? That, with his powers, he saw no reason to doubt the goodness of the Lord; that, under his burden, he held fast his confidence in God,—this should at least bring some little hope to our hearts when they are heavy and doubtful and sad. And if we believe, as we profess to believe, that David was not only a poet, but an inspired poet, we have in his words a Divine revelation, as well as the result of his own illuminated reason and far-reaching experience. It is *God* who speaks to us, as well as David, and assures us that He is good, and will do us good, however we doubt or distrust Him.

David, then, assumes it as a fact, verified by his own manifold experience, that the Lord is good; and God Himself, through David, assures us that, if we put Him to the test, we shall find Him good.

Is it possible for us, then, when once we are thus comforted and relieved by the testimony of God and man, to rise for ourselves to a clear mental perception of the Divine Goodness, and to a happy personal experience of it, so that we too shall be able in our turn to say: "*We* have both seen and tasted the goodness of the Lord; the man *is* blessed who puts his trust in Him."

It should be possible for us, and must be possible, or what meaning, what sense, is there in this invitation to see and taste that Goodness for ourselves?

Doubtless, as I have already admitted, there are phenomena both in the physical and in the human world which it is very difficult for us, with our limited powers, to reconcile with the goodness of Him who rules all worlds. In the world of Nature, for example, we see that weakness

is constantly punished as if it were guilt, so constantly that Science has formulated a law—"the survival of the fittest"—which implies the inevitable destruction of the weak and simple by the strong and crafty; we see many and large orders of creatures which can only live by cunning or violence; we find that the beneficence and beauty of Nature are balanced by a calm indifference to human want and misery, or even by a determined and apparently cruel hostility to human life and welfare. The floods rise, the tempests rage, pestilence spreads and flies, heedless and ruthless of the homes they desolate, the harvests they destroy, the hearts they embitter. The sun burns, the cold bites, the rains fall, and He who holds the seasons in his hand seems to go on his way indifferent to the defeat of the husbandman's hopes, and of the famine which decimates an entire race. And in Man, as in Nature, evil is rife. There are the inevitable collisions of interest which breed strife; there is the eternal want of bread which makes millions the mere slaves of toil, and leaves them neither energy nor leisure to cultivate intellect or heart; there are the animal and selfish and social lusts which war against the soul, against the peace and honour of families and nations, against the dignity of human life. It is only too easy to frame an indictment, whether against Nature or Man, the counts of which cannot be denied, and which run up and glance against the Lord of men and the Maker of the universe. But before we urge these charges against Him, should we not at least hear what He Himself has to say? And if we do listen, can we anywhere find, or anyhow invent, a heavier indictment than He Himself has launched against both Nature and Man? However black our mood, we can say nothing of the depravity of man to surpass the lurid description of human lusts and sins contained in his Word. And whatever defects we may find in Nature, we can hardly allege more against it than

this, that the whole creation is subjected to futility and corruption. So that the God who comes to us and asks us to believe that He is good is not ignorant of the facts which lead us to doubt his goodness; nor does He blink or palliate them, or seek to push them into the background of our thoughts. He tells us frankly that in much Nature is hostile to Man, and insubservient to his welfare. He frankly charges our common humanity with defects, with evil proclivities and passions, such as we ourselves have discovered and lament in it. But, despite all this, He still claims to be of a perfect and sovereign goodness, and asks us to see and to share that goodness.

Now such plain dealing should surely prompt us to inquire whether, if there be some facts within our view which lead us to doubt God, there may not be other facts known to Him and which He can make known to us, that would dissipate our doubts, and enable us to say, with clear and deep conviction, that He is good—better, far better even, than we had ever ventured to hope. And when we bring this inquiry to Him, and ask *Him* to tell us the meaning of the defects in Nature and of the miseries of Man, He is not slow to answer. He assures us that He made man king of the world, and put all things under his feet; that when man, by sin, fell under the tyranny of vanity and corruption, the whole subject-world was brought into the same miserable bondage, following the fortunes of its Head, and sharing his doom. He tells us that if men will but look to Him in faith and love, He will redeem them from their bondage; and that, when they are redeemed, the whole creation, still following the fortunes and sharing the fate of its king, will also be redeemed into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

To those who do not accept the revelation of the mind and purpose of God contained in Holy Writ, all this can only seem a dubious and unverifiable hypothesis; but even

they must admit that it is at least an hypothesis consistent with itself, and that it squares with and explains the very facts in Nature and Human Nature of which they find it most difficult to give any reasonable account. They must admit that, if this *were* the purpose of God, it would be a purpose worthy of his eternal wisdom and grace; and that it would inspire men with a hope in the strength of which they might well encounter all the miseries whether of life or of death.

But *we* accept that revelation. We look to the Bible for the clearest and fullest disclosures of the will of God. The point, therefore, which *we* have to mark is the method in which God meets and overcomes our misgivings, and enables us once more to taste and see that He is good. These misgivings arise within us when, in our efforts to relieve the misery of others, or by the pressure of some special misery of our own, we are moved to brood, somewhat too exclusively, on the darker facts of our experience, and are thus led, by a partial induction, to form an imperfect conception of the character of God. And the method in which He meets our doubts is this: He leads us to consider facts which we had omitted from our view; He compels us to an induction of a wider sweep, an induction which includes the past history of man and his future prospects, as well as his present miseries; an induction that includes the sins from which these miseries sprang, and the gracious corrective purpose they are intended to subserve, and the glorious compensations to which they will conduct us if we bear them with courage and constancy and cheerfulness. When we are weakly or wilfully pondering on the little we can see in a few moments of our brief span, and therefore fret at the indifference or hostility of Nature and the depravity and misery of Man, He bids us embrace in our view the whole field of nature and the whole world of men through



the entire space which stretches from "the beginning" of the creation to "the end." Nay, He bids us look at this long eventful history through his own eyes, and as from his own heart, in order that we may recognize the righteous and loving purpose with which He is conducting it to its goal, and learn that the dark age of the tyranny of evil is but an episode in the great story of Humanity; that as man came from the light at first, so at last he will return to it, and return the stronger and the richer for his conflict with the powers of darkness.

This, at least, is one way, and surely a very noble and effectual way, in which God seeks to comfort and reassure our hearts, and to confirm our faith in Him. But, to help our weak faith still further, He has also gathered up all these facts and truths, which are being slowly wrought out and made manifest through the long ages of time, and has compressed them within the compass of a single life, the life of Jesus Christ his Son; so that we need not study either the whole contents of the Bible or the long story of Humanity before we can taste and see that He is good. There is a simpler shorter way to our mark. The great problem which covers the whole extent of time has been reduced into a single demonstration which even a child may master.

For that which disturbs our trust in the goodness of God, so that at times it is all clouded with a doubt, is, as we have seen, our experience of the indifference or hostility of Nature, or of the vileness and misery of Man. In much we admit that Nature is friendly to us and bountiful; but in much also she seems careless of us or even adverse to our well-being. In much we admit that Man is noble and admirable, and that he is most fitly and happily conditioned; but in much also he is weak and wicked, and his conditions are unfavourable to his development and peace. And as we brood over these darker facts, we are

too apt to omit from our view the facts which are bright and full of promise; we forget that the night has its uses as well as the day. But even in our most dubious and despondent moods, what room is left for doubt if only we raise our eyes and consider Christ, and the purpose of God concerning us as revealed in Him? He *was* what God meant man to be. He *is* what God will yet make man to be. Was there ought that was evil in *Him*? Was not He of a complete and perfect goodness? Was the natural world hostile or insubordinate to Him? Did it not, even when raging with tempest, obey his lightest word and delight to do his will? Did He not, after He had passed through the purifying ministry of death, rise into an absolute lordship over the laws and processes of Nature, and ascend into a world of absolute purity and peace and joy?

But in Him, as in a glass which gathers into itself the whole course of time, the whole story of man, and lights it up with the benign splendour of the secret purpose of God—in *Him* we see what God is making *us*, and what his end for us is. His will is that we should become perfect even as Christ was perfect, and that we too should rise and sit in the heavenly places, untouched by vanity and corruption. When, therefore, we are depressed by the doubts and fears which are natural to us in the imperfect conditions amid which we reach forth to perfection, we have only to recall the gracious and redeeming purpose of God written out large in the inspired Word, or to look to Christ in whom that purpose became incarnate, in order once more to taste and see that the Lord is good, and to share the blessedness of the man who trusts in Him.

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