

(1.22) Human Misery

Wherever you are in life true joy will evade you unless you turn to Almighty God. Why are you troubled when things do not unfold according to your wishes? Does anyone have things happen according to their desires? Neither you nor I, nor anyone is so fortunate in this way. A man may be a great religious leader, a king, someone of exceptional wealth or power, but each has his trials, sufferings, and difficulties. Who then is the most fortunate? Most likely the one who can willingly bear his sufferings as a cross to carry. Jesus says, *Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*¹



Immature and harebrained people point to the rich, famous and powerful and think they necessarily have a happy life.² Such temporal advantages are diminished when compared to heavenly riches; the worldly things are a magnet to fear, worry, and anxiety and their benefits are uncertain. A person's happiness does not depend on the abundance of worldly things since a moderate amount is sufficient. Because many are not able to put this aspect in sensible priority their life is miserable.

The greater spirituality a man desires the more burdensome life becomes as he understands human nature with greater clarity. The necessities of life, eating, resting, sleeping, working are encumbrances to a devout man who would rather be relieved of these aspects and be liberated from sin. Paul says, *Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body?*³ while the Psalmist prays, *Relieve the troubles of my heart; bring me out of my distress.*⁴

Woe to those who do not comprehend their own afflictions; such woe increases for them that love only this world and cling to it closely while completely neglecting the Kingdom of God which does *not belong to this world.*⁵ These are the senseless ones, unbelieving in heart, and deeply attached to earthly things while seeking carnal pleasures. They will come to realize that their love of worthless things carries a heavy cost and brings only misery. In contrast the Saints of God and the friends of Christ Jesus look not to ephemeral things of this life but place their hopes in things eternal, in the *inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy.*⁶ They *think of what is above, not of what is on earth*⁷, of things invisible, in order that the visible do not hinder their good intentions. They *look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal.*⁸

¹ Mark 8:34

² Luke 12:16-21

³ Romans 7:24

⁴ Psalm 25:17

⁵ John 18:36

⁶ Luke 12:33

⁷ Colossians 3:2

⁸ 2Corinthians 4:18

Brothers and sisters, be confident in continued spiritual progress; you have time and opportunity in the present moment *so live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience.*⁹

Why do you delay implementing your good resolutions from one day to another? Remind yourself of the present moment for this is the time to take positive action in improving your life. It may be difficult to change when things are going badly but actions at such times bring merit. A place of rest comes after passing through stormy times and vice can only be overcome by strict discipline. *Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.*¹⁰ It would be wonderful if we were free from pain and sorrow but through sin we have lost our innocence and our joy suffers. Patience brings God's mercy until the time when *what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*¹¹

How frail we are and how prone to wrongdoing; we are contrite for our sins today and yet repeat them soon after. We make up our minds to be more careful and in a moment of weakness act as if the resolve was never there. It is therefore prudent to be humble and not think so highly of ourselves because we are weak and fickle, otherwise we become self-satisfied and can quickly lose what we have attained through grace. How can we progress spiritually if we lose our fervor and become complacent in thinking we have achieved true holiness? Every once in a while become as novices and recommit yourselves to wisdom and instruction; such humility will lead to improvement and spiritual progress as *the Lord instructs us and shows us the way we should we walk.*¹²

This article is based on Book 1, Chapter 22 of Thomas of Kempis' writing, "Imitation of Christ." It is not a translation, and there are many of those, but a personal (layperson's) reflection on his writing; if any of it helps give credit to Thomas of Kempis; if any of it fails the responsibility is mine. (rfm)

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⁹ Ephesians 4:1

¹⁰ Mark 14:28

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:4

¹² Psalm 32:8