

On Mourning for the Dead

by John Wesley (11th January 1726 at a funeral)

"Now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." - 2 Sam. 12:23

The resolution of a wise and good man, just recovering the use of his reason and virtue, after the bitterness of soul he had tasted from the hourly expectation of the death of a beloved son, is comprised in these few but strong words. He had fasted and wept, and lay all night upon the earth, and refused not only comfort, but even needful sustenance, whilst the child was still alive, in hopes that God would be gracious, as well in that as in other instances, and reverse the just sentence he had pronounced. When it was put in execution, in the death of the child, he arose and changed his apparel, having first paid his devotions to his great Master, acknowledging, no doubt, the mildness of his severity, and owning, with gratitude and humility, the obligation laid upon him, in that he was not consumed, as well as chastened, by his heavy hand; he then came into his house, and behaved with his usual composure and cheerfulness. The reason of this strange alteration in his proceedings, as it appeared to those who were ignorant of the principles upon which he acted, he here explains, with great brevity, but in the most beautiful language, strength of thought, and energy of expression: "Now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

"To what end," saith the resigned mourner, "should I fast, now the child is dead? Why should I add grief to grief; which, being a volunteer, increases the affliction I already sustain? Would it not be equally useless to him and me? Have my tears or complaints the power to refix his soul in her decayed and forsaken mansion? Or, indeed, would he wish to change, though the power were in his hands, the happy regions of which lie is now possessed, for this land of care, pain, and misery? O vain thought! Never can he, never will he, return to me: Be it my comfort, my constant comfort, when my sorrows bear hard upon me, that I shall shortly, very shortly, go to him! that I shall soon awake from this tedious dream of life, which will soon be at an end; and then shall I gaze upon him; then shall I behold him again, and behold him with that perfect love, that sincere and elevated affection, to which even the heart of a parent is here a stranger! when the Lord God shall wipe away all tears from my eyes; and the least part of my happiness shall be that the sorrow of absence shall flee away!"

The unprofitable and bad consequences, the sinful nature, of profuse sorrowing for the dead, are easily deduced from the former part of this reflection; in the latter, we have the strongest motives to enforce our striving against it, -- a remedy exactly suited to the disease, -- a consideration which, duly applied, will not fail, either to prevent this sorrow, or rescue us from this real misfortune.

Grief, in general, is the parent of so much evil, and the occasion of so little good to mankind, that it may be justly wondered how it found a place in our nature. It was, indeed, of man's own, not of God's creation; who may permit, but never was the author of, evil. The same hour gave birth to grief and sin, as the same moment will deliver us from both. For neither did exist before human nature was corrupted, nor will it continue when that is restored to its ancient perfection.

Indeed, in this present state of things, that wise Being, who knows well how to extract good out of evil, has shown us one way of making this universal frailty highly conducive both to our virtue and happiness. Even grief, if it lead us to repentance, and proceed from a serious sense of our faults, is not to be repented of; since those who thus sow in tears shall reap in joy. If we confine it to this particular occasion, it does not impair, but greatly assist, our imperfect reason; pain, either of body or mind, acting quicker than reflection, and fixing more deeply in the memory any circumstance it attends.

From the very nature of grief; which is an uneasiness in the mind on the apprehension of some present evil, it appears, that its arising in us, on any other occasion than that of sin, is entirely owing to our want of judgment. Are any of those accidents, in the language of men termed misfortunes, such as reproach, poverty, loss of life, or

even of friends, real evils? So far from it, that, if we dare believe our Creator, they are often positive blessings. They all work together for our good. And our Lord accordingly commands us, even when the severest loss, that of our reputation, befalls us, if it is in a good cause, as it must be our own fault if it be not, to "rejoice, and be exceeding glad."

But what fully proves the utter absurdity of almost all our grief; except that for our own failings, is, that the occasion of it is always past before it begins. To recal what has already been, is utterly impossible, and beyond the reach of Omnipotence itself. Let those who are fond of misery, if any such there be, indulge their minds in this fruitless inquietude. They who desire happiness will have a care how they cherish such a passion, as is neither desirable in itself; nor serves to any good purpose, present or future.

If any species of this unprofitable passion be more particularly useless than the rest, it is that which we feel when we sorrow for the dead. We destroy the health of our body, and impair the strength of our minds, and take no price for those invaluable blessings; we give up our present, without any prospect of future, advantage; without any probability of either recalling them hither, or profiting them where they are.

As it is an indifferent proof of our wisdom, it is still a worse of our affection for the dead. It is the property of envy, not of love, to repine at another's happiness; to weep, because all tears are wiped from their eyes. Shall it disturb us, who call ourselves his friends, that a weary wanderer has at length come to his wished-for home? Nay, weep we rather for ourselves, who still want that happiness; even to whom that rest appeareth yet in prospect.

Gracious is our God and merciful, who, knowing what is in man, that passion, when it has conquered reason, always takes the appearance of it, lest we should be misled by this appearance, adds the sanction of his unerring commands to the natural dictates of our own understanding. The judgment, perhaps, might be so clouded by passion, as to think it reasonable to be profuse in our sorrow at parting from a beloved object; but Revelation tells us, that all occurrences of life must be borne with patience and moderation, -- otherwise we lay a greater weight on our own souls than external accidents can do without our concurrence, with humility, -- because from the offended justice of God we might well have expected he would have inflicted much worse, and with resignation, - - because we know, whatsoever happens is for our good; and although it were not, we are not able to contend with, and should not therefore provoke, Him that is stronger than we.

Against this fault, which is inconsistent with those virtues, and, therefore, tacitly forbidden in the precepts that enjoin them, St. Paul warns us in express words: "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep; that ye sorrow not, even as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also who sleep in Jesus will God bring with him: -- Wherefore, comfort one another with these words." (1 Thess. 4:13, 14, 18.) And these, indeed, are the only words which can give lasting comfort to a spirit whom such an occasion hath wounded. Why should I be so unreasonable, so unkind, as to desire the return of a soul now in happiness to me, -- to this habitation of sin and misery; since I know that the time will come, yea, is now at hand, when, in spite of the great gulf fixed between us, I shall shake off these chains and go to him?

What he was, I am both unable to paint in suitable colours, and unwilling to attempt it. Although the chief; at least the most common, argument for those laboured encomiums on the dead, which for many years have so much prevailed among us, is, that there can be no suspicion of flattery; yet we all know, that the pulpit, on those occasions, has been so frequently prostituted to those servile ends, that it is now no longer capable of serving them. Men take it for granted, that what is there said are words of course; that the business of the speaker is to describe the beauty, not the likeness, of the picture; and, so it be only well drawn, he cares not whom it resembles: In a word, that his business is to show his own wit, not the generosity of his friend, by giving him all the virtues he can think on.

This, indeed, is an end that is visibly served in those ill-timed commendations; of what other use they are, it is hard to say. It is of no service to the dead to celebrate his actions; since he has the applause of God and his holy

angels, and also that of his own conscience. And it is of very little use to the living; since he who desires a pattern may find enough proposed as such in the sacred writings. What! must one be raised from the dead to instruct him, whilst Moses, the Prophets, and the blessed Jesus are still presented to his view in those everlasting tables? Certain it is, that he who will not imitate these, would not be converted, though one literally rose from the dead.

Let it suffice to have paid my last duty to him, (whether he is now hovering over these lower regions, or retired already to the mansions of eternal glory,) by saying, in a few plain words, such as were his own, and were always agreeable to him, that he was to his parents an affectionate, dutiful son; to his acquaintance, an ingenuous, cheerful, good-natured companion; and to me, a well-trying, sincere friend.

At such a loss, if considered without the alleviating circumstances, who can blame him that drops a tear? The tender meltings of a heart dissolved with fondness, when it reflects on the several agreeable moments which have now taken their flight never to return, give an authority to some degree of sorrow. Nor will human frailty permit an ordinary acquaintance to take his last leave of them without it. Who then can conceive, much less describe, the strong emotion, the secret workings of soul which a parent feels on such an occasion? None, surely, but those who are parents themselves; unless those few who have experienced the power of friendship; than which human nature, on this side of the grave, knows no closer, no softer, no stronger tie!

At the tearing asunder of these sacred bands, well may we allow, without blame, some parting pangs; but the difficulty is, to put as speedy a period to them as reason and religion command us. What can give us sufficient ease after that rupture, which has left such an aching void in our breasts? What, indeed, but the reflection already mentioned, which can never be inculcated too often, -- that we are hastening to him ourselves; that, pass but a few years, perhaps hours, which will soon be over, and not only this, but all other desires will be satisfied; when we shall exchange the gaudy shadow of pleasure we have enjoyed, for sincere, substantial, untransitory happiness?

With this consideration well imprinted in our minds, it is far better, as Solomon observes, to go to the house of mourning, than to the house of feasting. The one embraces the soul, disarms our resolution, and lays us open to an attack: The other cautions us to recollect our reason, and stand upon our guard and infuses that noble steadiness, and seriousness of temper, which it is not in the power of an ordinary stroke to discompose. Such objects naturally induce us to lay it to heart, that the next summons may be our own; and that since death is the end of all men without exception, it is high time for the living to lay it to heart.

If we are, at any time, in danger of being overcome by dwelling too long on the gloomy side of this prospect, to the giving us pain, the making us unfit for the duties and offices of life, impairing our faculties of body or mind, -- which proceedings, as has been already shown, are both absurd, unprofitable, and sinful; let us immediately recur to the bright side, and reflect, with gratitude as well as humility, that our time passeth away like a shadow; and that, when we awake from this momentary dream, we shall then have a clearer view of that latter day in which our Redeemer shall stand upon the earth; when this corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal shall be clothed with immortality; and when we shall sing, with the united choirs of men and angels, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"