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Wings Like a Dove

"Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest."

— Psalm 55:6

Summary:

David's desire to fly away and find rest came from genuine suffering, despite his power, honour, wealth, and the devotion of his people. His experience shows that no rank or outward circumstance can shield anyone from sorrow. Happiness depends more on the state of mind than on wealth or position. Rather than envying those above us or striving for greatness, we should learn contentment and seek a balanced life in which God provides enough for the journey, without burdening us with poverty or excess.

Outline:

1. **Trouble reaches every human life**
   - Even David, greatly favoured by Providence, suffered deeply and longed for rest.
2. **Greatness cannot remove inward sorrow**
   - Royal honour, wealth, victory, and comfort could not heal David's body, family, or heart.
3. **Envy misjudges the lives of others**
   - We imagine that those above us are exempt from trouble, yet every station carries its own burdens.
4. **Contentment is better than ambition**
   - True happiness depends upon the mind, not outward position, riches, or distinction.
5. **The safest condition lies between extremes**
   - We should ask for neither poverty nor riches, but what is sufficient for faithful pilgrimage.

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Text

Whose exclamation is this? It clearly comes from a troubled man. The surrounding verses confirm his distress—a condition common to humanity: "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble." Yet this man seemed Providence's darling, having risen from shepherd to celebrated conqueror and powerful monarch. God gave him victory over his enemies and the hearts of his subjects; we might have thought him satisfied with glory, dominion, and riches. Still, amid his grandeur, he sighs, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest." For all his success, he suffered greatly from cold-hearted unkindness.

How much more from his own officers, especially his nephew Joab, the commander-in-chief! After building his fine cedar palace, he could not occupy it for a long time: he was near death, seeing his grave await him week after week. Had they then brought out his crown and placed it on him, would it have eased his aching head or relieved his diseased body? What is an ornate room during a raging fever?

David's household was far from peaceful. His daughter was humbled, his incestuous son murdered, and the murderer became a traitor, driving his father and king into exile. During his flight, David learned that Ahithophel, his closest friend and counsellor, had joined Absalom's conspirators. Who knows what other sorrows consumed him? "The heart knoweth his own bitterness." Some griefs cannot be shared even with intimates. Thorns hidden in a nest pierce its occupant, unseen by others. Did David ever regret leaving Bethlehem's privacy? We envy others, imagining that while most are born to trouble and this earth is a vale of tears, a few people or places escape sorrow.

Notice that we always envy those above us. Is the servant happy? He will be when master. The master, when rich; the rich man, when ennobled and distinguished; the nobleman, when king. And the king? "Oh," says he, "oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest." Remember this when another grows rich and his household's glory increases. Restrain ambition and do not seek great things for yourselves. Learn contentment in every state, following the Patriarch, who asked only for food, clothing, and a safe return to his father's house. Felicity depends not on external circumstances, but on the state of the mind.

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Paul was happy in prison; Nero miserable in a palace. After recounting his promotion and glory to his wife and friends, Haman admits, "Yet all this availeth me nothing so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." That night, the king could not sleep. He is ruler of 127 provinces—and that night, he could not sleep.

Ahab, Israel's monarch, is melancholy and sick because he cannot obtain Naboth's small plot for a herb garden. His happiness and health return only after his wife teaches him to satisfy his desire by destroying the noble peasant. How wise was the Shunamite's answer when Elisha offered to speak to the king for her: "I dwell among my own people."

If we are dissatisfied with what we have, we will never be satisfied with what we desire.

Differences in outward circumstances favour those in lower positions: their idleness—worse than labour—their little enjoyment of natural refreshment, weak nerves, timid spirits, health anxieties, and indulgence-softened dispositions leave them unable to endure. They are sensitive to trifling vexations others dismiss, have leisure to brood over dangers, and face envy, cares, fears, responsibilities, dependence, unreasonable demands, and the impossibility of satisfying those who expect things of them. Where shall I end?

These and a thousand other things should show the poor and busy that their superiors bear taxes in the same proportion. Yet the opposite extreme is not ideal. Since happiness partly depends on outward circumstances, the best choice lies between prosperity and adversity, poverty and wealth. If life is a pilgrimage, a traveller is best equipped not by a pinching or loose shoe, but one that fits; nor by lacking a staff or carrying many, but by having one that helps without burden.

Pray therefore, "Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain."

This sermon is taken from William Jay's devotional, Morning and Evening Exercises (February 3, Morning), first published in 1854.