

The Travail and Pain of Human Life
What can it Mean?

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In the sermon which I preached two weeks ago, the pith of which was stated in the phrase, "The eternal God is thy resting place, and underneath are the everlasting arms,"² and in the sermon which I preached last Sunday on the subject of moral responsibility in human life, we came face to face with the greatest of all problems that man has to face. This is the problem that is suggested by the facts of moral evil and human suffering. No one can escape the facts which present themselves to us on every side. We have brought home to us almost every day the plain and unvarnished facts of brute physical suffering, sufficient in themselves to compel one to hold up his hands in horror. On top of those we have to reckon with the less apparent, but even more real, suffering of mind and soul which, in varying degrees of intensity, come home very close to us. While we may not be very intimate with it in the way of close personal contact, yet the quiet serenity of our lives is disturbed by the reports of the tragic suicide or the thoughts of the asylums in which the mental and spiritual wrecks of our Christian civilization are cared for. Is there not some basis in fact for that old doctrine of eternal damnation which we nowadays cast aside so lightly? After all is said and done, we are still face to face with the stupendous and overpowering question of the travail and pain of human life, and every inquiring spirit cries out of the depths of his soul, "What can this all mean?" How can it all be involved in the life of a

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

² This phrase is found in Heman Packard DeForest's *Liturgical Forms: For Use in the Regular Services of the Church and on Special Occasions*, Cambridge, MA: Andover-Harvard Theological Library, 1903, p. 21. This particular phrase is among the "Response Sentences" for the "Order of the Third Sunday of the Month"

universe which we dare to believe is ordered in intelligent goodwill?

There are two or three ideas which have helped me tremendously in the face of this problem, and I give them to you in the hopes that they help you. They are ideas which are grounded in the very nature of things, they grow out of experience, and [are] alive with universal principles.

The first one reverts to the nature of the universe in which we live. Our mind has to be clear upon that point before we can even touch the outer edge of this problem. We are still victims of an ancient legend or myth in which people ages ago tried to explain this same problem. While we may not hold literally to the statement that God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh in the full assurance that he had completed his work, we still cling tenaciously to the idea that the universe is a completed article, finished and ready for use. But if you stop to think of it there is not one single scrap of evidence that such is the case. Everywhere is incompleteness and constant change. In the small bit of the universe that we know of there is nothing that is complete and final. Even the earth is subject to constant change and development, nature in every root and branch is alive with changing forces, man in his thought, his manner of living, in his ideals, is so hopelessly incomplete that many would have us think that all life is the sheerest mockery. Even those who have held that God did make the earth and rested on the sixth [sic] day, complacent in the satisfaction of his work, have had to invent the fiction that he made a blunder in making it, and has been compelled to spend all his time and energy since in repairing the work.

But why consider that at any greater length? Do not all the facts that we know of this universe in which we live, do not all the facts of human life and the inner impulses of the human soul, do not all the facts of the history of humanity and its long process of development declare to us beyond a venture of a doubt that the universe is not made, but is being made, that it is not completed but is in the midst of a great process of evolution whose beginning we cannot even guess at and whose day of completion is infinitely remote?

Somewhere in this great process, in a manner whose mysterious depths we cannot fathom, we find ourselves living. Strange

wonderful fact it is. We, finite human beings, as we call ourselves, self-conscious, thinking, reasoning creatures and creators, endowed with the powers of love and hate, capable of casting aside the life so precious to us for one whom we love, or indeed for that mysterious force which we call "the ideal," we meet together this morning in spring to feel, and to think about these great mysteries of human life, and perchance to act upon our convictions. Strange mysterious fact. Ages upon ages of growth and development, ages upon ages of life with its travail and pain, with its joy and hope, with its struggle and effort, with its defeats and its achievements, with its daring flights of human noble idealism and divine inspiration, purified by heroic experience, are pulsating through our whole beings this hour, or are poured out for us in lavish profusion in the daily life that we live. Who can grasp the tremendous grandeur of it all?

Still our whole being is alive, full to the point [of] bursting, with the still greater thoughts, still greater hopes, still greater aspirations than human life has yet realized. With a force more powerful than the greatest river, more powerful than the might of the ocean, more powerful than the great planets swinging through space, we are being carried on by the dynamic of human thought and human purpose, by the voice of the living God in the souls of men to the realization of ideals as yet undreamt of. The progress cannot be stayed. From the mountain peaks of human life and from its deepest and darkest valleys there comes to us the voice of the human soul, uttering its deep faith in the purpose and the destiny of humanity. I believe that this deep faith in the purpose and the destiny of humanity, a faith that is inherent in the human soul, declares and reveals to us an eternal principle of the universe in which we live. I believe that through a variety of processes we are working for a great purpose. We do not know what it is in its entirety, no more than the fresh blooming flower of spring knows what the sun is, but we turn towards that purpose as instinctively as the flower turns towards the sun. We live in the midst of a great incomplete evolving universe; we are creatures, produced in its processes, and my whole being tells me, and the history of human thought confirms my faith, that we are also creating forces, sharing with the great creating power, in the tasks and the responsibilities of the process in the midst of which we find ourselves this morning. Those characteristics of human life which we hunger for and sometimes

see-honor, respect, integrity, love—are characteristics which disclose to us the true nature of the universe, and destiny of humanity. Such is the growing forming and developing universe, both seen and unseen, in the midst of which we live, and ask ourselves the meaning of this travail and pain of human life.

Now in the midst of this process of development, through the various experiences of human life, its pains, its joys, its pleasures, and its sorrows, all that makes life what it is, broad in the scope of its experiences, rich in the depth of experience both in its everlasting happiness, and in its unspeakable travail and pain, we are absorbing into the fiber and the texture of our moral and spiritual life the truth of things as they are, the spirit of the great goodwill who works in and through us. God, the ideal of human life, is not only incarnated in us now, but in each day's experience the process of incarnation is going on, the ideal is becoming real, the word is being made flesh, and is dwelling among us, corruption is putting on its incorruptibility. In all the varied complexities of human life, in the quiet meditations of the pious saint, in [the] cruel and crushing life of the outcast; in the stolid life of the plodding son of toil, and in the desperate misery of the lonely prodigal; in the shallow mockery of the life of ease and luxury, in the grinding want of desperate poverty, is the spirit of the living God working in and through us unto truth and righteousness and justice. Not even is heaven given away, nor may truth be had for the asking, but he that asketh, receiveth, he that seeketh, findeth, and to him that knocketh, the door of eternal truth shall be opened. In unlimited labor and toil, through thousands upon thousands of years of progress, we are gleaning the truth of the infinite from the experiences, and forging our way forward with an irresistible power, into a deeper richer life, shot through and through with the understanding wisdom of eternal truth, justice and righteousness, burned into the very fiber of our being in the travail and pain of human progress.

In this search after the truth of human life, the truth of the living God, in this digging into the depths of human experience for the pure gold and the precious stones of life, we not only have to learn the methods by which we work, but we have to learn through that selfsame experience the things that are worthwhile. There is no public thoroughfare to truth and to life. It is all an unknown, and undiscovered country. We are charged with an

irresistible impulse to put out into the unknown, to risk all in that search after the truth of life. We are endowed with the capacity, with the working tools for these voyages of discovery, but the map of the unknown lands of truth which we seek are not given to us readymade. It has been and still is the task, the work, yes, the very essence of the pleasure and joy of human life, to put out fearlessly into this vast unknown to search for its islands, and continents of truth. Columbus, and all the great voyagers of discovery, are true to the deeper nature of the human soul, when they leave behind them all that has been learned and discovered, taking advantage of all the wisdom at their command, and, allured by the stary bits of floating vegetation suggesting the existence of other lands, put out into the vast and unexplored ocean to the discovery of a new world. Columbus is still true to the best and the deepest in human nature, when he casts aside all considerations, undergoes every hardship, and suffers unmeasurable travail and pain in his search for the land to which the floating messengers call him. The doubter, the skeptic, the followers of truth is also true to the deepest characteristics of human nature, characteristics which mirror the very nature of God and the universe, when he casts behind him all that human development has produced, taking only from the vast mass about him the essential things necessary for his work, and, allured by the suggestions of new worlds of truth, floating about him on the great sea of life, he weighs his anchor, and puts forth seeking for new worlds out of [which the] springs of life shall pour the waters of eternal truth. Strike into the depths of human life wheresoever you will, and you will find that its richness, its glory, its commanding beauty and attractiveness, rests not in things accomplished, or in the desire to remain amid the ease, comfort and luxury of the court of some Ferdinand and Isabella, but to put out into the undiscovered countries of truth, and amid the travail and pain of effort and labor, with its possibilities of defeat on the one hand, or achievement on the other, to risk all that we may lay hold upon the truth of eternal life. Go to the outcast, go to the prodigal, go to the thinker, go to the worker, go to the dreamer of dreams, go to the lover of humanity, go to the lonely toiler, go to the bold and adventurous leader of men, and ask for the secret of their life, and, if you have the understanding heart, you will find that beneath all the efforts, all the mistakes and the errors, as well as beneath all the achievements and successes, they are led by the indomitable heroic impulse of the human soul to seek after the truth of human life. In all the

experiences through which they pass, whether they be in what we are pleased to call sin, or in what we are pleased to call good, in them all, and through them all, we are gleaning the divine truth from the experiences of human life. In this God-like impulse to fathom the very depths of truth, in this irresistible search for the error and the truth of human life, in the heroic nature of man which compels him to put out into the undiscovered land lies the richness and the gloriousness for life. Indeed, life would be a stale poor thing at best were all things ordered according to a mechanical plan, were there no possibilities of error and mistake, were there no possibilities beyond the mere machine-like humdrum of pious virtuous living. Indeed, virtue itself would be an illusion, and its achievement but an empty honor, were it perfectly possible for us to travel along the paths of error and sin as well. Honor is to him whose noble purpose triumphs over baseness, simply because it was possible for him to be base. The discovery of truth is a glorious achievement just because it is possible for us to discover error. Those who, through bitter experience, have discovered the swamps and malarial, poisonous valleys of human life and thought, have also contributed to the wisdom of life and the good of humanity as well as those who have scaled the most glorious mountaintops of truth. In this transcending impulse of human life, fraught with its tremendous possibilities of success or defeat, of glory or shame, of salvation or of damnation, to use an old theological phrase, lies the richness that makes life real, and vital and precious.

But in it also lies the misery and the pain and suffering. In the hope of our salvation lurks the possibility of our damnation, and for the discovery and the revelation of the truth of life we are called to the possibility of infinite travail and pain. And in our damnation to misery and even to degradation in the experiences of human life there is revealed to us and to humanity not only the possibility of error and its inevitable compensations, but also the absoluteness of truth and its inevitable compensations. Thus, from our compensations of error, we return to the ways of truth and enter into the richness of a redeemed life, the more rich and the more powerful because we know not only its truth but its error. The story of the prodigal son is a great human document, revealing the deeper nature of man.³ Eating husks with the swine gives a background of shadow

³ See Luke 15:11-32.

which not only relieves, but brings out in detail the beauty of the homelife. The very fact that humanity has learned the hideousness of sin and error in the school of bitter experience makes the appreciation of truth the more keen and adds to the richness of life itself.

But more than that is to be said. In this school of life in which travail and pain enter so prominently, we are yet learning another lesson that is enriching life and purifying it. Through the sympathy of an understanding heart, aroused to action by the cry of the depressed and the downtrodden, we are, age by age, being wielded together into relationships in which the great divine ideals of justice and righteousness shall become incarnated into the very flesh of our life. As of old, when Moses heard the voice of God speaking from the burning bush, and saying unto him,

I have surely seen the affliction of my people that are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry by reason of their task-masters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of Egyptians, and bring up out of that land into a good land and large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.⁴

Moses left the sheep on the hillside and went down into Egypt, and led his people out of bondage, so today we hear the voice of God in the burning bush of human suffering in the midst of its misery, oppression and even its degradation, calling to us to come and lend the helping hand of human brotherhood. It is an appeal to the very richest characteristics of human nature. It reaches down into the very depths of our soul, and blows into a flaming fire the hidden powers of true human sympathy, and the deepest affection of man for man. To him that hears the appeal, and to him that responds to the [appeal,] shall be disclosed the vast treasures of the choicest things of the human heart. It is the historic mission of the oppressed to be the mouthpiece of the voice of God calling unto those whose work is as simple as the tending of flocks on the hillsides of Asia to reuse themselves and free the oppressed from bondage. Do you hear the low moan of despair? Do you hear the cry of the hungry child? Do you hear the pitiful groan of an outraged womanhood? Do you hear the shallow laugh of a selfish pleasure-seeker? It is the voice of God in the burning bush. They have been in search of truth and have found error. Verily God himself is in them, suffering

⁴ Exodus 3:7-8.

with them, in them, and through them, going with them even to the utmost limits of their error and their folly. In the last blank moment of their despair, and their misery, he cries out across the darkness of misery for human help and human love. Do not condemn them, do not pity them, but see in them the marks of human suffering through which we grow and develop in the richness of human life. Shut your ears to their cry, and you become yet even more hopelessly shut out from the vital pulsating life of truth, and your face is already turned towards the barren land where you, too, in loneliness and isolation, shall eat the husks in the swine troughs. Listen with a understanding heart, respond to the call, and you shall at once open up new treasures of life for them who call and unlock the chambers in your own life where the richest and most satisfying treasures are hidden, waiting for the key to human affection to be turned. In the travail and pain of life we are being bound the more closely into a great human brotherhood, the richness and the depths of whose life comes from the fact that we not only have been bold searchers for truth, but that we have suffered together for it, and have heard each other's cry in the wilderness of our despair, and have gone to each other's aid.

In the midst of this great process of life in which we find ourselves this morning, with the supreme peace and happiness of life depending alike upon the fact of joy and pleasure, and travail and pain, upon the possibility of error as well as truth, and evil as well as goodness, we are disclosing and revealing the deeper truths of human life and the divine will, and purifying life of its grossness, and giving ourselves in song and jest and mirth to the unspeakable task and pleasure of human life and human progress to the realization [of] truth, goodness and beauty in the real life as in the ideal. We are being wielded into a great brotherhood of understanding hearts that understand travail and pain, and in the understanding of it, its bitterness vanishes as the dew before the sun.

All for one and one for all
With an endless song and sweep,
So the billows rise and fall
On the bosom of the deep;
Louder in their single speech,
More resistless as they roll,
Broader, higher in their reach
For their union with the whole.

...

Kissed by sunshine, dew and shower,
Leaping rill and living sod,
Sea and mountain, tree and flower,
Turn their faces up to God;
And one human brotherhood,
Pulsating through a thousand lands,
Reaching for one common good
Will its million, million hands.

Through all warring seas of life
One vast current sunward rolls,
And within all outward strife
One eternal Right controls,
Right at whose divine command
Slaves go free and tyrants fall,
In the might of those who stand
All for one and one for all.⁵

⁵ James Gowdy Clark (1830-1897) American poet. This is his 1898 poem, "All for One and One for All," in *Poems and Songs*, Columbus, Ohio: Press of Champlin Printing Co, 1898, p. 191.