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THE STRIVING SPIRIT.

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“My Spirit shall not always strive with men.”—GENESIS vi. 3.

I N the sixth chapter of Genesis we have set before us the imposing spectacle of God the Holy Spirit striving with a wicked world and race of men. Sin had reached its hideous culmination. Crime of every kind was almost universal, and earth seemed to have become a province allied to the dominion of Satan. The cup of iniquity being nearly full, God was going soon to press it to the guilty lips of men, that they might drain to its dregs the bitter draught; and the cloud of divine wrath was soon to break with the crash of world-wide destruction upon the human race.

But though the progress of iniquity had been steady and rapid, it had not reached its culmination without divine interference. In all their wretched criminality there had been present and active among men the august personality of the Holy Spirit. The text lifts the veil which hides the unseen, and we behold, from the divine standpoint, a progress which had not gone on unresisted from above. God the Holy Ghost placed himself in the way of this terrible defection of the world from truth and righteousness. The men of that day and their fathers had travelled far from all that is good, but at every step they had been confronted and opposed by a divine barrier. Over God's most gracious influences they had trod, and in spite of a resisting omnipotence of

love they had progressed until they reached a height of crime that lifted its face into the very presence of the majesty of heaven.

It may be asked, How could man surpass resisting omnipotence? How could man overcome God? The answer is easy. Man is not a puppet, without power of choice; he is not a beast, without intellect, soul, conscience. He is a free moral agent originally imaged after God; and his Maker has never forced him against his will to do anything good. This would be to unmake man, to degrade him to a brute. God respects man in his freedom, nor does he seek a slavish service of the soul. In later times Christ, at the threshold of man's volition, declares, "Behold I stand *at the door* and *knock*." So in the days before the flood the Holy Ghost strove with man, but did not force his will.

How great the rebelliousness of mankind was may be estimated from what it was able to overcome. For in the gigantic struggle with divine grace they came off winners, gaining for themselves by this overmastery the victory of black and awful success.

This could not continue forever. The Spirit would not be insulted with perpetual impunity. God's wrath is aroused, and over the heads of men fall those pregnant words, "My Spirit shall not always strive with man." The world had lived out its probation, and the hour was set on the dial-plate of time for the destruction of the human race by a catastrophe the most stupendous that history records. The Spirit departed; grieved, he turned away, and the blow fell in swift retributive justice upon mankind, in the flood by which all perished except the family of one righteous man.

How did the Spirit strive then, and how does he strive with men to-day?

It was, and is, by the use of the whole apparatus of the universe; in other words, by the use of everything that is. The powers of nature show in turn the goodness and the wrath of God. Does calm sunshine mean nothing? Is there no lesson in the sunset; no invitation in the yellow harvest-fields? Have all the joys of life no heavenly undertone of love and mercy?

Yea, and tempest, disease, fire, famine, death; is there no warning in them to listening minds? Nature tells us in unmistakable utterance that whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap. Surely, she says, sin against law means misery, sorrow, and death. God has put a voice in everything that he has made, from glittering star to lily, rose, or wheat-sheaf; in disease, lightning flash, death, and even hell, to tell men that sin must have its awful fruition and punishment. All this prodigious universe, thrilled with the living presence of the eternal Spirit, throws its barrier across the path that leads away from God and truth. It was so before the flood; it is so to-day.

Then, also, God had living witnesses. He has never been without some to rebuke a wicked and perverse world. By example and by preached word the Spirit strove to recall the prodigal race of man. A line of preachers extends back in unbroken procession from this day to the gates of Paradise. Men have not been left to the mute testimony of nature alone, nor the foreign interference of angels, but they have had witnesses for God of their own flesh, and blood, and kindred. There have always been, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, men to preach to men; men to strive, and pray, and weep over the iniquity of their fellows. Noah and his predecessors preached righteousness to their contemporaries, and Noah's successors have never ceased thus to

preach, from the time of the flood to this hour, when by the Spirit's appointment souls are warned, by human voices, to fly from the wrath to come.

In our time the magnificent institution of a gospel church, that touches every shore and nation, preaches from ten thousand pulpits, and from house to house, the truths of responsibility, judgment to come, and mercy through the cross. These are preached, and prayed, and sung in the hearing of millions. On the myriad pages of journal and bound volume Christ is set forth, and civilization is but the rostrum for the preaching of the gospel.

Is not all this a striving of God's Spirit? Never since the gospel promise blazed over Eden's wreck has he put forth such energies for the resistance of evil, and the salvation of sinners.

But what of words and example in the sphere of private life? Take we no account of a devout father's life and admonitions; of the teachings of a gentle, believing mother, at whose knees we learned our earliest prayer? Are not these and all the gracious influences by which loved ones have sought to win us for God and heaven the very doing of the Holy Spirit? They are, and his power is present in all of them. His influence touches us at every point of life's varied story.

Leave now all consideration of these external means. Shut out the world, and in thy inmost soul sit down, where only the heart beats, and conscience whispers. Is not this the Holy Spirit's agent also? Yes, and above, behind, and under conscience there is his voice itself. God the Holy Ghost breathes upon the soul. You know this, you have felt it; yes, and alas! you have resisted it. Unconverted man, you have resisted it as many days as you have lived since the dawn of moral

consciousness; and, it must be added, you have resisted successfully.

Shall this resistance and this striving of the Holy Ghost go on forever? No. It shall not go on perpetually with the world, with any nation, or any single soul. The striving of the Spirit has an end. A day comes when it is all over, and the soul is forsaken forever to its own chosen lot and fate.

This always occurs at the death of the unbelieving and impenitent. Death ends the conflict. Probation is only in time. The Holy Spirit has no work in hell to save the lost. Of time, it may undoubtedly be said: IT IS NOW OR NEVER. The funeral of the body is sad enough, but what shall we say of the funeral of a lost soul? No angels to bear it singing to eternal rest, but only the fellowship of the doomed and hopeless. He does not always wait for the end of life. The striving Spirit sometimes leaves the resisting soul long before death. There is a sin against the Holy Ghost, for which no prayer is commanded to be offered, which no penitential tears can follow, and upon which no pardoning grace can ever fall.

Though the sin against the Holy Ghost is a matter shrouded in mystery, we have reason to believe that the Pharisees committed it when they said of Jesus, "This fellow doth not cast out devils but by Beelzebub, the prince of devils." The gracious miracles of healing done by our Lord in driving demons from the breasts of men, the Pharisees ascribed to a partnership with Satan. This was a sin against that Holy Spirit by whom these works of mercy were performed.

Just how this sin may be committed it is impossible definitely to say. In general terms we may venture to state that it is blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, and

also a deliberate and persistent rejection of his presence and influences, though we cannot point out the definite acts of the soul by which this is done.

The most dreadful thing we know in this world is the desertion of a soul by the Spirit. The fittest symbol of such a case is a human body forsaken by the soul. The most mournful of all sights is that of a corpse. The tabernacle of the mind is empty. No flash of thought lightens the eyes. No gleam of intelligence illumines the countenance. The silver cord is loosed and the golden bowl is broken. The wheel is broken at the cistern. The mansion is desolate, untenanted, and doom, death, decay, are written all over it. The most melancholy of all buildings is a crumbling, deserted house; and as we gaze upon it, the mind vibrates between the present desolation and the past, when living forms moved and happy voices sounded within its walls.

So with a body deserted by the soul. A marble statue, a precise counterfeit of the body, is not mournful, because we know it never was the dwelling-place of mind; but the body dead stands for desertion, and we grieve to look upon it because it has lost the life it had.

Thus the state of a soul bereft of the Holy Ghost is mournful because of its awful loss. Within it once the Holy Spirit dwelt. Along its halls of thought and feeling passed his gracious life and breath. But now he is gone, and gone forever. No more shall holy influence wrap it in gentle warmth. No more shall tender thoughts of God, and penitence for sin be felt within it. Nothing now is left but a deserted moral tenement, a soul doomed to decay forevermore.

In view of sorrowful meditations like these, many an anxious heart has asked itself the question: Have I committed the sin against the Holy Ghost which is never forgiven in this world or the next?

Well, let us see: To ask the question sorrowfully, tenderly, hoping you have not committed this sin, this itself furnishes an answer. You have not, or you would not ask, in this spirit, the question. Have you any sorrow for sin that is more than mere regret occasioned by wounded pride or fear of punishment? any longing for salvation and peace with God? Then you have not sinned away the Spirit. The reason is plain: These tender yearnings are the Spirit's own work. He has not left you, for he has made you anxious and concerned about your soul.

Let us see what ground you have for hope. This anxiety you feel about your soul is proof that you may yet be saved. Your holy guest has not departed. These tender drawings are your hope of salvation and blessed peace. As a practical question, in view of this, what shall you do to be saved?

Give way to the Spirit's drawings. Cultivate and cherish his influence on your soul. Strive not to banish your rising sense of sinfulness. Do not turn off your thoughts on other things, and try to quench that which is bringing you to repentance. A very slender silken line is fastened to your heart, and by it he is drawing you towards life and light. Do not break this gentle fetter.

Pray for your own soul. Have you ever really asked God for eternal life? Have you truly and sincerely sought pardon at the cross? You have uttered words, but has your heart prayed? have you wrestled with God for his unspeakable gift? Certainly you have not, if you are yet away from God. We look with utmost sorrow on a prayerless person, and are dismayed to think of knees that never bend before the throne of grace, and of lips that never open to utter the name of him who is the giver of all good. Little better is the soulless prayer,

the petition made up of words, without feeling, and without faith.

Do the things he suggests. What are they? Put that besetting sin beneath your feet. Is there some darling thing that stands in your heart and keeps the Holy Spirit from the sway he seeks? Turn his hateful rival out. It is more than folly to risk eternal life for a mere pleasure, and that one which is unworthy of a place within your breast.

Seek in God's holy word to know the way of life. Here are the teachings to point you to pardon and peace. Read it to know the truth, not from habit, nor necessity, but with a motive to learn the way to God. Seek the guidance of the Spirit as you read. He will make the word a living power in your soul, and the very light of everlasting life.

The soul not deserted by the Holy Ghost has great reason to *hope*, and this hope may be turned at once into fact and sweet fruition. Your soul is yet his abiding-place. He is not very welcome; you allow rather than invite his presence; you do not make your breast his home. He is but a visitor whom you do not admit to intimacy. There are some parts of your soul you do not allow him to enter. If you have guests in any room which you could not present to him, bid them depart at once.

Let him dominate your beliefs, your affections, and your will. Say: I will believe the things he teaches, will love the things he loves, will do the things that please God, and my will shall follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit. He will assume control if you submit, and will undertake a work of renewing, sanctifying power, by which you shall be cleansed from sin and made conformable to the image and character of Christ. The work is grace and the end will be glory.