

COMFORT IN CARES.

PSALM xciv. 19.

THE Authorised Version renders the Verse, "In the multitude of my *thoughts* within me, thy comforts delight my soul." By simply substituting *cares* for "thoughts," we throw a new light on the Verse and get a much more helpful and consolatory meaning from it. And we are bound to substitute the more significant word; for the Hebrew substantive denotes those *branching and divided thoughts* by which a man is drawn, in different directions, to opposite conclusions. It covers, therefore, at once the doubts by which we are perplexed and the fears by which we are perturbed—cares of the mind and cares of the heart.

But if the Verse grows luminous by this simple change of form, the whole Psalm grows luminous if we carry this Verse, like a lamp, through every corner of it; while, in return, the whole Psalm pours its added and gathered significance into this single Verse, at once defining and enlarging its meaning. Even as we read it apart from its connexion, if we take it merely as a general axiom, we cannot but be aware of a certain bright and sympathetic music in it, a certain large promise of good; but when we begin to reflect upon it, we find that it a little eludes our grasp, that it suggests questions which it does not answer, that the hope it inspires is somewhat vague, and lacks both precision and solidity. *What* are the cares, we ask, to which it refers? and what the comforts which can sustain and gladden us under even a multitude of such cares? And till these questions are answered, we grope as in the dark, and cannot share in the strength and gladness of the Psalmist's discovery. But if we take this Verse in our hand, and travel through the Psalm by its guiding and revealing light, we see at once what his cares were—what

it was that moved him now to doubt and now to fear ; and what the comforts were which gladdened him under his load of care, which unravelled the perplexities of his labouring mind and banished fear from his burdened heart.

1. First of all he gives us a specimen of the kind of *doubt* by which he was oppressed ; and then, secondly, a sample of his *fears*. Doubt grew strong within him as he faced the problem by which the thoughtful good of all ages have been perplexed,—viz. the triumph of the wicked (Verse 3). He had been trained to believe in God as the Judge of all the earth (Verse 2). He had been taught, he had believed that, under the rule of this righteous Judge, righteousness must prosper and unrighteousness be rebuked and cast down. But this strong ingrained conviction had not been verified by experience. On the contrary, he saw the wicked slaying the innocent (Verse 6), the strong trampling on the weak (Verse 5), the unjust not only smiting the just, but insolently exulting over them, and boldly challenging the conviction by which both he and they had been sustained (Verses 4, 7) : “Jehovah seeth not,” they exclaimed, “neither doth the God of Israel regard.” *This* was one of the multitude of his cares, his doubts or perplexities, within him, and may well, so large and fruitful is it, have given rise to a multitude of itself. For this clashing of faith with experience ; this conflict between the conviction that goodness must thrive and wickedness decay under the equal rule of the supreme Judge, and the daily spectacle of a world in which a bold and insolent injustice triumphs over uprightness and integrity ; this strife between conviction and experience, cannot fail to breed innumerable perplexities and misgivings in the mind of every thoughtful and observant man, cannot fail to quicken many of those “branching and divided thoughts” by which we ourselves are torn and bewildered. “Does not God *see* ?” we ask. “Does He not *care* ? Does He not *rule* ? Will He not

execute and vindicate the law in which He Himself has taught us to trust? Is there to be no triumph of good over evil after all?"

This is *our* care as well as the Psalmist's. And where are we to look for comfort under it? The Psalmist refers us to at least three sources of consolation and hope. (1) He appeals to Reason; (2) he appeals to History; (3) he appeals to the Word of God.

(1) His appeal to Reason is an argument from analogy (Verses 8, 9). He virtually says to us: "You see the triumph of the unrighteous over the righteous. You hear their arrogant boasts, their insolent defiance of their Judge. And He that planted the ear, shall not *He* hear? He that formed the eye, shall not *He* see?" In arguing thus the poet is no doubt arguing up from man to God, and comes fairly under the terrible charge of Anthropomorphism. But that charge has of late been shorn of its terrors for many of us.¹ For, as *Almoni Peloni* has pointed out, Anthropomorphism is neither a vice in logic nor a sin in morals. If, as even those who pronounce it a blunder and a sin contend—if we are to go to Nature for our conception of God, we must go to Man who, on their own shewing, is the last evolution and highest product of the natural forces and laws. And if we are to go to Man, whom they as well as Tennyson confess to be "the roof and crown of things," we *must* argue up from him to God; we must believe that there are in God the qualities, powers, affections which we find in man. The intelligence and will, the conscience and heart, of which we are conscious in ourselves, can only come from Him from whom all things come. And, therefore, the Psalmist has reason on his side when he contends that He who planted the ear must hear, that He who formed the eye must see; when he implies that God does see that very triumph of the evil over the good which we

¹ See an article on *Miracles*, in this Volume, pp. 161 ff.

see and lament, does hear their insolent vaunts, their bold defiance of Him ; that He must regard it as we regard it, and mourn over it, and bring it to an end.

(2) His appeal to History is equally reasonable and cogent (Verses 10, 11). He felt the very danger to which we are exposed, to which we too often succumb—the danger of judging the Inhabitant of Eternity by our own brief and limited experience of time and change. And, therefore, he reminds himself, and us, that man himself is but a breath (“The Lord knoweth that . . . they”—men collectively, or collective man—“are vanity,” literally “are but a breath”); and much more any fugitive class, or generation, of men who may hold possession of the earth for a moment: and still more the thoughts which for some fraction of that moment they may frame or cherish. He invites us by his own example, to look beyond the bounds of our brief moment on the earth, and our brief experience of God’s ways, and to meditate on those ways as they are manifested on the larger scale of universal history and experience: “He that instructeth *the nations*, even He that teacheth man knowledge through the whole breadth of his career upon earth, shall not He reprove those who, judging Him by ‘the ignorant present,’ by the experience of a mere instant, conclude that He does not see their crimes and will not avenge them? Shall not He reprove *us* if, forgetting what He has done in past ages, what He is even now doing on a scale too vast for us to grasp, we suffer our momentary experience of wrong and defeat to colour our whole thought of Him; if, with eyes that look before and after, we contract our vision to a mere point, and infer the permanent conditions of human life from a mere passing phase?”¹

There is great virtue, great comfort, in this argument.

¹ In the Hebrew Verse 10 reads thus: “He that instructeth the nations shall not be correct, even he that teacheth man knowledge?”

And it is one of which we constantly need to be put in remembrance. For the present moment touches us so closely, affects us so keenly, it stands so close to our eyes and takes up so much room in our thoughts, that we are in constant peril of suffering it to shut out from our view all that lies beyond it. Sydney Smith bade his friends take *short* views of life if they would be bright and cheerful; and, in the sense in which he intended it, the advice was good. But there is a sense in which we can only be brave and cheerful as we take *long and large* views of life. For the scene immediately around us at any moment may be charged with all the elements of pain and loss, of cruel yet successful injustice, of unmerited yet bitter defeat. And if we would have comfort in the care which such a scene breeds in us, we must look beyond it; we must travel back to our past experience of better things; or we must go out into the wide world beyond, where the sun is still shining over great breadths of the earth, although the spot on which we stand is darkened by clouds; or, rising above the limits of our personal experience and observation, we must listen to the evidences which History presents century after century, in land after land, that God is just and rules by a just law, that righteousness is the only secret of strength and gladness whether in a man or in a people, and that unrighteousness, however strong and gay it may look, is but a name for weakness and misery.

(3) From the past we might reasonably infer the future, and argue that as, in the long run and on the large scale, goodness always has had much advantage every way over evil, so, in the end, evil must be overcome of good. But the Psalmist, happily for us, does not leave us standing on the difficult and questionable ground of logical inference, which is only too apt to quake beneath our feet under the shock of change or the steadfast pressure of any heavy and long continued misery. For the *future* triumph of good over evil

he refers us to a more sure word of testimony, even the Word of God. From that Word he had derived the conviction which his experience seemed to contradict—that, since God is Judge, all must be well with the earth. And now (Verses 12–15, 23) he harks back on that Word and rejoices in it, dilating on the blessedness of the man whom God teaches *out of his law*, to whom He gives rest in the day of adversity by shewing him the pit which is being dug for the wicked, nay, which the wicked are digging for themselves, since it is by their own iniquity they are to be requited and destroyed by their own sins. Better still, the very Word which opens his eyes to the self-destroying power of unrighteousness, also assures him that God will never thrust away the righteous, nor abandon them to the power of evil; but that “judgment must turn to righteousness and all the upright in heart follow it”: that is to say, he receives the assurance that God will yet vindicate and establish his law, and that all who love that law shall see its vindication and be glad. What the Psalmist finds in the Word of God is, therefore, a guarantee of the ultimate victory of good over evil, the ultimate extirpation of evil, the ultimate and uncontested supremacy of goodness. And if he could find that guarantee in the Law, may we not find it much more easily, and much more certainly, in the Gospel?

If we reflect on the ways of God with men, in so far as they come within the range of our personal observation and experience, it is impossible that we should not at times be oppressed by the care, the doubt, which darkened and perplexed the Psalmist's mind. The mere conflict between what we believe and what we see, by which he was torn, will tear and torment us. But has he not pointed out for us a very sufficient comfort under this care? If, like him, we appeal to what the inward voice of Reason declares of the character of God; if we lift up our eyes and look out,

beyond the narrow arc of personal and present experience, to the history of *nations* and of God's dealings with them: and if, besides the verdict of History, we embrace that prophecy of the future triumph of Righteousness which is woven into the very substance of the Word of God,—will not a great light arise on our darkness, a great strength pass into our weakness, a great joy into our grief? Shall not we also be able to say, and even to sing, “In the multitude of my cares within me, thy comforts delight my soul”?

2. The Psalmist gives us a sample of *the fears* by which his heart was shaken and perturbed (Verses 16–18). His fear sprang from the same general cycle of thought which gave birth to his doubts. It was the spectacle of God's law broken, and broken apparently with impunity, in the world around him which prompted the misgiving that his trust in Righteousness might have been misplaced. And it is his experience of that law broken, and broken with apparent impunity, in the narrower circle of his personal life, which leads him to fear that he is alone and helpless in the world, and that he may sink, undelivered, unbefriended, and unavenged, into the pit of silence and perdition. “Who will rise up *for me* against the evildoers?” is his cry now; and “who will stand up *for me* against the workers of iniquity?”

This was his care, as it is ours when, impelled by the sting of some sharp personal experience, we come down from the region of general speculation on the end and ways of Providence, into an agony of conflict with dark and sorrowful conditions which are no longer diffused through the world at large, but have come home to us individually, and demand of us a faith and courage such as we have never shewn, and perhaps have never needed before. These are the growing moments of the soul, no doubt; but, none the less, they are moments of great trouble and strife,

moments in which we are in no small danger of being bewildered and unmanned by fear. When we thus see the problem reflected in our own hearts, it is not so large as when our thoughts wandered through the earth and we saw it staring us in the face everywhere; but it commonly penetrates more deeply into our thoughts, and lays hold of them with a grip so tense and painful as to command our full attention. We have to wrestle with it as for our life, and often fear that it will prove too strong for us. Then, if ever, we need comfort, need help. And where are we to look for it?

It is most instructive, I think, to note that, in this close and urgent *inward* conflict, the Psalmist does not betake himself, as before, to arguments laboriously drawn from Reason, nor to the verdict of History, nor even to a study of the Word of God. The care, the conflict, is within; and the comfort, the help, must come from within. He is not at leisure from himself now, and cannot travel through the universe to seek aids to faith and arguments against doubt. Any help, if it is to avail, must be prompt, instant, close at hand. And so he seeks it in his own experience, both past and present. "Unless the Lord had been my help," he confesses, "my soul had soon dwelt in silence," *i.e.* had soon gone down into the unbroken stillness of the grave. "But when I said, My foot slippeth, thy lovingkindness, O Lord, held me up." The tenses are difficult here; and it is not easy to see when the Psalmist is referring to a past, and when to a present help. But there is no doubt that he does refer to both, and argue from both. He had passed through similar conflicts, through similar fears, before, though through none perhaps, so intense and dreadful as this; and God was with him *then*, not suffering his feet to slip, or, if they slipped, not suffering him to fall into the silence and darkness of the grave. Nay, God is with him *now*; for if there be much in his lot to distract and terrify

him, there is at least some touch of grace, some relief from care, some omen of good in it too. The day of his soul may have darkened into night : but even at night there are stars in the sky which bear witness to the existence of the sun whose light they reflect, and speak of yet another day to come. The darkness around him is but the darkness of night, not the darkness of death. He may feel that, in the dark, his feet are slipping ; but he also feels that he does not quite fall, or that, if he fall, none of his bones is broken. In this present help, these instant alleviations, he reads the proofs of God's presence with him, God's lovingkindness toward him ; while in his recollection of past deliverances he finds a promise that the Lord will never cast him off nor forsake him.

And here I repeat the appeal : Is it not a true and sufficient comfort to which the Psalmist points us ? If when we have suffered a wrong or loss, a pain or a bereavement, which darkens our whole prospect, and shakes the very convictions, the very trust in the Divine Justice and Love, in which we have been accustomed to rest, so that fear grows active and clamorous within us, and begins to forebode all manner of evil and misery, and mind and heart are too clouded and preoccupied to argue, or study, or travel far in search of help, but demand an aid that shall be near, close, present—may we not find what we need and desire where the Psalmist found it, in our past and in our present experience ? Has not God brought us safely through many similar, though perhaps lesser, afflictions, or afflictions that now look less to us because they are farther off ? Have we not sometimes been enriched by the losses of which we complained, and strengthened by the very sorrows which seemed to enfeeble us ? Has God ever permitted a tithe of what we feared to fall upon us ? Has he not been with us in every past trouble, to get some good from it for us ? Nay, is He not with us in this present trouble ? Is it,

after all, so overwhelming as to blot out every point of light from our sky, and to sweep every resource from the face of the earth? Is no blessing left us, no alleviation of our pain, no comfort in our care, no sacred and sustaining affection, no imperative but helpful and consoling duty? If our foot has slipped, has there been no lovingkindness to hold us up? However low we have fallen, we have not yet fallen into the silence of death; or how should we still mourn and complain?

I for one have never yet seen a man so impoverished by loss, so vexed by pain, so enfeebled by the infirmities of sickness or age, but that, if he were rightly approached, he would gratefully confess that he could recall many deliverances in the past, and that he still had to be thankful for many mercies. And if we would but let our past deliverances speak to us of a Love that can never fail, and see in our present and remaining mercies the proofs of a Love still working for our good, even from the midst of our misgivings and fears, whatever their number and whatever their pressure, we should be able to look up to Heaven and say, "In the multitude of my cares within me, thy comforts delight my soul." And, therefore, I can honestly commend the Psalmist's method of dealing with his cares, and hold up to admiration the noble temper of his soul.

For the most part we refuse to learn from the experience of our fellows. We insist on going to the more costly school of our own experience, in which the lessons are beaten into us with many stripes. Let us at least, then, not refuse to learn *from our own experience*, but gather from it ever new food for the conviction that, because God, the righteous Judge, the loving Friend, of man is in heaven, the cause of Righteousness and Love must prosper on the earth, and that, in the end, evil must be overcome of good.

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