

"Scripture a Record of Human Sorrow"
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1 "There is at Jerusalem by the sheepmarket a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue
2 Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind,
3 halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water." John v. 2, 3.

4 WHAT a scene of misery this pool of Bethesda must have presented! of pain and
5 sickness triumphing unto death! the "blind, halt, withered, and impotent," persuaded by
6 the hope of cure to disclose their sufferings in the eye of day in one large company. This
7 pool was endued, at certain times, with a wonderful virtue by the descent of an Angel
8 into it, so that its waters effected the cure of the first who stepped into it, whatever was
9 his disease. However, I shall not speak of this wonderful pool; nor of our Saviour's
10 miracle, wrought there upon the man who had no one to put him in before the rest,
11 when the water was troubled, and who had been for thirty-eight years afflicted with his
12 infirmity. Without entering into these subjects, let us take the text as it stands in the
13 opening of the chapter which contains it, and deduce a lesson from it.

14 There lay about the pool "a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, and withered."
15 This is a painful picture, such as we do not like to dwell upon,—a picture of a chief kind
16 of human suffering, bodily disease; one which suggests to us and typifies all other
17 suffering,—the most obvious fulfilment of that curse which Adam's fall brought upon his
18 descendants. Now it must strike every one who thinks at all about it, that the Bible is full
19 of such descriptions of human misery. We know it also abounds in accounts of human
20 sin; but not to speak of these, it abounds in accounts of human distress and sufferings,
21 of our miserable condition, of the vanity, unprofitableness, and trials of life. The Bible
22 begins with the history of the curse pronounced on the earth and man; it ends with the
23 book of Revelation, a portion of Scripture fearful for its threats, and its prediction of
24 judgments; and whether the original curse on Adam be now removed from the world or
25 not, it is certain that God's awful curses, foretold by St. John, are on all sides of us.
26 Surely, in spite of the peculiar promises made to the Church in Christ our Saviour, yet
27 as regards the world, the volume of inspiration is still a dreary record, "written within and
28 without with lamentations, and mourning, and woe." And further, you will observe that it
29 seems to drop what might be said in favour of this life, and enlarges on the unpleasant
30 side of it. The history passes quickly from the Garden of Eden, to dwell on the sufferings
31 which followed, when our first parents were expelled thence; and though, in matter of
32 fact, there are traces of paradise still left among us, yet it is evident, Scripture says little
33 of them in comparison of its accounts of human misery. Little does it say concerning the
34 innocent pleasures of life; of those temporal blessings which rest upon our worldly
35 occupations, and make them easy; of the blessings which we derive from "the sun and
36 moon, and the everlasting hills," from the succession of the seasons and the produce of
37 the earth;—little about our recreations and our daily domestic comforts;—little about the
38 ordinary occasions of festivity and mirth which occur in life, and nothing at all about
39 those various other enjoyments which it would be going too much into detail to mention.

40 Human tales and poems are full of pleasant sights and prospects; they make things
41 better than they are, and pourtray a sort of imaginary perfection; but Scripture (I repeat)
42 seems to abstain even from what might be said in praise of human life as it is. We read,
43 indeed, of the feast made when Isaac was weaned, of Jacob's marriage, of the
44 domestic and religious festivities of Job's family; but these are exceptions in the tenor of
45 the Scripture history. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity;" "man is born to trouble;" these are
46 its customary lessons. The text is but a specimen of the descriptions repeated again
47 and again throughout Scripture of human infirmity and misery.

48 So much is this the case, that thoughtless persons are averse to the Scripture narrative
49 for this very reason. I do not mean bad men, who speak hard, presumptuous words
50 against the Bible, and in consequence expose themselves to the wrath of God; but I
51 speak of *thoughtless* persons; and of these there are many, who consider the Bible a
52 gloomy book, and on that account seldom look into it, saying that it makes them
53 melancholy. Accordingly, there have been attempts made on the other hand to hide this
54 austere character of Scripture, and make it a bright interesting picture of human life. Its
55 stories have before now been profanely embellished in human language, to suit the
56 taste of weak and cowardly minds. All this shows, that in the common opinion of
57 mankind, the Bible does not take a pleasant sunshine view of the world.

58 Now why have I thus spoken of this general character of the sacred history?—in order
59 to countenance those who complain of it?—let it not be imagined;—far from it. God
60 does nothing without some wise and good reason, which it becomes us devoutly to
61 accept and use. He has not given us this dark view of the world without a cause. In
62 truth, this view is the ultimate *true* view of human life. But this is not all; it is a view which
63 it concerns us much to know. It concerns us (I say) much to be told that this world is,
64 after all, in spite of first appearances and partial exceptions, a dark world; else we shall
65 be obliged to learn it (and, sooner or later, we must learn it) by sad *experience*;
66 whereas, if we are forewarned, we shall unlearn false notions of its excellence, and be
67 saved the disappointment which follows them. And therefore it is that Scripture omits
68 even what might be said in praise of this world's pleasures;—not denying their value,
69 such as it is, or forbidding us to use them religiously, but knowing that we are sure to
70 find them out for ourselves without being told of them, and that our danger is on the
71 side, not of undervaluing, but of overvaluing them; whereas, by being told of the world's
72 vanity, *at first*, we shall learn (what else we should only attain *at last*), not indeed to be
73 gloomy and discontented, but to bear a sober and calm heart under a smiling cheerful
74 countenance. This is one chief reason of the solemn character of the Scripture history;
75 and if we keep it in view, so far from being offended and frightened away by its notes of
76 sorrow, because they grate on the ear at first, we shall stedfastly listen to them, and get
77 them by heart, as a gracious gift from God sent to us, as a remedy for all dangerous
78 overflowing joy in present blessings, in order to save us far greater pain (if we use the
79 lesson well), the pain of actual disappointment, such as the overthrow of vainly
80 cherished hopes of lasting good upon earth, will certainly occasion.

81 Do but consider what is the consequence of ignorance or distrust of God's warning
82 voice, and you will see clearly how merciful He is, and how wise it is to listen to Him. I

83 will not suppose a case of gross sin, or of open contempt for religion; but let a man have
84 a general becoming reverence for the law and Church of God, and an unhesitating faith
85 in his Saviour Christ, yet suppose him so to be taken with the goods of this world, as
86 (without his being aware of it) to give his heart to them. Let him have many good
87 feelings and dispositions; but let him love his earthly pursuits, amusements, friends, too
88 well;—by which I mean, so well as to forget that he is bound to live in the spirit of
89 Abraham's faith, who gave up home, kindred, possessions, all his eye ever loved, at
90 God's word,—in the spirit of St. Paul's faith, who "counted all things but loss for the
91 excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord," and to win His favour "suffered
92 the loss of all things." How will the world go with a man thus forgetful of his true
93 interests? For a while all will be enjoyment;—if at any time weariness comes, he will be
94 able to change his pleasure, and the variety will relieve him. His health is good and his
95 spirits high, and easily master and bear down all the accidental troubles of life. So far is
96 well; but, as years roll on, by little and little he will discover that, after all, he is not, as he
97 imagined, possessed of any real substantial good. He will begin to find, and be startled
98 at finding, that the things which once pleased, please less and less, or not at all. He will
99 be unable to recall those lively emotions in which he once indulged; and he will wonder
100 why. Thus, by degrees, the delightful visions which surrounded him will fade away, and
101 in their stead, melancholy forms will haunt him, such as crowded round the pool of
102 Bethesda. Then will be fulfilled the words of the wise man. The days will have come,
103 "when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; the sun and the light and the moon
104 and the stars shall be darkened, and the clouds return after the rain; then they who look
105 out of the window shall be darkened, the doors shall be shut in the streets, all the
106 daughters of music shall be brought low, fears shall be in the way, and desire shall fail."
107 [Eccles. xii. 1-5.] Then a man will begin to be restless and discontented, for he does not
108 know how to amuse himself. Before, he was cheerful only from the natural flow of his
109 spirits, and when such cheerfulness is lost with increasing years, he becomes evil-
110 natured. He has made no effort to change his heart,—to raise, strengthen, and purify his
111 faith,—to subdue his bad passions and tempers. Now their day is come; they have
112 sprung up and begin to domineer. When he was in health, he thought about his farm, or
113 his merchandize, and lived to himself; he laid out his strength on the world, and the
114 world is nothing to him, as a worthless bargain (so to say), seeing it is nothing worth to
115 one who cannot take pleasure in it. He had no habitual thought of God in the former
116 time, however he might have a general reverence for His name; and now he dreads
117 Him, or (if the truth must be said) even begins to hate the thought of Him. Where shall
118 he look for succour? Perhaps, moreover, he is a burden to those around him; they care
119 not for him,—he is in their way. And so he will lie year after year, by the pool of
120 Bethesda, by the waters of health, with no one helping him;—unable to advance himself
121 towards a cure, in consequence of his long habits of sin, and others passing him by,
122 perhaps unable to help one who obstinately refuses to be comforted. Thus he has at
123 length full personal, painful experience, that this world is really vanity or worse, and all
124 this because he would not believe it from Scripture.

125 Now should the above description appear overcharged, should it be said that it
126 supposes a man to be possessed of more of the pleasures of life than most men have,
127 and of keener feelings,—should it be said that most men have little to enjoy, and that

128 most of those who have much go on in an ordinary tranquil way, and take and lose
129 things without much thought, not pleased much in their vigorous days, and not caring
130 much about the change when the world deserts them,—then I must proceed to a more
131 solemn consideration still, on which I do not like to dwell, but would rather leave it for
132 your own private reflection upon it. There is a story in the Gospels of a man who was
133 taken out of this life before he had turned his thoughts heaven-ward, and in another
134 world he lift up his eyes being in torments. Be quite sure that every one of us, even the
135 poorest and the most dull and insensible, is far more attached to this world than he can
136 possibly imagine. We get used to the things about us, and forget they are necessary for
137 our comfort. Every one, when taken out of this world, would miss a great deal that he
138 was used to depend on, and would in consequence be in great discomfort and sorrow in
139 his new abode, as a stranger in an unknown place; every one, that is, who had not,
140 while on earth, made God his Father and Protector,—that Great God who alone will
141 there be found. We do not, then, mend the matter at all in supposing a man not to find
142 out the world's vanity here; for, even should the world remain his faithful friend, and
143 please him with its goods, to his dying day, still that world will be burnt up at the day of
144 his resurrection; and even had he little of its comforts here, that little he will then miss.
145 Then all men, small and great, will know it to be vanity, and feel their infinite loss if they
146 have trusted it, when all the dead stand before God.

147 Let this suffice on the use we must make of the solemn view which the Scripture takes
148 of this life. Those disclosures are intended to save us pain, by preventing us from
149 enjoying the world unreservedly; that we may use not abusing it.

150 Nor let it seem as if this view of life must make a man melancholy and gloomy. There
151 are, it is true, men of ill-constituted minds, whom it has driven out of the world; but,
152 rightly understood, it has no such tendency. The great rule of our conduct is to take
153 things as they come. He who goes out of his way as shrinking from the varieties of
154 human life which meet him, has weak faith, or a strangely perverted conscience,—he
155 wants elevation of mind. The true Christian rejoices in those earthly things which give
156 joy, but in such a way as not to care for them when they go. For no blessings does he
157 care much, except those which are immortal, knowing that he shall receive all such
158 again in the world to come. But the least and the most fleeting, he is too religious to
159 condemn, considering them God's gift; and the least and most fleeting, thus received,
160 yield a purer and deeper, though a less tumultuous joy. And if he at times refrains, it is
161 lest he should encroach upon God's bounty, or lest by a constant use of it he should
162 forget how to do without it.

163 Our Saviour gives us a pattern which we are bound to follow. He was a far greater than
164 John the Baptist, yet He came, not with St. John's outward austerity,—condemning
165 the *display* of strictness or gloominess, that we, His followers, might fast the more in
166 private, and be the more austere in our secret hearts. True it is, that such self-
167 command, composure, and inward faith, are not learned in a day; but if they were, why
168 should this life be given us? It is given us as a very preparation time for obtaining them.
169 Only look upon the world in this light;—its sights of sorrows are to calm you, and its
170 pleasant sights to try you. There is a bravery in thus going straightforward, shrinking

171 from no duty little or great, passing from high to low, from pleasure to pain, and making
172 your principles strong without their becoming formal. Learn to be as the Angel, who
173 could descend among the miseries of Bethesda, without losing his heavenly purity or his
174 perfect happiness. Gain healing from troubled waters. Make up your mind to the
175 prospect of sustaining a certain measure of pain and trouble in your passage through
176 life; by the blessing of God this will prepare you for it,—it will make you thoughtful and
177 resigned without interfering with your cheerfulness. It will connect you in your own
178 thoughts with the Saints of Scripture, whose lot it was to be patterns of patient
179 endurance; and this association brings to the mind a peculiar consolation. View
180 yourselves and all Christians as humbly following the steps of Jacob, whose days were
181 few and evil; of David, who in his best estate was as a shadow that declineth, and was
182 withered like grass; of Elijah, who despised soft raiment and sumptuous fare; of forlorn
183 Daniel, who led an Angel's life; and be lighthearted and contented, *because* you are
184 thus called to be a member of Christ's pilgrim Church. Realize the paradox of making
185 merry and rejoicing in the world because it is *not* your's. And if you are hard to be
186 affected (as many men are), and think too little about the changes of life, going on in a
187 dull way without hope or fear, feeling neither your need nor the excellence of religion;
188 then, again, meditate on the mournful histories recorded in Scripture, in order that your
189 hearts may be opened thereby and roused. Read the Gospels in particular; you there
190 find accounts of sick and afflicted persons in every page as mementos. Above all, you
191 there read of Christ's sufferings, which I am not now called upon to speak of; but the
192 thought of which is far more than enough to make the world, bright as it may be, look
193 dark and miserable in itself to all true believers, even if the record of *them* were the only
194 sorrowful part of the whole Bible.

195 And now I conclude, bidding you think much of the Scripture history in the light in which
196 I have put it,—that you may not hereafter find that you have missed one great benefit
197 which it was graciously intended to convey.