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The Law of Spiritual Repair.

BY THE LATE REV. W. A. GRAY, ELGIN.

'The new man which is renewed.'—Col. iii. 10.

ONE of the sermons I remember listening to in my student days was a sermon by a great Scotch preacher. His text was the counsel of St. Paul—'I beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more,' and his subject was the subject of Christian growth. Starting with the dictum of one of the fathers of science, that minerals grow, plants grow and live, while animals grow, live, and feel, he denied the first statement,—that minerals can in any real sense be asserted to grow, and went on to emphasize and illustrate the other two. And then with a power of word painting and a fervour of appeal that were all his own, he worked up from the principle of growth in the physical sphere to the principle of growth in the spiritual sphere, and the duty and the means of attaining to *that*.

It was all very good and all very true. But there is another and even more general law of nature than the law of growth, and that is the law of repair. We say, and say truly, that gradual development is the rule of being, we might say equally truly that constant renovation is the rule of being. In nature, nothing can advance—we might even say nothing can exist—except on condition of its continually renewing itself.

Take the strongest case possible. Take the mountains. The very mountains are not what they once were. In the course of the ages their constituent elements change. Repeated waste, repeated replenishment; repeated dissolution, repeated formation—so the process goes on. It is only by poetic licence we speak of the everlasting hills. The substance passes, the shape and the outline remain.

Take the case of the waters. Here is a lake, apparently the one enduring feature in a landscape that has otherwise changed; woods cut down, cottages laid even with the ground. You look at it, and it spreads itself just as of old, in early days, when you boated on its surface or angled in its depths—the same jutting headland, the same winding bays; the same glints, the same glooms, the same deeps, the same shallows. And yet, though the setting be the same, though the colour

be the same, the element is not the same. Not a drop of it is the same. What the sun exhales, the rain gives back. What the river at the foot drains off, the stream at the head supplies. But for the law of renovation the lake would vanish, turn to an arid hollow or a muddy swamp. The lake, like the objects that surround it, keeps its beauty and its very being on the principle of constant renewal.

Pass upwards still in the scale of existence, and the working of the law is even more obvious. Take the case of the plants. Here is a tree,—some veteran of its kind you remember in your early days. In youth you climbed on its branches. In youth you rested in its shade. The garden fence that surrounded it is broken. The homestead that nestled beside it is removed. But there stands the tree, very much as it was in the old days gone by, with its gnarled roots, its mossy trunk, its great spreading canopy of green. And yet it is not the same. Over and over again it has thrown out fresh foliage. Over and over again it has formed fresh wood. If it had not, it would have died. The tree, like everything round about it that lives and is healthy, holds its position, maintains its vitality, only in so far as it yearly renews itself.

We come nearer still to the thought of the text, when we pass from being that has life to being that has life and feeling. There is the human body. What transformations go on in the substance of that. Physiology tells us that it takes only a short term of years for a change to take place in the human body so complete as to make it absolutely a new creation, through every bone and tissue. There is personal identity, but there is physical substitution. And the fact is, the law of waste as checked by the collateral law of supply is as impressive and suggestive in the case of the human frame as in the case of anything. It is always wasting. It is wasted by motion, wasted by effort, wasted by thought, wasted by sympathy, wasted by every forthputting of the energy that is in it, wasted by the subtle principle of decay, with

which the healthiest and strongest must lay his account. What is life, but a continual warfare with death; death surrounding us in every quarter, death pressing in on us through every avenue. Air, food, sleep,—they are, each and all, only means by which we repair death's incipient ravages,—weapons by which we beat back death's incessant assaults. We die daily. And it is only because we are resurrected daily that we do not die utterly. Our very frames then, so fearfully and wonderfully made, are witnesses to the law we are speaking of. They maintain their soundness, they fulfil their existence, only on the self-same condition, the condition of constant renewal.

Now what I wish you to note is, that what is true of the physical life is true also of the spiritual life. It is true of the work of grace. It is true of that Divine nature which is provided and implanted from above, which St. John calls 'that which is born of God,' and which St. Paul calls 'the new creature.' It should grow, of course, and it does grow. It should strengthen, and it does strengthen. But it grows and strengthens only on the plan I have tried to describe. That is, it grows and strengthens through repeated renovations. Here as elsewhere you have the double process—continued waste, continued replenishment; continued decay, continued repair. That is what is meant by the Scripture idea of renewal. I suspect when we read or speak of renewal, we attach to the word the notion of the great spiritual change that is wrought once for all, when the soul for the first time takes Christ, and taking Him, takes the blessing He brings along with Him, namely, pardon and peace and power. There is such a change. And Scripture, as we shall soon see, has a name for it. But that name is not renewal. Renewal, according to Scripture, refers not to the beginning of the Christian life, but to the course of it; not to its origin, but to its upkeep. Says St. Paul to the Corinthians, '*The inward man, which is renewed day by day.*' And again to the Ephesians, '*Be ye renewed*' (that is, 'Be ye constantly renewed,—maintain the habit of renewal,—keep up the process of renewal'); and here, too, to the Colossians, '*Ye have put on the new man which is renewed*' (that is, the new man which should be kept new,—by fresh forthputtings of faith, by accessions of strength). And here, as I take it, we have a very important and a very suggestive but often neglected view of the Christian life. The

great original change, by which the Christian life is imparted—we rightly lay stress upon that. But the experience that follows, when the renovated character must itself be kept renovated,—sustained in health and activity, through fresh forgiveness for fresh sins, through fresh supplies for fresh wants,—I am not so sure that we think about that. With regard, then, to this great practical truth, the truth of spiritual renewal, we have to look at three things—its *prerequisite*, its *necessity*, and its *method*.

I. First, its *prerequisite*. On what is it based? From what does it start? What is the great underlying condition that makes this continued renovation possible? It is the new manhood. 'The new man,' says St. Paul, 'which is renewed.' The new man, not the old man. The old man cannot be renewed. Flesh remains flesh to the end, and you can never 'make it spirit. Sin remains sin to the end, and you can never make it holiness. You may starve the old man. You may cripple it. You may conquer it. You may crucify it. But you will never transform it. 'Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be!'

No, the old man cannot be renewed. But in the sense I have attempted to explain, the new man can. And when is the new man formed? When does the new man appear? Why, at the new birth. And there we have the whole put clearly. Regeneration first, renewal second—the renewal of those that are regenerate. Regeneration an act once experienced and never experienced again, renewal a process continually needful and just as continually available. Am I over-refining? Am I importing into Scripture distinctions which Scripture does not sanction? Hear what St. Paul says again, he is writing at the time to Titus—'Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy hath He saved us,'—and now mark what follows,—'by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost.' 'The washing of regeneration,'—there is the great initial revolution that makes after recruiting possible. 'Renewing of the Holy Ghost,'—there is the after recruiting itself, which proves the initial revolution to be sincere.

And how many influences are at work with us to make these repeated restorations needful? Some

are from without, some are from within. But there they are, with their wear and tear, with their drain and strain, a law of death working daily in our members, which nothing can conquer and nothing hold back but the counter-operation of a law of life.

II. And this brings me up to the next point, the *necessity* of renewal. What, then, are the forces that beset us—what are the principles that assail us, that use up our spiritual energy and lower our spiritual tone, tending to a languor and decline from which nothing can possibly secure us but constant renewal from above?

(1) Take sin. Sin poisons. Sin wounds. Sin makes a rent in the heart and in the character, through which the life-force ebbs. Realized or not realized, sorrowed over or not sorrowed over, it crumbles a man down. Thanks be to God, there is repair even for that. The blessing of the text, the blessing of renovation, may be had for the asking, may be had for the taking. Hear what a penitent petitioner prayed: 'Create in me a clean heart, renew within me a right spirit, O Lord; though our iniquities are many and they testify against us, do Thou this for Thy name's sake.' Put that prayer up, with the suppliant's sincerity, in the suppliant's spirit, and you will be answered even as he was. 'Behold I have blotted out thine iniquities as a cloud, and as a thick cloud thy sins.'

(2) But look at other influences than the influence of actual sin, all of them apt, if we watch not, to lower and pull down. There is the force and friction of worldly interests. Worldly interests are so apt to predominate. Worldly interests are so apt to absorb. Oh, what necessity there is for fresh communications of grace, for the recovery of feelings which the world has chilled, the re-stamping of impressions which the world has dimmed or expunged!

(3) Or take another and a different kind of drain. I mean the drain of religious effort. There is something exhaustive in *that*. There is a demand in religious effort, both on the emotional and spiritual nature, of which those only who have been engaged in it can adequately know. Some people never recognize hard work except in the physical sphere. Some never recognize it except in the mental sphere. There is hard work in both spheres, no doubt. But neither work in the physical sphere nor work in the mental sphere

creates such a draft on the springs of being as the work that is sometimes done in the religious sphere—thought, feeling, sympathy, faith, all put to constant experiment, all kept at constant strain! Let the biographies and the journals of outstanding Christian writers be the proof. They are called, let us say, to special service. Or they are called to special sacrifice. They face it boldly. They discharge it successfully. So boldly do they face it, so successfully do they discharge it, that those who look on say, 'How strong they are! Nothing daunts them. Nothing discomposes them.' Ah, but go to them when the service or the sacrifice is over, and you will see what the effort has cost them. Take the case of Elijah—was there ever a stouter heart, was there ever a firmer brow than his? Yet look at Elijah under the juniper tree, in discouragement, despondency, depression,—the heaven darkened for him, all the foundations of the earth out of course. Did he not need renewing? A man may be never nearer weakness than just when he has touched his highest attainments of strength. Such invasions does genuine Christian work make on the vigour of those who engage in it, that over and over again the worker would be bankrupt—bankrupt in energy, bankrupt in faith, bankrupt in wisdom to devise, bankrupt in patience to bear—but for the fact that he casts himself on God. 'He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might He increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint.'

III. We have spoken of the *prerequisite* of renewal, which is regeneration. We have spoken of the *need* of renewal, which is the necessity created by all the manifold influences that wear the spirit and drain the strength. Let us now for a moment look at the *means*. 'Be ye renewed,' says the apostle. God is willing to renew you. Let His will have effect on you. So bestow yourselves, so dispose yourselves, as that God may grant you the renewal you require!

This is a wide subject, the means of renewal, and I have nothing more to say of it than to state one very simple rule. If you want to be renewed, keep where renewing influences are at play. And they are at play not beneath, but above. We

sometimes say of a Christian whose character we mean to commend, that he breathes the very air of heaven. But that is what we ought all to do—breathe the very air of heaven. Rise to that atmosphere by faith. Inhale that atmosphere by prayer. That will secure renovation. That will secure restoration of life, constant provision for constant want. I read some time ago an article in one of our semi-scientific magazines on the growth of trees. And the point which the author endeavoured to make was this, that the atmosphere is of far more importance to tree life than the soil. Trees, he said, don't grow out of the earth so much as they grow out of the air. They are solidified gas, drinking in from the elements surrounding them the ingredients that are congenial and fit. Plants may exist without soil, if only they have air. But they cannot exist without air, if they have only soil. 'Soil,' he said, 'is useful only as a standing place, air is the life.' Possibly this may be a strong way of putting it, so far as the physical sphere is concerned. But when we pass from the physical to the spiritual, it is not exaggeration, but plain, simple, accurate truth. Earth is of no great value as a source of nourishment. It is serviceable mainly as a location, something on which we may stand, something from which we may work. The true source and seat of nourishment is heaven. The substance of the soul is woven, the life of the soul is kept up, just as the tissue and life of the tree is, by draughts taken in from the fair free sky, of its colouring and transforming sunshine, of its rich refreshing showers. Reach up where the tree reaches, feed where the tree feeds, in the upper spaces, among the upper influences, and you will be renewed as the tree is, from grace to grace, from strength to strength.

Take two lessons in conclusion. One is a lesson of warning. (1) *There is no regeneration without the after renewing.* Do you know this

renewing? Has it occurred repeatedly? Is it occurring still? When was your last replenishing of grace? When was your last reply to prayer? When was your last exercise of faith? When was your last enkindling of hope? When was your last sacrificial act of love? Was it yesterday? Was it a week ago? Was it a month ago? Was it longer still? It is useless to rest in the past. And I fear there are some who rest in a very distant past. It will not do to say that the water was running a month ago, it may have frozen since then. It will not do to say that the tree put forth leaves a year ago, it may have died since then. Do not build too much on a fancied regeneration. The proof of the one great act of regeneration lies in repeated acts of renewal. Are these acts going on?

(2) And the other lesson is a lesson of encouragement. *Where there really is this renewing, you may believe there has been regeneration first.* I know you are often disappointed with yourself. You are back so continually where you were, so like to your old unconverted self, with the same feelings, with the same temptations, with the same difficulties, that you doubt if conversion has taken place at all. Do not doubt, if though seemingly back again, you are ready to begin again. There is a sense in which the Divine life is just a series of beginnings. And though you may not be aware of it yourself, each beginning may start from a higher step than the last one. Regeneration does not secure that you shall not have lapses. What it does secure is that every lapse shall be followed by its own advance. It does not secure that you shall not have decay, what it does secure is that every decay shall be followed by its own renovation. By and by there shall be no more lapses. By and by there shall be no more decays. Till then, let us be thankful that renewal is promised, and let us also remember that renewal is commanded. 'Be ye therefore renewed.'