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THE DEATH OF A MOTHER.*

“I bowed down heavily, as one that mourneth for his mother.”—Psalm xxxv. 14.

THERE is a peculiarity in every kind of bereavement. There is enough to separate it from all other modes of trial, to produce a peculiar state of feeling, and to convey its own lessons to the soul distinct from those imparted by any other divine dispensation. The loss of a wife—a friend, a companion, a sympathiser in trials, a fellow-heir of the grace of life, a sharer of the joys and a divider of the sorrows of our pilgrimage; of a son who we hoped would be our stay and staff in old age, and perpetuate our name when we are dead; of a daughter whom we have tenderly nourished and tenderly loved; of a sister, the companion of the playful days of childhood, and a kind friend as she advanced with us to the maturity of life; of a father, the counsellor and guide of our youth—each one of these bereavements has its own sad lesson to convey to the soul; each one touches a cord in the heart which vibrates only then. It is a part of our duty and discipline here, carefully to gather up these lessons, and apply them to our own souls.

In the text it is supposed that the death of a mother affects those who are bereaved by her loss in a peculiar manner, and that such a loss is among the heaviest of sorrows. “I bowed down heavily, as one that mourneth for his mother.” To see the force of this text it is not necessary to suppose that this is the heaviest of all the sorrows which we can experience, nor is it necessary to make any comparison between this and the other forms of bereavement which we may be called to endure. All that is necessary to say is, that there are cords of the soul touched then which have

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not been touched before, and which will not be again. *A man has but one mother to lose* ; and *when* such an event occurs, it is well for him to endeavor to learn the lessons which God *once in his life* designs to teach him.

It is the duty of a minister of the gospel to adapt his teaching to all the relations of life, and to apply the lessons of religion to the various circumstances in which his hearers may be placed. At no one time indeed can it be supposed that any considerable part of his audience will feel an immediate interest in a topic of this kind ; but there are usually enough who have been recently afflicted in this manner to make such a topic of public discourse proper. Besides, how large a portion in a congregation, is there who have at some time been thus bereaved ! How many are there here to-day, who at some period of their lives have known what it was to lose a mother ! It will be no injury to recall the memory of that scene—not for the purpose of opening wounds again which time and religion may have healed—but to make more fresh in the recollection the lessons which God designed to convey by the living virtues, and by the death of a mother. It may be useful too to those who *have* mothers from whom they may soon be called to part, to contemplate this relation, and to be told of the kind of emotions which spring up in the soul when a parent is taken away to be seen no more. It may teach you to prize their counsels and their friendship more ; it may make you more careful not to pain their hearts by unkindness or disobedience.

I shall make no comparison between this relation and that of a father. *That* is in many respects as important and as influential as this ; and when that is sundered, the bereavement as much demands the tribute of our tears, and conveys as important lessons to the soul. Perhaps in some cases there may be more to affect the heart in such a loss—for some of us may owe more to the inherited mental characteristics, and the example and the direct teaching of a father, than we do to a mother. But though this may be so, the remarks which I propose to submit to you now, will, I trust, be seen to be founded in truth. Without any very exact order, yet with such a general distribution of my thoughts as will be adapted, I hope, to make a distinct impression on the mind, I shall submit to you a few reflections on such a relation, and such a loss, which I trust may be fitted to be useful.

I. I need hardly say, that the relation of a mother is a *peculiar* relation, and has features which are found in no other. The tie is one which exists nowhere else ; which can never be renewed ; which when it is sundered is sundered for ever—unless it is cemented by religion, and grows up into eternal affection in the heavens.

Her affection for us began at a period of which we have no re-

collection, and when we were not conscious that any being loved us. It was laid far back in her nature, by a benignant Providence, to *anticipate* our helplessness and our wants as we came into the world. It began when as yet we had manifested no qualities of mind or heart to deserve affection; when we were incapable of returning the tokens of her love; when we could not give back the kiss that was so tenderly impressed upon us, and when it was certain that the expressions of her lavished affection could not be remembered by us should we ever reach a period when we would be capable of repaying appreciated kindness. It existed in her heart whatever we were to be, or whatever was to be our fortune in this world, and was *so strong* that even could she have foreseen all our ingratitude, and all that we might yet do to pain her, she would still have loved us, and perhaps her caresses would have been only the more tender while we were yet innocent, and our souls were uncontaminated by contact with evil. She met us as we entered on life already *prepared* to do us good. Her first emotion toward us was that of love; and even then—when we had no character, and no claim for services rendered; when we had furnished no evidence that we ever *would* be worthy of her love, or repay her kindness with anything but ingratitude, she was ready to do for us what we may have even now scarcely secured a friend to do by all our virtues. Not a friend have we now who would watch more patiently by our sick-bed than she would have done by our cradle then, nor have we one who would sorrow more sincerely over our grave. This care we owed primarily to God, and under him to that affection which he had created in her heart.

Unnumbered comforts on my soul,
Thy tender care bestowed,
Before my infant heart conceived
From whom those comforts flowed.

The affection thus laid in her heart to anticipate our necessities, was strengthened on her part by all her own toil, and care, and watchfulness, and sacrifices on our behalf. Whatever might be the effect on *us*, the effect on *her* was to make her love us more. Her own solicitude and toil became thus a measure of her augmented affection; for God has instructed us to love that much which is the fruit of sacrifice and toil. Her love for us was measured far more by her own sacrifices than by our own worth, or by any developed traits of character which seemed to justify her ardor of affection, though it *was* also strengthened on her part by every thing in us—then estimated perhaps at more than twice its value—which seemed to reward her care. On *our* part the attachment formed is not that which grows out of favors *rendered*, but favors *received*. It is laid indeed in nature; but it grows up and expands because we *receive* so many benefits; because there is such an

obligation of gratitude ; because we learn more and more, as we advance in years, how much we owe to a mother.

The attachment for a mother is different from that which we have for a brother or sister. That may be exceedingly tender and pure. Indeed there is nothing *more* pure in our relations than love for a sister. But it is formed in a different way. When the tie which binds us to her is severed, it cannot indeed be renewed ; it makes a sad desolation in the soul ; but it is not precisely the sorrow which we have when we ' bow down heavily, mourning for a mother.' We love a sister for we began life together, under the same roof, under the fostering care of the same parents. We played together in childhood ; we shared the same gentle amusements ; we went to the same school ; we had the same father to counsel and guide us ; and had the same mother to teach us to pray, and to give us the parting kiss at night. We grew up equally beloved by our parents, and we have learned to love each other much by mutual acts of affection and kindness.

The attachment is different from those friendships which we form as we advance in life. Those may be dear, and they may be stronger than that which binds to a mother, but they are not the same. A man leaves father and mother and cleaves to his wife with an affection more tender and strong than that formed by any natural relation, but it is not the same. He forms strong friendships in life—like that which bound the heart of David and Jonathan, but such friendships did not begin as we entered on life, nor imbed themselves in the soft heart of infancy and childhood, nor are they cemented by so many acts of kindness.

The attachment to a mother is different from that which we form for our children. It is what we expect *of* them, rather than what we feel *for* them. We love them much—even as she did us. But it is a love for them as *our* children ; as dependent on us ; as helpless ; as needing our care and counsel ; as a part of ourselves ; as those who we hope will do us honor when we are dead. These attachments which we form in after life, of nature and affection, are strong and tender ; they may be more immediately tender than those which we bear for a parent ; grief may be more poignant when they are sundered by death, and when we follow wife or child to the grave, but it has its own features, distinct from that when a venerable and much loved parent is conveyed to the tomb. As there was a peculiarity of attachment, so there will be a peculiarity of sorrow such as we are not to experience again.

II. I notice a second peculiarity of feature in this kind of bereavement. It is in the change which is produced in our ideas of *home*—the home of our childhood and youth. When *she* lived *there*, there was always a home—a place which in every situation of life we felt was such, and which we regarded as such.

In our childhood and youth, there was in that home where she was, one who always cared for us, and for all that appertained to us. There was one who, we were sure would take an interest in everything that we took an interest in, and whose ear we were certain would be open to listen to all our tales of childish success, or of childish trouble. We were sure that she would take the same interest in it which we did, and we expected confidently that whoever might be against us, she would be for us. We never had a doubt that she would listen to our tale of fright, of disappointment, of calamity; nor that she would feel just as we did about it. The matter might be in itself important, or unimportant; it might be dignified or undignified, yet we never doubted that she would regard it as important, and as sufficiently momentous to claim her attention. We might have felt that it was not grave enough to tell a father about; we might have doubted whether he would suspend his more weighty employments to interest himself in our affairs; but we never had such a doubt for a moment about a mother. No matter what her employments, or her cares, or what she might be interested in, we were sure that she would be interested in us, and that, in all our troubles, we should find her our friend. We had our difficulties in the little world of childhood. Bigger and older boys struck us; or laughed at us; or reviled us, or surpassed us in learning, in running, or in skill, and in that little world we might have found no sympathy, and there was no one there to whom we could unburden an aching heart. But we were sure that there was one who *would* sympathise with us, and who would be on our side. Our playmates derided us, and laughed at us because we said, in our simplicity, that we 'would tell our mother.' And yet it was philosophy deep and pure to do so—like the pure crystal spring that breaks out of the side of a hill in the uncultivated forest. It was what nature prompted to—for nature designed that she should know our troubles, and nature had formed for us such a friend there, that, whoever was against us, we knew that she would be on our side; whoever wronged us, she would not; whoever exulted over us, she would not join in the exultation. You may say that this is *childish* philosophy. So it may be—and the nearer our philosophy comes back to simple nature as developed there, the nearer we shall be to truth. In our troubles we have *always* needed a friend who would sympathise with us, and to whom we might unburden all the sorrows of the soul. The disciples of John's Redeemer 'came, and took up his murdered body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus.' Math. xiv. 12. In him they had a friend—tender and delicate above all a mother's feelings—who they were sure would sympathise with their sorrows; and what was more natural than that they should go and tell him? So in the home of our childhood, it was dear to us *as* a home, for there

was not a sorrow of our heart that we might not tell our mother.

Many of us—most of us who are advanced beyond the period of childhood, went out from that home to embark on the stormy sea of life. Of the feelings of a father, and of his interest in our welfare, we have never entertained a doubt, and our home was dear because he was there ; but there was a peculiarity in the feeling that it was the home of our mother. While she lived there, there was a place that we felt was *home*. There was one place where we would always be welcome ; one place where we would be met with a smile ; one place where we would be sure of a friend. The world might be indifferent to us. We might be unsuccessful in our studies or our business. The new friends which we supposed we had made, might prove to be false. The honor which we thought we deserved, might be withheld from us. We might be chagrined and mortified by seeing a rival outstrip us, and bear away the prize which we sought ; but there was a place where no feelings of rivalry were found, and where those whom the world overlooked would be sure of a friendly greeting. Whether pale and wan by study, care, or sickness ; or flushed with health and flattering success, we were sure that we should be welcome there. Though the world was cold towards us, yet there was one who always rejoiced in our success, and always was affected in our reverses—and there was a place to which we might go back from the storm which began to pelt us, where we might rest, and become encouraged and invigorated for a new conflict.—So have I seen a bird in its first efforts to fly, leave its nest, and stretch its wings, and go forth to the wide world. But the wind blew it back, and the rain began to fall, and the darkness of night began to draw on, and there was no shelter abroad, and it sought its way back to its nest, to take shelter beneath its mother's wings, and to be refreshed for the struggles of a new day—but then it flew away to think of its nest and its mother no more. But not thus did we leave our home when we bade adieu to it to go forth alone to the manly duties of life. Even amidst the storms that then beat upon us, and the disappointments that we met with, and the coldness of the world, we felt still that there *was* one there who sympathised in our troubles as well as rejoiced in our success, and that, whatever might be abroad, when we entered the door of her dwelling, we should be met with a smile. We expected that a mother, like the mother of Sisera, as she “looked out at her window” waiting for the coming of her son laden with the spoils of victory, would look out for *our* coming, and that our return would renew her joy and ours in our earlier days.

“Oh ! in our sterner manhood when no ray
Of earlier sunshine glimmers on our way,
When girt with sin, and sorrow, and the toil

Of cares, which tear the bosom that they soil;
 Oh! if there be in retrospection's chain
 One link that knits us with young dreams again,
 One thought so sweet, we scarcely dare to muse,
 On all the hoarded raptures it reviews,
 Which seems each instant, in its backward range,
 The heart to soften, and its ties to change,
 And every spring untouched for years, to move,
 It is—THE MEMORY OF A MOTHER'S LOVE!

It makes a sad desolation when from such a place a mother is taken away—and when, whatever may be the sorrows or the successes in life, she is to greet the returning son or daughter no more. The home of our childhood may be still lovely. The old family mansion; the green fields; the running stream; the moss-covered well; the trees; the lawn; the rose; the sweet-briar, may be there. Perchance too there may be an aged Father, with venerable locks, sitting in his loneliness, with everything to command respect and love, but she is not there. Her familiar voice is not heard. The mother has been borne forth to sleep by the side of her children who went before her, and the place is not what it was. There may be those there whom we much love, but she is not there. We may have formed new relations in life—tender and strong as they can be; we may have another home dear to us as was the home of our childhood, where there is all in affection, kindness, and religion, to make us happy, but *that* home is not what it was, and it will never be what it was again. It is a loosening of one of the cords which bound us to earth—designed to prepare us for our eternal flight from everything dear here below, and to teach us that there is *no* place here that is to be our permanent home.

III I notice a third thing in such an event which is fitted to convey a lesson to the soul such as we always feel in bereavement, but which, like the other things adverted to, has a peculiarity of its own. I refer to a class of emotions often not less painful, and of a much more admonitory character than those which I have adverted to, and which, such are our imperfections in all the relations of life, we are always destined to feel when a friend is removed by death. I mean the quickened recollection of our neglects, of our acts of unkindness, of our ingratitude, of our improper feelings in our intercourse with those whom we have lost.

What I now advert to is one of the most beautiful and benignant laws of our nature—one of the most delicate arrangements to bring our guilt to remembrance in order that we may exercise true repentance, and to prompt us to kindness and fidelity in the remaining relations of life.

This law of our nature, which cannot well be explained except on the supposition that there is a moral government, and that God

designs that *all* our sins shall be brought to our remembrance, is this—that in the death of a friend we instinctively recall the wrongs that we may have done him; for some mysterious power seems to summon them up from the land of forgetfulness, and to cause them to pass in solemn procession before us. Things which we had forgotten; words which we long since uttered but which had passed from the memory; expressions of irritated feeling; unjust suspicions; jealousies; neglect of the respect or the courtesies due in that relation of life; a want of attention when the heart of the friend was sad; want of sympathy in his successes or reverses, all seem to revive as we stand around the open grave, and as the coffin of the friend descends there, they are quickened into life—as the dead man was by the bones of Elisha. *How* this is so, as a matter of moral administration, we may not be able to explain. Perhaps it is because, though conscious in the general that we had erred in that relation, we still hoped that the friend would somehow forgive us—but now he has gone to the grave, and now we can never ask him to pardon us. Perhaps it is that we look on him now as a sufferer—and pity his condition—and *all* his sources of sorrow seem summoned to aggravate his condition, and among others the wrongs that *we* have done arise to our view as a bitter ingredient in his cup of woes. Perhaps it is that God *meant* so to make the conscience that it would not always slumber, and designed that once at least it should do its appropriate work.

This law of our nature has been so beautifully described by one of our best American writers, that I can do nothing so well as to copy his words:—“Oh the grave! the grave! It buries every error, covers every defect, extinguishes every resentment. From this peaceful bosom spring none but fond regrets and tender recollections. Who can look down even upon the grave of an enemy, and not feel a compunctious throb that he ever should have warred with the poor handful of earth that lies mouldering before him? But the grave of those we loved—what a place for meditation! There it is that we call up in long review the whole history of the truth and gentleness, and the thousand endearments lavished upon us, almost unheard in the daily course of intimacy; there it is we dwell upon the tenderness of the parting scene, the bed of death with all its stifled grief, its noiseless attendants, its most watchful assiduities—the last testimonies of expiring love, the feeble, fluttering, thrilling—oh how thrilling is the fluttering pulse—the last fond look of the glazing eye, turning upon us from the threshold of existence; the faint, faltering accent, struggling in death, to give one more assurance of affection. Oh, go to the grave of buried love, and there meditate. There settle the account with thy conscience of every past endearment unregarded of that departed being who never, never can be soothed by contrition. If thou art a child, and hast ever added a sorrow to the soul, or a

furrow to the silvered brow of an affectionate parent--if thou art a husband, and hast ever caused the fond bosom that ventured its whole happiness in thy arms to doubt one moment of thy kindness or thy truth--of if thou art a friend, and hast injured by thought, by word, or deed, the spirit that generously confided in thee--if thou art a lover, and hast ever given one unmerited pang to the true heart that now lies cold beneath thy feet, then be sure that every unkind look, every ungracious word, every ungentle action will come thronging back upon thy memory, and knock dolefully at thy soul; be sure that thou wilt lie down-sorrowing and repenting on the grave, and utter the unheard groan, and pour the un-availing tear, bitter because unheard and unavailing."

Who, I may add, ever saw an endeared friend die, and did not feel that there were things in his intercourse with him to regret, and for which he would now desire to ask forgiveness? Who ever saw a man die of whom he had said hard things, or thought hard things, who did not lament that he had given indulgence to such words and feelings? Who ever attended one to the grave---friend or foe, partner or rival, with whom he had been at variance, who did not now wish to have it all buried in oblivion? Who can carry his enmity to the grave? There, when a rival or a foe is laid "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," we lay our animosities aside. There we feel, that whatever may be true of him whom we commit to the tomb, there was much in us that was wrong. And there we regret every unkind word, feel pained at the remembrance of every unkind thought, and mourn that we have done no more to impart happiness to the cold sleeper whom we are to see no more.

I said that this was a beautiful and benignant law of our nature, and though attended like other laws when violated, with pain, the *design* is as apparent as it is beautiful. It has two objects as a part of the divine moral administration. One is, to lead us to repentance for our errors and faults, that we may obtain pardon of our God before it be too late. True, the sleeper there cannot now utter the word of forgiveness. Those lips are for ever sealed in death—and how much would we give now could we *ask* that friend to forgive us! How much would we rejoice could we have the assurance from *those* lips that the faults that now come thronging on our memory *were* forgiven and forgotten, and that they did not add a pang to his last sorrows. But if we cannot now confess the fault in the ear of that friend; if we cannot now hope that those lips will open to declare us forgiven, we may confess the fault to God, and may be assured that *he* will blot the remembrance of it from his book. Around each grave of a friend, therefore, he summons up *groups* of our past offences that we may be humbled and penitent, and may not go unpardoned to eternity.—The other design of this benignant law is, to keep us from offending hereafter; to teach us

to manifest kindness in the remaining relations of life. True, we cannot again injure, or offend, or pain the sleeper there. Whatever may be his condition now, he is where *our* unkindness or neglect will not reach or affect him. But we have other relations in life, perhaps equally tender and equally important. There are other hearts that may be made to bleed by ingratitude, or coldness, or neglect, or mercy, and we may be assured that what has happened in the case of the friend that we have now lost, will happen also in theirs. The design of the law is, to teach us to indulge no thought, to speak no word, to evince no feeling which we would regret when they too are removed. And what a restraint would this be on our temper, our words, our whole deportment!

In each bereavement there is a peculiar group of these painful thoughts that come thronging to the recollection. They are those which are revived by *that* bereavement, but would be unaffected by any other. How many such things there are laid away in the chambers of the soul, now slumbering there like torpid adders, perhaps hereafter to be quickened into life to be our tormenters! The occasion requires me only to allude to that class of emotions which is thus summoned to our recollection on the death of a mother. And who is there of us that can see a mother die without many such painful and disquieting thoughts—greatly embittering the natural grief of parting? Even while we were conscious of having had for her strong and tender love; even when in the main we desired to respect her and to make her happy; even when we know that our general character has been approved by her, and that in life thus far we have not disappointed her fond anticipations, yet how many times in childhood have we been disobedient, how often have we spoken disrespectfully, how often have we disregarded her wishes, how often have we uttered sentiments peevishly that we knew differed from hers; how often have we failed in rendering that prompt and ready obedience which was due to her as a mother, and to her kindness to us; how many times by our perverseness, our self-will, our pride, our obstinacy, have we discouraged her in her efforts to do us good; how often have we done that which would weary out the patience of any one but a parent—and God. Could we hear her speak again, how many things are there which we would wish to confess, and which we would desire her to forgive!

There are lessons flowing from this subject adapted to those who are more particularly interested from having recently been called to this trial—lessons requiring us to submit to God; to be grateful for the example, and counsels, and toils in our behalf of those who have been removed; to imitate them as they imitated their Saviour, and to be prepared to follow them to the world of glory. But on these I will not dwell. There are two thoughts, however, which,

in conclusion, I will suggest, addressed to two classes of my hearers.

(1.) The first relates to those who *have had* pious mothers, who are now removed to heaven, but whose prayers and counsels they have disregarded. I refer to those who have thus far withheld their hearts from that Saviour whom their mother loved, and with whom she now dwells; who have embraced sentiments such as they know she would not approve; who have made choice of companions such as she lived to warn them against, or who indulge in scenes of revelry and sin such as if she were living you know would break her heart. Go, young man, and walk in the stillness of the evening among the graves. Beneath your feet, in the sacred slumbers of a Christian death, lies a much-loved mother. How calm her slumbers! How sweet the spot! How lovely a mother's grave! How the memory delights to go back to the nursery; the fire-side; the sick bed; the anxious care of a mother! How it loves to recall her gentle look; her eye of love; her kiss at night. At that grave, thoughtless young man, think of thy revels; thy neglect of God; thy forgetfulness of the prayer that she taught thee; thy friendship now for those against whom she warned thee! She sleeps now in death; but from that grave is it fancy that we hear a voice:---' My beloved son! Is this the life that I taught thee to lead? Are these the pleasures which I taught thee to pursue? Did I bear thee, and toil for thee, and pray for thee, and wear out my life, that I might train thee for sin, and death and hell?'

The other thought relates to those who now have a Christian mother---and who yet disregard her living counsels and prayers. I have adverted to a law of our being, beautiful in its nature, but painful in its inflictions. The day is coming when that mother will die. You may see her die; or, far away, you may hear of her death, and may return and visit her grave. Be thou sure that every unkind look, every disobedient action, every harsh word, will come back and visit thy soul. Be sure you will remember everything that ever gave pain to her heart, and remember it with unavailing regret when too late to recall it, or to ask forgiveness. Be sure if you are unkind and disobedient; if you are an infidel or a scoffer; if you slight her counsels and neglect the God and Saviour to whom she would conduct you, there are laid up in the chambers of your soul, the sources of bitter repentance hereafter---and that you cannot find forgiveness of her whose heart you broke, though you seek it carefully with tears. And be sure that the sweetest of all consolations when *she* dies, will be found in such love of her Saviour that you will appreciate what is meant when it is said *she has gone to Heaven*; and in evidence in your own heart that you will be prepared when the summons comes, to rejoin her in the realms of bliss.