



Selections from Eckhart

Meister Eckhart

GOD

God is nameless, for no man can either say or understand aught about Him. If I say, God is good, it is not true; nay more; I am good, God is not good. I may even say, I am better than God; for whatever is good, may become better, and whatever may become better, may become best. Now God is not good, for He cannot become better. And if He cannot become better, He cannot become best, for these three things, good, better, and best, are far from God, since He is above all. If I also say, God is wise, it is not true; I am wiser than He. If I also say, God is a Being, it is not true; He is transcendent Being and superessential Nothingness. Concerning this St Augustine says: the best thing that man can say about God is to be able to be silent about Him, from the wisdom of his inner judgement. Therefore be silent and prate not about God, for whenever thou dost prate about God, thou liest, and committest sin. If thou wilt be without sin, prate not about God. Thou canst understand nought about God, for He is above all understanding. A master saith: If I had a God whom I could understand, I would never hold Him to be God.

God is not only a Father of all good things, as being their First Cause and Creator, but He is also their Mother, since He remains with the creatures which have from Him their being and existence, and maintains them continually in their being. If God did not abide with and in the creatures, they must necessarily have fallen back, so soon as they were created, into the nothingness out of which they were created.

REST ONLY IN GOD

If I had everything that I could desire, and my finger ached, I should not have everything, for I should have a pain in my finger, and so long as that remained, I should not enjoy full comfort. Bread is comfortable for men, when they are hungry; but when they are thirsty, they find no more comfort in bread than in a stone. So it is with clothes, they are welcome to men, when they are cold; but when they are too hot, clothes give them no comfort. And so it is with all the creatures. The comfort which they promise is only on the surface, like froth, and it always carries with it a want. But God's comfort is clear and has nothing wanting: it is full and complete, and God is constrained to give it thee, for He cannot cease till He have given thee Himself.

It is only in God that are collected and united all the perfections, which in the creatures are sundered and divided.

Yet all the fulness of the creatures can as little express God, as a drop of water can express the sea.

GOD IS ALWAYS READY

No one ought to think that it is difficult to come to Him, though it sounds difficult and is really difficult at the beginning, and in separating oneself from and dying to all things. But when a man has once entered upon it, no life is lighter or happier or more desirable; for God is very zealous to be at all times with man, and teaches him that He will bring him to Himself if man will but follow. Man never desires anything so earnestly as God desires to bring a man to Himself, that he may know Him. God is always ready, but we are very unready; God is near to us, but we are far from Him; God is within, but we are without; God is at home, but we are strangers. The prophet saith: God guideth the redeemed through a narrow way into the broad road, so that they come into the wide and broad place; that is to say, into true freedom of the spirit, when one has become a spirit with God. May God help us to follow this course, that He may bring us to Himself. Amen.

GRACE

The masters say: That is young, which is near its beginning. Intelligence is the youngest faculty in man: the first thing to break out from the soul is intelligence, the next is will, the other faculties follow. Now he saith: Young man, I say unto thee, arise. The soul in itself is a simple work; what God works in the simple light of the soul is more beautiful and more delightful than all the other works which He works in all creatures. But foolish people take evil for good and good for evil. But to him who rightly understands, the one work which God works in the soul is better and nobler and higher than all the world. Through that light comes grace. Grace never comes in the intelligence or in the will. If it could come in the intelligence or in the will, the intelligence and the will would have to transcend themselves. On this a master says: There is something secret about it; and thereby he means the spark of the soul, which alone can apprehend God. The true union between God and the soul takes place in the little spark, which is called the spirit of the soul. Grace unites not to any work. It is an indwelling and a living together of the soul in God.

Every gift of God makes the soul ready to receive a new gift, greater than itself.

Yea, since God has never given any gift, in order that man might rest in the possession of the gift, but gives every gift that He has given in heaven and on earth, in order that He might be able to give one gift, which is Himself, so with this gift of grace, and with all His gifts He will make us ready for the one gift, which is Himself.

No man is so boorish or stupid or awkward, that he cannot, by God's grace, unite his will wholly and entirely with God's will. And nothing more is necessary than that he should say with earnest longing: O Lord, show me Thy dearest will, and strengthen me to do it. And God does it, as sure as He lives, and gives him grace in ever richer fullness, till he comes to perfection, as He gave to the woman at Jacob's well. Look you, the most ignorant and the lowest of you all can obtain this from God, before he leaves this church, yea, before I finish this sermon, as sure as God lives and I am a man.

O almighty and merciful Creator and good Lord, be merciful to me for my poor sins, and help me that I may overcome all temptations and shameful lusts, and may be able to avoid utterly, in thought and deed, what Thou forbiddest, and give me grace to do and to hold all that Thou hast commanded. Help me to believe, to hope, and to love, and in every way to live as Thou willest, as much as Thou willest, and what Thou willest.

THE WILL

Then is the will perfect, when it has gone out of itself, and is formed in the will of God. The more this is so, the more perfect and true is the will, and in such a will thou canst do all things.

SURRENDER OF THE WILL

You should know, that that which God gives to those men who seek to do His will with all their might, is the best. Of this thou mayest be as sure, as thou art sure that God lives, that the very best must necessarily be, and that in no other way could anything better happen. Even if something else seems better, it would not be so good for thee, for God wills this and not another way, and this way must be the best for thee. Whether it be sickness or poverty or hunger or thirst, or whatever it be, that God hangs over thee or does not hang over thee--whatever God gives or gives not, that is all what is best for thee; whether it be devotion or inwardness, or the lack of these which grieves thee--only set thyself right in this, that thou desirest the glory of God in all things, and then whatever He does to thee, that is the best.

Now thou mayest perchance say: How can I tell whether it is the will of God or not? If it were not the will of God, it would not happen. Thou couldst have neither sickness nor anything else unless God willed it. But know that it is God's will that thou shouldst have so much pleasure and satisfaction therein, that thou shouldst feel no pain as pain; thou shouldst take it from God as the very best thing, for it must of necessity be the very best thing for thee. Therefore I may even wish for it and desire it, and nothing would become me better than so to do.

If there were a man whom I were particularly anxious to please, and if I knew for certain that he liked me better in a grey cloak than in any other, there is no doubt that however good another cloak might be, I should be fonder of the grey than of all the rest. And if there were anyone whom I would gladly please, I should do nothing else in word or deed than what I knew that he liked.

Ah, now consider how your love shows itself! If you loved God, of a surety nothing would give you greater pleasure than what pleases Him best, and that whereby His will may be most fully done. And, however great thy pain or hardship may be, if thou hast not as great pleasure in it as in comfort or fulness, it is wrong.

We say every day in prayer to our Father, Thy will be done. And yet when His will is done, we grumble at it, and find no pleasure in His will. If our prayers were sincere, we should certainly think His will, and what He does, to be the best, and that the very best had

happened to us.

Those who accept all that the Lord send, as the very best, remain always in perfect peace, for in them God's will has become their will. This is incomparably better than for our will to become God's will. For when thy will becomes God's will--if thou art sick, thou wishest not to be well contrary to God's will, but thou wishest that it were God's will that thou shouldst be well. And so in other things. But when God's will becomes thy will--then thou art sick: in God's name; thy friend dies: in God's name!

SUFFERING

Men who love God are so far from complaining of their sufferings, that their complaint and their suffering is rather because the suffering which God's will has assigned them is so small. All their blessedness is to suffer by God's will, and not to have suffered something, for this is the loss of suffering. This is why I said, Blessed are they who are willing to suffer for righteousness, not, Blessed are they who have suffered.

All that a man bears for God's sake, God makes light and sweet for him.

If all was right with you, your sufferings would no longer be suffering, but love and comfort.

If God could have given to men anything more noble than suffering, He would have redeemed mankind with it: otherwise, you must say that my Father was my enemy, if he knew of anything nobler than suffering.

True suffering is a mother of all the virtues.

SIN

Deadly sin is a death of the soul. To die is to lose life. But God is the life of the soul; since then deadly sin separates us from God, it is a death of the soul.

Deadly sin is also an unrest of the heart. Everything can rest only in its proper place. But the natural place of the soul is God; as St Augustine says, Lord, thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless till it finds rest in Thee. But deadly sin separates us from God; therefore it is an unrest of the heart. Deadly sin is also a sickness of the faculties, when a man can never stand up alone for the weight of his sins, nor ever resist falling into sin. Therefore deadly sin is a sickness of the faculties. Deadly sin is also a blindness of the sense, in that it suffers not a man to know the shortness of the pleasures of lust, nor the length of the punishment in hell, nor the eternity of joys in heaven. Deadly sin is also a death of all graces; for as soon as a deadly sin takes place, a man becomes bare of all graces.

Every creature must of necessity abide in God; if we fall out of the hands of his mercy, we fall into the hands of His justice. We must ever abide in Him. What madness then is it to

wish not to be with Him, without whom thou canst not be!

CONTENTMENT

A Great teacher once told a story in his preaching about a man who for eight years besought God to show him a man who would make known to him the way of truth. While he was in this state of anxiety there came a voice from God and spake to him: Go in front of the church, and there shalt thou find a man who will make known to thee the way of truth. He went, and found a poor man whose feet were chapped and full of dirt, and all his clothes were hardly worth twopence-halfpenny. He greeted this poor man and said to him, God give thee a good morning. The poor man answered, I never had a bad morning. The other said, God give thee happiness. How answerest thou that? The poor man answered, I was never unhappy. The first then said, God send thee blessedness. How answerest thou that? I was never unblessed, was the answer. Lastly the questioner said, God give thee health! Now enlighten me, for I cannot understand it. And the poor man replied, When thou saidst to me, may God give thee a good morning, I said I never had a bad morning. If I am hungry, I praise God for it; if I am cold, I praise God for it; if I am distressful and despised, I praise God for it; and that is why I never had a bad morning. When thou askedst God to give me happiness, I answered that I had never been unhappy; for what God gives or ordains for me, whether it be His love or suffering, sour or sweet, I take it all from God as being the best, and that is why I was never unhappy. Thou saidst further, May God make thee blessed, and I said, I was never unblessed, for I have given up my will so entirely to God's will, that what God wills, that I also will, and that is why I was never unblessed, because I willed alone God's will. Ah! dear fellow, replied the man; but if God should will to throw thee into hell, what wouldst thou say then? He replied, Throw me into hell! Then I would resist Him. But even if He threw me into hell, I should still have two arms wherewith to embrace Him. One arm is true humility, which I should place under Him, and with the arm of love I should embrace Him. And he concluded, I would rather be in hell and possess God, than in the kingdom of heaven without Him.

DETACHMENT

THE man who has submitted his will and purposes entirely to God, carries God with him in all his works and in all circumstances. Therein can no man hinder him, for he neither aims at nor enjoys anything else, save God. God is united with Him in all his purposes and designs. Even as no manifoldness can dissipate God, so nothing can dissipate such a man, or destroy his unity. Man, therefore, should take God with him in all things; God should be always present to his mind and will and affections. The same disposition that thou hast in church or in thy cell, thou shouldst keep and maintain in a crowd, and amid the unrest and manifoldness of the world.

Some people pride themselves on their detachment from mankind, and are glad to be alone or in church; and therein lies their peace. But he who is truly in the right state, is so in all circumstances, and among all persons; he who is not in a good state, it is not right with him in all places and among all persons. He who is as he should be has God with him in truth, in all places and among all persons, in the street as well as in the church; and then no man

can hinder him.

It is often much harder for a man to be alone in a crowd than in the desert; and it is often harder to leave a small thing than a great, and to practise a small work than one which people consider very great.

PRAYER

Good and earnest prayer is a golden ladder which reaches up to heaven, and by which man ascends to God.

The man who will pray aright should ask for nothing except what may promote God's honour and glory, his own profit and the advantage of his neighbours. When we ask for temporal things we should always add, if it be God's will and if it be for my soul's health. But when we pray for virtues, we need add no qualification, for these are God's own working.

LOVE OF OUR NEIGHBOUR

It is a hard thing to practise this universal love, and to love our neighbours as ourselves, as our Lord commanded us. But if you will understand it rightly, there is a greater reward attached to this command, than to any other. The commandment seems hard, but the reward is precious indeed.

LOVE

He who has found this way of love, seeketh no other. He who turns on this pivot is in such wise a prisoner that his foot and hand and mouth and eyes and heart, and all his human faculties, belong to God. And, therefore, thou canst overcome thy flesh in no better way, so that it may not shame thee, than by love. This is why it is written, Love is as strong as death, as hard as hell. Death separates the soul from the body, but love separates all things from the soul. She suffers nought to come near her, that is not God nor God-like. Happy is he who is thus imprisoned; the more thou art a prisoner, the more wilt thou be freed. That we may be so imprisoned, and so freed, may He help us, Who Himself is Love.

THE UNION WITH GOD

The union of the soul with God is far more inward than that of the soul and body.

Now I might ask, how stands it with the soul that is lost in God? Does the soul find herself or not? To this will I answer as it appears to me, that the soul finds herself in the point, where every rational being understands itself with itself. Although it sinks and sinks in the eternity of the Divine Essence, yet it can never reach the ground. Therefore God has left a little point wherein the soul turns back upon itself and finds itself, and knows itself to be a creature.

God alone must work in thee without hindrance, that He may bring to perfection His

likeness in thee. So thou mayest understand with Him, and love with Him. This is the essence of perfection.

THE LAST JUDGMENT

People say of the last day, that God shall give judgment. This is true. But it is not true as people imagine. Every man pronounces his own sentence; as he shows himself here in his essence, so will he remain everlastingly.

PRECEPT AND PRACTICE

Better one life-master than a thousand reading-masters. If I sought a master in the scriptures, I should seek him in Paris and in the high schools of high learning. But if I wished to ask questions about the perfect life, that he could not tell me. Where then must I go? Nowhere at all save to an utterly simple nature; he could answer my question.

RELICS

My people, why seek ye after dead bones? Why seek ye not after living holiness, which might give you everlasting life? The dead can neither give nor take away. (599)

SAYINGS OF ECKHART

MASTER ECKHART saith: He who is always alone, he is worthy of God; and he who is always at home, to him is God present; and he who abides always in a present now, in him doth God beget His Son without ceasing.

Master Eckhart saith: I will never pray to God to give Himself to me: I will pray Him to make me purer. If I were purer, God must give Himself to me, of His own nature, and sink into me.

Master Eckhart was asked, what were the greatest goods, that God had done to him. He said, there are three. The first is, that the lusts and desires of the flesh have been taken away from me. The second is, that the Divine Light shines and gives me light in all my doings. The third is, that I am daily renewed in virtue, grace and holiness.

W. R. Inge, ed. *Light, Life, and Love: Selections from the German Mystics of the Middle Ages*. London: Methuen: 1904.

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