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WISDOM : WHENCE SHALL SHE BE GOTTEN ?

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”—JAS. i. 5.

WHAT is that which is most inseparable from a man, and of the greatest worth to him *while he lives*? Surely it is himself, his personality, his character such as he has made it. What is that, again, which alone a man can take with him *when he dies*, and the quality of which must shape his future destiny? Surely it is himself, his personality, his character such as he has made it. That then which is of supreme importance to us, that which endures through all the changes and decays of nature, that which really determines our fate in life, in death, and after death, is the character which has been framed and developed in us during these fleeting hours of time, and by all the chances and changes of this mutable world. *This* is, and will be, our sole, our real, possession, the single fountain from which our bliss or our misery flows, for ever. So that our highest wisdom, the one true secret of life, is self-training, self-culture, the development of a complete and noble character.

The point is so important, and so much depends upon it, that I must ask you to dwell on it a little, to turn it round and round in your thoughts, in order that you may see it on all sides, in order that you may assure and persuade yourselves of its truth.

Character, I say, the formation of a noble and complete character, is the secret and wisdom *of life*; and you are to consider whether or not that be true. What then are the things in which you take the greatest interest, which most engage your time, your thoughts, your heart, your activities? Business and its gains, shall we say? and home and its pleasures. You go forth to labour in the morning, and in the evening you return to your homes.

You want your business to prosper ; you want your homes to be pleasant. But does not much of your success in business, if not all, depend on your character ; *i.e.* your energy, your knowledge, your tact, your integrity ? And does not nearly all the pleasure you take in your success, whether that success be less or more, depend on your character ? Look around you. You see men whose business grows larger and more profitable year by year. They are rich and increased in goods ; they have all that heart could wish. Are they necessarily happy in their gains ? If they are of a base and selfish, a grasping and an envious spirit, or if they are of a peevish, fretful, and discontented spirit, are they not most miserable, however rapidly their gains accumulate ? On the other hand, do you not know men who, though they are far from wealthy, are nevertheless of so manly, cheerful, and hopeful a temper, that it is a pleasure to meet them ; so bright, that they shed a brightness on the day ; so brave and manful, that they inspire you with new courage and hope ? And of these last, do you not feel that they are equal to any fortune, and would conquer in almost any strife with adversity by force of sheer resolution and an invincible hopefulness of heart ? If the choice were offered you, " Take mere wealth, or take this strong, bold, manly temperament," which would you prefer if you were wise ? Not the wealth, I am sure, but the fine temper, which can either enjoy wealth or dispense with it.

Nor is character of less value in the home, with its charities and pleasures, than in business, and its gains or losses. A sweet and noble character goes far to make a happy home, even in the unhappiest conditions. Most of us, I suppose, have known men, not at all singularly blessed in wife, children, or conditions, who have nevertheless contrived to shed an atmosphere of health and peace and gaiety around them, who have somehow infected even a peevish wife or an ill-conditioned child with their

own good-nature, and have made even a poor home the abode of love and cheerful goodwill. And, on the other hand, have we not all known men with sumptuous abodes, loving wives, obedient, kindly natured children, who came into their homes like an east wind or a nipping frost, and wrought as unkindly and inauspicious a change?

Far more, then, than on outward conditions, the welfare and happiness of life depend on character. He whose character is well balanced and well developed, who is not only manly, but a mature and complete man, is equal to any conditions, and rises superior to them all.

So again, and still more obviously, *in death* character is of supreme importance. We often say, "It is very certain, that as we brought nothing into the world, so also we can carry nothing out." And, in a sense, the saying is pathetically true. We *must* leave all behind. We cannot take our factories, homes, gains, books, or even our dearest friends, with us. A great gulf suddenly yawns between us and all whom we have loved; and we have to go on our way, and leave them weeping on the other side, vainly straining their eyes toward the darkness which hides us from them. In this sense the common saying is obviously and pathetically true. But, in a deeper sense, it is as obviously untrue. Is it "very certain that we brought nothing into the world" with us—no hereditary bias, no predispositions, no special aptitudes, no defects of will or taints of blood? Surely not. Nor is it by any means certain that we shall "take nothing out" of the world. We shall take *much*—nothing visible and external indeed, but how much that is inward and spiritual! We shall take the character we have built up, the bias we have developed, the habits we have formed. We shall take the love and the prayers of our friends, if we have been happy enough to win their love. Our works will go with us, and follow after us, the kind deeds we have done, and, alas! the unkind

also. Like the prophet's roll, our whole soul will be written within and without with signs which God will read, and from which He will read off our sentence. All that strange complex of natural temperament, hereditary gifts, and acquired habits which we call *character*, the result of a myriad various influences—all this will go with us, and in us, when we arise to follow the summons of death. And beyond a doubt, then as now, there as here, the ruling bent of our character will determine our fate.

Are you convinced? Do you admit that, in life and in death, character is of vital and supreme importance; that "it matters not how long we live, but *how*"; that what happens to us is a very small thing as compared with how we take it? If you are, you will acknowledge that your main task in the world is the formation of character; that it is your highest wisdom to endeavour after a character which shall be noble and complete, a character which will fit you both to live and to die. All else is of no worth compared with this; all else is of no worth save as it contributes to this.

But, though this be our highest wisdom, is it within our reach? Let us ask St. James. In writing to the Christian Jews who were exiles in foreign lands, he commences his letter by wishing them "joy." But as their outward conditions were most miserable, as men of their blood were hated and plundered and persecuted far more bitterly than they are now, he felt that his wish, his salutation, "Joy to you," would grate on their hearts, unless he could teach them, by a certain divine alchemy, to extract joy from their very miseries. This divine art therefore he at once proceeds to teach them in the verses which immediately precede the verse before us. They were to "count it *all* joy," *pure* joy, *nothing but* joy, when they were exercised with divers trials and tribulations, when their outward conditions grew hard, painful, threatening: for these trials

came to test their faith in God; and this testing was designed by God, whatever man might mean by it, to breed in them steadfastness, courage, a resolute constancy of spirit. If they suffered trial to train and develop this constancy, this patient fidelity; if, *i.e.*, they suffered trial to produce its due and proper effect upon them,—they would become mature and complete men, lacking nothing. In other words, this patient and faithful endurance, which God sent and intended adversity to produce, would gradually work out in them that manly and noble character which, as we have seen, is our highest good, since it fits us both to live and to die; a good therefore which it is our highest wisdom to seek.

This, then, is the point I want you to mark—that our argument is confirmed by St. James. He too holds the right formation of character to be the sum of human wisdom. “Trials,” he says—and by “trials” he means such familiar adversities as pain, loss, the hatred and contempt of the world, and the fear and grief which they breed in us—“if they be bravely met, search out and carry away faults and defects of character as the acid bites out the alloy from the gold. They make, or tend to make, us of so complete and entire a manliness that nothing is lacking to us.” And here he seems to pause and reflect for a moment. “Nothing lacking! Ah! but those to whom I write may lack *wisdom to see* that the endeavour to become complete and mature men in Christ Jesus *is* the truest and highest wisdom, an aim so high and precious that, to reach it, they should count the world, and all that the world has to offer, well lost.” And therefore he adds, “If any of you lack wisdom,”—*i.e.* if any of you lack *this* wisdom, the wisdom which holds the hope of becoming perfect in character above all other aims—“let him ask of God, and it shall be given him.”

So that, according to James, the brother of our Lord,

the supreme good of life, the character which fits us both to live and to die, *is* within our reach. Many of us, no doubt, do lack the wisdom to make the attainment of this perfect manliness our supreme aim; for when St. James says, "*If* any man lack this wisdom," he does not mean to imply a doubt that we lack it. He knows that men do lack it, some being wholly without it, and others having it only in part. His word "*if*" is equivalent to our word "*when-ever*"; and what he means is, that so soon and so often as we become conscious of this lack, we may take it to God, and have it supplied.

As interpreting St. James to your moral and spiritual conditions therefore, I have first to warn you that you do lack the wisdom which lacks nothing; that you do *not* keep the hope of becoming perfect men in Christ Jesus constantly before you; that you are not content to endure any trial, however bitter and deep, in order that you may become perfect; and that still less can you account these keen and piercing tests pure joy and nothing but joy. But, happily, I have also to assure you that the wisdom which seems beyond your reach is nevertheless within your reach; that if you ask it of God, it shall be given you. *He* will teach and help you to put a pure and noble character before the happiest outward conditions. He will help you to welcome the trials by which He is seeking to make you steadfast, to brace you to a mature and complete manliness, to supply what is lacking in you until you lack nothing. He touches you here and touches you there with His tests, commonly searching out your tenderest and weakest points, seeming at times to wrap your whole nature in the fiery acid; but His design, His purpose, is that you may become pure gold throughout; His will is your perfection.

If you cannot *see* that to be His purpose, ask Him to show it to you, and He will show it. If you are saying within yourselves, "I cannot see anything in the trial that

is wearing me out and exhausting my powers which is at all likely to make me any better," obviously you lack wisdom. You can see neither the good end God has in view for you, nor how it is to be accomplished. "If any man lack this wisdom, let him ask of God, and it shall be given him." You may be sure that the good God *has* a good end in all He does, even though you cannot see it. But if you want to see it, if it be necessary to your welfare and peace that you should see it, ask Him to show it to you. St. James did not hesitate to say, "*It shall be given you*"; why should I scruple to repeat it? Nor is it only St. James's voice that we hear in this gracious promise. His words are here, what they often are elsewhere, simply an echo of the words of Him to whom God has given all authority in heaven and on earth. "Ask, and it shall be given you," says James; but in the sermon on the mount a greater than he said, "*Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.*" In short, it is no one less than the Lord from heaven who assures us that, whether we lack wisdom to *make* God's will our will, or wisdom to *see* the wisdom of His will, we have but to ask, and our lack of wisdom shall be supplied.

Let me put a case. Let me suppose that you are growing impatient or despondent under the pressure of some heavy and protracted trial, the kindly purpose of which you do not see. And you ask God to give you wisdom that you may both see and believe in the kind end for which He sent it. Is it likely, is it reasonable, to expect that He will answer your prayer? Surely it is most likely, most reasonable. If you talk with men indeed, your pride and obstinacy may be roused. In reply to all they urge you may say, "Still, I do not see that any good

comes, or can come, from this misery, and nothing shall ever persuade me that good will come of it." But if you speak with God, you cannot for very reverence take the tone which you might take with one no wiser than yourself. If you ask *Him* for wisdom to see His purpose in afflicting you, you will *try* to see it. You will admit that God may be right, and you wrong. You may even come to feel that He *must* be right, though you are too weak and ignorant to see what He is doing with you. And then He who can lay His finger on all the springs of thought and emotion within us may, and will, touch your heart in the right place. Coming to Him in the attitude of humble and sincere prayer, bringing an open mind to the influence of His truth and grace, He will be able to reveal His will and purpose to you, and you will learn that it is in love and compassion, not in anger, that He has afflicted you.

Let me put another case. Let me suppose that you do not yet see character to be far more valuable than happy outward conditions, that you have not learned to make it your supreme aim to become mature and complete men in Christ Jesus; and yet you are not satisfied with the aims you *have* set before you. You find that, even when you reach them, you cannot rest in them. You begin to suspect that you lack wisdom to choose your own way and your own aims, that you have not discovered the supreme good, having which you can be content, whatever else you lack. If that be your position, and you ask wisdom of God, the wisdom to see what your supreme good is, and where it lies, is it reasonable to believe that He will give it you? Again, it *is* reasonable, most reasonable. For, as you pray, you grow sincere. You can see more clearly for what your life has been given you, for what high and noble ends. You endeavour to break through the clouds which hide the chief end of man from

you, and to break away from the cravings and distractions which divert you from pursuing it. In short, you reach the position, and take the attitude, in which you are most likely, as all experience proves, to find wisdom. You so relate yourself to the Father of lights, that He is able to shed light into your soul.

And if He is able, can you doubt that He is willing? What is the sun full of light for, but that it may shine? And for what is God good, but that He may show Himself good, that He may impart His goodness? The sun may shine on cold, hard surfaces that simply throw off its light; but where it *can* penetrate and fructify, it does. And God may show His love and grace to hearts that cannot, or will not, receive them; but where He finds an open and prepared, a seeking and receptive heart, He enters in, and enters to make it wise and good.

If you want testimony to His goodness from one who has experienced it, listen to St. James. As he bids you ask of God the wisdom you lack, he encourages you to ask it by describing God as "the Giver," the universal Giver, as giving "to *all* men." God goes on giving, just as the sun goes on shining [on the evil and on the good, on the just and on the unjust. The difference between men is, not that God refuses any of them any one of the gifts necessary to their welfare and salvation, but that some receive and profit by them, while others reject them or abuse them to their own hurt. If then you honestly crave wisdom to make His will your will, to aim at that maturity and perfection of character which He knows to be your supreme good, He will as surely give you that wisdom as the sweet, pure, sun-warmed air will flow into your room when you throw open your window to the day.

You need have no fear that God will palter with you in a double sense, that He will keep His word of promise to the ear, but break it to the hope it has inspired. For

He giveth "with liberality," or "with *simplicity*," with singleness of spirit, and without reserve. *He* is not "of two minds," as men often are. He does not, as men often do, give, and yet in effect not give. Nor does He give, and yet by an ungracious manner, or by subsequent ungenerous exactions, spoil and neutralize His gifts, and make you wish you had not accepted them. His gifts are without duplicity, even as they are without repentance. He has no by-ends to serve, no self-regarding motive. *He* does not give that He may get. He gives, simply because He is "the Giver," because He loves giving, because He loves *you* and seeks your welfare.

Nor need you fear to ask of Him either because you have so often asked before, or because you have never asked before. For He "*upbraideth* not." He will not reproach you with His former mercies, or with your former indifference to them. All He asks is that you will ask of Him. It is His good pleasure to give you pleasure, and to do you good. He is of a perfect wisdom, and longs to make you wise. You can do Him no greater kindness than to ask, receive, and use the gifts He has to bestow. If, then, any of you lack wisdom, wisdom to count it all joy that you are being made perfect and complete men by the divers trials which put your character to the test, and put it to the test that they may raise and refine it, ask that wisdom of God, who giveth liberally to all men, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given you.

And, in especial, I would urge any of you who are *now* being tried, and tried, as you sometimes fear, beyond your strength, to ask wisdom of the great Giver of wisdom. From whatever cause your anxieties and griefs may spring, whether they spring from broken health, from the threatening aspect of your business affairs, or from trouble in the home, whether they spring from your own follies and sins or from the sins and follies of your neighbours, God intends them

for your good, for the discipline and growth of character; intends them to spur and brace you to fortitude, courage, patience; and therefore He would have you count them all joy, since they will bring you joy at the last, if you meet them with a constant spirit. But *how* can you meet them in such a spirit unless you believe that He intends them for your good?

Whether your trials will do you good or harm depends on the way in which you adjust yourselves to them, on how you take them; and this, again, depends on the leading aim you set before you. If you only care, or care mainly, to "get on," to amass a fortune or to take your ease, your losses and disappointments, your crosses and cares, will only sadden and distress you. But if your chief aim is to become good men, mature and perfect men, created anew after the pattern and image of Christ Jesus, you will try to get some good, some training in goodness, from your very cares and sorrows. Under their pressure you will endeavour more earnestly than ever to acquire that equal mind which takes Fortune's buffets and rewards with composure, that firm and habitual trust in God and in His gracious intentions toward you which is your only adequate support amid the chances and changes of time. Above all men you admire those who are of a brave and constant spirit, who will not be a pipe in Fortune's fingers, and let her play what stop she please, who will not be daunted by her frowns nor carried away by her smiles. And can you complain that God is seeking to make you the sort of man you most admire, as independent of all outward advantages or disadvantages as our Lord Himself, as resolutely bent on making God's will your will, and rising into the mature and perfect manliness which is His aim for you and should be your chief aim for yourselves? If you care most for character, the trials that brace, refine, and elevate your character should not be unwelcome to you. And if as yet you lack

the wisdom which sees in every trial a discipline of character and perfection, ask this wisdom of God the Giver, and it shall be given you.

And do not be daunted, do not infer that God has forgotten to be gracious, if you do not receive, or think you do not receive, an immediate answer to your prayer. Our prayers themselves are often God's best answers to our prayers, as even men unguided by the Christian faith, but not untaught of God, have discovered. Thus, for instance, an old Persian poet (of the thirteenth century), speaking of an austere Islamite saint, says :

That just person was crying, "O Allah!"
 That his mouth might be sweetened thereby.
 And Satan said to him, "Be quiet, O austere one;
 How long wilt thou babble, O man of many words?
 No answer comes to thee from nigh the throne:
 How long wilt thou cry 'Allah' with harsh face?"
 That person was sad at heart, and hung his head,
 And then beheld the prophet Khizr before him in a vision,
 Who said to him, "Ah! thou hast ceased to call on God;
 Wherefore repentest thou of calling on Him?"
 The man said, "The answer, 'Here am I,' came not;
 Wherefore I fear that I am repulsed from the door."
 Khizr replied to him, "God has given me this command:
 Go to him and say, O much-trying one,
 Did not I engage thee to do Me service?
 Did I not engage thee to call on Me?
 That calling 'Allah' of thine *was* My 'Here am I,'
 And that pain and longing and ardour of thine My messenger;
 Thy struggles and strivings for assistance
 Were my attractings and originated thy prayer.
 Thy fear and thy love are the covert of My mercy;
 Each 'O Lord' of thine contains many a 'Here am I.'"¹

"Be of good courage then, and strengthen thy heart;
 and wait thou on the Lord: *wait*, I say, on the Lord."

S. Cox.

¹ *Masnavi* of Jala-'d din, A.D. 1207-1273.