

Resting-Places

by F.B. Meyer

The sermon emphasizes the importance of finding rest and comfort in nature and human affection, and provides practical suggestions for preserving the Rest Day and cultivating meaningful relationships.

Scripture: Matthew 11:28

Topics: "Rest", "Finding Peace in God"

Description

F.B. Meyer emphasizes the importance of finding resting places in life, highlighting nature, human affection, and the will of God as essential sources of peace and rejuvenation. He reflects on how nature offers solace and comfort, encouraging individuals to detach from the chaos of life and embrace the beauty around them. Meyer also discusses the significance of the Rest Day, advocating for its preservation amidst modern distractions, and stresses the value of human relationships as a refuge from life's storms. Ultimately, he concludes that true rest is found in aligning one's will with God's, leading to a profound sense of peace and fulfillment.

Transcript

Life is not all climbing, fighting, toiling. There are sweet vales nestling among the gaunt hills, which invite us to come apart and rest awhile. In the darkest day there are some chinks of blue. On the steepest hills there are some level places. No life is without its pause, its landings, its interspaces of rest.

Nature

First among these let us put nature. "If any of my readers," says Nathaniel Hawthorne, "should decide to give up civilized life, cities, houses, and whatever moral or material enormities in addition to these the perverted ingenuity of our race has contrived, then let it be in the early autumn. Then nature will love him better than at any other season, and will take him to her bosom with a more motherly tenderness."

We will not dispute with Hawthorne in his choice of the autumn for the time of wooing or being wooed; perhaps one would prefer the precise time when the later spring is merging in the early summer. But, speaking generally, what comfort, next to God's, is so wholly satisfying as nature's? How often has one thrown oneself on the sweet-smelling earth, when wearied with the clash of arms and the ceaseless conflict, saying, "Oh mother, dear mother, thy tired child comes to thy bosom for rest. Thou hast fondled and caressed millions of thy sons, but thou art as fresh and young and unworn today as though thou hadst only yesterday emerged from the Father's home, where thou wast daily His delight."

We think of old Izaak Walton sitting on his primrose banks, hearing his birds sing, looking down the meadows and thinking of them as "Charles the Emperor did of the city of Florence, that they were too pleasant to be looked on, but only on holidays"; watching "here a boy gathering lilies and lady-smocks, and there a girl cropping culverkeys and cowslips, all to make garlands suitable to this present month of May."

We think, too, of Wordsworth, "the minstrel of the natural year," taking possession of his Westmorland mountains as by right of birth, that he might there exercise his vocation, and translate the language in which nature spoke to him into the tongue of ordinary folk. We think especially of Thoreau, as he reveals himself in his charming Walden.

We try to imagine the latter, building his little cabin beside the lakelet--"a pure white crystal in a setting of emerald," a perfect forest mirror. We smell again, as he describes it, the pungent perfume of the surrounding pines, and bathe ourselves in the golden sunlight, in which he would sit from sunrise to noon, "growing," as he says, "like corn in the night."

It is an irresistible impulse to record a snatch from one paragraph which breathes that spirit of calm restfulness that nature gives: "Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things that I did. Morning brings back the heroic age. I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with my doors and windows open, as I could by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. . . ."

Of Thoreau, Emerson said that he saw as with a microscope, heard as with an ear-trumpet, and his memory was a photographic register of all he saw and heard. "As we read him," says Lowell, "it seems to us as if all out-of-doors had kept a diary and become its own Montagne; we look at the landscape as in a Claude Lorraine glass; compared with his, all books of similar aim seem dry as a country clergyman's meteorological almanac."

But this love of nature arose not only from hereditary endowment, but from his possession of a nature which was singularly able to detach itself from the world of men, and bring its native simplicity in contact with God's own fair world. That latter qualification is open to us all. Detachment, purity, simplicity, childlikeness, the religious soul, these are the conditions of appreciating and loving nature, as she has been courted and won by thousands who have never recorded their impressions in eloquent and burning phrase.

Nature knows her lovers, and does not hesitate to unveil her face to them. Children will always discover those who are akin to their fresh, unsophisticated natures. Even dogs and birds, squirrels and hares, discover their lovers. The brook sings its sweetest for the ear that is willing to listen and appreciate. The woods open new glades for the devotees who, tearing themselves from other loves, will give an undivided heart to their spell.

Let us tear ourselves from men and things, from the clash of politics and the strife of competition, and let that music fill our souls which nature makes in sylvan glades and beside the tiny rills that drop from level to level in the woodlands. What nature has been to the writer of these lines he will never be able to explain, because ecstasies have seized on him in mountain solitudes and in forest glades which it is not lawful to attempt to describe. It is well enough to hunt for specimens, or carry pocket microscopes, or get

snapshots, but at the best these appeal to the observing and intellectual faculties, whereas there is a communion of heart to heart, which lovers know, and which defies art and speech.

Let us get away from the madding crowd, as He did whose heart was so sensitive to every voice and touch of nature, and who was so careful to adapt the natural scenery to his experiences, choosing the mountain for his temptation, the seashore for His teaching, the winepress for His agony, and the garden for His Easter.

Our Lord's sensitiveness to nature has been termed "the most charming aspect of His humanity." He watched the tall and splendid lily--not, like ours, white, but crimson--the reed quivering in the wind, the tender green of the first shoot of the fig tree. He built His teaching on the fold, the farm, the vineyard, and the whitening cornfields. The living well, the eastern glow, the ruddy hue of the stormy evening, the spate of the winter storm, and the homeward flight of the birds from their feeding grounds were objects of careful observation and enjoyment.

We like to think of Him loving the gorse and heather of the wild mountain, listening to the murmur of the waters down the hillsides, and scaling the higher reaches of the lonely hills that He might absorb the beauty of the far-spread landscape. To rest awhile amid the fairest scenes of natural beauty was His choicest recreation; and when He felt the Transfiguration glory coming on Him, He sought the moonlit slopes of Hermon. We are following His great example when we make much of those quiet resting-places that nature provides.

It is perhaps worth while to make one further addition to the restfulness which nature may secure for tired hearts and brains, and to refer to the effect that friendship with the lower animals, as we term them, may bring us. We recall the Apostle John and his domesticated pet, Cowper and his hares, Dr. John Brown in "Rate and His Friends," and Thoreau with his forest companions.

Take the two latter. The forest recluse lovingly records the mouse that sat on his hand, the partridge who brought him her brood, the moles who nested in his cellar, the red squirrels who made free of his corn which they ate before his face, the hares that came to his door at dusk; while the doctor writes graphically of his dogs--the white bull-terrier, the shepherd's dog, and the old, grey, brindled mastiff, as big as a small Highland bull, with Shakespearean dewlaps, who always reminded the doctor of the great Baptist preacher, Andrew Fuller.

It is refreshing, also, to read in one of Canon Jessopp's delightful books his disquisitions on moles and tortoises. He tells a delightful story of a tame tortoise, David, who not only came when his name was called, but exhibited something like personal attachment for his mistress, wandering into her drawing-room, climbing over the sill of the French windows, and finding his way to her feet.

Nothing could be further from our desire than to extol that excessive and culpable fondness which heaps upon dogs and cats an altogether extravagant, fastidious, and prodigal affection, bestowing on them a quite disproportionate attention, and expending on them what would suffice to redeem many a crippled existence from the direst need.

But there are opportunities of delightful intercourse between us and the dumb companions of our earthly sojourn, which need not incur reproach. On the contrary, it is altogether commendable. Mr. John Galsworthy, in an eloquent plea on the part of dogs the other day, spoke of some amongst us who are "honored" by the friendship of the lower orders of creation. The phrase is happily chosen. We are not all

worthy of that honor; but where it is bestowed, it is exceedingly precious and valuable, and a great asset among the contributories to our refreshment and exhilaration.

The Christian mystics have always had this absorbing love for nature. George Fox said that "all creation gave another smell beyond what words can utter." Brother Lawrence received from the leafless tree "a high view of the providence and power of God." And it is thus written of Francis of Assisi: "As of old, the three children placed in the burning fiery furnace invited all the elements to praise and glorify God, so this man also, full of the Spirit of God, ceased not to glorify, praise, and bless in all creatures the Creator and Governor of them all. When he came to a great quantity of flowers he would preach to them, and invite them to praise the Lord, just as if they had been gifted with reason.

"So, also, cornfields and vineyards, stones, woods, and all the beauties of the fields, fountains of waters, all the verdure of gardens, earth and fire, air and wind, would he, with sincerest purity, exhort to the love and willing service of God. In short, he called all creatures by the name of brother; and in a surpassing manner, of which other men had no experience, he discerned the hidden things of creation with the eye of the heart, as one who had already escaped into the glorious liberty of the children of God."

The Rest Day

The Rest Day is, of course, another of these quiet resting-places on life's highway. Alas! Of late years, its rest has been seriously threatened, and is being threatened. The attack comes from two sides. The first is from the invasion of the motor-car, and the craze of the weekend habit. One of the daily papers remarked the other day that the motor-car had taken the place of the old family pew. The head of many a household in the present day will assemble his wife and children on Sunday morning for a run into the country with the same regularity as that with which his father used to summon them to church. In many cases, instead of spending with their young children the one day when father and mother could be at home with them, they are left to their nurses, who may be quite unworthy of the trust.

Even now, the writer of these words can recall the absolute desolation and misery of those very rare Sundays when his parents were necessarily absent from the home; and what would have been the fate of the family life, to which, under God's blessing, he owes everything, had these modern habits been in vogue, he dare not surmise.

But from the other side, the Sunday is threatened by the decay of conventional religion. The time is not so very far distant when every respectable person was expected to go to a place of worship on Sunday. That any self-respecting people should go golfing on Sunday morning, or be seen starting for a party on the river, was unheard of. But all this is altered now, to the great detriment of society, which has surrendered one more of those sacred habits which did so much for the morality of the elder, and the proper training of the younger, members of our families.

We freely grant that, like other religious institutions, it has been perverted. To many it was irksome and tiresome, a day of heavy burdens and unnatural restraint. One example was brought under my notice of the father of a family, who was so fearful of doing wrong, that he and his children used to sit in their chairs, doing nothing whatever during the hours of the day in which they were not attending divine service. We are all familiar also with stories, not wholly unfounded, of the prohibition of hot shaving-water, and the delivery of milk.

But these are the exceptions. For myriads, through the centuries the return of the Rest Day has been fraught with untold benediction to our toiling masses, and to myriads of Christians, who, on that day, have entered into the very rest of God.

The law of septennial periodicity is written on most of the pages of natural history. Experiments on human and animal subjects yield similar results, and always establish the necessity of giving a seventh part of our time to rest, in addition to our nightly sleep. It is almost a commonplace to recall the experiment made at the French Revolution, when the Anarchists, in their desire to expunge all trace of religion, decided that the week should consist of ten days, but found it necessary to return to the older reckoning, because the nation could not endure the prolonged strain between the rest days.

It is well known that the proprietor who rests his horses and cattle on one day in the week will get more work out of them than he who keeps them at work without the seventh-day intermission. Though the same number of hours be worked in the week in each case, it is better that they should be concentrated in six days, followed by one for rest.

Deep in the constitution of the universe is engraved the law of rest. Because it is there, it is obligatory on us all. We neglect it at our peril. You cannot set yourself against the nature of things, and prosper. An inevitable Nemesis will find you out. The Rest Day is placed on a level with the other obligations of the moral law, from which we infer that its basis is to be found in the very being of God, and of man, made in His image. The increase of nervous disorders, and the multiplication of lunatic asylums, are probably directly traceable to the disregard of the weekly Rest Day.

The late Mr. Gladstone was specially careful in this matter. Anyone entering his room in Downing Street, during his tenure of the Premiership, would find that the ordinary books and periodicals of every-day use were replaced by others in keeping with the Sunday. On a Sunday evening, he writes to Mrs. Gladstone: "Although I have carelessly left at the Board of Trade, with other letters, that on which I wished to say something, yet I am going to end this day of peace by a few words to show that what you said did not lightly pass away from my mind." I have italicized the incidental phrase, which indicates more swiftly and emphatically than a more labored argument could do the light in which the great Christian statesman regarded the day.

And once more, among other suggestions, to one of his sons, then at Oxford, he wrote the following, which Lord Morley says was "the actual description of his own lifelong habit and unbroken practice": "There arises an important question about Sundays. Though we should, to the best of our power, avoid secular work on Sundays, it does not follow that the mind should remain idle. There is an immense field of knowledge connected with religion, and much of it is of a kind that will be of use in relating to your general studies. In these days of shallow skepticism, so widely spread, it is more than ever to be desired that we should be able to give a reason for the hope that is in us."

Parents should tax their ingenuity to make the Rest Day the most delightful of the week. Sacred music, good literature of the highest quality, the family-fellowship, the wholesome walk in the country, attendance at divine service, and the culture of the inner life, ought to be sufficient to provide a pleasant menu for the day's consumption, without resorting to the railway excursion, or the festive gathering, which leave the soul jaded and hungry, besides having entailed needless labor on those who serve us, and who deserve our consideration.

I can imagine a father who had a distinct leaning to some special line of study always reserving Sunday afternoon for the wonders of the microscope, for directing the arrangement of botanical specimens, or for discussing the fossils of a prehistoric age. What opportunities might not such an afternoon afford of driving home lessons on the traces of creative design and adaptation! Or if he were specially interested in biography, history, or geography, what vistas each of these would open! Or, when some great events were transacting on the theater of the world, or wars being fought to their issue, how much might be done by suggesting the principles on which to found right conclusions. To look out for the footsteps of God through our own age is a wholesome and elevating pursuit; and Sundays spent quietly thus in the companionship of one's family, or like-minded folk, will leave us more really rested than a long and tiring day of pleasure-seeking.

Human Affection

Another of these resting-places is in the understanding and confidence of Human Affection. In friendship the wearied, hunted soul finds a shelter from the windy storm and tempest. From the pitiless criticism of those who have the shallowest possible acquaintance with the sincerity and purity of our motives, we turn to our familiar friends; they, at least, will put the right construction on our actions, and will give us much credit, and more, as we give ourselves for all that is high-minded and holy. "A friend loveth at all times, and is born as a brother for adversity." In his happy-making presence we can relax ourselves, and be absolutely free and natural. The outer coat of self-repression in which we face the driving ice-cold blast of the world may be cast off, and we can assume another suit--that of tenderness, freedom of speech, and gaiety of mood.

We must choose as friends those who, in regard to religious matters at least, think as we do. There must be a point of contact, where heart absolutely and sincerely meets heart. If we do not revolve around the same pivot, the circling interests of life cannot be concentric. Do not give yourself in intimate fellowship to those who cannot sympathize with you in your holiest aspirations, and to whom you could not naturally and easily unfold your acutest pain.

It should, surely, be the subject of daily prayer to the Almighty Father that He would put the solitary into families, and bring about a fellowship of heart with some other, recalling that sweet old-time description, of which the colors can never fade, of the moment when the heart of Jonathan leapt to David's. "And it came to pass, when David had made an end of speaking to Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul; and Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his apparel, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle."

But, after all, the home is the best place of all for shelter and rest. There are the green pastures and still waters, there the shadow of the rock in the scorching heat, there the strength of manhood at its best blended with womanhood and childhood and in their most artless and sweet endearments and faith.

The attack which is being made on the family is one of the cruelest that can be imagined. If it were to succeed, it would destroy the mightiest bulwark in human life against the hatred, opposition and criticism of the world. Our king has said, in wise and eloquent words, that "the foundations of national glory are set in the homes of the people, and that they will only remain unshaken while the family-life of our race and nation is strong, simple, and pure."

And it is true also that our homes are our best defense against the heartbreak and despair that fill asylums, jails, and dishonored graves. The Church must enter the arena and fight for our homes against

the hand of the assailant. By permeating public opinion, through pulpit, press, and platform, with true ideals; by insisting on the necessity of marriage among Christians being only "in the Lord"; by her appeal for self-control, and by her advocacy of a simpler style of life and expenditure; by her insistence that husbands and wives should bring unsullied character to the marriage-altar, and that men and women should be judged by the same code--the Church may do much to preserve the sanctity of our homes.

What influence other than religion is pervasive enough, deep-seated enough, universal enough, to deal with the vast interests which are involved in this great question! Social reformers may deal with methods of segregation, science discuss the laws of blending and growth; educationists may train the young to right thoughts about their own natures and their responsibility for the hygiene of the race; moralists may urge to self-discipline and self-control, but only religion can comprehend them all, co-ordinate them with each other, and supply the breath of life. It becomes the Church to bestir herself, to give a loftier conception of wedlock and home-life, and so bring "a statelier Eden" back to man.

But our home-life cannot be left to chance. It needs culture, such as Charles Kingsley gave to it. "Home," writes his wife, "was to him the sweetest, fairest, most romantic thing in life; and there all that was best and brightest in him shone with steady and purest luster. No fatigue was too great to make him forget the courtesy of less-wearied moments, no business too engrossing to deprive him of his readiness to show kindness and sympathy. To school himself to this code of unfaltering high and noble living was the work of a self-discipline so constant that, to many people, it might appear quixotic. Justice and mercy, and that self-control which kept him from speaking a hasty word or harboring a mean suspicion, combined with a divine tenderness, were his governing principles in all his home relationship." We also must exercise such qualities, if our homes shall fulfill the highest ideal of restfulness.

The Will of God

Last is the Will of God. It was the olden custom in New England, as, for instance, in Lyman Beecher's family, to observe the Sabbath from Saturday night to Sunday night, when "three stars came out." Now, there are "three bright crystal laws of life," which, like pointer stars, guide the traveler's eye as he travels along the Way: To resist the tyranny of self; to recognize the rule of duty; and to live in the will of God. It is especially in the latter that the soul finds repose in the midst of the wildest storms that sweep life's ocean.

It was once said by Charles Lamb of one who had been grievously afflicted: "He gave his heart to the Purifier, and his will to the Sovereign Will of the Universe." Happy are they who have learned this art. With heart-purity they see God, and with wills submitted honestly and faithfully to His will, they have a foundation for their lives on which they may build the house of life with no fear of overthrow. Let the winds blow and the storms beat upon the structure of their character, let the waters rise and become a torrent, they cannot be moved, because they are founded on a rock.

But what can better describe the rest of the soul that has built on the will of God than those immortal lines of Dante:

In His Will is our peace. To this all things

By Him created, or by Nature made,

As to a central sea, self-motion brings.

This is Mr. Gladstone's translation, and he says: "The words are few and simple, and yet they appear to me to have an inexpressible majesty of truth about them, to be almost as if they were spoken from the very mouth of God. They cannot be too deeply graven on the heart. In short, what we all want is that they should not come to us as an admonition from without, but as an instinct from within. They should not be adopted by effort or upon a process of proof, but they should be simply the translation into speech of the habitual tone to which all tempers, affections, emotions are set. In the Christian mood, which ought never to be intermitted, the sense of this conviction would return spontaneously and be the foundation of all mental thoughts and acts, and the measure to which the whole experience of life, both inward and outward, is referred."

Too often, when men speak of the will of God, they mean that they are prepared to resign themselves to it, to submit to its dealings, and accept its rulings. But more than that is demanded of the truly Christian soul--namely, that it should unite itself with it, so that God's will should become the will of the creature by a thorough and blessed interfusion and blending. This position is only possible when, on the one hand, we check and quell the inclination of our own will to act as from the center of self, and when, on the other hand, we allow God to work in us to will and to do of His good pleasure.

This is the great work of religion, and when we have attained union with God we retire into Him as a stronghold and sure house of defense. From all our anxieties and troubles we flee to the Rock that is higher than ourselves. We shelter under the covert of His wings. Though a host should arise against us, in this we are confident. One thing we desire of the Lord, and that we seek after, to abide in the house of the Lord all the days of our life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in His temple.

And thus we prepare ourselves for and seek unto that eternal union with God, when there will be no effort to say Thy will be done in earth, as in heaven, because we shall be in heaven, and His will will be done in us, who shall then be partaking of the image of the heavenly. "Then we shall live and move with it, even as the pulse of the blood in the extremities acts simultaneously with the central movement of the heart."

Here, in point of fact, is the essence of the Atonement. Here the human comes to be at-one with the divine. We come back by the way of the Cross, which is the supreme emblem of the merging of the human will with God's, into that divine order from which we have strayed. Thomas a~ Kempis has rightly spoken of it as the King's high road, or as the royal pathway to Reality; and indeed there is no other method of arriving at soul-rest. "In the Cross doth all consist, and all lieth in our dying thereon; and there is none other way to life and very inward peace but the way of the Holy Cross and daily dying. Walk where thou wilt; seek whatsoever thou wilt; and thou shalt find no higher way above, nor surer way below, than the way of the Holy Cross. Turn to the heights, turn to the deeps, turn within, turn without: everywhere thou shalt find the Cross."

But, in very wonderful manner, the Cross is the gate to blessedness. The following incident shall illustrate this: A Christian man had to undergo an operation of a very painful description. He refused to take an anesthetic, lest he might die under the ordeal; and he desired, he said, to meet his Maker, if that were to be the case, with a clear mind. He cheerfully surrendered himself to the divine will and embraced it.

When laid on the operating-table, his face being downwards, over the ledge of the table he could just see the ground, and discerned two pierced, sandaled feet there. Though he could not see the upper part of the figure, he knew that Christ was keeping tryst with him, and became filled with such rapture that he had no knowledge of what was transpiring, and was quite surprised when told that the operation was over. They

carried him to his bed, and he lay in a perfect ecstasy for two or three weeks till he was quite restored and returned to his ordinary avocations.

The same testimony was often given by the martyrs, who were so exalted above their physical pains as to be loath to be taken off the rack or delivered from the flame. Missionaries who passed through the Boxer riots have borne witness that they were absolutely unconscious of pain, when knives and other instruments were plunged into their flesh. They that die to themselves live unto God. While they yield to the dying side, God sees to their Easter. Death is the stepping-stone to life and peace. "All things become new." Listen to this from Saul Kane, the converted poacher:--

The station brook, to my new eyes,
Was babbling out of Paradise;
The waters rushing from the rain
Were singing Christ has risen again.
I thought all earthly creatures knelt
From rapture of the joy I felt.
The narrow station-wall's brick ledge,
The wild hop withering in the hedge,
The lights in the huntsman's upper story
Were parts of an eternal glory,
Were God's eternal garden flowers.
I stood in bliss at this for hours.

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