

The Beauty of Self-Control - Part 2

by J.R. Miller

Jesus sees us as we are, but also sees the possibilities that are in us, and wants to help us become what we are meant to be.

Scripture: Psalm 139:14, Proverbs 27:17, John 15:15, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 2:10, Philippians 1:6, James 1:2-4, 1 Peter 2:9

Topics: "Transformation through Christ", "The Power of Friendship"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the transformative power of Christ's friendship in the life of Simon Peter, illustrating how Jesus saw not only Simon's current state but also his potential for greatness. Through Christ's guidance and love, Simon evolves from a rough fisherman into Peter, a foundational leader of the Church. Miller highlights that true friendships, especially with Christ, can profoundly shape our character and destiny, encouraging us to recognize the beauty in our struggles and the growth they foster. He urges believers to embrace the patience required in spiritual growth and to see every life encounter as a means of grace that contributes to our development. Ultimately, Miller calls for a life filled with gratitude and joy, reflecting the beauty of self-control and the influence of Christ's love.

Transcript

The Beauty of Self-control

Part 2

J. R. Miller

Chapter 11

What Christ's Friendship Means

When then Master first looked upon Simon, he saw him as he was, and saw him through and through. When a stranger comes into our presence, we see only his outward appearance. We cannot look into his heart nor read the inner secrets of his life. But the look of Jesus that day penetrated to the very depths of Simon's being. He read his character. He saw all his life, what had been good, and what had been evil. "You are Simon," he said.

But that was not all. Jesus not only saw Simon as he was--but he saw also the possibilities that were in him, all that he might become, and this was something very great and very noble. "You are Simon--but you shall be called Cephas." Now he was only a rough fisherman, crude, unrefined, and uneducated, without ability, without power or influence, full of faults. None of the neighbors of Simon saw in him any promise of greatness. They never dreamed of him as attaining the greatness and splendor of character that ultimately he reached. But that day when Simon was introduced to him, Jesus saw all that the old fisherman might become in the years before him.

In a gallery in Europe there stands, side by side, Rembrandt's first picture, a simple sketch, imperfect and faulty, and his great masterpiece, which all men admire. So, in the two names, Simon and Peter, we have two pictures--first, the crude fisherman who came to Jesus that day, the man as he was before Jesus touched his life and began his work on him; and, second, the man as he became during the years when the friendship of Jesus had warmed his heart and enriched his life; when the teaching of Jesus had given him wisdom and started holy aspirations in his soul; and when the experiences of struggle and failure, of penitence and forgiveness, of sorrow and joy, had wrought their transformations in him.

When Jesus said, "You shall be called Cephas," he did not mean that this transformation of Simon would take place instantaneously. The fisherman did not at once become the Rock-man. This was the man into whom he would grow along the years under Christ's tuition and training. This was what his character would be when the work of grace in him should be finished. The new name was a prophecy of the man that was to be, the man Jesus would make of him. Now he was only Simon--rash, impulsive, self confident, vain, and therefore weak and unstable. "You shall be Peter--a stone." That very moment the struggle began in Peter's soul. He had a glimpse of what the Master meant in the new name he gave him, and began to strive toward it.

Think what Jesus was to Peter during the years that followed. He was his teacher, his friend, his inspiration. If Simon had not come to him and entered his school, he would never have been anything but a rough, swearing fisherman, casting his nets for a few years into the Sea of Galilee, then dying unhonored and being buried in an unmarked grave by the sea. His name never would have been known in the world. Think what Peter became, then of what he is today, in history, in influence upon the countless millions of lives that have been blessed through him--all this, because Jesus found him and became his friend.

A new human friendship coming into a life, may color all its future and change its destiny. Every contact of life leaves a touch on the character. Think what helpfulness there is in a rich human friendship. It is interesting to follow the stories of friendships as we see them in those we know. Ofttimes it seems as if the friends had met by chance. They were not brought together by any of the processes of association. Nobody planned to have them meet. They did not choose each other and intentionally bring about the beginning of the friendship which meant so much to both of them in the end. Their lives touched--God brought them together--and the touch proved a divine coincidence. One became a potent influence in the formation of the character of the other. When we meet another as if by chance and friendship begins, we never know what it will lead to, what the influence of the companionship will be. It is God who guides such chances and the friendship is brought about by him.

One wrote to another, "Life has been so different to me since you became my friend." It had been easier, for the person had needed guidance, and the hand of the older friend had given steadiness to the life of the younger one. The friendship had brought new inspiration, for the guidance was safe and wise from

long experience. The friendship in this case has also brought companionship. Many of us have friendships which came into our lives and have been benedictions, inspirations, a comfort, a strength through all the years that have followed.

We may think of what the friendship of Jesus was to Simon. It set before him a vision of purity, of beauty, of heavenliness, of strength, which gave him new thoughts of life. Nobody he had ever known had had such a life as he saw in Jesus. He had never seen such gentleness before, such graciousness, such patience, such kindness. It was not the supernatural Jesus, the miraculous in power which impressed Simon--but it was the genuineness of his humanity, the simple goodness, the richness of his nature, which first so influenced him. He never had heard such words in his home or among the best people he had known--as the words he now heard Jesus speak.

A young girl, away at school, had a letter from her pastor, and wrote of it, "I never received such a letter as that before." It was entirely different from the letters the young people had written to her, yet it was not a solemn letter, it was not filled with pious platitudes, giving advice, and warning her against danger. She had expected that her pastor's first letter to her would be a serious one, and she almost dreaded receiving it. But instead, every word of it was bright and human, full of cheer, not trivial--but full of inspiration. She never had read such a letter. Yet that letter set her feet in new paths. She was a better girl than ever after receiving it. Life meant more to her from that day. In some such was the friendship of Jesus affected Simon. Jesus was not a bit like the rabbis, the priests, and the rulers to whom the fisherman had been accustomed. He had never heard that kind of religious conversation, nor found that sort of friend until now.

There are some friendships which really make all things new for those into whose lives they come. Life has a new meaning after that. It looks up and sees the blue skies and the stars, where before it saw only dust and barren fields. There is something else to seek for now, besides the day's bread and poor houses to live in. There is something in our friend that makes it easier for us to work, that makes our burdens seem lighter. The griefs that were so hard for us to endure, mean now to us far less of loneliness and bitterness since we have these new friendships.

These are hints only of what the personal friendship of Jesus meant to Simon. Think what uplift there was in the new name the Master gave him. He was going to be a Rock. He certainly was not that now--but just as certainly he would be. "You shall be Peter." In just this same way Jesus comes to us with a new name. We shall not always be poor fishermen--but some day we shall be catching men, some day we shall be great apostles. The life before us is glorious. Jesus sees us first as we are, with all our imperfections, our blemishes, and faults. But he sees also the possibilities that are in us. We do not consider enough what we are to be--when the new life in us grows into all its splendor of character. We ought to think of the splendor into which we shall come through Christ's grace. We are not worms; we are immortal beings. We are children of God. We are heirs of heaven. Now we are imperfect and very faulty--but we are going to grow out of all that and become glorious creatures. It is when we realize this and the glorious vision bursts upon us, that we begin to live truly.

The Master sets before us the goal of our being. He has a beautiful plan for each life. There is something definite for which he has made us, into which he would fashion us, and toward which all his guidance, education, and training will tend. This is not a world of chance--but it is our Father's world. All the experiences of our lives have their part in making us what Christ would have us become, in bringing out the possibilities that he sees in us when we first come to him.

All life is a school. Our school books are not all in English print. Our lessons are set for us in many kinds of type, in different languages. The Bible is our great text book, and we are to use it daily and always. The lessons are not written out plainly for us on its pages. But life is our practice school. There we are to learn patience, joy, contentment, peace, gentleness. All the experiences of the passing days have their lessons in them. Sometimes we are alarmed by the disappointments, the sufferings, the sorrows--which we have to endure. But there really is no reason for alarm or dismay, however full of pain or seeming loss the days may be. God is in his world, and whatever the experiences may be, nothing is going wrong. The disappointments which seem to be working confusion in our hopes and plans--are God's appointments, yielding better things in the end than if our pleasant dreams had been realized. The sufferings and the sorrows of our lives have their part in the working out of the Master's vision for us. Peter owed a great deal to the hard things in his education. He paid a large price for his lessons--but not too large.

It is worth while to endure all the sorrow, loss, and pain, just to learn to sing the one sweet song. No price in tears would have been too great to pay to be the author, for example, of the twenty third psalm, or "Rock of Ages, cleft for me." Think of the things Peter left--but was the price he paid too great? Let no one dread any suffering he may be called to endure, if thereby he becomes able to be a blessing to other lives, or leaves behind anything that will make blessings which shall enrich the earth, fruits which shall feed men's hunger.

The sculptor, hewing at his marble and seeing the chips of stone flying about, said, in explanation, "While the marble wastes--the image grows." The stone unhewn cannot grow into living beauty. The life which does not suffer, which endures no pain, cannot be fashioned into the likeness of Christ. Simon can become Peter only through chisel work. The marble must waste--that the image may grow. "The highest beauty is beauty of character, and the chiseling of pain completes it."

Chapter 12

People as Means of Grace

We speak of certain religious exercises as means of grace. Prayer is one of these. When we pray we stand in the very presence of God. We do not see any form--but faith makes us conscious of the shining of his face, and we cannot but be affected. We read of Moses, that when he had been long in the mountain with God and then came back to the people, that his face shone. In one of the Psalms it is said that God's people looked unto him--and were radiant. Being with God makes us like God. The Bible also is a means of grace. As we read its words and think upon them their revealings, their counsels, and commands, their promises and comforts bring the life of God himself into contact with our lives, and we are helped, quickened, strengthened, and made better. Whatever in our experiences brings us under the influence of God and leads us into holier life--is a means of grace to us. This is the meaning of Christian worship. More than we realize, people also are means of grace to us. We get our best lessons from men; we are most deeply influenced by our contacts with them. "Evil companionships corrupt good morals." We know how being with good people in intimate relations makes us better.

Many of us know a few people at least who have a strange influence over us for good. To be with them for an hour or even for a few minutes lifts us up into a new atmosphere and makes us want to live a better life.

One of the finest tests of character--is the effect a life has on other lives. There are certain people who make you desire to be gentle, kindly, thoughtful; and there are others who stir up evil desires in you, who make you bitter, resentful, who provoke you to anger and all unholiness. The Christian should seek to be

so full of spiritual influence, that all his words, his life, his conduct, shall be Christlike.

Paul wrote of certain friends whom he hoped to visit, "I long to see you--that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift." Could there be a more fitting wish than this in the heart of one friend for another? If this were always our desire when we were about to visit another, what blessings would we carry in our friendships wherever we go! We are not aware in how large a measure God sends spiritual gifts to men through other men. When he would help one of his children in some way he does not send an angel--but he sends a friend.

One reason for the incarnation, was that only thus could God get near to us, near enough to give us the blessing we need. If he had come in Sinai's splendors, the glory would have so dazzled our eyes that we could not have endured to look upon him. So he came instead in a sweet, gentle, beautiful human life. What was true of this largest of all divine manifestations is true in lesser ways of all heavenly revealing. God does not open a window in heaven that we may look in and see his face; he shows us a glimpse of heaven in some sweet home. Christ does not come down and walk again in person upon our streets that we may see him as the disciples saw him. He makes himself known to us in and through the lives of his friends. Even as in a dewdrop, quivering on leaf or grass blade, on a summer's morning, one can see the whole expanse of the blue sky mirrored, so in the lowliest life of a true believer there is a mirroring, though dim and imperfect, of the brightness of God's glory.

Thus God reveals his love to a child through the love of the mother. Thus the mother is the first means of grace to her child. She is the earliest interpreter to it of God's love and tenderness, of his thoughtfulness and care, of his holiness and purity. In wonderful ways also are children means of grace to their parents. A prayerful father and mother learn more of the love of God and of God's fatherhood as they bend over their first-born child, or hold it in their arms--than ever they learned before from teachers and from books--even from the Bible.

In other ways, too, is a child a means of grace to its parents. Jesus set a little child in the midst of his disciples and bade them learn from it lessons of humility and simplicity. Every child that grows up in a true home, is a constant teacher, and its opening life, like a rosebud in its unfolding, pours beauty and sweetness all about. Many a home has been transformed by the unconscious ministry of a little child.

Children are means of grace to parents, also, in the very care and anxiety which they cause. They bring trouble as well as comfort. We have to work the harder to make provision for them. We have to deny ourselves when they come, and begin to live for them. They cost us anxieties, too--sleepless nights, oftentimes, when they are sick, days of weariness when a thousand things have to be done for them. Then we have to plan for them, think of their education and training, and teach them to look after the formation of their habits. In many cases, too, they cause distress by their waywardness. In many homes the sorrow over living children is greater far--than was the grief from the death of those who have passed from our presence.

Yet it is in these very experiences, that our children become specially means of grace to us. We learn lessons of patience in our care for them. We are trained to unselfishness as, under the pressure of love, we are all the while denying ourselves and making personal sacrifices for them. We are trained to gentler, softer moods--as we witness their sufferings and as our hearts are pained by our concerns on their behalf. Our distress as we look upon them in their struggles and temptations and are grieved by their heedlessness and waywardness works its discipline in our lives, teaching us compassion and faith as we

cry to God for them. There are really no such growing times in the lives of true Christian parents as when they are bringing up their children, if they learn their lessons.

Every life, old or young, that touches ours is meant to be a means of grace to us. The poet said, "I am a part of all that I have met." He meant that every other life which had touched him had left something of itself in him. Every bit of conversation we have with another gives us something we shall always keep. We learn many of our best lessons from our casual associations with our fellows. Every line of moral beauty in a regenerated life--is a mirroring of a fragment, at least, of the image of God, on which our eyes may look, absorbing its loveliness. Every Christian life is in an imperfect measure, yet, truly, a new incarnation. Every believer may say, "Christ lives in me." We live every day in close and intimate relations with people who bear something of God's likeness. The good and the holy, therefore, are means of grace to us because they help to interpret to us the divine beauty. In sympathetic companionship with them, we are made conversant with holiness in practical life. God comes down out of the inaccessible light and reveals himself in the human experiences of those with whom we are walking or working.

If living in direct companionship with God seems too high an experience to be possible for us, it is possible for us to live with those who do have close fellowship with him. Converse with those who live near to Christ cannot but enrich our knowledge of divine things and elevate the tone of our lives.

Even the faults of those with whom we come in contact may be means of grace to us. It is harder to live with disagreeable people than with those who are congenial and sweet--the very hardness becomes a splendid discipline to us and helps to develop in us the grace of patience. Having to live or work with irritable, quick tempered people may train us to self-control in speech, teaching us either to be silent under provocation, or else to give the soft answer which turns away wrath. Socrates said he married Xantippe and endured her temper, for the self discipline he found in the experience. It would not be well to advise any man to marry such a woman for the purpose of the discipline he would get; yet if by accident a man finds himself unhappily yoked to a Xantippe, and wants to turn his misfortune to good, this is the way he may do it. In any case the disagreeable people, the unreasonable people, the unlikable people with whom we find ourselves associated in the contacts of business or society--may thus in indirect ways do a great deal toward making us better.

Enemies also may prove means of grace. For one thing, they give us a chance to practice one of the hardest lessons the Master gives us to learn--to love our enemies. When those who dislike us say unkind or bitter things about us--if we find that what they say is in any measure true, we should mend our ways. If what they say is false, we should be comforted by the beatitude for those whom men reproach and persecute and against whom they say all manner of evil falsely, for the Master's sake.

Thus on all sides we find that we may get good from those about us. From the holy and saintly--we may get inspirations toward better things and be lifted up perceptibly toward goodness and saintliness. From the gentle and the loving--we receive softening influence which melts our cold winter into the genial glow of summer. From the crude and the quarrelsome--we get self discipline in our continued effort to live peaceably with such people, despite their disagreeableness and their disposition to contention. Friction polishes not metals only--but characters also. Iron sharpens iron; life sharpens life. People are means of grace to us.

We may grow, therefore, as Christians, in our own place among people. Solitariness is not good. In the broader as well as in the narrower sense--it is not good for man to be alone. Every life needs solitude at

times; we should get into each of our busy days, times of silence when human presences shall be shut away, and we shall be alone with God. We need such hours for quiet thought, for communion with Christ, for spiritual feeding, for the drawing of blessing and holy influences down from heaven to replenish the waste produced by life's toil, struggle, and sorrow. There is a time for being alone. But we should not seek to live always nor usually in this way. Life in solitude grows selfish. The weeds of evil desire and unhealthy emotion, flourish in solitariness.

We need to live among people, that by the contacts, the best things in us may be drawn out in thought and care and service for others. It is by no means a good thing for us to live in such conditions that we are not required to think of others, to make self-denials for others, to live for others, not for ourselves. The greater and more constant the pressure in life toward unselfishness, toward looking out and not in, and lending a hand, the better for the true growth and development of our lives. We never become unselfish, but under conditions which compel us to live unselfishly. If we live--as we may live--with heart and life open to every good influence, we get some blessing, some inspiration, some touch of beauty, some new drawing out of latent life, some fresh uplift, from every person we meet, even casually. There is no life with which we come in contact, which may not bring us some message from God--or by its very faults and infirmities help to disciple us into stronger, calmer, deeper, truer life, and thus become to us a means of grace.

Chapter 13

What Christ is to me

The title of the chapter is important. It is not, "What Christ Is," but "What Christ is to me." He may be, in our thought, a most glorious person, with all the honor claimed for him in the New Testament--and yet be nothing at all to me personally. He may be a great Savior--and not be my Savior. He may be a wonderful Friend--and yet his friendship means nothing whatever to me. The twenty third psalm is an exquisite little poem. It is dear to the hearts of millions of believers. But it would not be the same if it began, "The Lord is a Shepherd." It is the word "my" which gives it its dearness. So it would not be the same if the title of this chapter were, "What Christ Is." It might depict his character in glorious words. He is the Son of God, deity shining in every line. He is the King of kings, worthy of the worship and adoration of the highest beings in the world. He has all divine excellences. It was no robbery of God, for Jesus Christ to claim to be equal with God. But we may believe all that the creeds of Christendom assert regarding him--and yet receive no blessing from him.

The question, what Christ is to us, starts in our hearts infinite thoughts of love, of mercy, of comfort. How can we ever tell what he has been to us? We may think of what he has done for us as our Savior. This opens a vista back to the heart of God--and into eternity. We cannot understand what the Bible tells us of the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world, of our names having been written in the Lamb's book of life from the foundation of the world. Whatever these and other such words mean, they certainly suggest that we have been in the heart of God from the eternal past. There is something bewildering in this revealing--that Christ thought about us before we were made.

We may think also of what Christ is to us in personal ways. For one thing, he is our Friend, and he calls us his friends. Then need of friendship is the deepest need of life. Every heart cries out for it. Christ spoke no other word to his disciples which meant more to them than when he said, "I will be your friend." A young man, a teacher in a mission school in the South, said these words to a boy who had been brought up in the darkest ignorance, who had never heard a kind word before, and who had never had a friend. The

words fell upon the boy's ear, like something spoken from heaven. Some days afterward the boy lingered about until the teacher was alone, and said to him, "Did you mean what you said the other day--that you would be my friend?" The teacher assured him that he did. "If you will be my friend," the boy said, "I can become a man." It was the beginning of a new life to the boy.

Hundreds of people in barren conditions never hear such a word from any lips and are starved to death for love. Human friends have brought life, joy, hope, and marvelous uplifting to countless lives just by saying, "I will be your friend." Nothing you can do for the world could mean half so much to men--as just going among them and in reality becoming their friend. There are great men, with noble gifts and splendid qualities, who have learned the secret of loving others, who are doing marvelous good among their fellows, not by giving them anything, nor by doing anything for them--but just by being a friend to them.

There never was any other man who wrought such a ministry of friendship as Christ has wrought through the centuries. He is always coming to men and saying, "I am your friend." That was the way he saved Simon, making of him the great apostle whose name is known through the world. That was the way he took the youth John, becoming his friend, putting a glorious ideal into his heart, and making him ultimately the apostle of love. It is this blessed friendship that, all the Christian centuries, has been touching lives everywhere with its own spirit of unselfishness and service. There are many pictures of Jesus in the Gospels--but perhaps there is no one more suggestive of his real character, than the one which shows him girt with a towel, holding the basin and washing the disciples' feet. There is nothing Jesus would not do--no sacrifice he would not make--no humbling of himself to which he would not stoop--in doing the part of a friend.

Dr. Watson tells of once hearing a plain sermon in a little country church. It was a layman, a farmer, who preached--but Dr. Watson says he never heard so impressive an ending to any sermon as he heard that day. After a fervent presentation of the Gospel, the preacher said with great earnestness: "My friends, why is it that I go on, preaching to you, week by week? It is just this--because I can't eat my bread alone." That is the Master's own burden--his heart is breaking to have men share with him the blessings of life. He cannot bear to be alone in his joy. There is no surer test of love for Christ--than the longing to have others love him.

When we receive Christ's friendship and love into our hearts, infinite possibilities of blessing are ours. Christ becomes our teacher, our guide, our burden-bearer, our very life. We are transformed through his influence. Loving him makes our dull lives radiant. A missionary teacher of Tokyo tells of a Japanese woman who came to speak about having her daughter received into the school for girls which the teacher was conducting. She asked if only beautiful girls were admitted. "No," was the reply; "we take any girl who desires to come." "But," continued the woman, "All your girls that I have seen are very beautiful." The teacher replied, "We tell them of Christ, and seek to have them take him into their hearts, and this makes their faces lovely." The woman answered, "Well, I do not want my daughter to become a Christian--but I am going to send her to your school to get that look in her face."

Christ is the sweetener and beautifier of the lives and the very faces of those who become his friends. He gives them peace, and peace brightens and transforms their features. He teaches them love, and love makes them beautiful. A girl who was very homely, so homely that even her mother told her she never would have any friends, determined to make her life so winning by its graciousness and its ministry of kindness, that her homeliness would be forgotten. She gave herself to Christ in a simple and complete devotion and sought to be wholly under his influence. She then devoted herself to the helping and serving

of others, until she was known everywhere as the angel of the town where she lived. Her ugliness of features, was forgotten, in the beauty of her disposition and life. That is what having Christ for a friend does for those who yield themselves to his transforming influence.

In no other experience in life is the blessing of the friendship of Christ more wonderful than in the times of affliction and trouble. "It is worth our thought," says Huntington, "how small the audience would be that would assemble weekly, to listen to a gospel that had nothing to say to sufferers. Poor, weak, broken hearts, staggering under their loads, would refuse a comforter who had never wept himself, nor remembered that his followers must weep. A religion that addressed itself only to those who are in a state of comfort would be like a system of navigation calculated only for clear weather, and giving no aid when night and cloud have wiped out all way marks from earth and sky, and the tempest shrieks in the darkness over an unknown sea."

The Bible is a great book of comfort. The heart of Christ was wonderfully sensitive to suffering. He was called a man of sorrows, and it is said that he was acquainted with grief, that is, with all phases of grief. We may know a little of pain, one phase of suffering--but Christ knew the whole field of grief. Yet the griefs of the world did not make him bitter. One of the dangers with us--is that we shall receive hurt from life's trials, shall be hardened by them. Christ received no harm from anything which he suffered. He came through all painful experience with the gentleness of his heart still gentler. He never complained of God, charging him with unkindness or saying he did not care when his children suffered.

We never can know in the present world, what we owe to the hard things in our lives, what pain and suffering do for us. Christ makes these experiences a school of blessing and good for us. He changes our crown of thorns--into a garland of roses. We have to meet hard things in our experiences--but it is never God's will that we shall be hurt by them; he wants us always to be helped by them, made better, our lives enriched.

In Barrie's book, is a chapter with the suggestive title, "How My Mother Got Her Soft Face." She got it through suffering. Her boy was hurt. News had come that he was near death, far away from home, and the mother set out to go to him, hoping to reach him in time to minister to him and comfort him. Her ticket was bought; she had bidden the other children goodbye at the station. Then the father came out of the little telegraph office and said sadly, "He's gone," and they all went home again. She was another woman ever after, however, a better woman, gentler. Barrie says, "That is how my mother got her soft face and her pathetic ways and her large charity, and why other mothers run to her when they have lost a child." There are many other mothers who have got soft faces in the same way. They have had very hard troubles to bear--but their lives have been made more beautiful by the hardness. That is part of what Christ is to us--he leads us through pain and loss--but our faces grow softer.

What is Christ to us in the development of our lives? A woman spent the summer in the mountains and brought home with her in the autumn some pieces of lovely moss. She put it in her conservatory, and in the warmth of the place, a multitude of beautiful little flowers came up among the moss. There are in us possibilities which, in common experiences are not brought out--but when the warmth and light of the love of God pour about them they are wooed forth. The poet, when asked what Christ was to him; pointed to a rose bush near by, full of glorious roses. "What the sun is to this rose bush," he said, "Christ is to me." Whatever is lovely in our lives has been brought out by the warmth of Christ's love touching us and calling out the loveliness. We do not realize all that Christ may be to us, what undeveloped beauty there is in our natures that he will bring out, if we yield ourselves to him.

What is Christ to us in our hope for the future? The veil that hides the eternal world is not lifted here--but we have visions of something very wonderful waiting for us. "It is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is." That is enough for us to want to know. A Christian woman was speaking of a saintly man who was for many years the superintendent of a large city Sunday school. He was a man of most gentle spirit. He loved the children with a love that made them most dear to him. When he lay in his coffin, the members of his Sunday school passed by to look at his face in their last farewell, and every child laid a flower on his breast, until he was literally buried beneath the sweet blossoms. Speaking of his death, the woman said, "He must have passed right into the bosom of Jesus, he was so true, so holy, so Christlike." That is what death means to one who has followed Christ faithfully.

When the news went out that Phillips Brooks was dead, the mother in one home where he was most dear, told her little daughter that her good friend was gone. She had dreaded to break the news to her lest her grief might be overpowering--but the child only exclaimed, "Oh, mother, how glad the angels must be to have him in heaven!"

It is sweet to think, that when we go away from the dear love of earth, we shall be with Christ, lying on his bosom, welcomed by angels and by waiting saints. Christ is everything beautiful to us here: there he will be infinitely more to us.

Chapter 14

Our Unanswered Prayers

In one of our hymns there is a line which runs, "Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer." The writer's thought is patience in waiting when our prayer seems not to be answered. The answer may be only delayed. Sometimes it takes a long time for God to give us the answer we seek. We can think of several possible reasons.

Perhaps the thing we seek cannot be prepared for us at once. God does not work unnecessary miracles. The economy of supernatural acts is to be noted in our Lord's life. He had all power and could do anything. Nature's limitations set no trammels for him. He could have changed water into wine whenever he wished to do so--but he did it only once. He could have made bread from stones--but he never did. He wrought a number of miracles--but he did thousands of deeds of common kindness when there was no necessity for supernatural acts. Some of the prayers we make, could be answered at once only by miracle. It is not the will of God to give us the answer in that way, and so he requires us to wait while he prepares it for us in a natural way.

If you want an oak tree to grow on your lawn and pray for it, God will not cause it to spring up overnight. He will bid you drop an acorn in the place where you want to have the tree, and it will grow as trees always grow and your prayer will be answered--but not fully for a long time. You will need the patience of unanswered prayer.

A young man has a desire to do great things. He has high ideals and is ambitious to achieve noble things. God may be willing to give him what he wishes--but not instantaneously. The young man needs to have his mental faculties developed and trained in order that he may be able to accomplish the great things he desires to do. Long after, in the years of maturity, he may achieve the thing he prayed in youth to be able to do. But now the prayer offered so importunately seems not to be answered. Really, however, it is

answered as soon as God could answer it. We need the patience of unanswered prayer while we do not seem to be receiving at all the thing we long for and ask for.

You pray to have the Christian graces in your life. You want to have joy, patience, gentleness, humility, mercifulness. But these heavenly qualities cannot be put into your life at once; they have to grow from small beginnings to perfection--but "first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear,"--but that requires a long time. It needs "the patience of unanswered prayer" in your heart, that you may not be discouraged while you wait.

Another reason for slowness in the answering of prayer, may be in ourselves. We are not yet ready to receive the thing we seek. There must be a work done in us, a work of preparation before the thing we seek can be given to us. A young man has a strong desire to go into a certain calling or business and prays earnestly and persistently that the way may be opened for him. But he has not now the qualification to make him successful in that business. Only by a long experience, can he be made ready for it. His prayer may seem long to be unanswered--but it needs only patience and continuance in work and prayer combined. Prayer without work would never be answered. Many prayers wait for answer for something that must be done first in us.

Our prayers for spiritual blessings cannot be answered until a great work has been wrought in us. You want to be holy. You are weary of sinning and grieving God. Months pass and somehow your prayer seems to have no answer. The trouble is, it can be answered only in your own heart. The evil there must be driven out. You pray to be made gentle. God loves to answer such a prayer--but the answer can come only through a long, slow discipline in which your old nature must be softened. You must have patience, for this great lesson is long and cannot be learned in a day. It never can come into any life as an immediate answer to prayer. It takes some people a whole lifetime to learn always to be kind, always to be gentle. But it is worth while to give even the longest lifetime to the learning of such a lesson.

But why should we pray at all--when we must win the answer by our own striving? Only with divine help can such prayers ever be answered. We cannot alone make ourselves gentle, or kind, or humble. These are among the things which we cannot do apart from Christ. There is a legend of an ancient church in England, which tells that while a new building was being erected, there came among the workmen a stranger and began to help them. This man always took, unasked, the hardest tasks. When a beam had been lifted to its place and was found too short, the men tried in every way to remedy the defect--but in vain. Night closed in, leaving them in great perplexity--but in the morning the beam was in its place, lengthened to the exact dimensions required. The strange workman was gone--but now the men understood that it was the Master himself who had been working with them unrecognized, supplying their lack of wisdom and strength. The legend has its teaching for us. We are not toiling unhelped at our work. We are not seeking the blessings of grace unaided. While we pray for new gifts and strive to attain them, Christ is with us, unseen, and our prayers shall not be unanswered nor our longings be unattained.

Another reason that prayers seem to remain unanswered, may be that the answers we desire and expect, would not be the wisest and best. Those who were praying and waiting for the Messiah before Jesus came, never received the answer they were looking for. They expected a Messiah who would be an earthly conqueror. Their prayers were unanswered, though the Messiah came. Many people pray for certain things which they think would be great blessings to them if they would receive them. God is willing to grant them the best gifts of his love. He does not reject their prayers. But the things they plead for would not be the good they seek. If they were granted to them, they would be only empty husks, not the corn

their hunger craves. Not receiving what they so eagerly longed for, and have pleaded for so earnestly--they suppose they have prayed in vain, that God has not listened to their requests. Meanwhile, the real good which their hearts needed, has been coming to them continually, coming in what they regarded as unanswered prayers.

Christian life is full of just such experiences as these. We do not know what really the things are, which we need most. Our vision is limited. We are swayed by the physical. We think a certain thing, if we had it, would make us almost perfectly happy; and that if it is not given to us, no matter what other good things we may receive, we cannot be happy. So we pray with great earnestness and importunity that God will grant to us this thing which seems so essential to us. Yet we do not surely know that the thing, so desired, will prove to us the blessing which we think it will be. Many people have felt the same concerning desires they had, and have received them only to be bitterly disappointed. They found only ashes where they expected to find delicious fruit. Or they shrank from a great sorrow which they saw coming toward them, and prayed that its coming might be averted. The prayer was not granted. The sorrow came with its apparent desolation. But out of it came in the end--the greatest good for which they will praise God in eternity.

No doubt we shall some time thank God that many ardent prayers of ours were not granted. One man earnestly longed to enter a certain business and prayed that he might be allowed to do so. But his desire was not granted. Later he was led into another line of life in which he found an opportunity for large prosperity and for great usefulness.

In a beautiful home a little child lay very sick. The young parents had once been active Christians--but in their first wedded happiness they had given up Christ, and had now no place in their home for God. Their happiness seemed complete when the baby came. Radiant were the days that followed. Their joy knew no bounds. Then the baby fell very sick. In their alarm the parents sought the offices of religion, and earnest and continued prayer were offered by the little one's bedside. Great physicians consulted together and all that science could do was done. But the baby died. "God did not answer our prayers," the parents said, and they complained bitterly.

Years afterward the father wrote these words to a friend: "I believe now that if God had granted my ardent prayers for the life of my beautiful first born son when he was taken sick at nine months old, I never would have been the man I am now; I would have remained the godless man I had then become. But when I stood with my despairing wife beside our dead baby, even feeling bitter toward God because he had not heard our cries, I remembered how I had departed from God--and returned to him with penitence and confession. The death of my boy brought me back to Christ." The prayers seemed unanswered. At least the answer came not as the father wished--but God's way was better. The boy's life was not spared--but the father was saved.

There are many who tell us that their prayers are unanswered, who, if they knew the whole story of these prayers, would see that God showed his love and wisdom far more wondrously in denying their requests--than if he had given them just what they pleaded for so earnestly. The prayers were really answered--but in God's way--not in their way--and God's way was better. God is too good to give us a stone, however earnestly we cry to him for it, thinking it is bread. Instead, he will disappoint us by giving us bread.

One of the blessings we need therefore to pray for continually, is "the patience of unanswered prayer," that we may be saved from impatience, as our prayers seem so long in being answered; or from disappointment, when they seem not to be answered at all. No true prayer ever is unanswered. It may bring no apparent answer at once--but it still waits before God and is not forgotten. The answer may come in some other form. When Paul prayed that his distressing "thorn in the flesh" might be removed, his request was not granted--but instead he received more grace. That is, to compensate for the pain that he must keep--he would have more of Christ. Many times pain is the price God's children have to pay for spiritual strength. We may be sure at least--that the prayers are never unanswered. They bring answers in some form at least.

Chapter 15

The Outflow of Song

In one of his epistles, Paul gives an interesting suggestion for a beautiful life. He says, "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." The point to be noted is that the dwelling of the word of Christ in the heart produces a musical outflow, a life of song-- "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."

The words suggest, in general, good and beautiful lives. Every such life is a song. In another of his epistles Paul says, "We are God's workmanship," and commentators tell us that the word workmanship means poem. "We are God's poem."

Poetry is supposed to be more beautiful than prose. It is characterized by fineness and loftiness of thought, and by charm and beauty of expression. It is not merely something in rhyme, as some writers seem to think. There are rhymes which do not make poetry. A life that is God's poem, should be very beautiful. We may not be able to write poetry, like Tennyson's, which will charm by its music and by its beauty--but we may live poems. We may not be able to write twenty-third psalms--but we can live them. We may make our life a sweet song. We do not need to be poets to do this. A very prosaic man may so live--that gentle music shall breathe from his life all his days. He needs only to be true and just and loving. There are people whose lives are so sweet, so patient, so gentle, so thoughtful, so unselfish, so helpful, and so full of quiet goodness, that they are exquisite poems. They may be plain, simple, without fame, without show, without brilliance--but the marks of God's hands are on them!

We are God's poems. Every beautiful life is a poem. There are people, living in conditions of hardness; whose lives we would say could not possibly have any music in them. Their circumstances are utterly prosaic, with no room for sentiment. Even home tenderness would appear to be impossible in their experiences of toil and pinching poverty. Yet even such lives as these, doomed to heavy work and dreary hardship, or constant pain, oftentimes do become poems in their beauty and winningness. There are many men who never have an hour's leisure or a bit of luxury in all their years, who yet please God continually by their faithfulness, their patience, their contentment, the peace of Christ in their hearts--whose lives are lovely songs. You may not find these poems in homes of luxury and splendor. There is more joy oftentimes in the plain cottages of those who are poor and love God--than in the mansions of the rich who care not for God. Their lives are poems. We find them as we go about these days, sometimes in sick rooms--they are uncomplaining, unmurmuring, singing in suffering; sometimes in experiences of loss and poverty--they are patient and trusting. In many a lowly home you will find poems finer than ever you read in books. The mother of Goethe used to say that when her son had a grief he turned it into a poem. He who knows the

secret, may turn all his troubles into poems.

Another meaning of this description--"psalms and hymns and spiritual songs"--is that our lives should be joyous. God wants them to be songs. He wants them to be pure, sweet, gentle, and kind.

We get music into our lives, when we live sweetly in hard circumstances and amid trying experiences. Anybody ought to be able to live songfully in summer days, with flowers strewn all along the path, with only gladness on every hand. But to live rejoicingly in the midst of discouragements, hindrances, and all manner of trouble, is a truer test. The newspapers some time ago, told of a ship coming over from Germany in midwinter with a cargo of many thousand song birds. At the beginning of the voyage the weather was warm and clear. Not a bird sang in those days. Not a note of music was heard. The birds all seemed depressed and unhappy. But about the third day out it began to get colder, and soon the wind was blowing stiffly and there was stormy weather. Then the birds began to sing. Soon all the twenty five or thirty thousand little throats were pouring out song.

People often say that if they had only ease and luxury all the time--costly furniture, sumptuous meals, automobiles--that they would be gladder and would live more sweetly. But if our hearts are right--we should sing all the better, the more joyously--when life is hard, when we have heavy tasks and sharp trials, keen losses and bitter sorrows. An invalid who loved to hear the birds sing at her window said she liked the robin best of all the birds--because the robin sang in the rain.

There are some people who have not learned to sing in the rain. They are easily discouraged. Nehemiah wanted the Jews, who were rebuilding the Temple, to rejoice. They were disheartened, and he wanted them to sing. "The joy of the Lord is your strength," he told them. They would be stronger if they would sing. They would get on better with their building. That is what God wants us to do. He does not want them ever to be gloomy or unhappy. When the word of Christ richly dwells in them--the result will be "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." Paul puts it thus in another of his epistles, when he says, "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, Rejoice." That is, if you are a Christian, you should be a happy one. An unhappy Christian is not doing honor to Christ.

Yet, somehow, many Christians seem not to understand this. Not everyone who bears the name of Christ, sings psalms and hymns and spiritual songs in his daily life. There are Christians who are not always sweet and songful. Some are gloomy, unsympathetic, and cynical. One man said of his neighbor, "I am sure he is a Christian--but he is a disagreeable one." Of another man, in contrast with this one, a neighbor said that other people learned at his feet the kindness, the gentleness, the sympathy, the considerateness of Christ himself. He lived psalms and hymns wherever he went.

God wants our lives to be songs every day, every night, everywhere. He makes the music bars for us and we are to set the notes on them. The notes are our obediences. God's will is an anthem set for us to sing. There never would be any discords in the music, if we always did God's will, and did it sweetly. Any disobedience, however, any wrong thing we do, any unloving thing, will break the harmony. A perfectly holy life would be a faultless song.

If we would have such musical outflow in our lives--we must keep love in our hearts. Nothing but love makes music. Hate is always discordant. One of the finest things the world has heard in recent days, is the news of the movement for a treaty of international peace. This is a sign of the coming fulfillment of the glorious reign of peace of which the prophets spoke, when wars shall cease, when the nations shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

There is a picture called 'Peace'. It is of a quiet meadow scene, with a cannon lying amid the grass and flowers. A lamb is feeding there. The warlike gun is now part of the picture of peace. But the gun, even resting, spoils the picture. Here is something better. A tourist tells of visiting a little village in Germany where the church bells that rang on Sundays were made of cannon that had been used in the Prussian War. Instead of belching forth death, the guns now proclaim peace. Dr. Jowett tells of a shop where he saw workmen making bombshells into pots and dishes. That is precisely what the prophet foretold concerning the changing of implements of war into the implements of peace. Every Christian should help to make it true, that nations shall learn war no more. Then would the angel's song, "Peace on earth, good will to men," become part of the glad life of the world.

This life of song--psalms and hymns and spiritual songs--should be the music of every Christian community, of every Christian home. How much broken music there is in many homes! Instruments out of tune make discords in the music. Musical people speak of certain harsh sounds in instruments as 'wolf notes'. There are wolf notes in the music of some homes where violent tempers are indulged, where jealousy, hate, lust, the wild utterances of passion, mar the music.

The word of Christ dwelling in the heart would produce a life of song--"psalms and hymns and spiritual songs"--every jarring discord hushed into harmony. That is what Christian peace is. That is what love is.

There is One who can take our lives, with all their jangled chords, their faults and sin, and bring from them the music of love, joy, and peace. There is an old legend of an instrument that long hung silent upon a castle wall. Its strings were broken. It was covered with dust. No one understood it, and no one could put it in order. Many had tried to do this--but had failed. No one could play on it. But one day a stranger came to the castle. He saw the instrument on the wall. Taking it down, he quickly brushed the cobwebs from it, gently reset the broken strings, and then played upon it, making marvelous music.

This is a parable of what Christ does for those who believe on him. Every human life in its natural state is a harp, tarnished by sin, its strings broken. It is capable, however, of giving forth music marvelously rich and beautiful. But first it must be restored, its strings reset; and the only one who can do this is the master of the harp, the Lord Jesus Christ. Only he can bring the jangled chords of our lives into tune, so that when played upon--they shall give forth rich music. If we would have our lives become songs, we must surrender our hearts to Christ--that he may repair and restore them. Then we shall be able to make music, not in our individual lives only--but in whatever relations our lot may be cast, and in whatever circumstances it may fall to us to dwell.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly--and then songs will pour out in all your experiences. One sat before an open fire, where green logs were burning, and listened to the weird music that the fire brought out, and spoke this little parable: "When the logs were green trees in the woods the birds sat on the branches and twittered and sang, and the notes sank away into the wood of the trees and hid there. And now the fire brings out the hidden music." Just so, we may let the words of Christ sink into our hearts as we read them, ponder them, love them. Then, wherever we go, whatever we do, whatever our experiences are, if we suffer, if we have struggle, if we have sorrow, if we have joy, the music will come out in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs!

Chapter 16

Seeing the Sunny Side

Thankfulness is one of the cardinal virtues. One of the finest marks in a noble life, is perennial praise. Yet this spirit is rare. It is the exception to find among people, one who sees something to thank God for in all life's circumstances. The great majority of people are grumblers. They seem to be looking always for unpleasant things. For example, there appears to be a very common disposition to see the dark and discouraging side of Christian life and Christian work. There appears to be just now a chronic tendency in the religious press and among Christian ministers to think and talk dishearteningly of the condition of things in the churches. It has been shown over and over again that there has been a marvelous progress in the influence of Christianity within a century. But in some way the croakers give out the impression that religion is waning, that the churches are dwindling and dying out, that very few men are interested in the work of Christ. The truth of the assertions is taken for granted, and ministers and church officers, as well as the rank and file, go about bemoaning the sad condition of things and wondering what is going to be the end of it all.

Not long ago, somebody sent out a scare article about the exhaustion of the material in the sun. This material is being consumed at an amazing rate, and the writer showed that in a certain number of thousands of years the sun will be burnt out, becoming only a big, cold, dark cinder, like the moon. What shall we do then? There is even less to alarm any thoughtful person in the talk about the dying out of Christianity than in the assertion that the sun is burning out. Those who are pessimistic about the general decadence of Christianity, ought to look up the statistics, ought to read the reports of the wonderful work and progress of Young Men's Christian Associations, of the Laymen's Missionary Movement, of the great missionary conventions and of the story of the Christian work that is being done in the cities, and the tremendous things the Sunday schools are doing throughout the world.

Such a view of the situation, ought to set in motion a new tide of cheer, hope, encouragement, in the churches and among Christian people. Instead of deploring the dying out of Christian life and activity--there should begin now a new era of gladness, of enthusiasm, of praise, for the great things the church is doing.

The question was asked of two church officers, "How are matters in your church this year?" The first spoke discouragingly. The church to which he belonged seemed dead, he said. The attendance was not large. The Sunday school had fallen off. The prayer meetings were only a handful. The men in the membership appeared indifferent. Even the pastor did not seem as enthusiastic as he used to be. The whole tone of the good man's talk was pessimistic. There was not a glad, cheerful, praising word in all he said.

The other man, to the same question, answered with enthusiasm. The meetings were full. The pastor was working with earnestness and hope. Everybody was eager to work. A tone of thanksgiving ran through all his words. A church with such sunshiny men for its officers will have twice the success and blessing that a church can have whose officers are gloomy, disheartened, and hopeless.

But it is not in religious life and work alone, that there is so much lack of cheer and hope. In all lines of life one finds the same spirit. In many homes there is almost an entire absence of the thanksgiving spirit. A shadow rests on all the life. There is an immense amount of whining heard. Nothing is quite satisfactory. There is little singing. The quest seems to be searching for spots and mistakes of others, something to blame and condemn. How much better it would be, how much more of heaven we would get into our homes if we would train ourselves to find the beautiful things and good things in each other, and in all our experiences and circumstances! Anybody can find fault--it takes no genius to do this. Genius is far better

shown in finding something to praise and commend in imperfect people, in hard conditions.

Here is a paragraph from someone, which suggests a better way at home, than the complaining way: "She knew how to forget disagreeable things. She kept her nerves well in hand, and inflicted them on no one. She mastered the art of saying pleasant things. She did not expect too much from her friends. She made whatever work came to her, congenial. She relieved the miserable, and sympathized with the sorrowful. She never forgot that kind words, and a gentle smile cost nothing--were a rare priceless treasures to the discouraged. She did unto others as she would be done by, and now that old age has come to her, and there is a halo of white hair about her head, she is beloved and revered. This is the secret of a long life and a happy one."

Everything depends upon the way we look at things, whether we see shadow or brightness in them. Miss Mulock, in one of her books, tells of a gentleman and a lady who were passing through a timber yard, by a dirty, foul smelling river. The lady remarked, "How good these pine boards smell!" "Pine boards!" exclaimed her companion. "Just smell this foul river!" "No, thank you," the lady replied, "I prefer to smell the pine boards."

The woman was wiser than her friend. She was entirely right in her way of dealing with the conditions. Both the foul river and the fragrant pine boards were present in the surroundings, and it was a question which of the two she should allow to impress her. She had the happy faculty of trying always to find the most cheerful quality in her circumstances, and so it was the sweetness of the air, and not the foulness of the river--that she chose to find in her walk that day. We may train ourselves always to make the same distinction and choice in what we find in our circumstances--to see the beauty, the pleasure, the charm--rather than the ugliness, the pain, the disagreeableness. Too many people never see anything but the discouraging aspect of things, so they are never in a really thankful mood. A little sunny hearted mind set, would make a world of difference in the lives of a great many men and women.

Things are not going so terribly wrong, after all, as the croakers think they are. There are always a lot of things that are good and comfortable--far more indeed than there are painful and unhappy things. We have only to make up our minds to find the bright spots and make the most of them. One January day, when the house was cold, the dog was trying to be as warm as he could. He was lying in the parlor, which was not heated. Along in the forenoon a beam of sunshine came through the blinds and fell on the floor, making a patch of sunshine on the carpet. The drowsy, shivering dog saw it, got up, stretched himself, walked to the spot and lay down in the bright place. Instead of staying in the chill and darkness, when he saw even an inch or two of warmth and light--he appropriated it. There is not one of us who on the gloomiest day of his life cannot find at least a square yard of sunshine somewhere. Let us go and lie down in it and take the comfort we can find in it.

There are a good many people who make life harder for others by indulging in this habit of always taking disheartening views and always saying dispiriting things. They call on a sick friend and tell him how ill he looks, and the man is worse all day afterwards. They meet one who is in some trouble and sympathize with him in such a way that the trouble seems ten times greater. They come upon a neighbor who is discouraged, and they talk with him until he is almost in despair. They think they are showing a kindly spirit in all this--but they are really only adding to the burdens of their friends and making life infinitely harder for them.

There are men in these very days, who are evermore putting doubts into the minds of others and raising questions which only cause fear and uncertainty. We ought not to add to the spiritual perplexity of men by holding up shreds of torn pages, as if our Christianity were something riddled to tatters by those who have thrown away their childhood faith. "Give me your beliefs," said Goethe; "I have doubts enough of my own." So people are saying to us, "Give us your hopes, your joys, your sunshine, your confidence, your uplifting faiths; we have sorrows, tears, clouds, fears, uncertainties enough of our own." People need to be helped--not hindered.

Nine of every ten people you will meet tomorrow will be carrying as many and as heavy loads as they can possibly carry. They will not need to have their burdens lifted away--that would not be the truest kindness to them; their burdens are God's gifts, and in bearing them they are to grow; but they will need cheer and strength--that they may walk steadily, bravely, and unfalteringly under their loads. There is nothing t

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