

HEART RELIGION – A MISSING DIMENSION: 2

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In the last *Quarterly* we considered heart religion in an overall way. We said that it was a missing dimension today, even among heirs of the Reformation. A love for Reformed truth is not necessarily an *experimental* knowledge of what was recovered those centuries ago. Church history shows that doctrinal orthodoxy can outlast inward piety. Even in John Knox's Scotland two hundred and fifty years later, Thomas Boston could lament:

“An unfelt religion, is the religion of them ... whose sound principles are like fire painted on a wall; as far from any sanctifying efficacy on their lives, or from burning up their corruptions, as that painted fire is from burning the house on which it is. But the religion of the saints is a felt, experimental religion. They feel the power of its mysteries upon their own souls” (*Works*, volume 4, page 166).

Submission

The same author maintained, “The heart must be a temple consecrated to God, wherein love, fear, delight in God, submission, patience, and all other parts of unseen religion, are exercised” (*Ibid.*, volume 2, page 12). In this quotation appears the important word “submission.” It is a scriptural word, for James exhorts us to “submit yourselves therefore to God” (James 4:7). Boston says it is an integral part of heart religion and one vital evidence of it. How true this is!

In concluding our subject I want to consider this aspect of it: the submission that God requires, and is graciously pleased to work in us. We only touched on this last time, but its importance is such that there can be no heart religion without it.

Seen

There is a time when we see submission to God at its clearest and loveliest: in the afflictions and sufferings that come to us in life. These exercise us deeply, and our reaction to adversity is the index of our religion. This is why scripture calls such seasons “trials” (2 Corinthians 8:2; 1 Peter 1:7). Heart religion will always acknowledge God in adversity with a sweet submission that justifies Him, and in so doing makes a conduit that brings blessing into the soul.

1. Submission to God in trials is never a natural reaction.

Left to ourselves, such divine dealings will have one of three effects:

a] They can prove we have no religion at all.

In the parable of the sower, the “stony ground” hearers “have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended” (Mark 4:17). A “fair weather” religion is not heart religion.

b] They will discover in us much unbelief, rebellion, pride, and self.

The children of Israel illustrate the immense difficulty of coming to this godly submission. The Lord sent each emergency on their pilgrimage as a call to trust Him who went before them in the cloudy/fiery pillar. Their repeated “murmurings” only revealed what was in their hearts (Deuteronomy 8:2,16). These things were “ensamples” or types, for they accurately mirror our hearts also (1 Corinthians 10:10,11).

Every Calvinist will acknowledge that God is in control of all events - but rightly reacting to what happens can be another matter. The Lord will test our confident adherence to truth. How often we have professed a certain doctrine, only to find that Providence required us to apply to our situation what we believed. And how often we have failed. John Newton used to say that many a man is a good Calvinist until someone accidentally spills coffee on his new coat! The Lord tries and proves us so that what we believe is never a

superficial claim. This is especially true for ministers of the gospel, who must help others with these things. The Lord will teach us all to work out and walk out what we believe so that it becomes “the doctrine which is according to godliness” (1 Timothy 6:3).

c] They will reveal that grace has taught us to acknowledge God and bow to His fatherly hand.

Meek patience under affliction is a rare jewel in the religion of our day. Yet it shines in the examples of scripture. When Aaron’s two sons died together, he “held his peace” (Leviticus 10:3). Samuel brought a heavy message of judgment to Eli, and the old priest said: “It is the LORD: let him do what seemeth him good” (1 Samuel 3:18). Job, stripped of everything but his life, responded by saying: “the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” ... “What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips” (Job 1:21; 2:10). David, in Absalom’s rebellion, referred to the Lord’s dealings like this: “But if he thus say, I have no delight in thee; behold, here am I, let him do to me as seemeth good unto him.” The disciples, concerned for what might happen to Paul if he went to Jerusalem, “ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done” (Acts 21:14).

Nearer our time is the compelling example of General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. Wounded by “friendly fire,” his left arm had to be amputated. His chaplain exclaimed, “Oh, General, what a calamity!” Jackson thanked him for his sympathy, but replied, “You see me wounded, but not depressed, not unhappy. I believe it has been according to God’s holy will, and I acquiesce entirely in it. You may think it strange, but you never saw me more perfectly contented than I am today, for I am sure my heavenly Father designs this affliction for my good. I am perfectly satisfied that either in this life or in that which is to come, I shall discover that what is now regarded as calamity is a blessing.” He died of pneumonia eight days later, on 10 May 1863.

Such examples, and there are countless others, are evidence of great grace in the heart, and the path to even more grace (1 Peter 5:5). And it is to the glory of “him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us” (Ephesians 3:20).

2. Submission to God is knowing, in our hearts, the truth of His sovereignty.

What is God’s role in our troubles and sorrows? Does He *allow* them — or does He *appoint* them? The Bible’s answer is that God *appoints* all our trials and troubles. A graciously-exercised heart, receiving this truth, will submit to God in all that He sends. This is the essence of heart religion. Such doctrine, however, is offensive to human pride, and many believers have never had that pride mortified.

I remember, some years ago, relating a true story in a sermon. It concerned an elderly believer who never forgot his godly, exercised mother’s reaction to a family tragedy. In the early 1900s, he and his brothers and sisters were playing beside a road. A car came by (an unusual event in those days) and they ran across the road. However, his little sister, only 3 years old, was knocked down and killed. When their mother received the news, she said, “God never makes a mistake.” After the meeting a believer rebuked me for saying that God would do such a thing – and this was at a Reformed Bible Rally!

However, we can easily see this truth to be scriptural if we consider some key verses. In Exodus chapter 14 the Israelites find themselves trapped and likely to be recaptured or killed by the advancing Egyptians. How did they arrive in this fatal cul-de-sac? Verses 2,3 and 9 tell us that the Lord led them that way. So it was not the Israelites, not the Egyptians, not the devil but *God* who raised up those dire straits. He did it so that He might be glorified in their trusting Him, going forward at His command, and having the Red Sea opened for their deliverance. God originated their crisis, and then brought them out.

The case of Job is clear also. In the verses already quoted, he declares, “the LORD hath taken away” (Job 1:21). Although the devil used the particular agents of his sufferings, he was not their author, as Augustine wrote: ““He does not say, ‘The Lord gave, and the devil took away,’ but ‘The Lord hath taken away.’” Also in chapter 2:10 he actually attributes the “evil” to “the hand of God.”

Godly Naomi echoed these sentiments when, reviewing her trials in Moab, she says, “the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me ... the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?” (Ruth 1:20,21). There is

no doubt in her enlightened mind who the Author of her troubles is, and she says so in meekness of wisdom.

In Psalm 55:22 David says “Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.” The word “burden” can be rendered “gift,” as it appears in the margin. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon has it: “thy lot (the care, anxiety, etc. which are thy portion).” David evidently knew where his burden came from, and where he could take it. So it is with every one of life’s burdens.

If any object that Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was “a messenger *of Satan* to buffet me” (2 Corinthians 12:7), the answer is in his earlier words “there *was given to me*” – the Lord was the First Cause of Paul’s thorn. As Thomas Watson confirms: “Instruments can no more stir till God gives them a commission, than the axe can cut of itself without a hand ... whoever brings an affliction, it is God that sends it.” The uniform testimony of scripture is that God appoints and sends our trials.

Not His “permissive will” but His *prescriptive* will is the joy of saints: “This also cometh forth from the LORD of hosts, which is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working” (Isaiah 28:29). If God only *allows* our adversity, who is really in charge? This makes Him little more than a bystander, responding to circumstances, engaged in damage-limitation, overruling it for Him and for us. Is this the God of the Bible? Does this honour Him or comfort us? Only as we trace up our trials to God are we then brought to see a divine purpose in them and can come to the Source of our comfort and help. To quote Watson again: “It is one heart-quieting consideration in all the afflictions that befall us, that God has a special hand in them.” Nothing, therefore, is arbitrary because God does everything according to His set purpose: “For of him, and through him, and to him, *are all things*: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Romans 11:36).

If someone asks how God can deliberately afflict His children, then think of what He did to His own Son: “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief” (Isaiah 53:10). It was not His Son’s suffering that pleased Him, as we know, but the pleasure of His holy purpose being fulfilled: “the good pleasure of his will” (Ephesians 1:6). Thus God our Father is pleased to afflict *us* (which is never penal but fatherly, and with accompanying support) for the glory of His name, and the good it will work in us. Heart religion, then, is as ready to bow to affliction as it is to receive mercies.

3. Submission is acknowledging, loving and trusting the God of hope.

a) The first step is to have confidence in His revealed character.

Because the Lord Himself appoints and sends our trials, we are in danger of viewing Him as against us. Or at least of seriously questioning His wisdom, kindness and power. Such a caricature the devil would present to our minds, and our unbelief would readily accept. It is God’s word that keeps our thinking right and assures us that we are not to interpret His heart from His hand. “The LORD was with Joseph” although he was exiled from home, and afterwards unjustly imprisoned (Genesis 39:2,21). His love is “perfect (and) casts out fear” (1 John 4:18); “his way is perfect ... he maketh my way perfect” (Psalm 18:30,32); and we can say with Medley,

In all His holy, sovereign will,
He is, I daily find,
Too wise to be mistaken, still
Too good to be unkind.

Someone asked Edward Payson, when in great bodily affliction, whether he could see any particular reason for this dispensation. “No,” he replied, “but I am as well satisfied as if I could see ten thousand; God’s will is the very perfection of all reason.” Let us beware of hard thoughts of God, and only entertain biblical views of Him: “transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2).

b) Then, to realise that each trial is sent to accomplish something specific in us.

The Lord tailor-makes each trial to suit our particular need. Whatever grace to be developed, weakness to be strengthened, sin to be subdued, waywardness to be corrected, lesson to learn – God will fit the affliction to us exactly. “Chastening ... afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Hebrews 12:11). John Flavel in his *Mystery of Providence* wrote: “The wisdom of God is much seen in the choice of His rods. It is not any kind of trouble that will work upon and purge every sin; but when God chooses for us such afflictions as, like medicine, are suited to the disease the soul labours under, this speaks of divine care and love.”

Submission is when we realise this, bow to His dealings and ask Him to have His way. As Richard Greenham said, “Whatsoever is upon you is from the Lord, and whatsoever is from the Lord, to you it is in mercy; and whatsoever comes in mercy ought not to be grievous to you. What loss is it when the losing of earthly things is the gaining of spiritual things? All shall be for your good, if you make your use of all.”

c] We then gladly accept the divine discipline, and pray to have it sanctified to our spiritual profit and God’s glory.

The New Testament word “submission” means to put ourselves under another. Although a military term, it is used in more ways than that. Jesus submitted Himself to Joseph and Mary (Luke 2:51), wives are to submit to husbands (Colossians 3:18) and Christians are humbly to submit themselves to each other (1 Peter 5:5). To submit to God, therefore, is to recognise His loving right to deal with us how He pleases and for our best.

Negatively, it means we do not struggle nor try to escape what the Lord is doing. The psalmist says, “Thou broughtest us into the net; thou laidst affliction upon our loins” (Psalm 66:11). How natural to want to break free! When we struggle and fret it becomes worse than the affliction itself. God in kind wisdom has a work to do upon and in us: submission is our surrender to that. Only then, “as a weaned child” (Psalm 131:2) are we free spiritually to profit from our afflictions.

Positively, it means we examine ourselves, seek the Lord, and pray to Him to show us what this discipline is for. It might be for correction, to humble and make us more dependent upon Him, to bring some secret sin to light, to wean us from the world, to deepen our experience of God, to prize prayer and the word, to qualify us to sympathise with others or to prepare us for some future work. We should make Job’s prayer our own: “shew me wherefore thou contendest with me” and “That which I see not teach thou me” (Job 10:2; 34:32).

Actively, it means we shall repent of any sin discovered, make restitution if necessary, take up neglected duty, give ourselves afresh to things with renewed zeal, put into practice the lessons the Lord has taught us - and anything else the Lord would call us to do. Our actions in these things will show how much trials have bettered us: “Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away; and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit;” “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (John 15:2; Psalm 119:71).

d] This leads to contentment.

A.W. Pink put it like this: “Contentment, then, is the product of a heart resting in God. It is the soul’s enjoyment of that peace which passeth all understanding. It is the outcome of my will being brought into subjection to the Divine will. It is the blessed assurance that God doeth all things well, and is, even now, making all things work together for my ultimate good ... Contentment is possible only as we cultivate and maintain that attitude of accepting everything which enters our lives as coming from the Hand of Him who is too wise to err, and too loving to cause one of His children a needless tear” (From *Comfort for Christians*, Chapter 16).

e] We then have hope that the present trial will lead to a fruitful and joyful end.

Such experiences are only “for a season” and “if need be” (1 Peter 1:6). The “day of prosperity” replaces “the day of adversity” (Ecclesiastes 7:14) in God’s good time. “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5). The divine Refiner “sit(s) as a refiner and purifier of silver” (Malachi 3:3), meaning that He is there carefully overseeing the fiery trial, so that it is never too much to spoil the process, and when the dross is gone and the precious metal purified, the furnace is no more. Let

us look up and be sure the Lord does all things well. Let us wait upon Him, and say with Job “he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (23:10).

May the Lord grant us hearts to know these things by experience, and restore to us in these days the exercised religion of our forefathers, which is surely the religion of their Bible and ours.