“STRENGTH FOR TIRED WORKERS”

Sermon by the Rev. A. J. Gordon, D. D.


“O God, the heart was made for thee,” wrote St. Augustine, “and it can find no rest till it finds it in thee.” It shall be our study this morning to discover how the weary heart, tired of toil, faint with burdens, overborne with care, may find and enjoy this rest. In order to do this we shall begin with God and come down to men.

I. The Unweariedness of God. “The Creator of the ends of the earth fainteth not, neither is weary.”

When we think of his holding the stars in his hand, and swinging the worlds in their orbits, it seems as though he must sometimes be tired. And hence we cannot realize the fact of an unresting God. We wonder how the Almighty can live without sleep, and how the eternal thought and the eternal activity can go on and on forever, without any respite for slumber and repose. And yet we are distinctly told that “he that keepeth Israel slumbereth not neither sleepeth.” “Eternity.” — If there is any living mind that can pronounce that word and ponder it, without a sense of intolerable weight and weariness, I know not who it can be. The vastness oppresses us, and staggers us, and strains us, and it is a real relief to hear that clock strike, and remind us of time, after we have been gazing a little while upon the dial plate of the everlasting, whose second-hand ticks off ages, and whose hour-hand traverses the infinite circle without beginning and without end.

And so it is exactly with the thought of unceasing activity. It makes you dizzy to think of a being who works without cessation or rest. The law of periodical repose is so deeply written in our members that we cannot be happy in even thinking of a condition of unceasing activity. Have not you realized this fact even in nature? There is that tremendous tide of water that is pouring over the falls of Niagara. You go a long distance to see it, and you stand there and hear its deafening roar, and witness its awful power, and you say: “Yes, it is wonderful” and to think that it has been going on in this way for years and centuries, and ages, an millenniums, without ever taking a half-hour’s vacation! And you find yourself pressing your hand to your head to keep the brain from reeling under the immensity of the thought, and you wish that the frost would lay its hand upon this rushing torrent for a little while, hush its roar, and lock it up in frozen slumbers, and give it rest. The human mind cannot bear the thought of time without end, or of an activity without cessation. And for the finite soul to simply think of eternity forever would constitute an eternal punishment.

Well, now, the Bible makes us acquainted with the unresting and the unwearied God. To be sure, we are told that after the creation has been completed, “God rested on the seventh day.” But Christ intimates that he rests no longer. “My Father worketh hitherto and I work,” He says. And all the descriptions of the eternal state seem to suggest the idea of unceasing action on the part of God. “There is no night there,” as though there were no call for rest. “He slumbers not, neither sleepeth.” “They rest not day nor night.

And this is the conception which I get of God. That he is a being. That he is a being of unceasing activity; that while we sleep he is always awake; that while we are tired he is always unwearied. He does not let go the reins of the universe even for one moment, else
there would be a collision. He upholds all things by the word of his power; he guides all
things by his superintending care; he directs all things by his immediate counsel.

Of course I do not forget that nature and the universe are largely self-acting. The seed
has the power of reproduction, and the winds move by the laws of equilibrium, and the
waters flow by the power of gravitation. All these processes would go on still, if God’s
hand were not immediately put forth. But he must behind all, to guide and direct. “The
Lord’s throne is in the heavens, and his kingdom ruleth over all.” The king acts through
subordinates, but unless he wills and guide, there will be anarchy in his kingdom. And so
without the constant and immediate superintendence of the Almighty, I do not believe
that the world could get on for twenty-four hours. God had not retired from business,
leaving his work to his agents. If I wish anything done, I believe he will do it, if
agreeable to his will, with own hands and not simply refer me to agents -- gravitation
and evolution -- and tell me that I must wait their convenience. I know that this idea is
going out of fashion even among Christian thinkers. We have come to think that God is
not to be troubled with the details of business; that he is simply the chief manager of the
universe, who sits in his office up yonder, and issues commands for his subordinates to
execute; but that he will not soil his hands by touching an impure sinner to purge him
from his iniquity, when there are the laws of regeneration and sanctification to attend to
them; and that he will not stretch forth his finger to heal, when there are scores of doctors
who know how to mix medicines and cure maladies. There is no mistake about it; the
people of this generation want a very remote God -- one who stays in his office. And lets
his clerks do the drudgery of providence, and execute the petty details of his moral
government. They think it detracts from his dignity and elevation for him to come down
into the small services and minute attentions of life. And so there are many persons who
carry a great load of care about with them all the time, simply because they are unwilling
to trouble God with it. “It is enough for God to drive the chariot of the universe,” says
one, without our expecting him to stop to pick up men and women that get knocked down
by its wheels, and wipe the dust from them.”

And yet, I tell you what Christ has plainly taught when I say that he does care for just
such things. “He maketh the clouds his chariot, and rideth upon the wings of the wind.”
And if, perchance, the storm chariot knocks a bird’s nest from a tree, the sparrow that
was in it “does not fall to the ground without your Heavenly Father’s notice. Fear not,
therefore; ye are of more value than many sparrows.” God is looking after all the minute
events of your lives. He is pardoning your individual sins, alleviating you little sorrows,
lifting your petty burdens, watching over your minutest interests, and doing it for myriads
of beings, and doing it day and night from century to century. And yet he is never weary.
No danger that he will be cross sometimes, because he is tired out with care, just as you,
father and mother, often are, so that you refuse to be annoyed with your children’s
requests. I think this is the best proof of the goodness of our Heavenly Father that he does
not lose his temper with us, because of or little faults and provocations. You know that
great and good people, who know how to be perfectly calm under strong provocation,
often break their temper over the spilling of a bottle of ink on the table-cloth, or the
spattering of a little mud upon their garments by a passing carriage. There are pious and
serene Christians in this city by the hundreds, who have never been stirred
to indignation by the outrageous wickedness of the rumseller and the seducer, which has
turned scores of once happy homes into scenes of unutterable woe and agony; and yet
these same Christians have perhaps burst into a passion, and cuff'd their children's ears for tipping over a cup of coffee on the table-cloth.

Now, how infinitely above all such caprices of temper is God. He is "slow to anger," the Scripture tell us. He looks upon the wickedness and cruelty and corruption of a city or a nation as it goes on century after century, and by-and-by his whole indignation breaks out against it, and he overwhelms it with fire as he did Sodom, or buries it beneath a volcano, as he did Pompeii, or gives it as a prey to armies, as he did Jerusalem. There is the dignity and awful grandeur becoming a God in such anger. But he does not get out of patience at our little faults and foibles, and burst into swift anger against us.

Ah! beautiful name which the Scriptures give to the Almighty, "the God of patience." That means a God that can attend to little requests without annoyance; bear little burdens without affront: stoop to little mercies without weariness. It means, in a word, a God who works forever, and yet "fainteth not, neither is weary." And I have held up his character before you to-day, my brethren, that you may imitate him. "The God of patience grant you to be likeminded one towards another." And so having spoken of the unweariedness of God, I ask you to consider.

II. The weariness of men. "Even the youths shall faint and be weary and the young men shall utterly fail," The youth represents the class that is stronger and freshest and fullest of vigor. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong," says John. And yet even youth has no "Elixir vitae" that can keep them from fatigue or furnish an antidote against exhaustion. Who that serves the Lord with any degree of fidelity, does not at times become utterly tired? Not tired of the work but tired in the work. A man with four hundred and fifty voluntary muscles, as physiology teaches, and nerves without number, and all these muscles being strained in constant tension, and all these nerves plied with constant appeal of suffering, is it any wonder if sometimes the strength fails, and the heart sinks within us?

It is no dishonor to us that we sometimes are faint and weary. The dishonor is that we should fail to be so; that we take life so easy and bear responsibility so lightly that we never know the ache of tired limbs and a tired brain. And the reason why heaven has so few attractions to most men lies in this, I suppose, that they know so little of spiritual weariness. "The one idea of heaven which most allures me is that of rest," says Robert Hall. And he was a tired man that said that -- the man whose mighty brain had weighed down and exhausted his fragile body. "Oh, for a well-tuned harp," cried Samuel Rutherford, when his nerves had been racked, and strained, and broken by a lifetime of toil and trial. These were strong men, valiant youths among the hosts of God; but they were not exempt from fatigue; "for even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men utterly fail."

And how full God's Word is of the sighs of the weary—great souls and valiant workers overborne with the heat and burden of the day, and crying out under their faintness. Hear Moses, weighted down with the care of Israel: "Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? Have I conceived all this people? Have I begotten them that shouldst say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom? I am not able to bear all the people alone. If thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray thee out of hand, and let me not see my wretchedness."

Hear Gideon, faint in the midst of the battle crying: "O my Lord, if the Lord be with us why then is all this befallen us? But now hath the Lord forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites." Hear Elijah, sinking down beneath the juniper tee and

utterly tired of life praying: “It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.” Hear David: “Oh that I had wings to like a dove: for then would I fly away and be at rest.” What sighs of sorrow are here! And when we come down to latter times, we read the same story, busy workers with aching brains, with hands that hang down, with tired eyelids upon tired eyes, “I am weary of life, if this can be called life,” said Luther. “I pray the Lord will come forthwith and carry me home.” And Whitfield in the midst of prodigious labors exclaimed, “Lord, I am weary, not of thy work, but in thy work. Let me speak for these once more, then seal thy truth and die.”

I recall the utterances of holy men for the purpose of verifying the words of the prophet, that even the strong and stalwart saints become faint in service. And how is it today? I venture to think that there has rarely been a time when so many of God’s servants have cried out with faintness as now. “Prodigious toil, and little visible result,” is the report that comes up from the whole field, East, West, North and South. In a Christian conference recently said that “whereas in the Apostles’ day one sermon converted three thousand souls, now it takes three thousand sermons to convert one soul.” And it is not a great exaggeration to speak thus. When we look over the field and think of the score or less of souls brought into the church in a year; and then think of the money spent, the sermons preached, the meeting held, the house to house visits made, the tracts distributed, and the prayers offered, it seems literally as though we had to compass heaven and earth to make one convert. It is the law of nature that one seed should multiply itself a hundred-fold by sowing. But when we sow the seed of life, how it seems to require a hundred seeds to produce one grain of wheat.

And this is the characteristic of our times—great activity and small returns. I am not complaining. If we get becalmed and haven’t a breath of wind to move us, the only way is for us to take the oars and do the best we can to bring the vessel to port. But we are poor sailors if we do not realize the difference between sitting with our hand upon the rudder and letting our ship fly before the wind, and tugging straining every muscle to row it ashore. “The wind bloweth where it listeth,” says Jesus. I know not why the spirit should have been with us in such mighty power in the days of Edwards, and why it is present in so little power in our day. We bow to the fact and toil on, determined to do the best we can. But of the weariness of such work there can be no doubt. An English pastor saw an old man hard at work, pounding stone for the road, and singing while he worked. “Well, friend, glad to see you enjoy your noble battle,” he said. Yes,” the workman replied. “Yes, your reverence, thank the Lord, I am fond of work, but all the same I am glad I am going to a world where work won’t make my back ache.”

And we are also glad of this. But if we have the Spirit of God, the motive power of heaven, with us, it won’t make our backs ache even now to do God’s work.

III. God’s refreshment of the weary: “They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength.”

To wait upon God is to commune with him, to talk with him. It is to bring your soul in contact with his soul, your spirit with his Spirit, your heart with his heart. If we come into communion with God’s Spirit, we shall be tranquilized, also: for God is in perpetual peace, and we get into peace when we get into him.

We talk about taking recreation. Prayer is the Christian’s recreation. It recreates him by bringing the divine life within him. And the only way for us to get rested when we are tired, is to go to God. It is the plainest and simplest thing possible that we are to do when
we are weary. We are to take a day’s vacation, and retire with the Lord. I will not glory save in mine infirmities, but I can say, truly, that the happiest days I have ever known have been those of such retirement—going apart, with only three of us present; God, and the Bible, and myself. These seasons of waiting on God are not as common as they have been in other days. And that is the reason Christians are so jaded and dull. Honest old Scotch saint was she who said that her idea of heaven was, that it would be a place she could sit all day long in a clean white apron, and sing psalms. Don’t you see how the idea came to her? She knew what good times she had had with the Lord here, when her kitchen work was all done for the day, and she had put on her clean attire and sat down with her Bible; and what better could heaven be than an extension of all this? Oh, we do not have good times enough with our heavenly Father,—we don’s stay with him and get refreshed and reinvigorated by him, and that is the reason we are dull and weary. “They that wait upon the Lord.” That means, you see, to tarry with him. Not a few moment’s snatched in the morning,—a hurried and fragmentary greeting, as two friends salute each other when they each are hastening to business; but a real all-day or all week’s visit with the Lord,—that is resting. And I do not believe a man ever tried this that was not strong and tireless and well-equipped for service. Luther used often to spend three hours a day with God. And this is where he got strength to wield such sledge-hammer blows against bigotry and superstition. John Welch, son-in-law of John Knox, often prayed seven hours a day, and if anybody has worked miracles in modern days, you will find them in the mighty deeds of preaching and soul-saving which he wrought. And this is the promise, that “they that wait upon the Lord shall mount up on wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” Strange is it that they begin with flying and end with walking?

But this is God’s way with the soul. Caught up in communion in order to be made ready for service! “Seated with him in heavenly places” in order to be fitted to run in the way of his commandments! Oh, to learn this lesson well! Amen.

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