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THIRST SATISFIED
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By William John Knox Little

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

William John Knox Little, English preacher, was born 1839 and educated at Cambridge University. He has filled many parochial cures, and in 1881 was appointed canon of Worcester, and sub-dean in 1902. He also holds the vicarage of Hoar Cross (1885). He is of high repute as a preacher and is in much request all over England. He belongs to the High Church school and has printed, besides his sermons, many works of educational character, such as the "Treasury of Meditation," "Manual of Devotion for Lent," and "Confirmation and Holy Communion."

THIRST SATISFIED

My soul is athirst for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before the presence of God?—Psalm xlii., 2.

The verse, dear friends, which I have read to you for a text is one of those verses which justify in the highest degree the action of the Christian Church in selecting the Hebrew Psalter as, in fact, her prayer-book. There are many passages, as you will feel with me, in the Hebrew psalter that express in a very high degree the wants of the human soul; but perhaps there is no passage more telling, more touching, more searching, more expressive than that solemn and that exalted sentiment which is spoken in the text, "My soul is athirst for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before the presence of God?" The passage is a justification, then, of the action of the Christian Church. People sometimes ask why in the daily service, why on Sundays, you rehearse the Psalms, which have about them so much that is incomprehensible, so much that requires explanation; why there are those tremendous denunciations of enemies, why there are those prayers that seem at first sight to touch wants that we modern people scarcely know; but if you want a real justification and a handy answer you may fall back upon the general texture of the psalter as exprest by such solemn words as those of the text. If you would find any document, any volume that will speak your thoughts best about and towards eternity, you cannot select a better than the Hebrew psalter, for the general tone and temper of its teaching is the cry of the soul for God.

And then there is another thought upon the threshold of such a subject that demands our attention. This verse of the text, being a sort of example or representative verse of the psalter, expresses to us—does it not?—the attitude and the mission of the Christian Church. The attitude. For what is the position, dear friends, of the Christian Church? What are the struggles of Christian souls except, in the midst of a world that is quite complicated with difficulties, in the midst of a world that is overwhelmed with sorrow, in the midst of a time of severe temptation, to constantly rise and gaze high above the thought of evil, and gaze towards the sun of brightness, and cry for God? And what is the mission of the Christian Church? Is it not to help men and women in their struggle and their sorrow to forget at least at times their pettinesses and degradation to rise to better standards and loftier ideals, and cry for God? And if that be the mission of the Christian Church, then I hold—

that is my point this morning—that that is the justification of such noble efforts as have been made in your church to enable so great, so sinful a city as London to have at least moments of relaxation from its world-wide weariness, moments of pause in the pursuit of its sin, and to call it back from that which is overpowering tho transient—to ask it to pass them in the ministrations of religion. What is the object of such a church as this? Why, buried among your buildings, in the midst of this great, powerful, sinful city,—why has it a mission for eternity? Why is it good that you should do your best? Why is it praiseworthy and beautiful that your rector and churchwardens should have exerted themselves to the utmost to make this church what it ought to be? Why? Because there is not a man or woman in London, not one in this bustling crowd, not one in this confusion of commerce, not one in this sink of sin, but might say "Yes"—ought to say, and must ultimately feel, and should now be taught to realize that the soul has one satisfaction, one only—"My soul is athirst for God, for the living God." Well, if that be so, can we be wrong, dear friends, can we waste our time, if we ask ourselves this morning something quite practical about this thirst of the soul?

And, first of all, I submit that in such a verse as this, and in such a work as this, we are face to face with one of those great governed contrasts that are found throughout Scripture and throughout human life. I may say, par parenthèse, that that is one of the great proofs of sacred Scripture. When your shallow thinker, when your wild and profound philosopher, kicks the sacred Book with the toe of his boot, and denounces it because he does not like the measure of Noah's Ark or the exact activity of Jonah's whale, the moment you begin to think beneath those mere sharpnesses of speech and those mere quicknesses of the thought, you say this: "There may be this or that about the surface of Scripture which I do not and cannot explain, and cannot entirely understand; but at least there is no book—no, not excepting Milton; no, not even excepting Dante; no, for us English people, making no reserve for Shakespeare—there is no book that, after all, expresses that deep, inner, serious fact of my being, of my soul, of myself; the fact that lives when our facts are dying; the fact that persists in asserting itself when the noise of the world is still; the fact that does not care about daylight only, but comes up in the dark; the fact that whispers low when I am in the crowd, but speaks loud in the darkest night, when the clock is ticking on the stairs, and conscience has stalked out and stood before me, asserting facts that I cannot contradict—there is no look that can speak that fact of facts, that thirst, that longing, that desolation, that desire, that hope, that activity, that possibility of supreme contention and final victory, there is nothing like the Bible that does that." And so wise men, while they admit difficulties, thoughtful men, while they do not controvert the fact that that which is divine needs larger explanation, fall back upon such great governed truths as that text to support the Bible. The Bible says, asserts, determines, and insists upon the truth which the Church is insisting upon, which you and I, in our better moments, emphasize and say "Amen" to—the soul is athirst for God. The Bible brings home the great contrast that is present to us all.

Let us dwell, that we may realize this thirst of the soul, upon the contrast. There are, at least, four forms of attraction which are presented, as I suppose, to your soul, certainly to mine. First of all, there is the attraction of natural beauty. If you stand on a fair August afternoon on the terrace, for instance, at Berne, or on the heights of Chaumont; if you gaze at the distant Alps, crowned with snow which was generated in winter, but which takes the brightness and glory of diamonds in the summer sun; if, coming from the noise and heat of England, you first gaze at that line of strange pointed mountains crowned with that whiteness, struck with the sunlight, you are moved by natural beauty. If you stand in America on the upper reaches of the St. Lawrence, and watch the river as it hurries to its destiny at Niagara; if you see the tossing water writhing almost like living creatures anticipating a dreadful destiny and passing over the fall; or if, rising out of what is tragic in nature, you come to what is homely—if, for instance, you see the chestnut woods of spring with an inspiration of quiet joy, or if you see the elms at Worcester or Hereford in our common England in the autumn time with an inspiration of sorrow; wherever you turn with eye or head, with a feeling in your heart, a thought in your mind, nature demands her recognition; and you London men, in the toil of your struggle, in the noise of your work, in the dust of your confusion of life, when you get your holiday in spring or autumn,—unless, indeed, you have passed into the mere condition of brutes,—while you still keep the hearts of men, you feel there is something in the apostles of culture, in the teachers of esthetics, in persons who say that beauty is everything to satisfy the soul. Nature, you say—and you say it justly—says, "Beauty." You find a delight as you gaze upon nature. Yes, dear friends, you are stimulated, you are delighted, you are consoled; there is one thing which you are not—you are not satisfied.

Or, quite possibly, you turn to that which seems to English natures more practical and less poetical—you turn to the attraction of activity. You say the poets, or the preachers, or the dreamers may gaze upon nature; but Englishmen have something else to do—we have to work. You look at the result of activity, and it is splendid. Imagine, picture for a moment, political achievement; picture to yourselves the power not only of a mind, but of a personality, of a character which can attract vast millions who have never gazed upon the human expression in the human face—can attract them to great love or to great hatred, can mold the destinies of an empire, can change the current of the time—think of such men as Richelieu or Cavour, or more modern instances, and you understand what is the greatness and the power of the attraction of political activity. Or, to come nearer home, go into your London city, and watch the working of your London mart. What have you before you there? The activity of the hearts and minds of Englishmen, sending out the force of the life that is in them from the heart that is beating in those tremendous centers to the distances that are only stopt by the most distant frontiers of the world. Your sayings and thoughts are quoted throughout the markets of Europe—yes, throughout the markets of other continents; your

actions and decisions make the difference between the decisions and the actions of men that you have never seen, that you shall never see. The Medici were a power in Florence, first as bankers, then as governors. There are men in London who have power throughout the world, not only in Florence, not as profest governors, but as practical governors through the activity of commercial instinct. Certainly, it seems to me quite possible that there may be minds carried away by such a great activity; but that great activity I submit to your deeper, quieter English Sunday thought—that activity will stimulate, will delight, will attract, will intoxicate; one thing it will not do—I am bold to say it will never satisfy.

And if I may take another instance for a moment, there is this pure intellect, bidding good-by to the political arena, to the commercial strife, saying farewell to the dreams of beauty, and falling back upon the cells of the brain, traversing the corridors of thought, and entering first here and there into that labyrinth of instinct, or association, or accumulative learning. Certainly, there is a power of a delight that the world can never realize outside the region of the brain. If that needs proof you have only, dear friends, to meditate upon such lives as Newton, or Shakespeare, or Kepler, or if you turn to the region of meditative thought, to such lives as our own George Eliot—yes, there is that in the mere exercise of intellect which is intoxicating, which is consoling even to the highest degree. But intellect, after all, finds its frontier. I may say of it what I have said of the esthetic sentiment, what I have said of the active sentiment in man: it attracts, it delights—what is more, I think it even consoles; but the one thing I find about it that to me is perfectly appalling is that it does not satisfy.

There are many of you perhaps to-day who will demand that I should take my fourth instance, and will ask that that at least may do its duty. Will it? There is the region of the affections—that region wherein we stray in early spring days as pickers of the spring-flowers of our opening life, where suns are always glorious and sunsets only speak of brighter dawn, where poetry is in all ordinary conversation and hope springs to higher heights from hour to hour, where Mays are always Mays and Junes are always Junes, where flowers are ever bursting, and there seems no end to our nosegays, no limit to our imaginations, no fetter to our fancies, no restraint to our desires. There is the world, the vast, powerful world, of the passions, purified by exhaustive cultivation into what we call the affections of a higher life. By them we deal with our fellow-creatures; by them, when we are young, we form great friendships; by them, as we grow older, we form around us certain associations that we intend to support us as life goes off. We have all known it. There is the friend, there is the sweetheart, there is the wife, there is the child, there are the dear expressions of the strong heart that after all beats in Englishmen. But as life goes on, first in one object and then by anticipation and terror perhaps in others, we watch those who have been dear to us pass in dim procession to the grave, and we find, after all, that in the world of affections that old strange law that pervades one branch of the contrast prevails; it can stimulate, it can support, it can console, it can delight, it can lead to delirium at moments, but it does not satisfy. And, my brothers and sisters, because you and I are born not for a moment, but for infinite moments; not for the struggle of time, but for the great platform and career of eternity—because that is so, never, never, never, if we are true to ourselves, shall we pause in the midst of our mortal pilgrimage until we find, and grasp, and embrace, and love that which satisfies. When you awaken up a young heart to that truth, then that heart, as I hold it, is on the path of conversion. When amidst the struggle of sin you have determined the soul to strive after that truth, then that soul is in progress of solid conversion and final perfectibility. But, at any rate, all human nature joins that cry of the Christian, and the Bible speaks of it as it always does—its ultimate truth expressing what we need. No; there are many things given, there are many attractions to draw; they will stimulate, they will help, they will console, they will give pleasure; there is one thing that satisfies the immortal, there is one life that meets your need: "My soul is athirst for God, for the living God; when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?"

Why, dear friends, why is it that these things do not satisfy? There lies a city in the Volscian Hills, fair and beautiful, climbing in its peaks and pinnacles up little ledges of the rocks, and down into the depths of the valleys. And if you wander some two days from Rome, and gaze upon those mountains, historic in their memories and splendid in their beauty, you are struck by the tenderness and the attraction of that city. It is a city of flowers. The flowers stream up its streets in grave procession; they climb up the pillars of churches, embracing them and holding on with arms of deep affection; they laugh in the sunshine, they weep in the shadow, they are shrouded in the clouds of night, but they blaze again in the blaze of the morning. There is the dim funereal ivy, there is the brightness and glow of the purple convolvulus, there is the wild-rose clustering round the windows. They are lying

asleep on the doorsteps, they gather themselves into knots as if to gossip and to talk in the language of flowers by the doorways—utterly beautiful! You look at the city with wonder and astonishment—with desire. How wonderful, you say, that church tower covered with its flowers; that altar covered with flowers not gathered and placed in vases, but with Nature's own hand arranging an offering to the living God. These streets that sound no footfall of an angry multitude, but that listen to the footfall of a quiet nature—yes, it is beautiful in the early morning. But stay there until the later afternoon, when the fog begins to gather; stay there until night-time, when the miasma begins to rise; stay there until morning, and you are in danger of destruction from poison. It is a land of flowery expression; but it is not a land of real life.

My friends, the activity of man, the poetic faculty of man, all the gifts and all the capacities of man—they are beautiful, they are touching, they are attractive; but if they are all, if they express all that you have to offer, and all that is in you to feel, then they are hollow, or they-are poisonous, and like that city of flowers. Why? Because there is in you and me a soul that lies behind our thought, altho there is more than feeling there—a soul that supports our will, and is more than our volition. It thinks, but is not thought; it feels, but is not feeling; it wills, but is not volition. There is something deeper in man than his esthetic desire or his active practise, something deeper beneath us all than anything that finds expression, certainly than anything that finds satisfaction. There is the self; there is myself, yourself; there is that strange, mysterious life of loneliness which stands, and thinks, and judges, and appraises. When, by divine grace, we escape from the voice of the crowd, and from the cry of custom, from the delirium of desire, that poor lonely self within us pleads to us in a cry like the call of the starveling crying to the rich man that passes by, "Oh, will you gratify desire? Oh, will you gratify pleasure? Oh, will you stimulate activity, and will you leave me alone? I, yourself, your very self, the foundation of your life, the permanent expression of your immortality—I must be satisfied, and being infinite and immortal, I know but one satisfaction: 'My soul is athirst for God, for the living God; when shall I come, and appear before the presence of God?'"

If that be true, or if it be approximately true, dear friends, let us ask ourselves this morning these questions. Let us be quite practical. What do you mean, you may say for a moment, by the thirst for God? I remember long ago in Paris, in conversation with one whom I deem one of the greatest modern statesmen, tho not one of the most successful—I remember, when a mere boy, talking to that thoughtful man just at the moment when he was standing amidst the ruins of his activity, and gazing with the placid spirit with which a good man gazes when he feels that he has done his duty, tho the world can see that he has failed—I remember talking to him on such questions as these, and what he said, among other things, was this: "In dealing with mankind and in dealing with yourself you must rise by degrees, you must advance from point to point; there is a point of achievement, but you cannot reach the point of achievement unless you have gone up the ladder of progress." I follow his advice. What do we mean by thirsting for God? My friends, on the lower round of that ladder, I mean thirsting for and desiring moral truth. I mean that the soul within you is thirsting and imploring for the satisfaction of its moral instincts. Turn for an instant to the ten commandments; they are trite, they are ordinary, they are placed before you in the east end of your church, after the old custom of your practical, unaesthetic, and undreaming England. Ask what they mean. Turn to the second table. You are to reverence your father and mother. Why? Because they are the instruments of life that God gives. You are to reverence life in others in the sixth commandment. Why? Because life is the deepest mystery that God can possibly exhibit to you. In the seventh commandment—I scarcely like to say, but yet it is wise to repeat, it is necessary to assert it—we are to remember, you and I, when we are young, when we are active, when we are passionate, the great responsibility of man; you are not to trifle with that awful mystery, the transmission of life, life which unites itself with eternal love. You are to remember respect for property, for that which divine providence has placed by wise laws in the hands of others. You are to remember that the best of properties is a good character. Finally, in the tenth commandment, you are not to forget that divine providence guides you, and you are not to murmur and be angry when He guides you who knows the best for you, and when you have done your best. And rising from the second table and coming to the first, you are not to forget that there is one object for every soul, as the text asserts. You are not to forget that a jealousy may be created, ought to be created, if you put anything before God. You are not to grudge God the restraint of speech, and—thank God, still it is possible to appeal to the wise instincts of England—you are not to grudge on your Sunday the gift of your time. These are the outlines of the grave moral law that runs deep into the heart of the Christian; and I answer, the thirst for God means the thirst within me to fulfil that grave moral law.

But, my friends, pause for a moment. After all, that would only be a skeleton. After all, simply to draw out the outlines of a picture is not the work of an artist. Suppose you ask a master in music, "How am I to produce the real result of stately sound?" He will tell you about the common cord; he will tell you about the result of its changes and its affinities, and will speak of those results as harmony; or he will tell you about the gamut of sounds—sounds found in the wind upon the mountains, found in the surging sea, found in the voice of childhood, found in the whisper of your dreams—sound that is everywhere, sound that wanders up and down this wild, wild universe. He will tell you all that, and explain how in proper steps, in wise modulations, that is melody, as the union of sounds is harmony. Is that enough? Would that produce "The Last Judgment" of Spohr, that made you dissolve in tears? Would that produce the chorus of Handel that made you almost rise and march in majesty? Would that fill you with deep thoughts in Beethoven, or fire you into joy in Mendelssohn? Oh, no! You have your skeleton, but you have not one thing, the deepest; genius has to touch with its fire the fact that is before you; you want the mystery of life. And then suppose you turn to an artist and ask him to guide you in painting, and he talks to you about light and shadow, about the laying of the color, about the drawing of lines, about the exact expression of the distant and the present, of the foreground and the background, and having learned it all, you produce what seems an abortion; you ask yourself, "What is the meaning of this?" Is this enough to make you quiver, in Dresden, before the San Sisto, carried away by those divine eyes of the "Mother of Eternity," or rent with sorrow before the solemn eyes of the Child? Is this enough to fill you with tears of delight when you enter the Sistine Chapel and see St. John as he kneels with his unshed tears about the dead Christ? What is there wanting in the touch of your artist? There is wanting genius; there is wanting life. Or to take one instance more. You ask somebody to teach you sculpture, to tell you how to make yourself master in the treatment of stone. He will tell you wise things about the plastic material that you have to mold with thumb and finger, and then about the use of the chisel and the hammer to produce the result in the stone, following the treatment of that plastic material. But when you have learned it all, can you really believe that you will produce the effect of that majestic manhood that you see in the David of Angelo in the Piazza of Florence, or that wise, determined progress that is exprest in Donatello's St. George? What is the difference between your failure and the results of those men? Genius—life. And when you turn to the moral law, and when you ask yourself, "How can I learn to be athirst for God?" the preachers say, "Accept the moral law; act exactly in distinct duty to your parents; say, 'Corban, it is a gift by whatsoever thou mayest be profited thereby'; do your duty strictly to the letter and nothing more; be conservative about your property; restrain yourself from desire of change; do not stimulate and do not satisfy your passions beyond what is exactly exprest in the moral law." But then, if you speak the truth, you say, "And in the end what am I? Why, after all, most commonplace, and, in truth, most sinful." What is the difference? This difference: there wants here the touch of genius; there wants the touch of life divine, grace that illuminates the moral law; there wants, my friends, the enthusiasm for goodness, the science of sciences, the art of arts, the delight and the desire of doing right because it is right, the great and splendid spirit that belongs to all of us; and yet it is the highest when the thirst of your soul is real. Certainly it is to know God's guidance in law; but what is law? It is to grasp that atmosphere of life and reality which comes out of the moral law to those who seek it in a living person first—the desire of goodness, the desire, the love, the enthusiasm, the ambition, cost what it may, of doing right because it is right. Oh, my friends, I submit—and I submit it without fear of contradiction—that is an ambition worthy of Englishmen. Certainly we are not dreamers; certainly God has given us practical activity; certainly, whatever we misunderstand, this we can understand, the thirst of the soul for God is the thirst to love goodness because it is right.

And then hastily to conclude, I would say that that thirst is exprest, that that thirst is satisfied, not only in moral law and in its atmosphere, but in one thing more that I think we can all understand. When we read the New Testament, so simple, so straightforward, so true, so beautiful, with some difficulties, but no difficulties that a true heart can find insuperable—when we read the New Testament we are brought face to face with the teachings of Christ. And there is this, my friends, more about these teachings, that if you are to follow them out you have not time enough in time; the teachings of our Master demand eternity—there is something about them infinite, so simple, so beautiful, and yet we feel that we are insufficient to fulfil them in this sphere of time. If my soul is athirst for God, it is athirst for the fulfilment of those great, splendid, practical teachings which remind me that I am to begin to learn my lesson in this narrow school, but that I shall fulfil my achievement in that great land beyond the grave. Is that enough? No; no, when the heart is lonely; no, when the sun is setting; no, when the clouds are gathering round us;

no, when the storm is coming up. It is useless for the preacher, if he tries to be real, to talk about law, or the result of law, or the splendor of teaching; if we know the human heart in its width and its activity, if it is to find satisfaction it must find it in a personal life. You may say you cannot know God. That is the ordinary answer of the human sinning heart, which in modern times calls itself agnostic. Know God! Well, of course it is truly said that it is by mere license of speech when you talk of knowledge about human perceptions—it is wisely said. You perceive a fact, my friend; you must perceive it in itself, and as it is, and by an intellect that can infallibly state that it is so and in that manner. Knowledge like that is impossible, I grant; but between that scientific knowledge and utter unbelief there are shades, first of all of assent that shuts out doubt, and at last, at the other pole, of a doubt that almost shuts out assent. Between the two there are activities of life, and if you are to say, "I cannot know the personal God with scientific knowledge," I grant it; but you cannot know anything, not only in theology, but in politics, or social life, or moral conduct, or conduct that is not moral—you can know nothing, you can never act at all, because all our action is not on knowledge, but on belief, and therefore when we turn to a personal life that is not perceived by the activity of the senses we only demand that you are to accept that which it is possible to accept in any sphere of activity, and which you do accept. It is possible for you, according to the laws of your being, to accept a personal Christ. "But," you say—and I must remind you of it as I close—"a personal Christ, but still clothed in human lineaments, a personal Christ who is mysterious—how can you accept that?" How can you not? My friends, the human intellect is so framed that it acts habitually upon ideas that are true yet indistinct. You act on space, you act on time, you have infinity, you have in your mouth the word "cause." What do you know exactly about infinity, or space, or time, or cause? The human intellect, it is truly said, first by the greatest of the fathers, then repeated by modern thinkers—the human intellect is so great, first, that it can take exact ideas, and then, because it is infinite, that it can act instantly upon ideas that are real but indistinct. Christ—yes, first He is indistinct yet most real—real because He entered into history, real because He exprest the idea that is in the brain and heart of us all; indistinct because these little twenty centuries have separated us from His actual historic life; but a fact to those who seek Him, because His power is to make Himself an inward gift to the human soul, because His activity is such that He meets us on the altar of His sacred sacrament, that He meets us in the divine Word to express His thoughts, that He meets us in consolation, that He meets us in absolution, in moments of sorrow and of prayer. Oh, you are not driven to a distant infinity! Oh, you are not asked to rest upon a shadow I Oh, you are not besought to play the dreamer or the sentimentalist, when you think about God! Oh, you are asked to remember that fair, sweet vision—the vision of a Man so devoid of vulgarity, that whilst He loved the people He did not despise the great—the vision of a Man so strong that He could face a multitude, so tender that He could raise the lost woman, so gentle that the little children gathered their arms about His neck; the vision of a Man at home with fishermen, and at home with the high-born, with thoughts so deep that they permeate modern Christendom, with thoughts so simple that they taught truth to ancient Galilee; the vision of a Man who encouraged youth, the One on whom we rest, by whom we hang, in whom we hope, who sympathizes with all our best desires, who does not denounce us, but only intercedes and pities; the Man who never places Himself upon a Pharisaic pedestal, but feels with the child, with the boy, with the man, with the woman,—the Man of men, the crown of our humanity, the God in Man, the Man in God, the power of the sacraments, the force of prayer, the sweet, dear Friend who never misunderstands us, never forsakes us, never is hard upon us. My friends, it is your privilege, it is mine, beyond the privilege of the psalmist, to know in the gospel, to know in the Church, Christ, God exprest in humanity. Is your soul athirst for the highest? You may find it if you could come in repentance, if you come in desire, if you come in quiet determination to do your duty; you may find it satisfied—yes, now satisfied—in Christ.

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