

VI.

THE EYE OF FAITH

“We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”—2 COR. iv. 18.

NOTICE carefully that S. Paul says look *at*, not look *for*. He is not speaking in this place of things future, for which the Christian waits in *hope*—he goes on to that in the next chapter; he is talking of things present, here and now, at which the Christian looks in *faith*. There are certain things, he says, which are seen, certain obvious facts of life which force themselves upon our attention; and these are, after all, only temporary: they last for a time, and then pass away. And there are certain other things, invisible to the eye of sense, but which it is the Christian’s privilege that he can see, and these are eternal. *We look at the things which are not seen.* When S. Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians, he was thinking especially of pain and all kinds of suffering. Pain

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and suffering are real evils while they last, but they last only for a time; whereas the spirit of endurance which they will produce in us, if we will let them, the Christ-like glory of patience which they will work into our character, will not pass away, but will be an eternal possession. “Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day.”

Let us consider this eternal fact and this temporary appearance which the apostle so distinguishes.

Take any man or woman of us. Here, surely, we are presented with an appearance real enough, which we seem to comprehend, and can estimate and use. Here are we, creatures made up of desires and wants, and there is the world ready to satisfy us at all points. And yet do we always satisfy all our desires even if we are able? Do we gratify all our instincts as they arise? And if not, why not?

Have you never known a man in a passion restrain his hand from striking, or a woman in a passion restrain her tongue? And why do they restrain themselves if they are really in a passion?

Have you never known a child who has seen something he really liked—ripe fruit, perhaps, hanging over a neighbour’s wall—and has longed to have it, and yet has turned away without

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taking it? And why, if the child really wanted the fruit and could get it, did he restrain himself?

What is the meaning of our being able to say in the same breath, “I want that—I will not have it;” “I want to do that—I will not do it.” How strange it is! For if we are really what we seem to be, children of nature, creatures made up of desires and wants, what hindrance should there be to our gratification, except such as may come from without?

And yet, who has not known, after yielding to some of these most natural gratifications, a sudden and irresistible fit of remorse, because he had gratified himself, because he had done what his nature prompted him to do?

There are, then, two powers in us; and we may go further, and say that the power in us which can rise up against our desires and contradict them, or which can assert itself afterwards as remorse, must be more truly ourself than they. That power in us which restrains us from anger must be more certainly our real nature than the desire for revenge, which spends itself passionately in inflicting pain and then as passionately in regretting; that power in us which crushes down the covetous impulse, the impure thought, must be more truly ourself than that impure thought or that covetous impulse. To use S. Paul's words, the flesh is not our real nature, but the Spirit. The flesh is one

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of those things which are seen—one of those appearances which, although they only last for a time, impress us with the belief that they alone are important; the flesh is persistent, and always soliciting us; our desires say to us, "We are yourself; gratify us. How can a man deny *himself*? Why should a man have desires if they are not to be gratified? If I am hungry, why may I not eat? If I am thirsty, why may I not drink? What is to check or hinder?"

And the answer is—that we are not our flesh, although we may at first think so, but something far higher and nobler. If we will only hearken, there is a voice within us, which distinguishes among all the crowd of our wishes, and approves some, and seconds them; and disapproves of others, and would destroy them, if we would only give it way;—and that is the voice of the Spirit. We Christians walk not by appearance, but by faith in God, believing that He has given us of His Spirit; and the main purpose of Christian education is to give the Spirit mastery over the flesh.

The instinctive satisfaction of our wants should have been left behind very early in childhood. As we grew, we grew ever more and more to look less at the outward form, and more and more for some expression behind it. Our mother soon ceased to be merely our mother; she was our

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mother pleased or our mother grieved. And this pleasure or grief was not merely a reflection of our own; it was independent of it. Our playfellows soon ceased to be so many animated dolls, who went through a performance for our delight, who danced to our piping, who lamented when we mourned; we discovered that they had wills of their own, and our happiness depended on our will working in harmony with theirs. And so we grew into the idea of something which we and our brothers and sisters had in common; something which *had* to be preferred to our own private gratification, however imperious; something not seen; something easily forgotten, but yet something which we felt to be a reality; something which, if it were disregarded, could assert itself terribly as remorse.

Our recognition of this deeper nature of ours—this life of the Spirit—became still clearer when we came to know the meaning of friendship. Brothers and sisters are always brothers and sisters, even when we treat them selfishly; but with a friend it is not so. Here in friendship is a bond of union, which we form for ourselves, and yet one which seems to us at the time stronger than any natural ties. And the impulse which seized upon us, if our friendship was worthy of the name, to give and to give our best, to give ourselves, how strange it was—what a subversion of the natural

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law of self-gratification! And yet that friendship was a real thing, who ever doubted that ever

had a friend?

In such ways it was, by our own friendships, by the love of our parents, by remorse for selfishness, that the Spirit first asserted its desires against those of the flesh; in this way the Spirit proved to us its reality, although appearances were against it. And as we grew older the reality of the Spirit was still more forced upon us, by its power in others, if not in ourselves. There were those about us who retained from childhood a sense of God's presence in them—dear saints of God, in whom the fruits of the Spirit had grown with their growth and strengthened with their strength.

As we watched them, and marked their sweet content, and felt the virtue that went out of them, the healing that they brought to the broken-hearted and weary and heavy-laden, we could not doubt that their nature was liker God's than that of the self-seeker. And then we read of those who in old times had scorned delights and lived laborious days for the sake of others—patriots who had worked hard with brain and sword to redeem from slavery men whom they had never seen; seekers after truth who had felt compelled to give up some popular view of things, and try to understand the truth about the world and the mind of man; and who for so doing brought themselves to

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the dungeon and the fire. We understood that these men all gave the lie to that view of our nature which seemed at first so obvious—the view that we were sent here, into this best of all possible worlds, to enjoy ourselves—and there was something in us which acknowledged that they were right. So, then, we grew up into the belief that the true life of man is the life in the Spirit; that the life after the flesh, the life in which a man gratifies all his desires, the selfish life, for all its obviousness, is not the true life. And for the final justification of this view, we were pointed to the life of Christ—which was the life of One who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many—as the revelation of the life that God meant for us. Having, then, been so taught ourselves, and verifying the truth in every day's experience, we try to persuade others by the proofs that had weight with ourselves. We point them to Christ and to the saints. We say, "There are two kinds of life, and you must choose. There can be no proof given you that the one is more divine than the other, except what is given by your own conscience. If you really think there is no harm in anger, no sin in stealing, no shame in drunkenness or fornication, it cannot be proved to you in this world. If you say this life after the flesh, the natural, frank, unrestrained, selfish life, obeying each inclination as it arises, is the truer

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life of the two—the life man was made for—there is no answer for you; you have closed our mouth." When the Pharisees, after they had heard our Lord's words, and seen His works of mercy, still asked for a sign that He came from God, there could no sign be given them. They accused Him of being possessed with the devil, and He could not disprove their charge, because the only witness of God is goodness; the only sign of the Spirit is the fruits of the Spirit, and they can only be spiritually discerned. It was when Pilate was preparing to perjure his soul that he asked, "What is truth?" It can only be when goodness means nothing to us that we can ask "what goodness is." What hope is there for a man who, standing in the sun, asks, Where is the light? How great is that darkness!

This, then, is our faith, that although selfishness—the law of each for himself, and the

survival of the strongest—is the law of nature, it is not the law of our lives. We believe that there is another law working in us—the law of the Spirit of God; and that this, not the law of the flesh, is man’s true nature. We believe that the great natural law of selection, so far from being carried on in the spiritual world, is there utterly denied and repudiated. We believe that man is not a part of nature, gifted with some greater power and more potent instinct called a soul; but that man is *spirit* as God is *spirit*—

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that man’s soul is the breath of God, working for a time through a body of flesh. And this distinction is not a mere matter of words. It makes all the difference whether you regard your true nature as flesh or as spirit. No man can serve two masters, and these two masters both claim you for their own. “The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.” But can we doubt which should win? Since God has seen it good that we should not live the quiet, serene life of the angels, would we rather live the quiet, contented life of the sheep and ox, into which there can come no confusion, or disturbance, or strife? Even if we would we cannot, for we are not as they. We are not flesh as they are; we are spirit. The flesh is but a means to that. The flesh, if it be unruly, is but a servant pretending to be master—a slave which must be schooled and taught its place. By the Spirit we must walk.

But what if we are in doubt whether, in any given case, it is the flesh or the Spirit whose voice we hear? I do not believe that any one is ever in doubt; but if he be, one rule will help in most cases. The Spirit, being the Spirit of God, is universal; the flesh is private and self-seeking. It is the unity of the Spirit of God, who is Love, which binds together the members of a family, or a Church, in the bond of peace. It is the flesh which says, “Depart from me, for I am holier than thou.”

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Look carefully at that awful list which S. Paul gives of the works of the flesh in Galatians, and you will find that they are all instances of self-seeking,—where they affect others, it is to use them as mere means to self-gratification; and then, if you turn to the fruits of the Spirit spoken of in the same chapter, you will find that in each case the self is forgotten, and lost in love to God and man.

And the text teaches us that the flesh with all its works is only for a time, and the Spirit with all its fruits is eternal. The whole body of sin must utterly be abolished; but no faith, no hope, no charity, can ever be lost, no devotion to truth, no devotion to duty; because these are not the works in us of the corruptible flesh, but of the Spirit, which, as it is the breath of God, must live for ever.