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## JEREMY TAYLOR

1613–1667

The gifted and personable son of a Cambridge barber, Jeremy Taylor was educated at Cambridge and Oxford, and became deeply read in the early Church Fathers. Marked out for preferment under the conservative anti-Puritan Archbishop Laud, he supported the Royalist cause, but was captured by the Parliamentary armies in 1645; after his release he retired to Golden Grove, in Carmarthenshire (Wales), till the Restoration returned him to favor. After 1660 he held several bishoprics in Ireland.

His reputation rests, today, less on the originality of his ideas than on the splendor of his rhetoric. *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying* (1650–51) are earnest and eloquent exhortations to a Christian way of life; *The Liberty of Prophesying* (1646) is an argument for freedom of conscience more sweeping and impressive than anything Taylor was able to put into actual practice as a working Restoration bishop. But it was in the pulpit that Taylor shone. He was particularly fond of the extended, the almost Homeric, simile; and it is by a culling of these that he is represented here. They are often introduced by a “so have I seen”—a phrase taken up in mockery by the advocates of a plainer, more everyday style (fancy pulpit images were sometimes called “so-have-I-seens”). The images in the similes are soaring, artificial, and ambitious; they seem rather extraneous decoration than essential parts of the sermons in which they occur. Yet they have, at their best, a florid energy and dignified rhythm which must have been impressive indeed in the pulpit.

### Gems of Pulpit Rhetoric<sup>1</sup>

[*The Flames of Human Desire*]

For so have I seen a busy flame sitting upon a sullen coal turn its point to all the angles and portions of its neighborhood and reach at a heap of prepared straw, which like a bold temptation called it to a restless motion and activity, but either it was at too big a distance or a gentle breath from heaven diverted the spear and the ray of the fire to the other side, and so prevented the violence of the burning, till the flame expired in a weak consumption, and died, turning into a smoke and the coolness of death and the harmlessness of a cinder: and when a man's desires are winged with sails and a lusty wind of passion and pass on in a smooth channel of opportunity, God oftentimes hinders the lust and the impatient desire from passing on to its port and entering into action by a sudden thought, by a little remembrance of a word, by a fancy, by a sudden disability, by unreasonable and unlikely fears, by the sudden intervening of company, by the very weariness of the passion, by curiosity, by want of health, by the too great violence of the desire, bursting itself with its fullness into dissolution and a remiss easiness, by a sentence of Scripture, by the reverence of a good man, or else by the proper interventions of the spirit of grace chastising the crime and representing its appendant mischiefs and its constituent disorder and irregularity; and after all this, the very anguish and

1. These lyric metaphors have been culled from different sections of Taylor's work, as indicated.

trouble of being defeated in the purpose hath rolled itself into so much uneasiness and unquiet reflections that the man is grown ashamed and vexed into more sober counsels.

[From *XXVIII Sermons* (1651), Sermon XXVI]

[*The Flight of the Lark*]

For so have I seen a lark rising from his bed of grass and soaring upwards, singing as he rises, and hopes to get to heaven, and climb above the clouds; but the poor bird was beaten back with the loud sighings of an eastern wind, and his motion made irregular and un-constant, descending more at every breath of the tempest than it could recover by the libration<sup>2</sup> and frequent weighing of his wings, till the little creature was forced to sit down and pant, and stay till the storm was over; and then it made a prosperous flight, and did rise and sing, as if it had learned music and motion from an angel as he passed sometimes through the air about his ministries here below; so is the prayers of a good man.

[From *XXV Sermons* (1653), Sermon V]

[*Aspirations of a Worm*]

For as a worm creeping with her belly on the ground, with her portion and share of Adam's curse, lifts up its head to partake a little of the blessings of the air and opens the junctures of her imperfect body, and curls her little rings into knots and combinations, drawing up her tail to a neighborhood of the head's pleasure and motion; but still it must return to abide the fate of its own nature, and dwell and sleep upon the dust: so are the hopes of a mortal man; he opens his eyes and looks upon fine things at distance, and shuts them again with weakness, because they are too glorious to behold; and the man rejoices because he hopes fine things are staying for him; but his heart aches because he knows there are a thousand ways to fail and miss of those glories; and though he hopes, yet he enjoys not; he longs, but he possesses not, and must be content with his portion of dust; and being "a worm and no man"<sup>3</sup> must lie down in this portion, before he can receive the end of his hopes, the salvation of his soul in the resurrection of the dead.

[From *A Sermon at the Funeral of the Archbishop of Armagh*,  
3rd edn., 1663]

[*A Fair Structure Half-Completed*]

But so have I seen a fair structure begun with art and care and raised to half its stature, and then it stood still by the misfortune or negligence of the owner, and the rain descended and dwelt in its joints, and supplanted the contexture of its pillars,<sup>4</sup> and having stood a while like the antiquated temple of a deceased oracle, it fell into a hasty age, and sunk upon its own knees, and so descended into ruin: so is the imperfect, unfinished spirit of a man; it lays the foundation of a holy resolution, and strengthens it with vows and arts of prosecution, it raises up the sacraments, and prayers, reading, and holy ordinances; and holy actions begin with a slow motion, and the building stays, and the spirit is weary, and the soul is naked, and exposed to temptation, and in the days of

2. Fluttering.

3. From Psalm 22.6: "I am a worm, and no man."

4. Taylor thinks of the rain leaching out the mortar which holds the pillars together.

storm take in everything that can do it mischief; and it is faint and sick, listless and tired, and it stands till its own weight wearies the foundation, and then declines to death and sad disorder, being so much the worse because it hath not only returned to its first follies, but hath superadded un-thankfulness and carelessness, a positive neglect, and a despite of holy things, a setting a low price to the things of God, lazinesses and wretchlessness<sup>5</sup> all which are evils superadded to the first state of coldness, whither he is with all these loads and circumstances of death easily revolved.<sup>6</sup>

[From XXV *Sermons* (1653), Sermon XIII]

[*The Fluctuating Compass of Conscience*]

But as the needle of a compass, when it is directed to its beloved star, at the first addresses<sup>7</sup> waves on either side, and seems indifferent in his courtship of the rising or declining sun, and when it seems first determined<sup>8</sup> to the north, stands a while trembling, as if it suffered inconvenience in the first fruition of its desires and stands not still in a full enjoyment till after, first, a great variety of motion, and then an undisturbed posture: so is the piety and so is the conversion of a man, wrought by degrees and several steps of imperfection; and at first our choices are wavering, convinced by the grace of God and yet not persuaded; and then persuaded, but not resolved; and then resolved, but deferring to begin; and then beginning, but (as all beginnings are) in weakness and uncertainty; and we fly out often into huge indiscretions, and look back to Sodom, and long to return to Egypt; and when the storm is quite over we find little bubbings and unevennesses upon the face of the waters, we often weaken our own purposes by the returns of sin; and we do not call ourselves *conquerors* till by the long possession of virtues it is a strange and unusual, and therefore an uneasy and unpleasant thing to act a crime.

[From XXVIII *Sermons* (1651), Sermon XVII]

[*The Strong River of Devotion*]

The river that runs slow and creeps by the banks, and begs leave of every turf to let it pass, is drawn into little hollownesses, and spends itself in smaller portions, and dies with diversion; but when it runs with vigorousness and a full stream, and breaks down every obstacle, making it even as its own brow, it stays not to be tempted by little avocations, and to creep into holes, but runs into the sea through full and usefull channels: so is a man's prayer, if it moves on the feet of an abated appetite, it wanders into the society of every trifling accident, and stays at the corners of the fancy, and talks with every object it meets, and cannot arrive at heaven; but when it is carried upon the wings of passion and strong desires, a swift motion and a hungry appetite, it passes on through all the intermedial regions of clouds, and stays not till it dwells at the foot of the throne, where mercy sits, and thence sends holy showers of refreshment.

[From XXV *Sermons* (1653), Sermon XIII]

5. An old-fashioned form of "recklessness."

6. The coldness of religious indifference turns almost insensibly to the coldness of death.

7. Overtures, onsets.

8. Drawn.

[*Moses and the Glowing Coal*]

The old Rabbis, those poets of religion, report of Moses that when the courtiers of Pharaoh were sporting with the child Moses in the chamber of Pharaoh's daughter, they presented to his choice an ingot of gold in one hand and a coal of fire in the other; and that the child snatched at the coal, thrust it into his mouth, and so singed and parched his tongue that he stammered ever after. And certainly it is infinitely more childish in us for the glittering of the small glowworms and the charcoal of worldly possessions to swallow the flames of hell greedily in our choice. Such a bit will produce a worse stammering than Moses had; for so the accursed and lost souls have their ugly and horrid dialect, they roar and blaspheme, blaspheme and roar forever. And suppose God should now at this instant send the great Archangel with his trumpet to summon all the world to judgment, would not all this seem a notorious visible truth, which you will then wonder that every man did not lay to his heart and preserve therein actual, pious, and effective consideration? Let the trumpet of God perpetually sound in your ears, *Surgite mortui, et venite ad judicium* (Arise, ye dead, and come to the judgment).

[From *XXVIII Sermons* (1651), Sermon XIX]