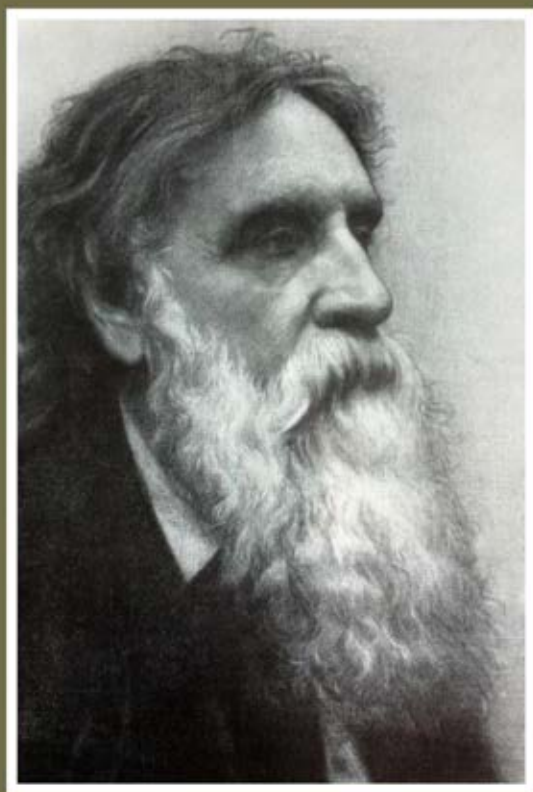


THE GOSPEL IN  
GEORGE  
MACDONALD



Selections from His Novels, Fairy Tales,  
and Spiritual Writings

*Appreciations by C. S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton*

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# The Gospel in George MacDonald

Selections from His Novels,  
Fairy Tales, and Spiritual Writings

*Edited by Marianne Wright*

*With Artwork by Arthur Hughes*

*From the Gospel in Great Writers Series*



PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

Published by Plough Publishing House  
Walden, New York  
Robertsbridge, England  
Elsmore, Australia  
[www.plough.com](http://www.plough.com)

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PRINT ISBN: 978-0-87486-766-4

EPUB ISBN: 978-0-87486-767-1

MOBI ISBN: 978-0-87486-768-8

PDF ISBN: 978-0-87486-769-5

Cover portrait by Edward Hughes, 1886. All other illustrations are by Arthur Hughes from early editions of MacDonald's works in the public domain.

Quotations from Scripture are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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# Introduction

In a widely reproduced photograph from an 1876 book titled *English Celebrities of the Nineteenth Century*, George MacDonald appears among a group of nine British literary giants. Charles Dickens is there, of course, as well as Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins, and W.M. Thackeray. The photograph—a montage created by a commercial publisher—is a visual monument to Victorian eminence: big black-cloaked men with big beards who wrote big famous books.

When this picture was first published, it was apparently uncontroversial to rank George MacDonald among the great writers of his age. Not so today. It has been at least a century since MacDonald has been widely read, and scholars outside his small fan base tend to approach his works as period pieces rather than as literature. So it is reasonable to ask: can we truly consider MacDonald a great writer?

C.S. Lewis, like many of MacDonald's admirers, had his doubts, writing that "MacDonald has no place in [literature's] first rank—perhaps not even in its second." Today's reader, when first confronted with MacDonald's writing, may well be tempted to agree. His books are long, his nineteenth-century mannerisms do not all age well, and several of his novels include patches of intimidating Scots dialect (more on that below).

All this. Yet mention MacDonald's name, and it will not be long before you find yourself speaking with someone who, like C. S. Lewis, has found MacDonald's books "beyond price" despite their literary deficiencies. Lewis goes on:

I dare not say that he is never in error; but to speak plainly I know hardly any other writer who seems to be closer, or more continually close, to the Spirit of Christ Himself. Hence his Christ-like union of tenderness and severity. Nowhere else outside the New Testament have I found terror and comfort so intertwined.

♦ ♦ ♦

I was introduced to George MacDonald early in life by my grandfather. He could read aloud better than anyone in the world, and among the dozens of books he read to me and my siblings were MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *The Princess and Curdie*. My grandparents' house was full of books, but it was obvious even to a child that George MacDonald meant something special to Grandpa. At a time when most of MacDonald's books were out of print and difficult to find, he would spend long weekend afternoons combing the catalogs of secondhand booksellers for titles he hadn't read. The books, when they came, were generally in poor condition. He mended and rebound them with loving precision, letting us help paint on the stiff bindery glue and select ribbons to bind in as markers. Into the back of each book he pasted a glossary of Scottish terms, and in the front he placed a photocopied overview of MacDonald's life along with a list of his works. The list was annotated in Grandpa's decisive handwriting to save future readers from wasting time on titles he considered inferior. There are marks of A+ for his favorites (*Robert Falconer*, *Sir Gibbie*, *Warlock o' Glenwarlock*). *Lilith*, which he could



never see the point of, rates a D-. Like many people who love MacDonald's writings, he made collections of extracts. It was from one of these—ninety-one short selections manually typed on a vintage Smith Corona and bound into a little volume he gave my father for his birthday—that I first discovered, at a time when I badly needed it, MacDonald's great-hearted, practical, but uncompromising account of the New Testament message. I read that collection numerous times before I read MacDonald's novels for myself, and although I have since read almost all his published work, I still return to that little book for inspiration and reflection.



MacDonald dedicated his life to spreading the gospel; writing books was his main means of doing this. He once said, "People find great fault with me—that I turn my stories into sermons. They forget that I have a Master to serve before I can wait upon the public." In his work he returns frequently to themes of discipleship, conscience, and faith. And yes, he is sometimes—actually, often—preachy. But we forgive him because so many of his novels are terrifically entertaining in unexpected ways; when they were published they sold in the hundreds of thousands in both England and the United States. His 1875 novel *Malcolm*, for instance, was reprinted more than a dozen times after being serialized in a magazine. MacDonald's imaginative stories for children and adults are peerless in their invention, humor, and insight. As W. H. Auden wrote, "In that style of writing which is called visionary or mythic, MacDonald has never been surpassed." His explicitly religious works, meanwhile, are rich in wisdom, beauty, and generosity. The aim of this book is to bring together those passages from MacDonald's writings—novels,

works of fantasy, children's stories, sermons, devotional writings, and personal correspondence—that best illuminate the good news of Jesus, which was the constant theme and the joy of his life.

The selections in this book have been arranged to follow the path of a life of discipleship (and to address some of the challenges to such a life: moralism and mammon). This organization is necessarily arbitrary at times—a passage about worship will inevitably be about prayer as well—and some passages have been split between chapters because they speak to different ideas. Arranging the material this way allows readers to explore MacDonald's insights on key themes in various literary forms and shows the consistency and largeness of vision with which he returned to the gospel's first principles. (Because this message is the focus of this book, no scholarly inquiry into MacDonald's theology or literary influences has been attempted.) All of MacDonald's published works were considered in selecting passages, but for the purpose of this collection some books proved more useful than others. The organization of the material into thematic sections forced some of the passages to be out of narrative order. Anyone wanting to find out more about the stories—which are by turns realistic, gothic, fantastic, romantic, and comic—should treat themselves to the original novels. Readers will notice that some names are repeated in different selections. This is because MacDonald revisited some of his favorite characters in several novels: Robert Falconer, who shows God's love to the people around him simply by being present with them; Donal Grant, whose serenely courageous faith is the result of weathering an early disappointment; Malcolm, the fisherman who combines childlike discipleship with iron integrity.

A handful of characters in MacDonald's novels speak a

lowland Scots dialect. Because the remarks of these characters sound glib or contrived if “translated” into standard English (and because MacDonald himself resisted such simplifications), the selections in this book containing dialect have not been modernized. Readers are of course free to skip these passages, but most people will find them easy to understand if they are read slowly and sounded out phonetically; the meanings of those words and phrases that are less easily understood are given at the foot of the page.



MacDonald believed that God makes use of the ordinary events of each day—the “holy present” as he called it—to lead and teach his people. He was convinced that the kingdom of God can be a reality in the here and now, and that it requires daily acts of obedient discipleship to bring it about. As a character in *Thomas Wingfold* says, “I begin to suspect . . . that the common transactions of life are the most sacred channels for the spread of the heavenly leaven.” Some of these channels recur in MacDonald’s books (and in this collection): the conversation with a parent or wise teacher; the delight in the created world and the everyday pleasures of life; the lengthy sickness that stirs the conscience; the experience of love between man and woman; the contemplation of death and life eternal.

There is an autobiographical element to several of these themes, so that some knowledge of MacDonald’s life is instructive. (MacDonald himself had no interest in publishing the details of his history: he wrote in 1893 to a friend who had asked to interview him, “I never have and never will consent to be interviewed. I will do nothing to bring my personality

before the public in any way farther than my work in itself necessitates.”) George MacDonald was born in 1824 in a village in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, and was raised in a loving and happy home on his father’s farm. He later said that his relationship with his father taught him that fatherhood must be the core of the universe. George MacDonald’s early education in country schools emphasized stories—of Scotland’s history and heroes, classical mythology, and the Old Testament—giving him experience in the power of stories to transform and illuminate everyday life. He left home to study at King’s College in Aberdeen, receiving a master’s degree in chemistry and physics in 1845.

Around this time, he decided to devote his life to serving God by spreading his word, both from the pulpit and through writing. He traveled to London to seek ordination as a Congregationalist minister, and when he was twenty-six, he was appointed minister of a church in Arundel, East Sussex. He left this position after three years because some of his views were considered heretical by the church deacons: he believed that God’s love extends even to the heathen, and held out hope that God would eventually reconcile all creation to himself. (His belief that animals would also enter heaven was another point of disagreement.)

In 1851 he married Louisa Powell. Their fifty-one-year marriage was a partnership of deep love, mutual respect, and happy collaboration on the project of raising eleven children (“the wrong side of a dozen,” MacDonald liked to say). He relied on his wife’s literary opinions as well as the cheerful reliability with which she managed the affairs of their large household. Louisa was by all accounts a spirited woman. A typical anecdote tells how, during the bedlam of an earthquake that struck during a church service, she reacted by making for the organ and playing Handel’s Hallelujah chorus while the rest of the

congregation hid under the pews.

Even in the years of MacDonald's greatest popularity as a writer, the family was never financially secure, but his confidence that God would provide was never disappointed. MacDonald received very little in royalties for his books, in part because pirated editions appeared on both sides of the Atlantic. Additional income came from occasional lectureships and the amateur family dramatic productions Louisa organized, and in 1877 Queen Victoria—who had given his children's books to her grandchildren—gave MacDonald a small Civil List pension. Despite the family's habitually penniless state, their home was widely known as a place of genial hospitality where anyone, from an orphan child to Alfred Lord Tennyson, the poet laureate, would find welcome. One guest wrote, "In some wonderful way, all classes, nations, and creeds met willingly under that roof."

One of MacDonald's early admirers was Lady Byron, the widow of the poet, who sponsored a family trip of several months to Algiers in 1858 after doctors advised Mediterranean air for MacDonald's tuberculosis. John Ruskin and Lewis Carroll were especially close friends—the MacDonald children were the first to read the manuscript of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and it was their enthusiastic response that convinced Carroll to publish it. MacDonald enjoyed similar relationships among the American literary establishment: during a lecture tour in the northeast in 1872, his itinerary included visits with Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He and Mark Twain struck up an unlikely friendship and discussed co-authoring a book.

But more important to him than his famous acquaintances was his desire to reach a broad public with the gospel message. Apart from writing, he lectured to crowds of up to

eight thousand. According to one newspaper account, “There is something indescribable about the man which holds the audience till the last word. It is not eloquence or poetry, nor is there any straining for effect, but it is the man’s soul that captivates. You love the man at once.”

George MacDonald suffered from lung trouble throughout most of his life, and several of his children had tuberculosis: the deaths of four of them during his lifetime brought great grief, together with an ever firmer faith in the resurrection. Because English winters aggravated tuberculosis, the family moved in 1879 to Bordighera, Italy, where they lived for about twenty years in a villa they called Casa Coraggio (House of Courage). These years and the years leading up to them were MacDonald’s most productive literary period: in the two decades between 1870 and 1890, he wrote twenty-two books, including numerous novels of over four hundred pages, all while participating in a lively home life and corresponding with dozens of friends. One acquaintance of this period was Arthur Hughes, an artist in the Pre-Raphaelite school who identified closely with MacDonald’s belief that imagination can promote an understanding of God’s purpose by “choosing, gathering, and vitally combining the material of a new revelation.” Hughes provided dozens of illustrations for MacDonald’s books, some of which have been reproduced in this volume. There was a family connection with Hughes as well: the MacDonald’s second daughter, Mary Josephine, was engaged to Hughes’s nephew Edward Hughes—another artist, who drew the portrait of MacDonald that is on the cover of this book—for four years until her death from tuberculosis in 1878.

The family returned to England in 1900. MacDonald’s last years were spent in a house in Surrey that had been designed for him by a son who was an architect. Here he and Louisa

celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary in June 1901, and here they parted: Louisa died in January of the next year. From then until his death on September 18, 1905, George MacDonald rarely spoke. He kept what his son Greville called “his long vigil,” waiting to be taken into what he had once described as “a life beyond, a larger life, more awake, more earnest, more joyous than this!”



That George MacDonald is known at all today is likely due to the influence his writings had on two of the twentieth century’s most important Christian apologists, G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis. Both men gladly acknowledged their debt to him, and both were eager that he should be more widely read. Chesterton wrote, “When he comes to be more carefully studied as a mystic, as I think he will be when people discover the possibility of collecting jewels scattered in a rather irregular setting, it will be found, I fancy, that he stands for a rather important turning-point in the history of Christendom.” For both men, MacDonald’s imaginative stories first provided a new view of the world: Chesterton described *The Princess and the Goblin* as “a book that has made a difference to my whole existence,” while C. S. Lewis said that, reading *Phantastes* as a young atheist, “I knew that I had crossed a great frontier.” Lewis explained this statement when he looked back later in life:

The quality which had enchanted me in his imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic reality in which we all live. I should have been shocked in my teens if anyone had told me that what I learned to love in *Phantastes* was goodness. But now that I

know, I see there was no deception. The deception is all the other way round—in that prosaic moralism which confines goodness to the region of Law and Duty, which never lets us feel in our face the sweet air blowing from “the land of righteousness.”

Both men came to admire MacDonald’s realistic novels and religious writings as well; their appreciations at the end of this book provide perspective on the question of George MacDonald’s greatness as a writer. In Chesterton’s words, he is “not so much a man of letters, as a man with something to say.” And what MacDonald says returns invariably to the heart of the gospel. There is an account of a lecture he gave toward the end of his life that describes how, “Acknowledging a vote of thanks, MacDonald said in the homely Scottish tones so characteristic of him: ‘I’m getting an old man, and I don’t know how soon I may be away, but I would just like to say to the young men and women present that there’s nothing in all the world worth doing except following Jesus Christ.’”

♦ ♦ ♦

My grandfather was found to have advanced incurable cancer in May of 2002. During his final summer, his appreciation for the simple and sublime joys of daily life remained vivid, but he never (that I know) questioned or regretted that his time on earth was ending. During those months he referred us to a passage from one of MacDonald’s A+ titles, *What’s Mine’s Mine*, that could have been written about him: “I do care to live—tremendously—but I don’t mind where. He who made this room so well worth



living in, may surely be trusted with the next!" It is to my grandfather, Richard Arnold Mommsen, that my work on this book is gratefully dedicated.

*Marianne Wright*

*July 2016*

For what is the great glory o' God but that,  
tho' no man can comprehen' Him,  
He comes doon, an lays his cheek till his man's,  
an' says till him,  
"Eh, my cratur!"

*George MacDonald*

# Finding God

*Ask, and it shall be given you;  
seek, and ye shall find;  
knock, and it shall be opened unto you:*

*For every one that asketh receiveth;  
and he that seeketh findeth;  
and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.*

*Matthew 7:7-8*



I.

## Seeking

*From a sermon reflecting on Jesus' words, "Whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me" (Matt. 18:5).*

Brothers, have you found our king? There he is, kissing little children and saying they are like God.

*From the novel Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood. A young man despairs of finding a way to talk to the woman he is in love with, and at last decides to ask God for help.*

How often do we look upon God as our last and feeblest resource! We go to Him because we have nowhere else to go. And then we learn that the storms of life have driven us, not upon the rocks, but into the desired haven; that we have been compelled, as to the last remaining, so to the best, the only, the central help.

*From a sermon.*

Nor will God force any door to enter in. He may send a tempest about the house; the wind of His admonishment may burst

doors and windows, yea, shake the house to its foundations; but not then, not so, will He enter. The door must be opened by the willing hand, ere the foot of Love will cross the threshold. He watches to see the door move from within.

Every tempest is but an assault in the siege of Love. The terror of God is but the other side of His love; it is love outside, that would be inside—love that knows the house is no house, only a place, until it enter.

*From the novel Thomas Wingfold, Curate. A young minister, Thomas Wingfold, is challenged by an atheist to defend his religious convictions, and in trying to do so finds how shallow his own faith is. In time he confides in the deeply believing Mr. Polwarth.*

Of course all this he ought to have gone through long ago! But how can a man go through anything till his hour be come? Saul of Tarsus was sitting at the feet of Gamaliel when our Lord said to his apostles—“Yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.” Wingfold had all this time been skirting the wall of the kingdom of heaven without even knowing that there was a wall there, not to say seeing a gate in it. . . .

It never occurred to him—as how should it?—that he might have commenced undergoing the most marvellous of all changes,—one so marvellous, indeed, that for a man to fore-know its result or understand what he was passing through, would be more strange than that a caterpillar should recognise in the rainbow-winged butterfly hovering over the flower at whose leaf he was gnawing, the perfected idea of his own potential self—I mean the change of being born again. . . .

And all the time, the young man was wrestling, his life in his hand, with his own unbelief; while upon his horizon ever and anon rose the glimmer of a great aurora, or the glimpse of a boundless main—if only he could have been sure they were no mirage of his own parched heart and hungry eye—that they were thoughts in the mind of the Eternal, and *therefore* had appeared in his, even as the Word was said to have become flesh and dwelt with men! The next moment he would be gasping in that malarious exhalation from the marshes of his neglected heart—the counter-fear, namely, that the word under whose potent radiance the world seemed on the verge of budding forth and blossoming as the rose, was *too good to be true*.

“Yes, much too good, if there be no living, self-willing Good,” said Polwarth one evening, in answer to the phrase just dropped from his lips. “But if there be such a God as alone could be God, can anything be too good to be true?—too good for such a God as contented Jesus Christ?”

*From the novel Robert Falconer. Robert Falconer is a school-boy who is being raised in a tiny Scottish village by his loving but strictly Calvinist grandmother. His father has abandoned him and his mother died when he was born. This longer selection follows Robert as he grows up and his search for God leads him, as he strives to find the truth, to question the religious dogma that he has been taught.*

*Every evening Robert and his grandmother read Scripture and pray together.*

They rose from their knees, and Mrs. Falconer sat down by her fire, with her feet on her little wooden stool, and began, as was

her wont in that household twilight, ere the lamp was lighted, to review her past life, and follow her lost son through all conditions and circumstances to her imaginable. And when the world to come arose before her, clad in all the glories which her fancy, chilled by education and years, could supply, it was but to vanish in the gloom of the remembrance of him with whom she dared not hope to share its blessedness. This at least was how Falconer afterwards interpreted the sudden changes from gladness to gloom which he saw at such times on her countenance.

But while such a small portion of the universe of thought was enlightened by the glowworm lamp of the theories she had been taught, she was not limited for light to that feeble source. While she walked on her way, the moon, unseen herself behind the clouds, was illuminating the whole landscape so gently and evenly, that the glowworm being the only visible point of radiance, to it she attributed all the light. But she felt bound to go on believing as she had been taught; for sometimes the most original mind has the strongest sense of law upon it, and will, in default of a better, obey a beggarly one only till the higher law that swallows it up manifests itself. Obedience was as essential an element of her creed as of that of any purest-minded monk; neither being sufficiently impressed with this: that, while obedience is the law of the kingdom, it is of considerable importance that that which is obeyed should be in very truth the will of God. It is one thing, and a good thing, to do for God's sake that which is not his will: it is another thing, and altogether a better thing—how much better, no words can tell—to do for God's sake that which is his will. Mrs. Falconer's submission and obedience led her to accept as the will of God, lest she should be guilty of opposition to him, that which it was anything but giving him honour to accept as such. Therefore her love to God was too like the love of the slave

or the dog; too little like the love of the child, with whose obedience the Father cannot be satisfied until he cares for his reason as the highest form of his will.

*Later at night, Robert is in his attic room.*

So Robert sat in the dark.

But the rain had now ceased. Some upper wind had swept the clouds from the sky, and the whole world of stars was radiant over the earth and its griefs.

“O God, where art thou?” he said in his heart, and went to his own room to look out.

There was no curtain, and the blind had not been drawn down, therefore the earth looked in at the storm-window. The sea neither glimmered nor shone. It lay across the horizon like a low level cloud, out of which came a moaning. Was this moaning all of the earth, or was there trouble in the starry places too? thought Robert, as if already he had begun to suspect the truth from afar—that save in the secret place of the Most High, and in the heart that is hid with the Son of Man in the bosom of the Father, there is trouble—a sacred unrest—everywhere—the moaning of a tide setting homewards, even towards the bosom of that Father.

*As he grows older, Robert continues to wonder how it is possible to find God, often walking outdoors as he thinks.*

And once more the words arose in his mind, “My peace I give unto you.”

Now he fell a-thinking what this peace could be. And it came into his mind as he thought, that Jesus had spoken in another place about giving rest to those that came to him, while here he spoke about “my peace.” Could this mean a certain kind of peace that the Lord himself possessed? Perhaps it was in virtue of that



peace, whatever it was, that he was the Prince of Peace. Whatever peace he had must be the highest and best peace—therefore the one peace for a man to seek, if indeed, as the words of the Lord seemed to imply, a man was capable of possessing it. He remembered the New Testament in his box, and, resolving to try whether he could not make something more out of it, went back to the inn quieter in heart than since he left his home. In the evening he returned to the brook, and fell to searching the story, seeking after the peace of Jesus.

He found that the whole passage stood thus:—

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

He did not leave the place for six weeks. Every day he went to the burn, as he called it, with his New Testament; every day tried yet again to make out something more of what the Saviour meant. By the end of the month it had dawned upon him, he hardly knew how, that the peace of Jesus (although, of course, he could not know what it was like till he had it) must have been a peace that came from the doing of the will of his Father. From the account he gave of the discoveries he then made, I venture to represent them in the driest and most exact form that I can find they will admit of. When I use the word discoveries, I need hardly say that I use it with reference to Falconer and his previous knowledge. They were these:—that Jesus taught—

First,—That a man’s business is to do the will of God:

Second,—That God takes upon himself the care of the man:

Third,—Therefore, that a man must never be afraid of anything; and so,

---

*burn* stream

Fourth,—be left free to love God with all his heart, and his neighbour as himself.

But one day, his thoughts having cleared themselves a little upon these points, a new set of questions arose with sudden inundation—comprised in these two:

“How can I tell for certain that there ever was such a man? How am I to be sure that such as he says is the mind of the maker of these glaciers and butterflies?”

All this time he was in the wilderness as much as Moses at the back of Horeb, or St. Paul when he vanishes in Arabia: and he did nothing but read the four gospels and ponder over them. Therefore it is not surprising that he should have already become so familiar with the gospel story, that the moment these questions appeared, the following words should dart to the forefront of his consciousness to meet them:—

“If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.”

Here was a word of Jesus himself, announcing the one means of arriving at a conviction of the truth or falsehood of all that he said, namely, the doing of the will of God by the man who would arrive at such conviction.

The next question naturally was: What is this will of God of which Jesus speaks? Here he found himself in difficulty. The theology of his grandmother rushed in upon him, threatening to overwhelm him with demands as to feeling and inward action from which his soul turned with sickness and fainting. That they were repulsive to him, that they appeared unreal, and contradictory to the nature around him, was no proof that they were not of God. But on the other hand, that they demanded what seemed to him unjust,—that these demands were founded on what seemed to him untruth attributed to God, on ways of thinking

and feeling which are certainly degrading in a man,—these were reasons of the very highest nature for refusing to act upon them so long as, from whatever defects it might be in himself, they bore to him this aspect. He saw that while they appeared to be such, even though it might turn out that he mistook them, to acknowledge them would be to wrong God. But this conclusion left him in no better position for practice than before.

When at length he did see what the will of God was, he wondered, so simple did it appear, that he had failed to discover it at once. Yet not less than a fortnight had he been brooding and pondering over the question, as he wandered up and down that burnside, or sat at the foot of the heather-crowned stone and the silver-barked birch, when the light began to dawn upon him. It was thus.

In trying to understand the words of Jesus by searching back, as it were, for such thoughts and feelings in him as would account for the words he spoke, the perception awoke that at least he could not have meant by the will of God any such theological utterances as those which troubled him. Next it grew plain that what he came to do, was just to lead his life. That he should do the work, such as recorded, and much besides, that the Father gave him to do—this was the will of God concerning him. With this perception arose the conviction that unto every man whom God had sent into the world, he had given a work to do in that world. He had to lead the life God meant him to lead. The will of God was to be found and done in the world. In seeking a true relation to the world, would he find his relation to God?

The time for action was come.

He rose up from the stone of his meditation, took his staff in his hand, and went down the mountain, not knowing whither he went. And these were some of his thoughts as he went:

“If it was the will of God who made me, my will shall not be set against his. I cannot be happy, but I will bow my head and let his waves and his billows go over me. If there is such a God, he knows what a pain I bear. His will be done. Jesus thought it well that his will should be done to the death. Even if there be no God, it will be grand to be a disciple of such a man, to do as he says, think as he thought—perhaps come to feel as he felt.”

My reader may wonder that one so young should have been able to think so practically—to the one point of action. But he was in earnest, and what lay at the root of his character, at the root of all that he did, felt, and became, was childlike simplicity and purity of nature. If the sins of his father were mercifully visited upon him, so likewise were the grace and loveliness of his mother. And between the two, Falconer had fared well.



# Repentance

*From a sermon in the novel* Thomas Wingfold, Curate.

At the root of all human bliss lies repentance.

Come then at the call of the Water, the Healer, the Giver of repentance and light, the Friend of publicans and sinners, all ye on whom lies the weight of a sin, or the gathered heap of a thousand crimes. He came to call such as you, that he might make you clear and clean. He cannot bear that you should live on in such misery, such badness, such blackness of darkness. He would give you again your life, the bliss of your being. He will not speak to you one word of reproach, except indeed you should aim at justifying yourselves by accusing your neighbour. He will leave it to those who cherish the same sins in their hearts to cast stones at you: he who has no sin casts no stone.

Heartily he loves you, heartily he hates the evil in you—so heartily that he will even cast you into the fire to burn you clean. By making you clean he will give you rest. If he upbraids, it will not be for past sin, but for the present little faith, holding out to him an acorn-cup to fill.

The rest of you keep aloof, if you will, until you shall have done some deed that compels you to cry out for deliverance; but you that know yourselves sinners, come to him that he may work in you his perfect work, for he came not to call the righteous, but sinners, us, you and me, to repentance.

*From a letter to a friend.*

What would be the most dreadful thing, do you think? To me it seemed the other day that it would be for God to let any fault or wrong in me pass; for Him not to mind, not to care about it. Better hell a thousand times than that. Let Him forgive, splendidly, tenderly, but let it be forgiveness, and not “never minding.” Let Him make every excuse, every honest excuse for us, for that is but fair; but let not our Father be content that one spot should be passed by, or one shade less than His righteousness satisfy Him in us!

*From a sermon.*

The Christian life is a constant fighting. . . . You think Jesus Christ came to save you from any suffering and to do you good. He came to save you from your sins, and until you are saved from them He will step between you and no suffering. “As many as I love I rebuke and chasten. Be zealous, therefore, and repent” [Rev. 3:19].

What does repent mean? To weep that you have done something wrong? No; that is all very well, but that is not repentance. Is repentance to be vexed with yourself that you have fallen away from your own ideal . . . ? No; that is not repentance. What is repentance? Turning your back upon the evil thing; pressing on

to lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold upon you. To repent is to think better of it, to turn away from the evil. No man is ever condemned for the wicked things that he has done; he is condemned because he won't leave them. . . .

The Eternal Son of the Father speaks of Himself as a suppliant at our door. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." . . . Do you hear Him knocking at your hearts? He wants to get in. What do I mean by that figure? Well, I mean this, that He wants to get to your inner house, your consciousness, your life, and to clean it out for you, and to turn out that self that you are always worshipping—to turn it out, and put the Eternal Father in its place. . . . It is His Father that He wants to see ruling there. He is to be one with us in a way that there is no power in our hearts to understand the closeness of it, no figure in our language to say how close it is, for except you know how close the relation of Jesus Christ to the Father you cannot know how close the relation of every child of God, every creature that He has made, is to his Father, his origin. . . .

When you are unhappy, restless, dissatisfied, do not know what to do with yourself, it is just because you have not Christ as your friend. To know God by knowing Christ, that is salvation, that is redemption, and nothing else is.

*From the novel Robert Falconer. Robert Falconer, who had played violin since early childhood, has suffered from a paralyzing illness. After recovering, he experienced a conversion.*

The rumour got abroad that he was a "changed character,"—how is not far to seek, for [the minister] Mr. MacCleary fancied himself the honoured instrument of his conversion, whereas paralysis and the New Testament were the chief agents, and even



the violin had more share in it than the minister. For the spirit of God lies all about the spirit of man like a mighty sea, ready to rush in at the smallest chink in the walls that shut him out from his own—walls which even the tone of a violin afloat on the wind of that spirit is sometimes enough to rend from battlement to base, as the blast of the rams' horns rent the walls of Jericho.

*From the novel The Vicar's Daughter. A man has spoken unkindly to his wife.*

Doubtless he would have given much to obliterate the fact, but he would not confess that he had been wrong. We are so stupid, that confession seems to us to fix the wrong upon us, instead of throwing it, as it does, into the depths of the eternal sea.

*From the youth novel Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood. The boy Ranald, remorseful over a mean action that injured his friend Elsie and her grandmother, Mrs. Gregson, dreads telling his father about it.*

I woke early on the Sunday morning, and a most dreary morning it was. I could not lie in bed, and, although no one was up yet, rose and dressed myself. The house was as waste as a sepulchre. I opened the front door and went out. The world itself was no better. The day had hardly begun to dawn. The dark dead frost held it in chains of iron. The sky was dull and leaden, and cindery flakes of snow were thinly falling. Everywhere life looked utterly dreary and hopeless. What was there worth living for?

I went out on the road, and the ice in the ruts crackled under my feet like the bones of dead things. I wandered away from the house, and the keen wind cut me to the bone, for I had not put on plaid or cloak. I turned into a field, and stumbled along over

its uneven surface, swollen into hard frozen lumps, so that it was like walking upon stones. The summer was gone and the winter was here, and my heart was colder and more miserable than any winter in the world. I found myself at length at the hillock where Turkey [the nickname of a boy who is Ranald's closest friend] and I had lain on that lovely afternoon the year before. The stream below was dumb with frost. The wind blew wearily but sharply across the bare field. There was no Elsie Duff, with head drooping over her knitting, seated in the summer grass on the other side of a singing brook. Her head was aching on her pillow because I had struck her with that vile lump; and instead of the odour of white clover she was breathing the dregs of the hateful smoke with which I had filled the cottage. I sat down, cold as it was, on the frozen hillock, and buried my face in my hands. Then my dream returned upon me. This was how I sat in my dream when my father had turned me out-of-doors. Oh how dreadful it would be! I should just have to lie down and die.

I could not sit long for the cold. Mechanically I rose and paced about. But I grew so wretched in body that it made me forget for a while the trouble of my mind, and I wandered home again. The house was just stirring. I crept to the nursery, undressed, and lay down. . . . But I did not sleep again, although I lay till all the rest had gone to the parlour. I found them seated round a blazing fire waiting for my father. He came in soon after, and we had our breakfast, and Davie gave his crumbs as usual to the robins and sparrows which came hopping on the window-sill. I fancied my father's eyes were often turned in my direction, but I could not lift mine to make sure.

I had never before known what misery was.

Only Tom and I went to church that day: it was so cold. My father preached from the text, "Be sure your sin shall find you out." I thought with myself that he had found out my sin, and

was preparing to punish me for it, and I was filled with terror as well as dismay. I could scarcely keep my seat, so wretched was I. But when after many instances in which punishment had come upon evil-doers when they least expected it, and in spite of every precaution to fortify themselves against it, he proceeded to say that a man's sin might find him out long before the punishment of it overtook him, and drew a picture of the misery of the wicked man who fled when none pursued him, and trembled at the rustling of a leaf, then I was certain that he knew what I had done, or had seen through my face into my conscience. When at last we went home, I kept waiting the whole of the day for the storm to break, expecting every moment to be called to his study. I did not enjoy a mouthful of my food, for I felt his eyes upon me, and they tortured me. I was like a shy creature of the woods whose hole had been stopped up: I had no place of refuge—nowhere to hide my head; and I felt so naked!

My very soul was naked. After tea I slunk away to the nursery, and sat staring into the fire. Mrs. Mitchell came in several times and scolded me for sitting there, instead of with Tom and the rest in the parlour, but I was too miserable even to answer her. At length she brought Davie, and put him to bed; and a few minutes after, I heard my father coming down the stair with Allister, who was chatting away to him. I wondered how he could. My father came in with the big Bible under his arm, as was his custom on Sunday nights, drew a chair to the table, rang for candles, and with Allister by his side and me seated opposite to him, began to find a place from which to read to us. To my yet stronger conviction, he began and read through without a word of remark the parable of the Prodigal Son. When he came to the father's delight at having him back, the robe, and the shoes, and the ring, I could not repress my tears. "If I could only go back," I thought,

“and set it all right! but then I’ve never gone away.” It was a foolish thought, instantly followed by a longing impulse to tell my father all about it. How could it be that I had not thought of this before? I had been waiting all this time for my sin to find me out; why should I not frustrate my sin, and find my father first?

As soon as he had done reading, and before he had opened his mouth to make any remark, I crept round the table to his side, and whispered in his ear,—

“Papa, I want to speak to you.”

“Very well, Ranald,” he said, more solemnly, I thought, than usual; “come up to the study.”

He rose and led the way, and I followed. A whimper of disappointment came from Davie’s bed. My father went and kissed him, and said he would soon be back, whereupon Davie nestled down satisfied.

When we reached the study, he closed the door, sat down by the fire, and drew me towards him.

I burst out crying, and could not speak for sobs. He encouraged me most kindly. He said—

“Have you been doing anything wrong, my boy?”

“Yes, papa, very wrong,” I sobbed. “I’m disgusted with myself.”

“I am glad to hear it, my dear,” he returned. “There is some hope of you, then.”

“Oh! I don’t know that,” I rejoined. “Even Turkey despises me.”

“That’s very serious,” said my father. “He’s a fine fellow, Turkey. I should not like him to despise me. But tell me all about it.”

It was with great difficulty I could begin, but with the help of questioning me, my father at length understood the whole matter. He paused for a while plunged in thought; then rose, saying,—

“It’s a serious affair, my dear boy; but now you have told me, I shall be able to help you.”

“But you knew about it before, didn’t you, papa? Surely you did!”

“Not a word of it, Ranald. You fancied so because your sin had found you out. I must go and see how the poor woman is. I don’t want to reproach you at all, now you are sorry, but I should like you just to think that you have been helping to make that poor old woman wicked. She is naturally of a sour disposition, and you have made it sourer still, and no doubt made her hate everybody more than she was already inclined to do. You have been working against God in this parish.”

I burst into fresh tears. It was too dreadful.

“What *am* I to do?” I cried.

“Of course you must beg Mrs. Gregson’s pardon, and tell her that you are both sorry and ashamed.”

“Yes, yes, papa. Do let me go with you.”

“It’s too late to find her up, I’m afraid; but we can just go and see. We’ve done a wrong, a very grievous wrong, my boy, and I cannot rest till I at least know the consequences of it.”

He put on his long greatcoat and muffler in haste, and having seen that I too was properly wrapped up, he opened the door and stepped out. But remembering the promise he had made to Davie, he turned and went down to the nursery to speak to him again, while I awaited him on the doorsteps. It would have been quite dark but for the stars, and there was no snow to give back any of their shine. The earth swallowed all their rays, and was no brighter for it. But oh, what a change to me from the frightful morning! When my father returned, I put my hand in his almost as fearlessly as Allister or wee Davie might have done, and away we walked together.

“Papa,” I said, “why did you say *we* have done a wrong? You did not do it.”

“My dear boy, persons who are so near each other as we are, must not only bear the consequences together of any wrong done by one of them, but must, in a sense, bear each other’s iniquities even. If I sin, you must suffer; if you sin, you being my own boy, I must suffer. But this is not all: it lies upon both of us to do what we can to get rid of the wrong done; and thus we have to bear each other’s sin. I am accountable to make amends as far as I can; and also to do what I can to get you to be sorry and make amends as far as you can.”

“But, papa, isn’t that hard?” I asked.

“Do you think I should like to leave you to get out of your sin as you best could, or sink deeper and deeper into it? Should I grudge anything to take the weight of the sin, or the wrong to others, off you? Do you think I should want not to be troubled about it? Or if I were to do anything wrong, would you think it very hard that you had to help me to be good, and set things right? Even if people looked down upon you because of me, would you say it was hard? Would you not rather say, ‘I’m glad to bear anything for my father: I’ll share with him?’”

“Yes, indeed, papa. I would rather share with you than not, whatever it was.”

“Then you see, my boy, how kind God is in tying us up in one bundle that way. It is a grand and beautiful thing that the fathers should suffer for the children, and the children for the fathers. Come along. We must step out, or I fear we shall not be able to make our apology to-night. When we’ve got over this, Ranald, we must be a good deal more careful what company we keep.”

“Oh, papa,” I answered, “if Turkey would only forgive me!”

“There’s no fear. Turkey is sure to forgive you when you’ve done what you can to make amends. He’s a fine fellow, Turkey. I have a high opinion of Turkey—as you call him.”

“If he would, papa, I should not wish for any other company than his.”

“A boy wants various kinds of companions, Ranald, but I fear you have been neglecting Turkey. You owe him much.”

“Yes, indeed I do, papa,” I answered; “and I have been neglecting him. If I had kept with Turkey, I should never have got into such a dreadful scrape as this.”

“That is too light a word to use for it, my boy. Don’t call a wickedness a scrape; for a wickedness it certainly was, though I am only too willing to believe you had no adequate idea at the time *how* wicked it was.”

“I won’t again, papa. But I am so relieved already.”

“Perhaps poor old Mrs. Gregson is not relieved, though. You ought not to forget her.”

Thus talking, we hurried on until we arrived at the cottage. A dim light was visible through the window. My father knocked, and Elsie opened the door.

*From the novel Thomas Wingfold, Curate. The narrator is speaking about a woman who has committed and hidden a heinous crime and has now tried to murder the man who deceived her daughter.*

“I suspect it is the weight of her own crime that makes her so fierce to avenge her daughter. I doubt if anything makes one so unforgiving as guilt unrepented of.”

*From the novel Robert Falconer. Two men have been discussing how prison chaplains should approach their work.*

The clergyman has the message of salvation, not of sin, to give. Whatever oppression is on a man, whatever trouble, whatever conscious something that comes between him and the blessedness of life, is his sin; for whatever is not of faith is sin; and from all this He came to save us. Salvation alone can rouse in us a sense of our sinfulness. One must have got on a good way before he can be sorry for his sins. There is no condition of sorrow laid down as necessary to forgiveness. Repentance does not mean sorrow: it means turning away from the sins. Every man can do that, more or less. And that every man must do. The sorrow will come afterwards, all in good time. Jesus offers to take us out of our own hands into his, if we will only obey him.

*From the novel The Marquis of Lossie. The estate manager, or factor, is a hardened, cruel man. He has been confined to his bed by a serious accident.*

Sickness sometimes works marvellous changes, and the most marvellous on persons who to the ordinary observer seem the least liable to change. Much apparent steadfastness of nature, however, is but sluggishness, and comes from incapacity to generate change or contribute towards personal growth; and it follows that those whose nature is such can as little prevent or retard any change that has its initiative beyond them. The men who impress the world as the mightiest are those often who can the least—never those who can the most in their natural kingdom; generally those whose frontiers lie openest to the inroads of temptation, whose atmosphere is most subject to moody changes and passionate convulsions, who, while perhaps



they can whisper laws to a hemisphere, can utter no decree of smallest potency as to how things shall be within themselves. . . .

But then first, when the false strength of the self imagined great man is gone, when the want or the sickness has weakened the self assertion which is so often mistaken for strength of individuality, when the occupations in which he formerly found a comfortable consciousness of being have lost their interest, his ambitions their glow, and his consolations their colour, when suffering has wasted away those upper strata of his factitious consciousness, and laid bare the lower, simpler, truer deeps, of which he has never known or has forgotten the existence, then there is a hope of his commencing a new and real life.

Powers then, even powers within himself of which he knew nothing, begin to assert themselves, and the man commonly reported to possess a strong will, is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. This factor, this man of business, this despiser of humbug, to whom the scruples of a sensitive conscience were a contempt, would now lie awake in the night and weep.

“Ah!” I hear it answered, “but that was the weakness caused by his illness.” True: but what then had become of his strength? And was it all weakness? What if this weakness was itself a sign of returning life, not of advancing death—of the dawn of a new and genuine strength! For he wept because, in the visions of his troubled brain, he saw once more the cottage of his father the shepherd, with all its store of lovely nothings round which the nimbus of sanctity had gathered while he thought not of them; wept over the memory of that moment of delight when his mother kissed him for parting with his willow whistle to the sister who cried for it: he cried now in his turn, after five and fifty years, for not yet had the little fact done with him, not yet

had the kiss of his mother lost its power on the man: wept over the sale of the pet lamb, though he had himself sold thousands of lambs, since; wept over even that bush of dusty miller by the door, like the one he trampled under his horse's feet in the little yard at Scaurnose that horrible day. And oh, that nest of wild bees with its combs of honey unspeakable! He used to laugh and sing then: he laughed still sometimes—he could hear how he laughed, and it sounded frightful—but he never sang!

Were the tears that honoured such childish memories all of weakness? Was it cause of regret that he had not been wicked enough to have become impregnable to such foolish trifles? Unable to mount a horse, unable to give an order, not caring even for his toddy, he was left at the mercy of his fundamentals; his childhood came up and claimed him, and he found the childish things he had put away better than the manly things he had adopted. It is one thing for St. Paul and another for Mr. Worldly Wiseman to put away childish things. The ways they do it, and the things they substitute, are both so different. And now first to me, whose weakness it is to love life more than manners, and men more than their portraits, the man begins to grow interesting. Picture the dawn of innocence on a dull, whisky drinking, commonplace soul, stained by self indulgence, and distorted by injustice! Unspeakably more interesting and lovely is to me such a dawn than the honeymoon of the most passionate of lovers, except indeed I know them such lovers that their love will outlast all the moons.

*From the novel The Elect Lady. Alexa has enjoyed arguing about matters of faith with a man she considered her intellectual inferior.*

“When you would not discuss things with me, I thought you were afraid of losing the argument. Now I see that, instead of disputing about opinions, I should have been saying: ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’”

*From the novel The Vicar’s Daughter. Mrs. Percivale has just realized that she had misjudged a new acquaintance, and asks her forgiveness for having disparaged her.*

“Have you forgiven me?” I asked.

“How can I say I have, when I never had any thing to forgive?”

“Well, then, I must go unforgiven, for I cannot forgive myself,” I said.

“O Mrs. Percivale! if you think how the world is flooded with forgiveness, you will just dip in your cup, and take what you want.”

I felt that I was making too much even of my own shame, rose humbled, and took my former seat.

*From the novel Alec Forbes of Howglen. A teacher, remorseful for having mistreated his students, now seeks to make amends.*

Can one ever bring up arrears of duty? Can one ever make up for wrong done? Will not heaven be an endless repentance?

It would need a book to answer the first two of these questions. To the last of them I answer, “Yes—but a glad repentance.”

## **Shucks.**

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