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DECLINE

AND

ITS SYMPTOMS:

TRUTH FOR THIS DAY.



LONDON:
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DECLINE AND ITS SYMPTOMS,

ETC.

It is said, Ephraim hath grey hairs here and there, and he *knoweth it not*. Decline, open and palpable, does not occur at once or suddenly. On the contrary, there is usually a long course of symptoms, indicating and preparing for a state which is not discovered until literally there is no concealing it. The sensibility to observe those symptoms is necessarily of all importance to our well-being. If we would judge ourselves we should not be judged. When there is spiritual sense to see and feel the first workings of decline, they are of course denounced and checked. We do not sanction and encourage what we *see* to be wrong. It is because our sensibilities are blunted enough not to see it; or, seeing it, think it excusable under the circumstances, that we suffer or yield to it. The light is that which doth make manifest. "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." We are light in the Lord. If we walk in the light we keep near God, and we must see things as He sees them. We may not be entirely clear of them, but we see them; and seeing them in His presence, we shrink from what is unsuited to Him. If we walk in darkness we have not fellowship with Him. It is not a question merely of having a good conscience, and of walking therein *before* Him; it is communion—a common mind *with* God. If we are not in the light we cannot have this; and if we are in the light, all things are exposed as God would expose them. We are made sensible of the line which must be drawn,

and we accept it: and this gives us freedom and entrance into increased fellowship with Him. The darkness is that which does not comprehend the light. When I am in the light, I judge myself—I denounce everything contrary to God; and therefore, standing in the light—the light my armour, sheltered by it—I am not judged. But this has to do with walk, and consequent joy of soul; and one may fail in it very much who still preserves a certain amount of peace of conscience, and service for the Lord. But if this inability to judge oneself is continued, we are judged of the Lord, and in many ways this judgment is inflicted.

It will be useful and instructive to gather from scripture the symptoms of decline. Forewarned we are forearmed. The first and most unmistakable symptom is discontent. "Be ye content with such things as ye have," has a far wider application than to merely temporal means. It reaches on to the power of man. The Scripture used indicates this: "For we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper; I will not fear what man can do unto me." It is because of the Lord's help that we do not fear anything in the power of man. But we are hardly aware how small at the beginning this feeling of discontent may be, while doing deadly mischief, because unjudged and undiscovered, until at length it is esteemed almost a virtue to be dissatisfied with everything. I know I shall be met here by the question, Are we to be satisfied with anything not according to God's counsel and desire? To this I merely say now, that if that were the only discontent in your mind, it would shew itself in a different way to the discontent of nature;* though doubtless the latter is often excused under the cover and name of the other. First, let us see how discontent paves the way and prepares for decline. If my heart in simplicity is assured that He will not leave me nor forsake me, I am not thinking of myself. I am resting in the fact that a greater than I am thinks of me, and says "He will never leave me nor forsake me." And therefore my attitude of

* Zeal for the Lord is always shewn in more care for the saints and more distinct separation from the world.

soul and line of conduct attest this plain truth, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear what man can do unto me." So that it is not only contentment, but resolute, happy, expressed confidence in God. The strange, subtle, and peculiar ways in which this first symptom works, is beyond any pen fully to describe or enumerate; but I defy any soul which has in any degree wandered, not to be able to trace to buddings of this order, his first declension. Self becomes a subject of attention and thought; and there is an effort accordingly to acquire something more for it than in God's ordering has been provided. This was Achan's sin; he would appropriate to himself what belonged to God; he was not contented—he sought himself.

It will be admitted that when the children of Israel tempted Christ in the wilderness, they only then for the first time were made to understand, through the fatal bite of the fiery serpents, that discontent ends in death; that it was this which was originally engendered by Satan in the mind of Eve in the garden of Eden; and that there is no relief from it but in the life given by God to faith. This discontent arose because they considered the manna, the divine provision, insufficient. They said, "Our soul loatheth this light food:" they tempted Christ. Now that which is analogous to manna in this day, is Christ now for us in passing through this world, and nothing but Christ. The whole fear and warning of the apostle in Colossians ii., is the falling away from this; and keeping to it is simply returning to the same truth in another form, couched in the words, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Now it is plain that you never see, nor could you, any one simply and truly happy in Christ and satisfied with Him, suffering from an inroad of decline; but, on the contrary, when you see one complaining either of his means, of his home, of his work, of his health, or of his brethren, in fact, of anything, you may rest assured that he loathes the manna; that his eye is off Christ; that the first seeds of decline have set in. For what comes after complaining? What always comes after the sense of want is allowed? Why,

of course, if there be any energy, any ability, any opportunity, there will be an attempt to remove it or relieve it. If we see a want, our first impulse is to meet it; and in proportion as there is energy and manly ability, it is met. If I *admit* a want, I must pine if I cannot relieve it; and I must chafe like a bull in a net if I see it, and am by legal restriction debarred from removing it. But when I am subject to God, I do not chafe, for I am satisfied in Christ; I am in the region where want does not enter. (John iv. 14.) If we pay a little attention to the history of individual saints, we shall soon discover the particular want or wants which led to their decline, because the course becomes coloured by the want which it seeks to relieve. Lot wants food for his cattle, and the fields of Sodom suited him. Jacob wants rest after his flight from Padan-aram, and Shalem suited him. Israel lost sight of Moses, and a golden calf suited them. Achan wants self-distinction, and he appropriates what belongs to God. The unrelieved want, whatever it be, first leads to decline. There is an occupation of mind with an effort to attain the thing needed, instead of resting in the full sufficiency of Christ; for surely it is ever Satan's way to impress one first with the sense of some want, and then to propose an undue way of relieving it. Must we not have declined, when self in any shape controls our attention, and the support and sufficiency of Christ is forgotten or overlooked? The thing we have recourse to for supplying the want, indicates our true idea of the want. Thus was it law in Galatia, Philonism in Colosse. The place in Christ is lost sight of, and the want felt is attempted to be supplied by a thing which of itself declares the real nature of the want. This is, I suppose, in principle, losing "first love," and there is no power to progress. First love makes *Him* prominent and paramount, though there may not be much intelligence.

Now, consequent on seeking and reaching a set of circumstances which seem to suit the discontent, there will be an altar answering to that condition; that is to say, there is still a conscience; but God is limited and

modified to the mind suited to the condition in which the heart desires to be. We may not at first see how this happens; but it follows as naturally as effect follows cause. If I retain any conscience, which is the sense of God's claim on me, I must either rise up to the fullest intelligence of this claim, or bring the truth down to my own level. In the former case I must occupy the position which is pleasing to His mind, and according to the revelation He has made of Himself; and thus I am walking in the highest truth in Christ, judging everything, and His grace rising superior to all the cravings of nature. But if on the other hand I have yielded to the discontent, I must either lose conscience altogether, or I must define God to my own mind and condition in such a way as not to interfere or clash with that condition. How could I live in a condition suited to what my nature demands of me, which I knew or felt He would not recognize or permit? I must either have no conscience, no God, or live with a bad conscience; which is either a shipwreck or intolerable, and is a stage in decline farther on. But it makes all easy to adopt an idea or limitation of God suited to myself; for the conscience is untroubled, and the condition of nature unrebuked. Surely Lot had relations as a righteous soul with God in Sodom. How could he have rested there with any ease if he had not? Nay more; he must soon have sunk into the evil with which he was surrounded, if he had not maintained relations with God. But they were relations quite below his calling—to the word to Abram; entirely dissimilar! and hence he must have assumed an idea of God different to and below the one in which the calling presented Him. This is always the first consequence of meeting and suiting the discontent. Thus Jacob, when he settled at Shalem, erected an altar, and called it El-elohe-Israel. There he is below his calling; but while he rests in the condition which suited his nature, his conscience, while maintaining relations with God, adopts such relations as will not interfere with or rebuke his place in nature. God is only thought of in relation to Jacob. There is no recognition or room

for a thought of God in respect to *Himself*. God, as to His own purpose and counsels, is entirely overlooked and forgotten. Hence many a corruption can be suffered at such a time, because the soul is not in the nearness in which God has revealed Himself, and there cannot be nearness otherwise. This we learn from the fact that as soon as Jacob set his face to go to Bethel, and to follow out the call of God, he said to his family, "Put away the strange gods that are among you; and be ye clean, and change your garments." What can be allowed when we are at a distance from God, cannot be suffered when we are nearer Him; and the allowance of unholiness always indicates that the soul is at a distance from Him. O may the heart ponder it! and may we fear to yield to the discontent of our nature; seeing that when we gratify it, or attempt to do so, we have lost our true calling; and that then, in order to preserve an easy conscience, we reduce the revelation of God to that measure which will not interfere with or rebuke us in our carnal position. This is a more serious and a more constant evil than perhaps any of us are aware of. To depart from our own privileges and calling is bad enough; but when in order to remain there with an easy conscience we limit and reduce the revelation of God (for we only know God as we receive the revelation of Himself), it is sad indeed. But it is ever so. You will in no instance find one who has sought to make *himself* in any way more easily circumstanced here, be it by retirement or self-consideration of any kind, that has not, in departing from his calling as in Christ and satisfied in Him, adopted and assumed an idea of God's mind as revealed, below the true one, and reduced it in order to meet himself in his inferior position. And it could not be otherwise if he is to retain any conscience at all.

I doubt not that when Mark turned away from Paul to go back to Jerusalem, he found relief for his conscience in a lower element (the circumcision, Col. iv.) than if he had remained with Paul. Here was the point and cause of decline in Galatia and Colosse. Christ being lost sight of, something is in-

roduced to fill the place; and if not divine righteousness, it must be our own, or no conscience at all. Barnabas too, in the dissension with Paul, found fellowship with Mark on the same ground, for both were on carnal ground, and together went to Cyprus, Barnabas's native country. And surely when all they of Asia had turned away from Paul, when they had surrendered the higher truths, they must, if they retained anything of a conscience, have interpreted the revelation of God, proclaimed and taught in a modified way; in a line which would not clash with and denounce their decline. They who had left their first love in Ephesus were among the number of those who had turned away from Paul. Surely they had tampered with and reduced the revelation to meet their own state, for otherwise they could not have maintained an easy conscience, though doubtless they propped it up to a great degree by their zeal in "trying apostles and them that were evil," &c. They were looking *down* with peculiar zeal, because they had ceased to look up. What they were doing was right enough and commendable; yet, like Peter fishing, the zeal was in a line to suit men and themselves more than Christ. Whenever the *seen* thing becomes the paramount object in the soul, the *unseen*, the greater as a matter of conscience, is overlooked or unknown. Hence, the true place of privilege and calling of God for His child must be forfeited, when he seeks for himself; and in seeking it he must, if he retains a conscience, modify the revelation to his condition in order to maintain any relation with God.

Be assured you may thus explain and account for the dulness of many Christians in apprehending higher truths, and for the imperfections and indifference with which many others hold them. They are first carried aside by some selfish end, and then they must modify the truth to suit their condition,* or their consciences would be disturbed; and if their consciences are disturbed, and they do not respond to them, they must

* Insisting on the Lordship of Christ, and overlooking His Headship to the body, would be an example of limiting truth in order to suit a low condition.

either put them aside, and then shipwreck ensues (1 Tim. i. 19), or they become "seared with a hot iron." The first is where there is real work in the soul, and the latter where there is none. When any one pursues a course, and yields to a snare which an exercise of conscience would have immediately checked; there is no help for it, he must be wrecked; that is to say, he must, having lost all self government, be useless and a wreck. He has not retained conscience in connection with his faith. What he believed, he neglected or refused to use as the claim which God had on him. The sense of this he put away, and then became unmanageable, the sport of winds and waves!

The man of God seduced by the old prophet in Bethel (1 Kings xiii.) is an example of this. If he had kept his conscience to his faith, he would not have been seduced from the commandment of God. The address to his nature, to think of himself and care for himself, overcame his scruples; so that he disregarded his conscience, put away the sense of God's claim on him, yielded, and became a wreck.

Peter, in like manner did not exercise his conscience on the plain word of Christ. He suffered also, though not to the same extent, because he succumbed from fear. The other yielded to desire provoked. We can discover, in all the moral shipwrecks known to us, one or other of these elements, either to please oneself or to yield because of the fear of others. In many and varied forms these elements may work in our souls. In one, the self-seeking may be Achan-like; "Of your own selves shall men arise, seeking to draw away disciples after them." In another it may be a love of popularity, a desire to stand well with influential christian friends. In another, a love of ease, domesticity, and so on. It is rarely that these elements appear in a carnal phase. Sometimes they do; but in either case the giving up of the conscience paves the way to ultimate fall and disgrace.

I do not pursue the subject farther at present, though there be a further stage, when the conscience is seared with a hot iron, and when they become reprobate con-

cerning the faith. That is the sequel to the downward steps which we have been considering, unless they be retraced, and by grace the conscience is enabled to reassert its power; as with Jacob, when in the midst of his carnal rest at Shalem the Lord says to him, "Arise, go to Bethel;" or with Peter, when recalled in sorrow and repentance by the Lord's look. My object in this paper has merely been to sketch the beginnings of the course of decline. I have sought to direct attention to the tendency. I do not pursue it into the open rebellion of the apostasy. My purpose is attained if I have been able to arouse the heart of saints to a more earnest self-judgment; their senses exercised to discern good and evil, and therefore a greater ability on their part to watch and guard against the workings which lead to decline. While the eye of the heart is turned to Christ; while the mind is occupied with "things above, and not with things on the earth," there is no decline. The moment things of the *earth* engage our attention as in relation to it, decline sets in. Hence the more I desire to be preserved, the more do I seek the ministry of the word, the converse which maintains me in intimacy with Christ apart from the world. It matters not whether it be my own need, the need of others, or even of the Church as on earth; the moment anything in relation to the earth engages me, I am declining. The moment man's power affects me, I have lost the sense of the Lord's help. The very sublimity of our present and proper position exposes us the more to detriment on the slightest departure from it. The purer anything is, the more carefully must it be preserved; and you will never see a desire to modify truth, or a dulness in accepting the *highest* truth, unless the eye of the mind is engaged with a scene and condition dissonant with it. Then the understanding either refuses it, or modifies it in order to keep the conscience easy. The final step, the putting away of conscience, only occurs when the light of God's presence is avoided, in order to be at unhindered license to carry out the will of the heart. If you retrospect, you will always be able to discover the beginnings of decline. Com-

plaining and discontent—Absalom-like—mark it first; then perhaps a corner for oneself somewhere, under the plea of health, or family, or retirement, or to escape disorders, or to escape church responsibility, even it may be in evangelizing; but this always with associates of a lower tone and standing: low principles lead to low company. No matter what form it takes, the beginning is the same, and the effort to provide for or to make oneself an object is the palpable aim, be it self-indulgence like Samson, or self-importance like Jonah. Christ is tempted: He is not rested in as sufficient. Others, it may be said, may do this even more. True; but the difference is that they have never done anything else. If a person has never advanced, has never been much in the light, you cannot properly call their self-seeking, decline. I speak of those who *have* advanced, and who have declined from that position of advance which they had at one time taken.

The Lord give us all grace to watch against the beginnings, and then, in His grace, we shall be kept simply and happily dependent on Him, doing His will, and knowing how, amid all, his rod and staff can and do comfort us.

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