

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF THE PSALMS.

PSALM XC. 12.

So teach us to number our days,
That we may get us an heart of wisdom.

'This psalm,' says Isaac Taylor, 'may be cited as perhaps the most sublime of human compositions, the deepest in feeling, the loftiest in theological conception, the most magnificent in its imagery.' Its deep, sombre music has been made familiar to us by bereavement and grief. The first part contemplates the awful eternity of God and the pathetic frailty of man. The second part is a prayer for compassion, for the transfiguration of sorrow and for the prosperity which attends the Divine favour and grace.

The twelfth verse is the key-note of the 90th Psalm. It numbers sadly the days and vicissitudes of human life; but it does this, not for the sake of mere sentiment, but rather for practical purposes, that it may furnish a motive for a wiser life of the heart.

On his return from the Rockies in 1879 Professor Henry Drummond found himself at Boston, and in a curious dilemma. He had only five days before his departure for home. He was in the city of Lowell, Longfellow, Emerson, Channing, and Holmes, and he had an invitation to meet Longfellow and Holmes at dinner. But some eight hundred miles off, away by Lake Erie, there were two men, more to him than philosopher or poet—Mr. Moody and Mr. Sankey. It was hard for him to give up Longfellow, but, convinced that the world needed preachers more than poets, he set off at once. He arrived. There, before him were the two men—Mr. Sankey, down to the faultless set of his black neck-tie; Mr. Moody, to the chronic crush of his collar. Probably never in all his life did he feel a greater wrench than this from Boston; probably never greater happiness than when he burst in uninvited, unannounced upon the astonished evangelists at Cleveland. 'And yet—and yet O Henry! why didn't you dine with Longfellow and Holmes?' asks his scholarly biographer.¹ Drummond's reply must have been, 'Because it is better for most of us to spend a day with two great preachers than with two great poets.' Who shall say that the charming master of students was wrong?

I.

i. *Our Days.* The Psalmist does not speak of years, not even of months or weeks, but of days. There is something very impressive in such a mode

of reckoning. A year is a long period; and while we may hope for years of life, be they many or few, the passage of time is not continuously felt by us. But days—how they rush past and are gone, with a rapidity which on reflexion is almost appalling. Even the heedless must feel the ebb of life when it comes to be calculated by days.

We cannot profitably deal with life in the wholesale, we must deal with it in the retail. That is the way God gives us time, moment by moment; just as He gives the gold, grain by grain. We are able to handle life only in short periods. A year! No man is equal to a year. A month! No man is equal to a month. A day! That is the longest period any man can handle. Let a man finish up a day well, and he does magnificently. The best works are those which are finished particle by particle, each particle being wrought up to the highest state of perfection. Besides this there is another consideration. If time is to be spoiled, it is better to spoil only a day than to spoil a month, or to spoil a year.

God does not give life in years, but in days. Have you thought how beautiful and kind it is of our Father when He gives us time that He breaks off a bit of eternity, and says, 'There is a day; take care of it, and to-morrow come and get another?' It is just as much as we can manage. One of my children says to me, 'Father, give me a sovereign.' 'A sovereign, I daresay,—here is a penny for you! I give you as much as you can take care of.'²

Each day, each week, each month, each year is a new chance given you by God. A new chance, a new leaf; a new life—this is the golden, the unspeakable gift which each new day offers you.³

An artist recently took at short intervals a hundred photographs marking the various stages of a rapidly growing plant. Now, it would require a fine eye to distinguish progress in the successive pictures of the long series; so imperceptible would be the changes of the plant, that any two closely following plates would be indistinguishable, and *progress would be evident only when somewhat distant pictures of the series were compared.* Yet personally we often lose heart by comparing our present selves with our moral and spiritual history of yesterday. How impossible to gauge moral movement! But even when onward and upward movement is really slender, *has not modern thought recognized the immense importance of even the most trifling variation?* If we are living rightly, the deepest changes are being silently wrought

¹ G. A. Smith, *Life of Henry Drummond*, 127.

² Mark Guy Pearse.

³ Dean Farrar.

in the depths of our nature, and the faintest of these is a cause for infinite gratitude. The plant was steadily on its way to the consummation of its glorious flower, even when the photographic film failed to register its too delicate progress; and with true men the soul grows in the power of holiness, even when crude self-examinations fail to discover the delightful transformation. *No impatience will accelerate the unfolding of flower or soul; it can only retard.*¹

2. *Numbering our Days.* Perhaps it would not be difficult to number our days if we saw things as God sees. If we could reach to the end of a life, and count its years, would it take us long to number the days? Five-and-twenty thousand is not an extraordinary sum. A man with five-and-twenty thousand pounds of capital is scarcely reckoned rich. An army of five-and-twenty thousand soldiers would not be worth much in a modern war. And yet there are less than twenty-five thousand six hundred days in a lifetime of threescore years and ten. Deduct the age of infancy and the age of decrepitude, take away the months of sickness and of enforced inactivity, and there remains a number which is certainly not inestimable by reason of its magnitude.

It is especially in the spring-time of life that we do well to count our days. I don't for a moment say that we shall be excused if we are negligent about them at any other period. But this I do say, that we can least afford to waste that part of life when our minds and hearts are young, and everything we sow in them is likely to take root and flourish. Have you ever heard of the unfortunate nobleman of whom it was said that he used to lose half an hour every morning of his life, and spent the rest of the day looking for it? Even more to be pitied are the people who have lost or wasted the morning of their life, and have to struggle during the rest of their existence to make up for it.²

(I) We number our days when we feel their fewness. To the imagination of the young, life seems long. They catch no echo of 'the roar of the waves of eternity as they dash on the shores of time,'—so far away those shores appear to lie. But the further we advance the more swiftly and imperceptibly the hours and weeks and years steal on. At the outset of the voyage we mark our progress by the objects on the river-banks: trees, houses, church-spires, towering hills. But later, we have left the channel, and are on the trackless sea; and nothing indicates how remorselessly the miles accomplish themselves. Before we look for it, we shall hear the cry, 'Land ahead!' and our voyage will be finished and past.

¹ W. L. Watkinson, *The Ashes of Roses*, p. 31.

² S. Singer, *Sermons to Children*, 116.

Eternity! Eternity!
 How long art thou, Eternity!
 And yet to thee Time hastes away,
 Like as the warhorse to the fray,
 Or swift as couriers homeward go,
 Or ship to port, or shaft from bow,
 Ponder, O man, Eternity!³

(2) We number our days when we recall their uncertainty. Often they are abruptly broken, before they have attained their bound. 'Lord, spare the green, and take the ripe,' a lion-hearted man cried once as he entered the fight in which he fell; but the cry is not always answered, and the child as well as the parent is laid in the churchyard grave. And mental activity is no guarantee of continuance; God strikes His silence through our thoughts, our schemes, our enterprises. An unreadiness for the stupendous change of death—is it not a broken staff on which to lean? Let us remember how brittle our years are; and let us seize hold in them upon the things which cannot be shaken.

(3) We number our days, too, if we compare them with the abidingness of God. The world is old. It watches the generations come and go. The Talking Oak was thriving before King Harry turned the monks adrift; it heard the Roundhead hum his surly hymn; and still it blossomed with each returning spring. But God is both older and younger than the world. He is without beginning, and the millenniums have left Him unhurt by the tooth of time. How paltry our fourscore winters seem, in the light of His unending ages! Yes! but let us turn to Him. Let us cast ourselves on the Everlasting Arms. And the enduringness of our God will pass into our frailty and littleness.

(4) And we number our days, if we think of them in relation to the limitless future. In one sense, we are easily robbed of them; in another sense, they will come to no conclusion at all. Short as they are, they prelude an existence unimaginable, stable, deathless. Now we are laying the foundations of a palace or of a prison, from which we shall go no more out. Now we are moulding for ourselves a king's unfading crown or a captive's inexorable chain. And since momentous issues hang on the slender thread of our fleeting days, let us seek and find Christ's pardon, let us live as one about to migrate, and let us be diligent in our Father's business.⁴

³ *Lyra Germanica*, 26.

⁴ A. Smellie, *In the Secret Place*.

II.

But the text is especially concerned with a certain motive we should have for numbering our days—'So number your days.' The motive is that we may obtain a heart of wisdom.

1. The first thing, then, in the numbering of our days is to see that we have *the right end* in view—this end, 'that we may get us a heart of wisdom.' Now it is needful to remember that we must give a much wider interpretation to the word 'heart' than is accorded to it in modern usage. Nowadays it has been degraded until it suggests and comprehends the emotional life only. But to express the Old Testament meaning we must add the factors of the mind and will. It is a masculine word, describing the allied forces of the inner life. And the Psalmist's purpose is that the whole of this spiritual army should be possessed and illumined by 'wisdom.' It is needful, again, to remember that 'wisdom' is more than knowledge. It is the supreme light of the Divine, the irradiation which springs from intimate and constant fellowship with God. And therefore the prayer of the Psalmist expresses a pleading for a holy light which shall illumine mind and heart and will, and so transfigure the life in its character and conduct.

(1) Wisdom is not money. What is material wealth—houses, ships, lands, money—compared with the high and lofty characteristics of mind when it has been adequately instructed, or those treasures of thought, feeling, and impulse which accumulate in the high ranges of spiritual reception and expression? It is a short-sighted vision which plans only for the triumphs which the skill and strength of man can gain over matter. It is a mean ambition that is contented with the accumulation of material fortune. Try as much as you please, you cannot lift the mercenary motive to the level of dignity and applause. Men do not applaud it. There is too much of the divinity of correct judgment in them to pronounce mercenary results, however large, worthy of man or an ornament to society.

(2) Nor is wisdom pleasure. This is not to say that happiness may never be hoped for, or enjoyed when it comes. If we did not desire to be happy, we should be more than human,—or less. But the only way of obtaining happiness is to renounce altogether the pursuit of it. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness;

and all these things'—things which go to make life happy—'shall be added unto you.'

2. But if the true end is to be reached there must be a *right starting-point*. Everything depends on the start in the religious life. It is said, 'All is well that ends well.' That is a lie. The penitent thief ended well, but that did not undo the mischief of his life. It did not restore the stolen goods, or banish the misery from the broken-hearted mothers of those he had slain. It does not do to begin at the wrong end. 'Well begun is half done.' That is true. The old rhyme says of the day, 'Between six and eight, you have sealed its fate.' You have made your day between six and eight. Sailors can see by the sunrise what the character of the day is to be. If you get a good sunrise, you will get a good day. And you can make your own sunrise in religion.

The quaint Fuller tells us of a Sybil offering to sell to a King of Rome three volumes of her oracles, but he refused to buy because of the high price. She took them away and burned one volume, and afterwards returned to sell the two remaining at the price of three. He refused again, thinking her little better than frantic: thereupon she burned the second volume, and demanded the same price for the remaining one that she had asked for the three. Otherwise she would burn that also, and he would dearly repent it. The king, thinking it must be of great value and admiring her resolution, bought it. There are three volumes of men's time: Youth, Manhood, and Old Age; and ministers advise them to redeem this time. But men think the price too much, because it will cost them the renouncing of carnal delights. Whereupon one-third part of their life (youth) is consumed. The same renunciation, or price, is asked for manhood, but refused; so of old age, the last volume, and the same price; but the aged will find it harder and dearer, because of fixed habits, than if they had bought all three at the beginning.

There is a very striking utterance of Coleridge, in which he says that 'There is no chance of truth as the goal where there is not a childlike humility at the starting-point.' I suppose that Carlyle would substitute the word 'reverence' in place of the word 'humility.' The Bible uses neither word, but employs the mighty phrase, 'the fear of the Lord.' It is here that we are to find 'the beginning of wisdom.' When a man wishes to make a sacred and worthy use of time he must lay aside all flippancy and insincerity, and move in the spirit of holy reverence and fear.¹

3. There must also be serious *determination to make progress*. A man who wants to employ every moment in dignified purpose must be continually questioning the moral significance of things. He must not allow things to 'take their chance.' He must assert an imperative discrimination over every-

¹ J. H. Jowett.

thing that comes to his door. He must not pay final homage to established custom. There are some customs which he must break if he would preserve his own integrity. Neither must he allow his feelings to decide his destiny. It is not what he likes that must be the arbiter, but what is morally true. He must bring everything to the bar of moral judgment. He must cross-examine everything. 'Where are you going? What is your main trend? Are you a regular liner or only a buccaneer on the high seas?'

There are two ways in which days may be numbered to no purpose.

(1) That of the Epicurean—'Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die.' There is a strong tendency to reckless enjoyment when the time is felt to be short, and religion does not exist to restrain.

(2) That of the sentimentalist. It is no part of our Christian duty to think of decay in an abject spirit. That which the demoniac in the Gospels did, having his dwelling among the tombs, has sometimes been reckoned the perfection of Christian unworldliness. Men have looked on every joy as a temptation; on every earnest pursuit as a snare—the skull and the hour-glass their companions, curtaining life with melancholy, haunting it with visions and emblems of mortality. This is not Christianity. Rather it is so to dwell on thoughts of death 'that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.' If the history of these solemn truths does not stimulate us to duty and action, it were no duty to remind ourselves of them. Rather the reverse. Better shut out such gloomy and useless thoughts. But there is a way of dwelling amidst these facts which solemnizes life instead of paralyzing it. He is best prepared to meet change who sees it at a distance and contemplates it calmly.¹

4. Again, there must be a *dynamic*. If we are to set about in quest of a noble and transfigured character, to press on 'toward the mark of the high calling of God in Christ' we need an adequate inspiration. And here it is: 'I can do all things in Christ strengthening me.' And here it is again: it is possible for me to apprehend that 'for which also I have been apprehended of Christ.' 'Thou, O Christ, art all I want.' If we will consecrate our judgments and our wills, and use the common sense which is the Lord's finest gift next to His own grace, He will bestow upon us the powers of the Spirit, and we shall find that the impossible is our destined inheritance.

The dynamic is the love of God in Christ Jesus. It is the conviction that God loves us, and loves us with all the love He has got. If I had to make God love me I should give up in despair, for I should never be loved. Said one of my

little ones to the youngest, in that threatening tone which is usually adopted in teaching, 'You must be good, you know, or father wont love you.' Then I called him to myself, and said, gravely and tenderly, 'Do you know what you have said? It is not true, my boy, not a bit true; you never made a bigger mistake, my son. I don't love you because you are good. There are lots of lads, but I love you just because you are my own little son. If you grow up to be the worst man I shall love you with a love that will break my heart, but I shall love you still. I don't love you only when you are good. I love you because I cannot help loving you. When you are good I love you with a love that makes me glad, and when you are not good I love you with a love that makes me sad.' 'Is that it?' said my child. 'Then I will be good, father.' God's love is not conditioned. Nothing we can ever do, nothing we can ever be, nothing we can ever feel or believe, will make God love us more than He does.²

5. And, finally, there must be *some method*. The great majority of people are convinced that they have little or no time for anything. One of the commonest wastes of time is that which consists in frequently saying that we have no time at all. It is a commonplace that it is the busiest man who is always readiest to do a little more. In the simple matter of packing a bag it is amazing how soon the inexpert packer seems to be at the end of his resources. But the expert packer of a bag always has room for another article. And so it is in the daily life. Methodical men, with purpose and method, can always find a corner for a good thing. Morley's *Life of Gladstone* revealed to us how marvellous were the harvestings which that great man made in the mere corners of his fields.

Like all the greatest spiritual poetry, this Psalm has a deep undertone of remorse and retribution. Rossetti's terrible sonnet, which he entitled 'Lost Days,' reads like a commentary on 'Thou hast set our iniquities before thee: our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.'

The lost days of my life until to-day,
What were they, could I see them on the street
Lie as they fell? Would they be ears of wheat
Sown once for food but trodden into clay?
Or golden coins squandered and still to pay?
Or drops of blood dabbling the guilty feet?
Or such spilt water as in dreams must cheat
The undying throats of Hell, athirst alway?

I do not see them here; but after death
God knows I know the faces I shall see,
Each one a murdered self, with low last breath.
'I am thyself,—what hast thou done to me?'
'And I—and I—thyself' (lo! each one saith),
'And thou thyself to all eternity!'

¹ F. W. Robertson.

² Mark Guy Pearse.