

Central Africa; evil is all too potent in our very midst. Let us fight against the evil in ourselves, and we shall have need enough of the psalms of David and of Asaph. We shall find out our own special psalms, as Luther found out his. Only there is one verse which we shall *never* have occasion to use, "*Save me, O God, for the waters are come in even to the life.*" For our "life is hid with Christ in God."

T. K. CHEYNE.

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## THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SON

(A HOMILETIC STUDY).

### II.

#### THE PENITENT'S RETURN AND RECEPTION.

WE find the account of the recovery, like that of the fall, of the prodigal marked by clear and striking gradation. The steps are these: first *Reflection*, "when he came to himself, he said"; then *Resolution*, "I will arise"; then *Return*, "He arose and came"; afterward follows the father's *Reception* of him—the son's *Confession*; to crown all, his *Restoration* and the *Rejoicing*.

1. REFLECTION. "*And when he came to himself.*" For plainly, he had been beside himself,—not only an exile from home and alien from his father, but madly doing violence to his own nature. So is our state of sin, madness and folly; not such as to unfit us for the common business of life, not such as to free us from responsibility, yet such that we are out of our true and proper mind as to our highest and truest interest. The first step towards salvation is when we come to ourselves, and Reflection is the first mark of this return.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Trench notes that *Resipiscentia* or "becoming wise again," is one of the

The prodigal's reflection ran thus, "*How many hired . . . hunger,*" as much as to say, "to be connected in any way with my father, even in the most menial capacity, is better than to be as I am." This proved returning sanity. Once he had thought, in his madness, that anything was better than to be connected with his father; and he had given himself no rest until he had got as far from him as possible. How differently he sees it now! Such is the beginning of a sound mind in religion; when the thought possesses us, "It were better for me to be near God, to know God on any terms, than to be as I am." It is a new day to a man's soul, when after immersion in the world, long forgetfulness of God, or wilful injury to conscience, and attempts to blind himself to Divine light, he begins to say within himself, "Peace with God, hired service for God, even stripes and chastening which I could see came from God's hand, would be better for me than to live thus in a far country where He is not."

The source of this reflection is not high. Not at any earlier stage is it recorded of the prodigal that he came to himself; but now when he had arrived at the bottom of his misery, and no man gave unto him, his heart broke. He sat down on the cold ground—that throne of the desolate—and cried, "How many hired servants of my father's," etc. "Lo! all these things worketh God oftentimes with man, to bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living."<sup>1</sup> He lets him go down stage after stage in his misery, that what the foolish heart will not admit when corn and wine abound, what the proud spirit will not confess at the first stroke

names of Christian repentance. It may be worth recalling that Lactantius among the Fathers, and Beza among the Reformers, sought in vain to get this term into current use, as an equivalent for *μετάνοια*, instead of the misleading *Pœnitentia*.

<sup>1</sup> Job xxxiii. 23, 30.

of punishment, it may learn after many stripes,—that it were better to return to God on any terms than thus to perish with hunger. Thus is learned that secret of the restored and pardoned ones, so dark to others, the blessedness of those things which seem the bane of life—pain, poverty, sorrow, disappointment. How wonderful the alchemy by which God's grace brings man's best out of life's worst. Troubles that are the just consequences of sin, He turns into occasions of repentance and means of recovery. "I will hedge up thy way with thorns, and make a wall that she shall not find her paths, . . . then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband, for then was it better with me than now."<sup>1</sup>

2. RESOLUTION. The course of thought in the mind of the youth is very natural and evident. Hunger made him think of the plenty at home, even in the servants' hall; that suggested his father's heart, the love for him there still, the good case of servants even, in that house, much more of sons. So his fancy travels back from present wretchedness to past happy days. With that remembrance comes hope, and with hope, resolve: "I will arise and go to my father." Such is the dawn of repentance in the human soul. Misery makes us think of help—help in God, when man fails us. The character of God apprehended creates hope of pardon and desire to ask it. These together stir resolution to turn to Him. Mere misery, mere natural broken-heartedness by reason of affliction works no penitence. The sorrow of the world worketh death. But the remembrance that God is love, the belief that with Him there is mercy, this added to the sense of misery and conviction of the sin which has deserved it, breaks the heart with genuine contrition, stirs the soul with filial desire, animates the man with the resolve of repentance.

*"I will arise, and go to my father, and will say unto him."*

<sup>1</sup> Hos. ii. 6, 7.

It is resolution, prompt and pointed. It is no vague, shiftless, hesitating, blind longing. All the steps are before his mind, he sees his way home, he has prepared the very words (comp. Hosea xiv. 2). "*Father!*" He feels that the relationship is not broken. Obedience did not constitute it. Disobedience, even apostasy does not dissolve it. In spite of all provocations inflicted, that father remains, in the lost son's apprehension, a father still to be so addressed and trusted. Now this is a foremost element in true penitence ("Return, O Israel, unto the Lord, thy God," "I will go to my father"); to believe that however shamefully we have treated God, He abideth faithful; that though we have broken with our side of the relationship, and renounced our covenant place, He remains in His, unchanged and unchangeable.

"*I have sinned against heaven and before thee.*" There is a delicate rhetorical propriety in the words put into the mouth of the youth, so as not to mix up the figure and the fact. It is our sinning "against God" that is figured, so that phrase is not used in the parable. Yet the *μετάνοια* of the prodigal is shown to be pure by his express reference to his offence against a higher than his earthly parent. He discerns sin in its root and essence as the transgression of the Divine will (so Olshausen, *in loc.*). Thus is brought out the very heart of true confession. The mere words "I have sinned" may be uttered in many characters. Hard-hearted Pharaoh said "I have sinned," when the judgment of God was upon him, but the moment it was removed, hardened his heart again. Double-minded Balaam said it, yet with the word in his mouth still desired to go after the wages of unrighteousness. Fickle Saul said it when the prophet reproved him, but it made no change in his life. Convicted Achan said it when there was no door of hope left for him, in that valley of Achor where they stoned him. Despairing Judas said it, and went

and hanged himself. But to say it thus to God in heaven with a sense that against Him, Him only have we sinned, with trust in His mercy, and confidence in His pardon, this is genuine confession from a truly contrite heart.

*“And am no more worthy . . . hired servants.”* This in the mouth of the resolving penitent is true humility. What else could the youth resolve to say if he felt as he ought. He remembered the place he had once. He sees how justly he has forfeited that place. He tells himself how thankful he ought to feel now for the humblest place in his father's house, if only he may be received into it at all. So he revolves in his mind such words as these. The like feeling in us when we first truly repent is surely what our Lord meant to picture, the humility of the broken heart, not the lingering pride of the self-righteous spirit. “My inmost desire is that God would take me back anyhow. If He would but let me creep inside the door of His house, let me have the crumbs from His table, let me be the humblest menial in His service, let me only be near Him, and be His on any terms.” Such language expresses the true home-sickness of the penitent heart, the exact converse of that evil heart of unbelief whose choice was to depart into any country that was far enough from God. Now it is “let me in any wise be at home with Thee.”

3. RETURN and RECEPTION of the Penitent. The actual return of this prodigal is the happiest example of “said and done.” He waits not, wavers not, does not procrastinate. He does not, like so many, turn the thing over in the mind and think only of the difficulties—“resolve and re-resolve and die the same.” “He arose and came to his father.” “To whom shall we go but unto Thee?” When we find out that we are “strangers in the world,” let us straightway become pilgrims unto God. But our attention here is called to the other side of the picture—the Penitent's Reception.

“ *When he was yet a great way off . . . and kissed him.*” Mark this as the central scene of the drama. Think of the youth as he trudges on mile after mile over that dreary land. So easy as it had been to traverse on his light-hearted going away; so hard and sad now when he is retracing his steps. Think of the contending emotions within his breast; now desire and now shrinking, now hope and now fear. When he has surmounted the last hill-top, and yonder away in the distance stands the home of his birth, think how his heart would beat and his eyes grow dim with tears. As he begins to move from that spot towards the now visible end of his hopes his fears suddenly revive, he feels it impossible he should be taken back into favour, he must have been mad, he thinks, to dream of it, when, lo! yon advancing figure! What! it is his father himself, and in a few moments more he is locked in arms of paternal love.

Here we reach the very gist of the story. The heart of God overflows in these sayings of Jesus. Every word vibrates with emotion at once the tenderest and the holiest. God desires the return of us sinners and wretched, far more than even we desire in our most earnest moments to return to Him. God discerns the faintest sigh after good which breaks forth in a wanderer's heart, and from the moment this heart takes a step towards Him, He takes ten to meet it. Nay, He draws sinners ere ever they run as penitents towards Him. What this father was to his prodigal son, says Jesus, that and infinitely more is thy God, O penitent, to thee. When he was yet “ a great way off ” his father saw him. When you were still in darkness as to the way of life, when you had but slight views of sin and imperfect views of Divine grace, when you had many doubts as to your reception, when, left to yourself, you would have faltered and failed and never got to your Father's house at all, His eye of grace and compassion was

upon you. When you were advancing slowly and uncertainly as one burdened without and within, He ran to meet you. When you held back in mingled shame and fear, He fell on your neck and kissed you. In the words of our favourite household commentator, "Here were eyes of mercy, and these quick-sighted to see a great way off. Here were bowels of mercy, yearning at the sight of his son. Here were feet of mercy, and those quick-paced to run. Here were arms of mercy stretched out to embrace him, undeserving and filthy though he was. Here were lips of mercy dropping as an honeycomb." Kisses of mercy, words of mercy, deeds of mercy, wonders of mercy—all mercy. What a God of mercy and grace He is!

4. The Penitent's CONFESSIO. "And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned . . . no more worthy to be called thy son." In the words of M. Henry again, "As it commends the good father's kindness that he showed it before the prodigal expressed his regret and repentance, so it commends the penitent's confession that he expressed it after his father had showed him so much kindness." The reception was all that he could desire, and much more than he had dared to hope for. It was a royal forgiveness. The pardon was bestowed ere he got time to ask it. His sin was never mentioned to him. But this did not abate his real grief for having so mistrusted such a father. It rather opened heart and lips in a readier and deeper confession. And this which is so true to nature, has its counterpart in grace. God forgives His returning child with a royal, a Divine forgiveness. "I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for My own sake, and will not remember thy sins."<sup>1</sup> Yet such exceeding grace it is which breaks the heart into the truest contrition and confession. "Then shall ye remember your own evil ways and your doings that were not good,

<sup>1</sup> Isa. xliii. 25.

and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations.”<sup>1</sup> The deepest penitence is that which follows, not that which precedes the sense of being forgiven. The kiss of reconciliation unseals the lips of the penitent soul. The sight of the cross opens the fountain of its tears. The taste of God’s love in pardoning awakens the most genuine grief at our own sin which so long insulted such love. The strongest assurance of God’s favour is meant to call out the sincerest self-blame. “I will establish My covenant with thee; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord: that thou mayest remember and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more, because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God.”<sup>2</sup>

It is one of the subtle strokes of our Lord’s Divine genius, that in telling the story he makes the prodigal omit the last part of his pre-arranged petition, “make me as one of thy hired servants.” There is not a word of that now. Was it that the father’s prompt and repeated kisses stopped his mouth and cut off the unhappy ending. Or, was it rather, that the reception he met with had purified his heart of the one troubled element, of doubt as to how the father would receive him, made him feel that to express it now would be an insult to that father’s love, and taught him that the true humility was not to ask a servant’s place, but at the hand of such a father to accept the place of a forgiven child?

This last illustrates best the evangelical lesson. When the heavenly Father’s kiss fills the heart of the repentant sinner with a sweet assurance of forgiveness, it resolves all doubt, melts down all pride, dispels all misgiving and misconception, and makes him ready to accept the place and honour of that sonship which he was utterly unworthy to receive, but which it is so like the Father to bestow. To

<sup>1</sup> Ezek. xxxvi. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Ezek. xvi. 62, 63.



know something of the unsearchable riches of His grace, enforces the true humility, which is to go up higher when the Lord bids us. Far more really humble than to say "make me as one of thy hired servants," is it to take silently the place of a forgiven child.<sup>1</sup>

5. The RESTORATION. The scene at this point changes. From the place where the father met the prodigal, we are now transferred to the house. "I am no more worthy," was the word with which the penitent son wound up his confession. That word is now taken up by the father. He said to his servants, "*Bring forth,*" etc. So far as the son is concerned the father will answer him by deeds. He will show by more than words that as a son he is received. So far as the household is concerned words shall not be wanting, nor signs either, to proclaim the sonship of this restored child. "*Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him.*" This "change of raiment" (comp. Zech. iii. 4) is called *στολήν τὴν πρώτην*, either as "the former robe" such as he had worn before he went astray, or as "the foremost robe," the best robe (as A. V. has it), that well-known garb of honour in which it is fitting such a guest should be arrayed.<sup>2</sup> "*And put a ring on his hand.*" Let him not want the signs of dignity and honour (comp. Gen. xli.). "*And shoes on his feet.*" Ragged and barefoot had he come, but not such must he enter the house and sit down at the table. Shoes, too, were the sign of the free man. Slaves went barefoot,

<sup>1</sup> Godet makes a "wide difference" between the words of ver. 19 and those of ver. 21. This is now the cry of repentant love, that was the cry of despair. The "terms are the same, *I have sinned*, but how different the accent! Luther felt it profoundly; the discovery of the difference between the repentance of fear and that of love was the true principle of the Reformation." Though in itself a vigorous remark, this can hardly be built upon the omission of the clause. A growth in evangelical repentance may be meant, but not the contrast with an unevangelical fear.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the article is best justified by this latter rendering; as again in vv. 23, 27 *τὸν μόσχον τὸν σκευρόν* = that one prepared and reserved for special occasions. *Stola prima est dignitas quam perdidit Adam!* A flagrant instance of patristic exegesis.

but the son must be shod. Indeed the idea—full evidence of citizenship and sonship—is the real force of all these particulars. In carrying out the interpretation it has been usual to make the robe, ring, and shoes signify respectively the three chief “benefits of redemption.” The justifying righteousness, the sealing spirit of adoption, and the new walk of sanctification. Wittily and temptingly complete as is this interpretation, it cannot be exegetically sustained. For in the parable all the three particulars refer to the declaration of the restored prodigal’s position. He is to be neither a slave nor a hired servant, but an honoured son. We should beware, therefore, not to bury under such evangelical details our Lord’s exact purpose here, which, as the whole story and its setting witness, is to show that God seeks sinners as His own; that when He finds them He takes care to let all know that these restored sinners are as much His children as the highest angel; that the worst prodigal among them is as truly a son as the most honoured of His saints; that the distinctions and degrees which men would introduce into His kingdom are blotted out in the freeness of His forgiving grace; that whereas men when they forgive are apt not to forget, the mercy of God as far exceeds man’s as the heavens are above the earth.

“Man’s forgiveness may be true and sweet,  
And yet he stoops to give it; more complete  
Is love which lays forgiveness at thy feet,  
And pleads with thee to raise it. Only heaven  
Means crowned, not vanquished, when it says ‘forgiven.’”

6. The REJOICING. “*Bring hither the fatted calf . . . was lost and is found.*” The return of the prodigal was a great event in that house, greatest to the heart of the father. He saw farthest into its meaning. He knew that he had received in this son another man altogether from him that went away and tarried in the far land. His is the deep joy of receiving a son indeed, once dead, now alive; once

lost to him and to heaven, now found alike by both. Such joy in a human heart must run over. It must impart itself. So he summons all his house to rejoice with him, and that no one may be unable to enter into the gladness, he makes provision for its being a feast-day for them all.

Here again the details take care of themselves. And so also does the interpretation. "*The fatted calf.*" Jesus knows country customs. On every farm homestead there is always "the calf" which is fattening for feast days. What does it represent spiritually? "All that is most excellent and sweet in the communications of Divine grace."<sup>1</sup> It means the rich provision of joy and peace in believing which God provides for the returning sinner; as also, that added joy to those who heartily sympathise, which His Church has often found to accompany times of the awakening and conversion of sinners.

Note how this brings us to the point and application of the story as a parable of the kingdom. Our Lord plainly means by this crowning parable of the three in this chapter, to clench the lesson which runs through them all. Man's redemption is a momentous event in the annals of God. He alone perfectly understands it and most of all rejoices over it, for to Him our nature belongs and He knows what it is worth. Other beings however, including men themselves, are called to rejoice along with God in this. The mark of their nearness to God in spirit will be the degree in which they are taken up about human salvation, are concerned for it, and delight in its accomplishment. For what is it, when, say, a single human being repents and is forgiven? What does it mean to the Highest of all Beings?

<sup>1</sup> Godet *in loc.* If it were needful to set aside with reasons the patristic conceit which made the fatted calf mean the Atoning Sacrifice, this commentator's answer would be sufficient. "The absence of every feature fitted to represent the sacrifice of Christ is at once explained, when we remember that we have here to do with a parable, and that expiation has no place in the relations between man and man."

It means the recovery not only of something dead and out of use like a missing coin, of something lost like a wandered sheep, but the restoration, says the Divine Father, of My child, made after Mine own image. "This my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found."

J. LAIDLAW.

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BREVIA.

THREE books have lain too long on a side-shelf in my study waiting to be noticed. To any who have been expecting a word of guidance respecting them, regretful excuses are due. I had hardly thought it possible for me to write again about Ewald, especially in THE EXPOSITOR. But I will at least invite the student of theology, whatever be the colour of his "views," to acquaint himself with the skilful adaptation of portions of Ewald's last great work (*Die Lehre der Bibel von Gott*), which Mr. Goadby has issued under the title given below.<sup>1</sup> All honour to the president of a Baptist college for the good work which he has done! There is no German writer on the Old Testament so fitted in many respects to supply the wants of an English theological student as Ewald. I do not think that Ewald, either in the work from which this book is taken, or in his grand *History of the People of Israel*, shows a sufficiently keen historical sense; he has not such an eye for "development" as many far less gifted later German writers possess. But for all that, or perhaps because of that, the essential ideas which are more or less common to all the great Biblical writers are brought out with a force and a completeness here which will be sought for in vain elsewhere. Great as were the faults of Ewald, his standard and his spirit are such as each religious and yet thoughtful Biblical student will desire as his own. This volume is a companion to a similar one, also drawn from Ewald's last work, called *Revelation: its Nature and Record*.

To the same publishers we owe the translation of P. Cassel's

<sup>1</sup> *Old and New Testament Theology*. By Heinrich Ewald. Translated by Rev. Thomas Goadby, B.A. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.)