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God's Good Pleasure

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

It is upon a part of that statement that I want to dwell: *"it is your Father's good pleasure"*. There is a very great, a vast, opening out of that fragment in the later part of the New Testament - later, that is, so far as our arrangement is concerned, not later actually in date, for the Gospels were written much about the same time as many of the epistles. But when we turn to such fuller revelation as we have in Paul's letter to the Ephesians we have this: *"having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Eph. 1:5)*. "Your Father's good pleasure"; "the good pleasure of his will". And then again: *"making known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he purposed in him unto a dispensation of the fulness of the times, to sum up all things in Christ" (Eph. 1:9,10)*. And again, in Philippians 2:13, we have this: *"It is God which worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure"*. The good pleasure of the Lord is a tremendous thing. "To give you the kingdom"; "foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will"; "making known unto us the mystery of his will" (how great a thing that is!) "according to his good pleasure"; and He is 'working in us to will and to work according to His good pleasure'.

And yet it is not the object that is with me for this moment. It is the *fact* of His good pleasure. We have recently passed through a season of the year in which the old Authorised translation of Luke 2:14 has been very much used: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men". There are different views as to how the original ought to be translated here; the renderings are various. "Men in whom he is well pleased", or His "goodwill toward men". I do not think it matters very much, because the upshot of it all, and the very accompaniments and associations of that great event, all combine to speak of His goodwill. And, after all, was not that the beginning of

the Gospel? - and the Gospel is "good news". It is the spirit, the attitude, the mind of God toward us that is the thing of importance - His goodwill.

The Battle to Maintain Faith in God's Goodwill

I am not going to speak of the associations of that goodwill, that good pleasure, as we have them in the passages which we have read. Each one of them relates the goodwill of God to some tremendous thing. But you and I need constantly to be held strongly to this fact, that God's attitude toward us is a 'goodwill' attitude, in a very vast and full way. It is not always easy to feel that; it is sometimes difficult to believe it. Does that sound too bad a thing to say? Are there not times when you really do wonder about this - when for anybody to say in those situations and conditions that the Lord is in an attitude of goodwill toward you sounds almost like mockery? We know this conflict with the evil forces that are always trying to come between us and the Lord, to make the Lord appear evil, as giving Him their own complexion, or giving us their complexion and transferring it to God, suggesting that God is not a God of goodwill. It is a real battle to maintain that position, otherwise there would have been no point in the Lord saying to His disciples, "Fear not, little flock". 'You will go to the slaughter, you will know suffering, you will know what it means to have your innocence made into evil by evil-minded people, you will know what it means to have your purity besmirched and blackened, your good name defamed' - all that the Lamb Himself knew, we shall know it as the little flock - 'but fear not, none of this is evidence that God is against you, none of this is proof that God is other than a God of goodwill toward you'. That is something that we must constantly hold on to. It is a part of the very victory that has to be maintained. "Your Father's good pleasure".

The Frown of God's Goodwill

Now, strangely enough, the very goodwill of God is often hidden behind a frown. I turn to my friend John Bunyan. You know that he had a man called Goodwill. He lived at the wicket gate, and Christian's first contact with Goodwill was when he came to the gate. He saw the notice written up, "Knock and it shall be opened", and he knocked and the man opened. It was Goodwill. But how is he described? "A very grave person called Goodwill". Surely that is a contradiction! Surely that is not right! If we had been describing Goodwill according to our idea, well, we should have said he was a boisterous, hilarious, hearty, jovial sort of person who was just falling over you with beneficence and everything light and helpful and cheerful. But in John Bunyan's story it was a very grave person that Christian met when he met Goodwill at the wicket gate. And, the gate having been opened to him somewhat, and seeing this very grave person and being asked what he wanted and giving his reply, he was suddenly laid hold of by Goodwill with a terrible grasp and pulled in so strongly that he might almost have been torn to pieces. Anything but goodwill, it seemed! Christian did not expect that, and he turned to the man and said, 'Why did you do that?' 'Oh', he said, 'Beelzebub has a castle just over there, and he is always watching for pilgrims coming, so that he can shoot them down before they get through the gate. He was going to shoot you down, so I pulled you in'. Sometimes we need rough handling, and it does not mean it is not goodwill.

This is the marvelous shrewdness and honesty of Bunyan. Why was Goodwill a very grave person? Because of the aspects of the wicket gate. It looked down the way to the city of Destruction; and Goodwill had constantly in full view all that was going on down there - the souls perishing and going to perdition. He saw the road out, and the hard, difficult way from the city of Destruction to the wicket gate, and how many were caught and slain or turned back before they got through. He saw all that. And you cannot live in full view of the awful depredations of sin, Satan and Hell without being a grave person, with all goodwill. He saw the castle of Beelzebub, and the malignant eyes

watching for pilgrims, to shoot them down before they could get through; he knew this hatred, this malice of the Evil One; and with all the goodwill in the world he could not but be a grave person in the light of that. And he saw on - he saw the way the pilgrims were going. He knew what they would encounter. He knew all that they had to meet. He knew all the rest of the story contained in that wonderful *Pilgrim's Progress*, which was not always progress as we think of it, for we make progress very often by falls, by mistakes. There are Giants of Despair, and there are deep and dark valleys, and there are many other things. Goodwill stands looking in all directions, taking in everything, but he is still Goodwill.

The point is that God is disposed like this. Goodwill is not just some soft, happy-go-lucky sort of person. The Lord takes in all the gravity and seriousness of the whole course of things, and He has never promised that we should be exempt from these perils and these dangers. He has not said, 'You will never suffer, you will never be tried'. No. He has promised us nothing short of: "In the world ye have tribulation" (John 16:33). But He has said, 'When these things come, do not forget that it is never to be interpreted as indicating that I am disposed toward you otherwise than in this way of goodwill, good pleasure'.

We have to meet, then, our difficulties and go through our trials and believe that in them God's will is good and perfect and acceptable. It is all in the good pleasure of His will. And is it not true that it just works out like that? We sometimes feel, 'Oh, that it might never have been, that this might never have been', and afterward we say, 'God meant it for good; the outcome is good, not evil; I did not see it, I could not see it, but it was the good pleasure of His will'. "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom". Rough handling - but it is good will. Many an adversity, but the goodwill is looking over it all and following the whole course. I can say this out of my own coward heart, that knows only too well what it means to wonder whether the will of God is always good. The Gospel begins with goodwill, and it develops and unfolds to a vast fulness encompassing all ages - the good pleasure of His will.

So He says, "little flock". He immediately, in so saying, admitted that His flock would be very small in comparison. They would be very full of suffering, because they were going the way of the Lamb, 'following the Lamb whithersoever he goeth'. A "little flock". But - 'fear not, small, despised, persecuted flock, fear not!' In the midst of all that comes upon the world, remember, it is the Lamb who has everything in hand, and He has it all in hand with a view to having with Him the company of which we read in Revelation 14. "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom". It is "the good pleasure of his will".