

*Distress
and its Remedy.*



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DISTRESS AND ITS REMEDY

THE most touching narrative the world ever heard was that related, many ages ago, by a poor man to a crowd of disreputable people—a mixed assembly, however; and among whom I may well imagine that there stood some who were neither better nor worse than the reader of this paper. The story was an extraordinary one, and its effects, even at this hour, are sometimes not less striking.

A man of benevolent character, an encourager of worth and industry, was living in independence and plenty with his two children. His heart seems to have rested on these children with peculiar affection. It would appear that every evil and every care was warded

off, and all their wants abundantly provided for. The father's morning smile was accompanied with the provision of their daily meals; their employment was presided over by his love, and their rest was guarded by his watchfulness.

It would have been hard to guess whence the disturbance of all this happiness of the children could come: yet come it did. *From the heart* rose the thought, that the plenty for which the house was known, might be enjoyed without the gentle authority of their father; and one—the younger of the two—besought his father to give him wherewithal to stand apart in *independence*. None at that time could guess why it was, but the kind parent, doubtless after his tender care had been silently pleaded in the heart of the child against the unchildlike wish, gave an unwilling consent, and with it a portion of his substance.

For a little while, the youth, inexperienced in all but the taste of a father's love, was content to live near him ; but not many days had elapsed before the servants saw him clearing out all he had from the scenes of his childhood, gathering all together, and setting forth for a distant country, there to follow his *own inclination*. Whatever turn that inclination might take — whether he spent his money for what was not bread ; whether in the opinion of the people of that country his way was counted prudence or folly—judged by the rules of his father's house his life was disorderly ; and ere long the result appeared, and it was seen that he had “wasted his substance and spent all.” The land he had chosen to live in was not hay—it was subject to frequent famines ; and now a very grievous famine arose, and this son, among others, had not wherewithal to satisfy the wants

he began to feel. Circumstances beget the image of their opposites; and the youth's thoughts must have sometimes travelled back to the home he had left—his once cheerful waking, his plenteous meal, and above all his father's smile and never-doubted care. Yet he did NOT turn and hasten homeward.

What could have been in the heart of the child? He had lived in "a far country," among cold, hard hearts—perhaps he thought his father such as one of these; and taking up this hard thought concerning his father he tried to forget the comforts of his youth, and bound himself to service to a citizen of that country, who, disregarding his feelings, sent him to feed swine in the fields. Here, then, he was brought low indeed—here he had leisure to think. The riotous living was past; or, if present to his thoughts, it may have come in company with the world's wisdom

to upbraid him.* He may have been angry with himself—he may have thought that, if once more he could be leaving his father's house, with the same means at his disposal, he would husband them more wisely—and there may have been nothing yet to *change his heart and mind*, although “want had come upon him like an armed man,” and “he would fain have filled his belly with the husks the swine did eat.”

In the midst of his distress did he find in *strangers* the heart or ability to help him? *Not one of all the people of that country gave unto him.* Then it was, having held long to the country of his wilful choice, and remained long dissevered and estranged from the home of his father, “he came to himself.” It seems to have been a sudden thought: and yet, it is a melancholy truth, that he did not do so with one bound of a

* Compare James i. 5

liberated heart — with one paramount desire to be at peace with his father after so long estrangement. No! the poor, selfish, and unworthy young man was greatly influenced, among other motives we know not of, by the thought that “in his father’s house was bread enough and to spare.” His purpose at best still looked to *self*—to a peaceful sufficiency, and so far better things than husks, or the riotous living—but still to *self* alone—not to a joyful sympathy with his father’s mind, and a glad fellow-working in obedience to it. Perhaps these things were too high for his hope—yet not for his desire if his heart had pointed true. Something was yet to be done ere this could be; and this something is ever best done “in the father’s house.” But *now* he is humbled and brought low—now his thoughts are turned homeward, and the purpose formed to go to his father, and with confession,

backed only with the extremity of his degradation, to say, "Father, I have sinned, and am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants." *Poor faith*; low thoughts of his father's love! but in so far availing as being brought to that father in deep self-renunciation and humility. It would surely not be wonderful from what we know of that kind father, if he had constantly received intelligence of the ungrateful child's conduct—if he had grieved over his obstinate alienation, and neglected no means his power could command to suggest a better mind. We might infer that he was watching for his return, for he saw him coming while yet a long way off. Now what did this gracious father? Oh, think of this!—he had *compassion* on him. The word is remarkable. He could not really admit his *sin* into his heart, but he had compassion, and his bowels yearned over

him, knowing all the while the deep resources of his own untiring love.

A talented writer has observed, "There is an enduring tenderness in the love of a *mother* to a *son*, that transcends all other affections of the heart. It is neither to be chilled by selfishness, nor daunted by danger, nor weakened by worthlessness, nor stifled by ingratitude. She will sacrifice every comfort to his convenience; she will surrender every pleasure to his enjoyment; she will glory in his fame and exult in his prosperity, and if adversity overtake him, he will be dearer to her by misfortune; and if disgrace settle upon his name, she will still love and cherish him, and if all the world beside cast him off, she will be all the world to him." The passage is an eloquent one, and not without considerable truth; but I quote it to set it side by side with the declaration, "*Yea, she may forget, yet will I not forget thee*" (Is. xlix. 15).

He fell on his neck and kissed him, before even the self-condemning words of the returning penitent were uttered, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son."

Yes, it was all true; but there was the "*Father*" even in the words of the penitent's confession; and there were the resources of the father's heart to meet the necessity. His voice is heard, "*Bring forth the best robe;*" not the garment of the hired servant, but a something altogether glorious—the best robe—a robe shining with splendour—"the righteousness of saints;" not their own, or to their own praise, but to the praise of His super-abounding Grace! (Compare Eph. i.) I remark that he calls for "a ring" also—and I might say something of this; as also of the "shoes," and especially of the "fatted calf," the father said "bring hither."

But the significancy of these things is most blessedly entered into *within the house*. I prefer to rest on the father's greeting the prodigal—it is more than receiving him: he went forth to meet him (Luke xv. 20)—he gave him joy for his strength for service (Neh. viii. 10; Rom. xv. 13), not “bread enough” in payment for service rendered. He bestowed upon him, not the hired servant's meat and shelter during pleasure, but the son's portion, with the child's security. Yea, more than this; for if, while yet sinning against him, he had been met, rejoiced over, and brought home by his father into the house (Rom. v. 8–9), could he fear that that father's unchanging heart would turn him out of doors for infirmity, fail with so great deliverance, freely to give him all things? (Heb. iv. 15; Rom. viii. 32.)

Blessed, child-like confidence! Nothing now in self—everything in his father.

Henceforth would he not watch his father's ways—his looks? (Ps. xxxii. 8)—entering into his thoughts and the communion of his will; obeying not with grudging reference to rules hung up in the hall for servants' guidance, but with the service of love, as an obedient child, counting it his meat and drink to do his father's will in all things (Rom. viii. &c.).

The Christian, at least the healthful Christian, who walks "in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Ghost," will need no other opening of this narrative but what the anointing which he hath received will supply (John ii. 27). To one whose thoughts are now first, by the gracious leadings of God, engaged on this matter, I would add a few words, some of which may possibly be profitable to his soul. I see everywhere in this narrative the ground of responsibility to be *grace given*—a

something, much or little, committed to man's stewardship under a just and and holy God. I see this responsibility *before* the prodigal's wandering; and I see it, only far more blessed in its character, *after* his return. And as the frame and relationships of society are the things in which man's judgment passes sentence unwittingly on *his own sin against God*, I apprehend the "fathers of our flesh" will see the prodigal's sin in the light of the kindness of that father whose care it had been "to fill his heart with food and gladness" (Acts xiv. 17). We perceive at once that the thought which disturbed the happy family could not have been sown by the father, but that an enemy must have done this (Matt. xiii. 28). We learn, indeed, that the soil wherein it was sown had no inherent power of rejecting it; for, on the contrary, it received it, and it grew and appeared in

the wish to quit his father's house. "Riotous living," after the course of his own will, was that by which the enemy's work stood plainly revealed. But would the child's ingratitude have been less if his course had been more cool—if he had deliberately framed rules for the ordering of his own dwelling, to the exclusion of his father's name? Consider and answer, ye decent ones "*without God.*" In any case, the *famine was sure*—the famine of the soul—grievous indeed to him who would "live at ease in his possessions." But there is one part of the narrative which, if our hearts were rightly fixed, would fill us with astonishment. It is that the prodigal should not, in the very beginning of the famine, have hastened back to his father. But no! the world has a saying, that nothing is so intolerable as the sight of a benefactor whom we have wronged: the saying, like most others, expresses

a truth. Adam hid himself when he sinned; and the poor prodigal drew back from the thought of home and its associations. This tendency of our fearful hearts was foreseen and provided for when Samuel said to Israel, "*Fear not*, ye have done all this wickedness, yet turn not aside from following the Lord, for then should ye go after vain things which cannot profit or deliver" (1 Sam. xii. 20).

But among the chief causes of the prodigal's continued alienation, must have been the unfeeling spirit of the "evil world" in which he was living, and the hard thoughts it taught him to impute to the father he had left. Blessed, with tenfold blessings, is the heart that encourages large views of the grace of God to *Sinners*.* Is there a man brought low, neglected, and forgotten by the world, desiring wisdom to direct his

* Rom. v. 8.

way?—let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally and *upbraideth not*—how gracious is that word!—and it shall be given him; but let him ask in faith (James i. 6), putting away all his hard thoughts of God, and accepting with joyful confidence His gracious provision in the BLOOD OF HIS DEAR SON. After that, he may go on to learn that not even his own salvation, but the glory of his heavenly Father, is his proper aim. See how the Father is gathering a company to rejoice over the son who “was dead and is alive again—was lost and is found.” Truly, He is glorifying His grace!

To conclude: there is one point in which the perfect analogy of the parable fails us. It is in that wherein nothing in our nature could afford a parallel! The earthly parent could do no more than wait and welcome from afar his son's return; the heavenly Father can

and does suggest the first thought of a return. And, dear reader, it may be that the Lord in His grace, abounding above your sin, may at this moment be depositing such a thought in your heart. If so, bless His holy name! open your heart wide—or rather look to Him to open it (Acts xvi. 14)—that so the good seed, falling in soft and good ground, may bring forth fruit abundantly to our endless joy, and the praise of the glory of His grace (Eph. i. 6).

These are but a few remarks on a rich theme; the Lord prosper them to your soul.

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