

"Present Duty"

by
Charles Mason

"Take, therefore, no thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." (Matthew 6:34)

This Divine maxim is introduced by several beautiful illustrations of the providence of God in its protecting care of the most helpless of His creatures. The fowls of the air, though they reap not nor gather into barns, are objects of His tender watchfulness; and not a sparrow falls to the ground without our Heavenly Father. By Him the flowers of the field are clothed with their robes of loveliness, richer than the most costly raiment of man. These *irrational* creatures, these perishing objects, all proclaim the most watchful care of their great Author and teach man constant lessons of trust and hope. Shall he who was made in the image of the Almighty, who alone of all earthly beings was endowed with reason and made the heir of immortality, --"a little lower than the angels,"-- shall he alone yield to distrust of the Divine protection, extended as it is to the irrational works of God?

And yet, notwithstanding the manifold proofs of the compassion of God towards those who put their trust in Him, hardly any admonition of the Scriptures finds its application to more hearts than that contained in the text. Anxiety for the future, in view of one or another of the blessings or trials of life, is in a greater or less degree almost universal among men. It pervades all classes and is hardly less marked in one than in another. It seems to be little dependent upon the real blessings which men receive or the security of the tenure by which they hold them. The poor are, in general, not more anxious for the future than the rich, nor the helpless and dependent than the strong and powerful.

Outward circumstances seem to have but little influence in causing or allaying this state of mind. It is not controlled by them. A contented and cheerful temper cannot be purchased by wealth, or power, or station; and cannot be destroyed by poverty, or weakness, or obscurity. You may see it in the abode of the humble poor as often as in the luxurious dwelling of the affluent. It is as frequently found to alleviate pain, console affliction, and cheer penury as to adorn prosperity and add its highest dignity to eminent station.

In some persons ***anxiety for the future*** is a peculiarly besetting infirmity. It is in them the prominent habit of mind. They are always foreboding evil, imagining new occasions of trouble, distressing themselves with afflictions to come, and mingling with present blessings the bitter ingredient of anticipated sorrow. The future is dark and gloomy to their view, and hope sends forth few rays to cheer the prospect. They are prone to give themselves up to the most sad and painful impressions and to clothe all earthly things with the dark mantle of mourning. Their fears are general and lead them to expect all kinds of evil and to find little comfort in hope. Sickness, poverty, bereavement, all cast their shadows before and obscure their path. Such is a habit of mind which we sometimes observe in the various walks of life, without distinction. It is a sort of *monomania*--a passion for contemplating future trouble, a love for dwelling in the tombs.

With others this anxiety for the future is more partial. It relates rather to one or more blessings. In one of its most common forms it is ***fear of want***. It is always providing for future wants.

Though it may possess abundance laid up in store for many years, it is yet constantly anxious for the time to come. It fears evil days and the loss of earthly wealth. This anxiety has no reference to the amount or security of present possessions. As the store increases, it does not decrease. As years advance, it does not relax its power but rather grows with the growth and gains fresh strength as life draws to its close.

The same tendency of mind shows itself in others in **fear of bereavement**, or of death itself. Their solicitude for the health and life of those nearest to them is intense. Every, even the slightest weakness, fills them with alarm. They expect calamities, and fear that death will soon strike down someone whose life is all their earthly stay and hope. Or perhaps they are themselves "through fear of death, all their lifetime subject to bondage." In their view death is the king of terrors, whom they most dread. They dwell upon the thought of death, which inevitably comes to all, with fear. They find no satisfaction in the approach of the great change which it brings, and desire to put far off the day of their departure. The grave brings to their view nothing but sadness. The reflection, that they must soon return to their mother earth and mingle with the dust of which they were formed, is one of terror. And the fear of this end fills their minds with anxiety while they sojourn in the land of the living.

Such is the state of mind as seen in different individuals to which our text refers. The force of the original expression is that of excessive anxiety. Be not overanxious for the morrow, for the morrow will bring its peculiar cares. Anticipate not evil, for sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

There are several motives for checking this tendency of mind, to which I would now direct your thoughts.

And the first which I would mention is **that it unfits for present duty**. Every day brings with it its appropriate duties, and these should be engaged in under an earnest sense of responsibility and with a self-possessed and well-directed mind. As Christians we are bound to maintain, day-by-day, habitual cheerfulness, hope, and faith. We are to engage in the daily work of life with a tranquil and trustful spirit. We shall find sufficient of evil in the trials, temptations, cares, and disappointments of each day to put to the test all the patience, meekness, forbearance, calmness, and submission which it is our duty to exercise. It will be often necessary to summon all the resolution and self-possession which the strongest faith can impart in order to bear up with a composed mind against the real calamities of our earthly pilgrimage. And in regard to our fellow pilgrims, too, we have constant duties which require our watchful care. We are to "bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ."

But for all these duties of each day, undue anxiety for the future entirely unfits the mind. Its resolution is broken by dwelling upon evils to come. It is unmanned, and easily yields to an apprehensive spirit. It engages in nothing with that collected, cheerful, hopeful energy which ever betokens success. And so far from imparting strength and courage to others who are engaged in the same conflict with trial, such a disposition tends to unnerve them also. Its influence is contagious. Nothing is communicated more rapidly than fear and distrust; and he who would effectually aid men in the great work of life must inspire them with hope, must teach them to make the most of present mercies, and to live by simple faith as regards the future.

An additional motive for checking this morbid tendency is **that it unfits the mind to bear the**

very troubles which it will necessarily meet in the future. There is, indeed, a thoughtfulness for the future which is an essential preparation for its wants, its duties, its trials, and dangers. There is nothing in the spirit of the Gospel to countenance improvidence, or recklessness, or insensibility of mind. It does not teach us so to presume upon Divine providence as to neglect to labor for our own living and to prepare for the necessities and contingencies of life. It does not teach us not to expect and prepare for trial and suffering. It does not bid us close our eyes to the truth that danger and affliction and death await us all in the journey of life. No. It is a duty to maintain habitually a deep practical conviction of the utter uncertainty of all things temporal. It is a duty to prepare for trouble and affliction and death. But this preparation is not effected by indulging in the habit of anxiety for the future. He is not best prepared to meet want who is always fearing it, but rather he who under all circumstances lives with the settled conviction that all earthly treasures are of a perishing nature, and who accustoms himself to self-denial amidst abundance. He is not best prepared to meet bereavement who is constantly and anxiously dreading it, but he who, while he makes his mind familiar with the thought of the changes which may occur, does not yield to disquieting fears but strives always to maintain hope even unto the end. Nor will that man be most ready to meet the great final change--death itself--who always looks forward to it with terror, but rather he who seeks daily to contemplate death in connection with the precious hopes, and duties, and promises of the Gospel.

A third motive for checking an anxious disposition in regard to the future is **that it destroys all happiness, all peace of mind.** God designs the happiness of His creatures and will bring upon them no greater trial than they are able to bear. "As their days, so shall their strength be." Therefore, in infinite wisdom and love, the future is hidden from our view. And if we would faithfully submit to the Divine guidance in this respect, we should not be compelled to bear more than the trial of the passing day. But by the habit of anxiously anticipating evil we increase the troubles of life, adding to the real those which are the offspring of our fears only.

Thus the mind multiplies distresses beyond those which are ordained of God for the probation of life. By this course men lose much of the happiness which they might have enjoyed in this world. They afflict themselves with evils which do not exist and, for them, have never existed, or else heedlessly forestall them. Did they, with humble submission to those trials which cannot be averted, seek to draw from their present blessings all those incentives to contentment, peace, and joy which they are capable of supplying, it would be impossible for them to be entirely deprived of the sources of true happiness; while it is very easy, by giving the reins to a fearful disposition, to cloud the mind with needless troubles, to see everything under its darkest aspect, to eat the bread of *excessive* carefulness and to be harassed with doubts, which before a more trustful mind would soon vanish like the mists and fogs which for a time obscure the sun.

And now, having taken a survey of some of the evil effects of this state of mind, let us next inquire into the means of checking it. How shall we avoid excessive anxiety about the future of our lives, knowing, as we do, that many heavy and inevitable afflictions must be met as we pass onward--witnessing daily the ravages of disease and death, beholding the suddenness with which these events often come? How can we avoid a tendency to look to the future with undefined and distressing fear, and to dwell upon this unexplored region with solicitude and distrust?

The first means which I would mention is **devotion** (with earnestness of purpose) to the duties of every day. It is one of the greatest blessings of this world that every man has an appropriate sphere of duty in which he is called to labor and thereby promote his own best interests, the good

of his fellow-men, and the great purposes of his Maker. The greatest affliction is that of the man who is doomed to an entirely inactive and solitary life. But such cases are very uncommon; and most men have, or may and ought to have, a sphere of daily duty sufficient to engage their principal attention, and which may be pursued in a truly Christian spirit at all times. Idleness of body or mind is a great cause of discontented and painful thoughts. It will be no wonder if he who has nothing valuable to do from day to day will look upon the future with pain. Let him, then, who is prone to imagine distress, make it his first duty to find a rational, honest, useful employment for his time. Let him devote a portion of it to the great duty of relieving his fellowmen. Let him remember that he is always surrounded by human beings who have, perhaps, tenfold greater real cause of distress than any that he has ever experienced. And let him expend some of those thoughts, which would otherwise be consumed in repining, upon devising projects for the relief of the poor, in visiting the sick, and in advancing the cause of Christian benevolence. Let him learn that he has a work to do in the world and enter earnestly upon it, striving, while he lives, to live for some good purpose; and he will be saved many an anxious hour, many a distressing doubt, and will find a cheerful prospect opening before him as long as life shall continue.

The next means of checking an anxious habit of mind is the ***exercise of faith in God***. It should tend to prevent all extreme and undue solicitude in regard to the future to know that "the Lord God Omnipotent reigns," that He is the all-wise disposer of all events, and that all things shall "work together for good to them that love God." If the heart only could maintain in living exercise such faith in the Divine promises, [then] we should always be able calmly to commit our ways unto the Lord and find peace in the belief that His will is always right. Trust in the love and protection of our Heavenly Father would prevent our yielding to the power of despairing thoughts, would sustain within us a hopeful spirit, and enable us to look forward to the future dangers of our mortal life without alarm.

"Oh, blessed Lord! the thought of Thee,
When clouds our fairer visions mar;
When we are not where we would be,
And dearest friends are set afar;
The thought that 'tis Thy ruling will,
The thought that Thou art with us still,
Nearer than ear or eye can know;
Art with us still in life or death,
In blooming life or failing breath,
'Tis all of heaven we need below."

And to these means of checking an anxious spirit, I would add ***reflection upon Eternity***. Let the heart rest with the same steadiness upon immortality as it often does upon the dangers and trials of this earthly span of existence, and the latter would sink into insignificance in view of that *eternal* future. Whether we compare the trials of life with eternal life or eternal death, they are as nothing. What is life itself? "It is even a vapor which appears for a little time and then vanishes away." What is that separation which can endure to the righteous only for a few years of this mortal life which rapidly passes away! And whatever changes may come while we remain here on earth, how soon will they all be over; and then how blessed their power if they shall inspire us with more sublime purposes in life, if they shall bring immortality and the heavenly world nearer to our view, if they shall quicken our zeal to make our heavenly calling and election sure.

Pilgrims to the eternal world, let this your glorious destiny free your hearts from bondage to earthly fears, inspire you with lofty faith to meet the dangers of the way, and impart the spirit of that blessed inheritance which, if you prove faithful unto death, will be your own! Let every new experience of sorrow exalt your faith and fix your hopes more closely upon that world where no change, nor grief, nor temptation shall ever come. And then, whatever may have been the trials of this life, however anxious and harassed you may have been here on earth, you can triumphantly look forward to your glorious inheritance above, and cherish the hope of entrance into those blessed mansions which Christ has prepared for them that love Him.

And now, unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be glory and honor, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.

"Present Duty" by Charles Mason, *Parochial Sermons* (Boston: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1865). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs divided.