

LECTURE I

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Mercy and Truth are met together: Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other. Psalm lxxxv. 10.

THIS psalm is a prayer for the restoration of Israel and a prophecy of blessings to come. Jehovah has been merciful and has brought His people out of captivity. He has put away His wrath and forgiven them all their sin. Such news is too good to be true, and hope falls back into deprecation. God's anger is still drawn out. Will He not raise up His chosen again and give them cause to praise Him? The answer comes quick upon the cry. The Lord speaks comfort and promises salvation—outward wealth, springing from the marriage of Mercy and Truth, issuing in Righteousness and Peace. God will make His way plain, a holy way for men to walk in.

The picture is primarily a social one—the psalm is a national psalm; but it has a personal application. The Mercy and the Truth which are promised to the people are the prerogative of God Himself, and He imparts them to individuals as well as to nations. They are indeed the very qualities by which He revealed Himself to Moses when He made all His goodness pass before him. Not as omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent was He proclaimed, but as a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, plenteous in Mercy and Truth.

The sum of God's character is Mercy and Truth, and

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it must be that His saints should shew some reflexion of the beauty of Him who has called them and set them apart. If a man have not this, he is not really a saint; if he have it ever so faintly, then we see that he is at least marked for service.

I propose in these lectures to deal, however perfunctorily, with one who bore this sacred sign, who deserves, if ever man did, to be called saint, Blaise Pascal. He was far from perfect; he was headstrong and impatient, he long clung to the things which he came to think were hateful; but his mind was aflame for Truth, and his heart athirst for Christ and His poor. And the Mercy which he practised and the Truth which he loved brought, in the end, to his frail body and his restless intellect, a Peace which the world could not give and a Righteousness which he would have been the last to claim for himself. The mercy may be gathered from his sister's account of his last days: examples of it will come up as we talk about him, examples which by their mixture of charity and common sense effectually dispel the legend that he was a misanthrope or a maniac¹. But the best measure of his mercy, and not only of his mercy but of his truth, his weakness, and his strength, is contained in one of his own *Pensées*, in words so sacred that unless they can be proved false, they assuredly proclaim him saint.

"I love all men as my brethren because they are redeemed. I love poverty because He loved it. I love money because it gives the means of helping the miserable. I keep troth with all. I do not render evil to those who wrong me, but I wish them a lot like mine which brings neither good nor harm from men. I try to be just (he first wrote I keep faithfulness and justice), true, sincere

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and faithful towards all men ; and I have a tender heart for those whom God has more closely bound to me ; and whether I am alone or seen of men, I lay all my actions before God, who shall judge them, and to whom I have consecrated them. These are my thoughts, and every day of my life I bless God my Redeemer who has implanted them in me and who has transformed a man full of weakness, misery, concupiscence, pride, and ambition into one exempt from all these evils through the power of His Grace, to which all the glory is due, since of myself I have but misery and error²."

If this is not the heart of a saint speaking out of its fulness, it is the heart of a hypocrite. My business will be to prove that it is a saint's.

I do not propose to tell Pascal's story in detail, but there are three points in it which are so liable to be missed that we must deal with them in order to understand the man. Of these points two are of a negative, and one of a positive, character. First, Pascal was not of the inner circle of Port-Royal—he was never a Solitary. Secondly, he did not, when he turned to religion, turn his back for ever on mathematics. Lastly, he was a man of wealth and position. It is this last fact which, coupled with his extraordinary scientific attainment, gives peculiar interest to his Christianity. If, as we are sometimes assured, saints are rare among men of science, they are rarer still among men of the world. So it is of this last point that I shall treat first.

Blaise Pascal came of a good Auvergnat stock, ennobled in the course of the fifteenth century, and furnishing several generations of useful civil servants³. His

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father held an important fiscal position at Clermont⁴. When the boy was eight years old, Étienne Pascal, already a widower⁵, retired from his post in Auvergne and came to Paris. His money was well invested, and he could devote himself without anxiety to the pursuit of science and the education of his three children⁶. Everyone knows the story of the marvellous boyhood of Blaise, and how he proved the first thirty-two propositions of Euclid by the light of nature. The tale may have gained rather than lost on the lips of his admiring elder sister⁷, but it is quite characteristic of the man who took nothing at second hand, that the child should have embarked on a voyage of mathematical discovery.

The circle of his father's acquaintance in Paris included men of note in the social as well as in the scientific world, and the success of his little sister Jacqueline as a prodigy of infant versification brought the family before the notice of the Queen, and of a greater than either Queen or King. It was indeed through her innocent intervention at an afternoon party⁸ that her father passed from under the displeasure of the great Cardinal who then ruled France⁹, into his high favour and a fresh place of trust. Richelieu forgave him and sent him into Normandy as *Intendant* or royal commissioner of finance. The move to Rouen was crucial for the Pascals in more ways than one. It was here that they first saw that form of religion with which their name is indissolubly connected. Jansenist doctrine and practice were being sedulously furthered in Normandy by the good *curé* of Rouville¹⁰. He drew crowds to his sermons and made many converts. Among them were two excellent gentlemen, philanthropists and amateur bone-setters, who were called in by M. Pascal when he

broke his thigh one slippery January day in 1646. They cured his leg and they opened his mind to the beauties of Jansen, Saint-Cyran, Arnauld and others of the clan. Étienne was touched, but not so deeply as his son. Blaise converted Jacqueline, and they two between them finished the work which the healers had begun upon their father¹¹; the married sister and her husband from Clermont followed their example, and by the end of the year all five were more or less under Jansenist direction. That the fervour or consistency of the women of the family was greater than the men's, will appear in the sequel; but on any shewing the atmosphere which Blaise breathed all these years was one of high thinking. The living, on the other hand, was not particularly plain. Rouen was at that time in point of culture hardly inferior to Paris¹², and the King's *Intendant* was naturally a leader in society. Rouen was a school of the fashionable philosophy of the day, a Christianized stoicism¹³; it was a very nursery of men of letters; it was the home of Pierre Corneille, who knew the Pascals well, who set the pattern for Jacqueline's verses and congratulated her in public when she won an annual prize for poetry¹⁴.

This was in fact just the society where the lad of twenty would acquire the tastes which his Jansenist friends and he himself lamented later, and would nurse ambitions which, if harmless, were strictly speaking worldly. He devised a calculating machine, intended primarily no doubt to help his father in his office-work, but probably also to bring profit to the inventor, for he meant to put it on the market, and he protected it by a royal privilege¹⁵. This instrument, which it took him years to perfect, of which he explained the mechanism in the drawing-room

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of a great lady and dedicated the completed model to a crowned head, involved expenses of production only possible to a long purse. Still further evidence of money easy to command and readily spent on science, is supplied by the experiments which he undertook in order to prove the pressure of the atmosphere. Research of this kind was very costly in the seventeenth century, and whereas rival experimenters in the same field had to be content with four feet of glass tubes or wooden pipes, Pascal is able in a lordly way to commission two glass tubes each forty feet long, and wine in proportion, wherewith to convince his gainsayers¹⁶. In a word he early learnt the value of money and loved it for what it brought—not at this time as the means of relieving misery, but as the means of advancing knowledge and winning fame and fortune.

He had his reward. At fifteen he was already famous, being recommended to Richelieu as a boy “very learned in mathematics¹⁷”; at sixteen he composed a treatise on Conic Sections which was received with astonishment and incredulity by Descartes; and now at the age of twenty-three he had made a sensible advance towards the solution of a capital problem in physical science. What might he not expect if health—a doubtful factor, for he was very delicate—and wealth were preserved to him! No wonder that when his generous father died and his property was divided up, Blaise regretted to see his younger sister’s portion on the point of disappearing into the common chest of the Port-Royal convent. Her decision to take the veil was indeed not new to him; he had himself shewn her the way; he had sympathized with her in the little difficulties she had had with their father when the project was first broached. But the moment she now chose for

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its fulfilment was very inconvenient, with so much precious work on hand and a position to make and maintain. If she joined forces with him they would do well; if she withdrew he would be seriously straitened. It is probable that the succession was saddled with certain family obligations¹⁸. In a couple of years the situation would be easier, the arithmetical machine might be in general use and provide an income. So he urged her at least to wait this space. Madame Perier, the married sister, backed him up. His suggestion was reasonable and legally correct; it did no material harm to Jacqueline, but it hurt her feelings sorely. She was disappointed in her brother. Not so her friends at Port-Royal. The convent was then ruled by the Abbess Angélique Arnauld, with her sister Agnès at her right hand and M. Singlin for her confessor. They all knew Blaise—Singlin at least in person, the nuns by reputation—and they had their own opinion about his devotion to science and other mundane vanities. *La Mère Angélique* in particular (who dominates the whole of this little drama, a figure of extraordinary beauty and sagacity), as she comforted the weeping girl, holding her to her bosom for a whole hour, spoke of him very plainly as belonging to the world and too frivolous to prefer an act of charity before his personal convenience. Nothing short of a miracle could touch him, “I mean a miracle of nature and affection, for there is no reason to look for a miracle of Grace in a person like him, and you know one must never count on miracles¹⁹.” But if the Mother Superior is great on this occasion, Pascal is not contemptible, and the end of it was that as soon as he saw his sister’s distress with his own eyes, he gave way, and the last scene is one of conflicting renunciations—Jacqueline, at the prompting

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of her abbess, eager to forgo her share, Blaise, moved by brotherly affection—the mother was right, Grace was not yet at work—pressing her to take it up. And here again the admirable nun displays her wisdom and her charity. “If Blaise is acting from Christian motives, the convent will accept—but not otherwise; we have learnt from M. de Saint-Cyran to take nothing for God’s House but that which comes from God.” Blaise signed the contract then and there, and after this glimpse into a world of which for all his Rouen and Rouville experiences he was not yet worthy, went back into the other world, to his arithmetical machine and his wealthy friends.

The society in which he moved was what the century called *celle des honnêtes gens*, people of refinement and breeding, whose code was that of *les bienséances* or good manners—perhaps the highest merely social code that has ever existed. It was the code by which Mme de Rambouillet softened and sweetened the rough manners of the early century²⁰. No one who rebelled against it was admitted to her salon, and it was no mere collection of external rules. The cynical La Rochefoucauld allowed its sanction and has analysed it for us. “It is the duty of an *honnête homme* to find pleasure in the pleasure of others, to treat their self-love with consideration and to avoid wounding it.” “The intercourse of *honnêtes gens* cannot subsist without some measure of mutual confidence.” “You must anticipate the pleasures of others, seek out ways of serving them, share their heartaches and, when these cannot be averted, shew them sympathy.” These maxims were penned some ten years after the time with which we are engaged²¹, but the man who largely inspired La Rochefoucauld and who was the acknowledged arbiter

of *honnêteté* was the Chevalier de Méré, scholar, freethinker, wit, purist, and gambler. Here is his confession of Faith. "I love Paris, the court, the gaming-table, music, ballets, the conversation of a gentleman and of a pretty woman; but losing these I do not count all lost; other pleasures come to console me. I love the song of birds in the copse, the prattle of a clear stream, the voices of the flocks in the fields. All this conveys to me a quiet and natural peace²²." This man was one of Pascal's intimate associates. Another was Damien Mitton, a somewhat shadowy figure, who nevertheless stands in Pascal's mind and in his *Pensées* as the type of the worldling, disillusioned, pessimistic, who answers every endeavour with a shrug and an "Is it worth while?", whose motto is deportment and his object the avoidance of unnecessary trouble. Another, of higher birth and better purpose, was the young Duc de Roannez, hereditary governor of Poitou, a great amateur of mathematics, who attached Pascal to his train, or rather attached himself to Pascal and stood by him through life, who was converted to Jansenism after him, to the great disgust of his people, and helped to bring out the first edition of the *Pensées*²³.

The intricacies of the arithmetical machine were expounded, as I have said, to a great lady, the Duchesse d'Aiguillon²⁴, and an aristocratic crowd, and the perfected model was offered to Christina of Sweden; but of the famous women to whom Pascal paid homage—it may be said at once that no breath of scandal ever touched him—the best known was the Marquise de Sablé, who had been beautiful in her youth and was brilliant all her life, La Rochefoucauld's loyal friend, the real successor of Madame de Rambouillet, whose outward adherence to Jansenism

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and spasmodic retreats at Port-Royal never changed her worldly heart and were the despair of the Abbess²⁵.

There is no question that for a time Pascal's life was that of an *honnête homme* among *honnêtes gens*, that it was marked by a splendour answering to his fame, that he played a part in Vanity Fair, that he knew at first-hand some of the distractions whose emptiness he condemns in the *Pensées*—the gaming-table, the chase, the tennis-court, feminine conversation—and from his friends the fascination of war and office of state²⁶. And his zest must have been the keener for the shortness of the time, eighteen months, during which he followed them²⁷. It was his way to do nothing by halves. The recoil came suddenly, though the conversion to which it led was not yet. Towards the end of 1653 he was seized by a great contempt for the world and with an ill-contained disgust with those who are of it. That it was not a true conversion appears from the account of his visit to his sister (now La Sœur Jacqueline de Sainte-Euphémie) at Port-Royal nine or ten months later, in September 1654.

This must be given in her own words. "He came to see me, and on this visit he opened his heart to me in a way that moved me greatly, confessing that amid his important occupations and all the things which helped to make him love the world and which were with reason supposed to have great hold on him, he was urgently prompted to quit it all both by the extreme distaste he had for unholy follies and distractions, and by the constant pricking of his conscience; that he felt detached from things in a way he had never been before, nor anything like it; but that yet he was so completely deserted by God that he felt no drawing in that direction: that