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IX. The Disciple in Sorrow

Sorrow is the common heritage of humanity. In all ages, in all lands, under all conditions, man feels pain, and suffers anguish. Is sorrow, then, a part of the original Divine intention for man? Does God take pleasure in human suffering in itself? Assuredly not. He who created without sorrow, will also wipe all tears away. And yet to-day sorrow is a Divine provision having an infinite meaning and exerting a marvellous influence. What Cowper sang is certainly true:

"The path of sorrow, and that path alone,
Leads to the land where sorrow is unknown;
No trav'ler ever reached that blest abode,
Who found not thorns and briars on his road."

Sorrow came in the track of sin, not the companion and ally thereof but God's quick messenger, a sense of loss, opening at once the door back to the heart and home of His love. Sorrow is a deep sense of loss, the consciousness of lack, the natural experience of a God-forsaken life. Had there been no dethronement of the King, there could have been no sorrow, for the whole being, still and quiet in Him, could have had no sense of loss. When man committed the act of high treason, by listening to a voice that called in question the love and wisdom of the Divine authority, there sprang up in that instance the first sense of lust, envy, hunger, and sorrow, and it took the form of a desire to know what God had not revealed. And when, following that desire, instead of returning then and there to allegiance man passed through the door, seeking liberty, he found himself in a great darkling void, without God, and yet possessed of a nature making demands perpetually that neither he himself nor any other could satisfy.

Sorrow, then, is the result of sin, but it is the benevolent, tender, purposeful messenger of the Eternal Love, who cannot see His offspring lose all, without causing within them this sense of loss, and so ever by that means attracting them homeward. Carry out that view of sorrow, and see how wondrously the person and work of Jesus agree thereto. The prophet, long before He came, spoke of Him, "A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," and further declared "Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." (Is. liii. 3, 4). Turning from that sacred forthtelling of the purpose of the Messiah's coming to the historical account of His life, and work, I find the very heart and centre of it reached when on Calvary's Cross He cried from the darkness into which He had passed, seeking that which was lost, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" That is the greatest sorrow of all, there in the person of Christ all humanity's sorrow and anguish and tears are centred. That is the expression of all agony. Beyond that there is no sorrow. And that is also the great cry of humanity's sin; God dethroned by man; man forsaken by God. Beyond that there is nothing. So He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows in that awful hour when He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. There all the world's sin is borne and its sorrow felt. After that — silence. Surely a stillness in heaven, on earth, in hell, — and then "it is finished" from His lips, and He, the conqueror, died by "laying down" His life. Sin is put away, and sorrow is recalled. Righteousness commences her new reign and joy follows in her wake, the glorious possibilities of humanity are opened up, for Christ has lived and died, and lives forever now, and is a priest "after the power of an endless life" (Heb. vii. 16). Yet while in that Cross there was the rediscovery of God to man, and the rending of the veil for man's return, and all of healing provided, the appropriation of the purchased possession is, in the wisdom of God, secured by processes that cover centuries in man's measurement, and so sin is still here, and sorrow must therefore remain also. What, then, is the disciple's relation thereto?

1. To the disciple the realm of sorrow has become circumscribed, and that in a large measure. The great sorrows of humanity are personal and self-centred. Some loss experienced, some injury inflicted, some disappointment realized, these are the common causes of sorrow. In proportion as self is subdued and God enthroned in the life, this class of sorrows becomes obsolete. The soul finds its all in God increasingly, and so is able not merely to be resigned but to rejoice in denials as well as in blessings bestowed. Very slow we may be, even in the school of Jesus, but this is the growing experience of those who are learning of Him and are submissive to His teaching; and witnesses, to the fact that God fills all the gaps, and brings the heart into perfect rest, are not wanting, neither are they few. "The heart at leisure from itself" is a heart that has so learned of Jesus as to rejoice in exactly the circumstances that in the old life caused the keenest sense of sorrow.

2. From this is seen the Mission of Sorrow. It is ever a disciplinary force, drawing the heart more and more toward God, as it creates a sense of the hollowness and uncertainty of all that has been held most dear. How wondrously this is manifest in the life of the believer. Take two persons — one whose will is rebellious and whose heart is unregenerate, the other a disciple of Jesus — and let them pass through identical experiences of bereavement, affliction, failure, and disappointment. In the one case the spirit becomes embittered and callous and the character degenerates; in the other gentleness, love, tenderness are the results, and the very face catches a new glory and beauty. The one defiantly faces sorrow, and looking upon God's messenger as an enemy attempts to destroy or banish it, and so sinks into hardness and hatred; the other is drawn to the heart of God, and finds the very pain is but God's fire for the destruction of dross, and so rises into that ineffable sweetness and love which is such a revelation of the power of the God of Love.

3. What, then, is the secret of this effect of sorrow upon the life of the disciple? The companionship of Jesus. He who touched the inner heart of all the world's agony is ever present, understanding the very deep meaning of that pain, the absence of God, knowing that every form of anguish was expressed in that great cry on the Cross, and then revealing Himself to whatever form of the need is present. In your darkest anguish, O believing heart, what healed you? Was it not that Christ said to you "I am just what you have lost, and infinitely more"? and as you said, "Yes, my Lord, Thou art," did not all the horizon kindle with a new light, and all the pain as quietly ease as by the magic of His own touch?

4. Looking back over our sorrows since we entered the school of Jesus, there is yet another truth to be recognized, and that is the fact of their transmutation. When the Master was about to leave His earliest disciples, He said to them of the keenest pain of the time — the thought of His departure — "Your sorrow shall be turned into joy" (John xvi. 20). And was it not so? They learned in the coming of the Paraclete how expedient it was for them that He should go away, and so His going their greatest grief — became to them, in His ascension and the consequent coming of Himself, into nearer, dearer relation by the indwelling Spirit, their greatest joy. In that promise was there not a statement of the whole philosophy of pain to a believing, trusting heart? How perpetually sorrow is turned into joy. Mark — not the sorrow removed, and so joy coming, but the sorrow itself becoming the joy. Have we not all had such experiences? Can we not look back and see that some of the hours that throbbed with agony were the most blessed of all the hours of life? That personal affliction, that grave, that blighting disappointment, that lonely hour of desolation, would you omit it from life's experience if you could? No, a thousand times, no. That affliction was my door to strength, that grave the prelude to resurrection power, that disappointment my finding His appointment, that lonely hour the one in which I found Jesus only. And so I come to understand that sorrow means my ignorance, my limitation, and by faith I learn to triumph even in the hour of darkness, having learned that God's hand arranges warp and woof, and the perfect pattern He knoweth, and for the unfolding of that I wait and sing.

5. The disciple enters a new realm of sorrow. Union with Christ means a measure of "the fellowship of His sufferings" (Phil. iii. 10). "A heart at leisure from itself" is a heart to "soothe and sympathize." Free from the blight of sorrow, seeing my sorrows as His choicest gifts and leaving them ever with Him, I come to understand the awful needs of humanity, and I go to His cross to be in some measure a sharer of His suffering for others. Out of that compassion comes all service that really does anything for humanity. There may be much activity in the self-life, but it is little worth. In the death of self on the cross, the new pain begins, and so long as I remain here, the sorrow and sin of the world must press on my heart, for His life now holds and governs it.

And what is the end? Through all earth's pain and anguish what is coming? Let a seer of the old and new covenants each answer:

Isaiah: "The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads: they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Is. xxxv. 10).

John: "And He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning nor crying, nor pain any more: the first things are passed away."

Hallelujah. Amen.