

THE SEPARATING POWER OF THINGS PRESENT

“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,” Romans 8:38.

It is notable that in the Apostle St. Paul’s enumeration of things which might dim the love of God to us, he mentions “Things present”. By things present, I take it he means the events and trials of our present day. As we scan his list of obstacles, we discover many and varied sources of great temptation that could cause us to doubt the love of God. But in the list, there is nothing more burdensome, more torturous, more debilitating and demoralizing than our anxieties for tomorrow, which often cloud the sunshine of the present day.

But in a darker sense, St. Paul knew about the separating power of “Things Present.” He knew the “Things of the day” had power to engage the entirety of our minds, bodies and souls that could turn us away from God and back into the world. The duties of the common day, the multitude of things we must get through before we lay our heads wearily upon the pillow at night could, in fact, consume us in temporal necessity that is both seductive and addictive, unless we are constant and continuous in the Divine watch. Our struggle with “Things Present” is apt to blind us to the great realities, which separate us from the love of God in Christ.

The separating power arises from the exceeding nearness of things present. Things nearest to us command our vision, out attention to the details of common existence. And yet, most often, this nearness leads to an erroneous perspective. When I am at my computer in my quiet study, the sun may be showering the landscape with its brilliant radiance or the silver moon may be riding through the sky, the stars glittering the universe like pearls, proclaiming the divine hand that made them. But the computer screen nearest me commands my attention, and all too often the sun, moon and stars are forgotten. We cannot escape the fact that things present are things near, and near things have a blinding nearness, a power to seduce and addict us. When things near command us, the things that truly matter lose their focus, become fuzzy and ethereal like fog that

covers the splendor of the landscape. All we can see is our hand before us, the immediate path upon which our feet step, and the narrow confines of human existence. And yet, we know in our “Heart of hearts” that the majestic creation is there! But, we have chosen to cover it by the worn and trifling things of the present.

Each day’s dawn bring with it, its own round of present duties. These duties absorb and command the whole of our energy, which embrace and stroke us into a comfortable complacency of the ordinary, mundane, and the common present of our blindness. This is why in our busy, crowded lives, things near are swift to tyrannize life like a blood-thirsty pirate stealing everything, including our gold fillings.

We all require moments of withdrawal. But it is not enough to say, “I declare a halt for a moment.” We need a purposed declaration of intent, a promised time and place of retreat, and there, in the secrets of our heart, we say, “God loves me.” A moment we grab greedily from the secular consumption of conscience, and there prepare the altar of our hearts before the Lord, and say, “God is here!” We may not do as the ancient Jew, gathering rocks for an altar, but symbolically we are declaring the same purpose. The Divine fills the creation—God’s Presence in the Present is beyond our questions, doubts, and understanding. This instant revelation of awe, the awe of wonder and glory, standing present in God’s Holy Present, is the remarkable Glory of God’s Presence. This is what the Apostle, St. Paul, knew so well. He knew the secret of how to master the separating power of things present. God is God. God is now. God is the moment. God is the Presence. God is the Present. Now, what, for love’s sake, do we have to compare with God? What is there in our lives that we can throw up to God and say, “Here, Lord, is something equal to you!”

Another obstacle in that separating power of things present is the difficulty of understanding present things. It is always easier to understand our yesterdays, after we are freed from the moments in our yesterdays. In tune with yesterdays, tomorrow’s hope of things yet to come is the ease of our understanding of the future. And yet, the feat of grasping the meaning of our lives today seems always the ultimate and illusive mystery. Often, it is difficult to see the straight path at our feet. The present things of our lives, the crowd of people all about us makes the path difficult. We are thrust and jostled into paralytic confusion of overwhelming overload, unless we become oblivious to those around us, marching the distance through them as though they do not exist. But unless we begin to

understand our past, its trials, its disappointments, its desires and illnesses, we, as life predicts, are doomed to repeat them. But such things are very hard to understand in their actual moment of occurrence. Oh, how difficult it is to read love in the dark characters of present things, which constitutes their separating power. Many a grown man or woman thanks God for the discipline of early childhood. As a child, life is quite unfathomable beyond their immediate present, and he or she doubts if Mother loved them. We are all God’s children, but few of us are in love with the discipline of love, and in that lies the separating power of things present.

Another obstacle of that separating power of things present is found in the distraction of things present. “Life isn’t a little bundle of big things: it’s a big bundle of little things.” While we, the servants of the Lord, are busy here and there, life speeds on toward the end. We discover one day, as if startled by its swift approach, that our years are spent. What dims the light of our human existence? What clouds of unknowing make the present as though it were not to our straining eyes? What makes the clear road ahead—unclear? Could it be that “Big bundle of little things”? Oh, what escapes us in our unending busyness! The serenity that ought to mark every Christian disappears upon the fragile scale of life, tipping to the used up power of self-control. Why is it that in the Present Moment, peace and joy turn from vision to illusion, like wisp-clouds disappearing while you gaze upon them? So much of what should be prized as treasure beyond price is lost, which to lose is the tragedy of tragedies—the sense and certainty of Divine Love. While we’re preoccupied elsewhere, it fades out of our reach for heaven. The comfort and calm of it are gone. The light shining “For ever and ever” is hidden by the cloud of things present blotting out the light. St. Paul knew better than most that in the cares that came upon him daily, nothing was more terrifying than the separating power of things present.

Of spiritual victory over present things, the one perfect example is our Lord. He affords us the perfect picture of untiring labor and unruffled calm. He conquered over things to come, setting his gaze steadily towards Jerusalem where the bitter Cross awaited Him. But wonderful as that victory was over everything the future had in store, there was another that was no less wonderful. Our Lord never doubted God’s Love to Him, certain of it in His darkest hour, through broken days of body, mind and soul, through never-ending calls when the leisure to eat was a luxury. Not only did He master things to come, he did what we think impossible—He mastered the separating power of things present.

Let us never forget that He did all that for us. All His victories were achieved for us. It requires great humility on our part, the abandonment of our soul's pride, to admit that we do not win our victories in life. We live out the victories Christ has already won for us. This is why the apostle, St. Paul, speaks so eloquently on, "All things are yours—things present, things to come—for you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

In a deep sense of measuring the depths of our human existence, we must conclude that we are nothing and God is everything. In the pride of this world, the ugly pride of our soul's desires, we rage pitifully against this Divine Truth. Like children who never grow up to maturity, we whine our presence and platitudes before God. We, like the passive-aggressive behavior of unresolved rage, smile at God in the light but growl our bitter lament of God's worthlessness in the dark. In the fact of Faith in God's Existence and Presence, we, the humanity of this world—both Christian and non-Christian are in dire need of Divine transformation. A soul-crushing break that wrenches from us the very stain of our human, arrogant pride. For it is in such pride we conjure and cuddle the secrets of our soul's desires for things present, maneuvering our minds and hearts away from God.

It was said by Peter Claver (1581-1654), "Man's salvation and perfection consist in doing the Will of God, which he must have in view in all things and at every moment of his life. The more he accomplishes this Divine Will, the more perfect he will be." So estranged is God's Holy Presence in the world He constantly creates, that few among us resign and reside in the Will of God, reposing assuredly on the words, "God will have it so; so be it done." Where is the certainty that whatever happens takes place by Divine Will instead of human will? Where do we allow ourselves to see the hand of God in all that happens to us, attributing nothing to individual people or us, for we know we are but instruments used by God in God's Grace and Work of Sanctification?

St. Alphonsus Liguori exposes our human frailty and weakness when he said, "Nothing but self-will can separate us from God." And St. Bernard nails us to the wall with, "Take away self-will, and there will be no Hell." We discover the huge, gaping hole in God's Divine Plan—US! If it wasn't for US, God's Perfect Plan could be fulfilled and completed. But, that's how God planned it. Maybe, if we can imagine such truth, it was for God's own Divine humility that He created us. We never see any true merit in renouncing our own will, even though our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, renounced His will completely to

God's Will. We do not see the power of God's Grace in the Present to overcome just one difficulty today. Do we not see that tomorrow and the day after God will surmount others that are much greater and more distressing? Why can't we say, as Blessed John of Avila said, "Turn yourself round like a piece of clay and say to the Lord: I am clay, and you, Lord, the potter. Make of me what you will."

The claim of the Church today is self-will instead of Divine Will. The claim of the Church today is that we, Christians, are an end unto ourselves. Everywhere we turn there we smell the sickening, sweet odor of self-will, ignoring the ardent plea of God to do His Will. This discovery clinches the loss of our lives to things present and the darkness that occurs when our chosen clouds of unknowing hide the Vision of God, the paten of Christ's Body and the Chalice of His Blood. Such human darkness proclaims that it is never enough for us to know that God is Present in our Present. Why can't we simply shut our eyes, so that we may not see His Body placed into our hands and what is inside the Chalice, knowing all that we can never see, we spiritually need to know—it is our sweet Jesus who has come. He is Presence and the Present and that is all that matters. He will take our life from that moment as the Master and Captain of the ship and sail us to safe harbor on the other shore of heaven. All we must do is board the ship and He shall do the rest. Somehow, in our busy lives of things present, that never seems to be enough for us. In our questions that lead to questions, we forget God is all in all through Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All has been answered through Christ—life, death and resurrection. Now, enjoy the Present in Peace and Serenity. The answer to life is before us, right in the midst of all things present.

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The Separating Power of Things Present

timeless
truths
for
turbulent
times

