

Thomas Traherne: A Viewpoint for Our Time

James W. Skeen

Thomas Traherne greatly desired to be a blessing to mankind.¹ He desired that each person please God, and so "to enable [one] to please God is the highest service a man can do" (Meditation #1.11, from Thomas Traherne's *Centuries*). He believed that he was called of God to show men and women how they can know and please God. He saw his life as a living illustration² of what all humans can experience (Meditation #3.1). Traherne's key concepts are felicity and contemplation. His knowledge and experience of felicity encompass what he saw as his gift to mankind. Felicity, a gift from God, is the end and God-centered contemplation and Christian service are the means.

Traherne lived in England in the seventeenth century. He was a pastor in the Anglican Church. His view of the Christian life was unique during his day. Knowing that he grew up experiencing war, violence, and bloodshed, makes his optimistic, peaceful philosophy all the more remarkable. And gives witness to the effects that his contemplative philosophy had on his life.

What he had to say can be of great help to the people of our time. This writer will seek to explain Traherne's Christian views in a way that will make them understandable and applicable.

Traherne's *Centuries* will be the main focus of this paper. With *Centuries* this writer hopes to convey Traherne as the happy man of God he was, as well as whet the appetite of the reader to read *Centuries*. In Traherne's quest to expose the nature and benefits of felicity he has recorded some of the greatest prose writings in the English language. C.S. Lewis said of Traherne's *Centuries*: "[it is] almost the most beautiful book. . .in English."³

Felicity by definition means bliss. To Traherne, however, it is more than just a state of blissful happiness: "...it is simply the wellspring from which all that is good and natural flows."⁴ It is that holy happiness that results in godly and virtuous living. It is not mere psychological contentment that follows satisfied desire or want. Lines 13-18 of Traherne's poem "Nature" speaks to these results as God intended it in creation:

I was by Nature (created nature of mankind) prone and apt to love
All light and beauty, both in Heaven above,
And earth beneath, prone even to Admire,
Adore and Praise as well as to Desire.

My inclinations raised me up on high,
And guided me to all Infinite.⁵

Humans can experience felicity because God has created them in His own image (Meditation #2.23). It is their gift from God. "To enjoy the treasures of God in the similitude of God, is the most perfect blessedness God could devise" (Meditation #3.59). By giving humans this capacity (Meditation #1.99), God has honored them above all creatures: "It is no blasphemy to say that God cannot make a God: the greatest thing that He can make is His Image: a most perfect creature, to enjoy the most perfect treasures, in the most perfect manner: (Meditation #3.61). Traherne also points out that its full potential will not be realized until heaven: "Here upon Earth perhaps where our estate is imperfect this is impossible (full experience of felicity in the image of God): but in Heaven where the soul is all Act it is necessary. . . .Here it is to rejoice in what it may be" (Meditation #2.73).

Although the journey's end is found in heaven's eternity, it starts in this life by discovering the powers, inclinations, and principles of the soul (Meditation #1.19). The soul has the power to know God, love all of God's creation, and see the infinite. It has inclinations of desire, happiness, and possession. And it is guided and governed by principles that order its passions toward the good.

Traherne's whole system is based on his belief that humans are capable of knowing God in a personal way. Traherne's God is not the God of the deists, who believed that God created the world but then distanced Himself from personal contact with that world. Felicity is his epistemological answer to the question of how a person can know God (Meditation #2.21). And his practical answer to the question of how a person can move toward godliness (Meditation #2.22). Unlike Calvin's "signs and tokens,"⁶ Traherne's felicity really gives one a personal glimpse of God (Meditation #3.66). Real personal knowledge of God is possible because God has made it possible in felicity.

Creation is humankind's to enjoy. "The world serves [Him] in this fathomless manner, exhibiting the Deity, and ministering to [His] blessedness. . ." (Meditation #2.24). Animals do not have such powers. They cannot appreciate and admire, they can only comprehend utility--nothing more. As humans love God's works in creation, they come to a better understanding of God Himself. By humankind's very ability to prize God's works, all of creation is validated. One of Traherne's poems, "Demonstration," speaks to humankind's central role in creation: "That Godhead cannot prize the Sun at all, nor yet the skies / Or air, or earth, or trees, or seas / Or stars, unless the Soul of man they please."⁷

The human soul also has the power to see the infinite. By way of thoughts, the

soul can inhabit all the ages (Thoughts IV)⁸. He made us the sons and daughters of God in capacity by giving us "Power to see Eternity, to survey His treasures, to love His children, to know and love as He doth, to become righteous" (Meditation #1.99). "This busy, vast, enquiring Soul / Brooks no controul / No limits will endure, / Nor any Rest: It will all see/ Not time alone, but ev'n Eternity / What is it? Endless sure" (Insatiableness II)⁹. But thought alone is not enough. Thought must be clothed with understanding before the power contributes to felicity (Meditation #2.76). In understanding, a soul can walk with Adam, Enoch, Noah, Moses, Aaron and Solomon and be benefited by all toward felicity (Meditation #1.55).

The soul also possesses inclinations that focus these powers. Desire is the key word here. "Wants are the Bands and Cements between God and us. Had we not wanted we could never have been obliged. Whereas now we are infinitely obliged because we want infinitely" (Meditation #1.51). Desire is what moves us toward God. By His wisdom He "[implanted] by instinct so strong a desire of Felicity in the Soul, that we might be excited to labour after it, though we know it not, the very force wherewith we covet it supplying the place of understanding" (Meditation #3.56). It is a noble inclination because thereby humans can thirst after the highest riches and virtues (Meditation #1.23).

This desire is for happiness. Everyone wants to be happy. But not everyone strives toward felicity, or holy happiness. God wants man to be happy because He is love; and love desires the best for its object (Meditation #1.52). When humans are truly happy, "holy happy," God is happy, for they were made for His enjoyment. (Meditation #4.50). God gives all to humans and humans give praises back to God. Praises are the end of all creation, the reason and "very end for which the world was created" (Meditation #3.82). The heartfelt praise of a person can reach where he or she cannot go--the very bosom of God (Meditation #3.82). Without this cycle, animals are but carcasses and things are but empty objects devoid of meaning (Meditation #3.82).

The soul is also inclined to possess all (Meditation #1.16). Its longings cannot be truly satisfied by anything short of infinite perfection (Christian Ethics, p. 20)¹⁰. It must possess God or be dissatisfied (Meditation #2.63). And this possession comes both by possessing and being possessed by the Great Lover of the Universe (Meditation #3.100). This is paradoxical but true. God is both the end and means of felicity.

Unfortunately, these powers and inclinations are often perverted in direction. Instead of all things being seen in the light of God, they are possessed for what they can do for the possessor. Everyone must live for something (Meditation #1.71) because "felicity is a thing coveted by all" (Meditation #2.100). Desire

moves us, but an individual sets the direction. It is not just the things we behold and desire, but with what eyes we behold them (Meditation #3.68). Properly followed, all objects lead to God. To not see God in all things is to be one's own worst enemy (Meditation #4.7). Such a person Traherne describes as a "blind wretch that wounds [themselves]" (Meditation #4.20). Because of this difficulty (3.63), principles of proper soul functioning are necessary (Meditation #4.94) for humans to reach their God-ordained end in felicity.

God has designed the soul to function according to certain principles. Traherne lists many in his fourth century in Centuries. We will take note of only three. First, seek wisdom and its companion, holiness (Meditation #4.4 and 4.31). Second, see God as a personal friend (Meditation #4.15). And third, see God as sovereign over one's life (Meditation #4.19). In these three principles we see God as truth, goodness, and security--all functioning to produce felicity.

The propositional laws of God are given to move humans in the direction of the above principles. These teach us to love God and all that is good and just (Meditation #1.20) and to live in His image. Obedience to these laws results in blessedness (Meditation #2.29). They are liberating because they free us from "seducing and enslaving errors" (Meditation #1.36). They are liberating because they move us to felicity which itself liberates one "from such imaginary captures as require the continual denial, sublimation, or transference of desire,"¹¹ when objects are possessed apart from God.

Up until now Traherne's description of the soul has been theoretical. What does it look like in real life? Traherne looks to three areas for this real-life look: Christ's cross, prefall Adam, and childhood.

1. To Traherne, the cross is where all virtues are found (Meditation #1.61). It is the center of eternity, the throne of delights, "that tree of life in the midst of the paradise of God" (Meditation #1.55). "The cross is the abyss of wonders, the centre of desires, the school of virtues, the house of wisdom, the throne of love, the theatre of joy, and the place of sorrows; it is the root of happiness, and the gate of heaven" (Meditation #1.58). Through understanding thoughts one can climb "Jacob's ladder" (Meditation #1.60) and enter into its treasures.

2. The second most important and frequent place he looks is the innocent state of prefall Adam. Prefall Adam is a central symbol who knew by intuition the enjoyment of felicity that men and women since have to recover by sanctified reason.

"Remember from whence thou art fallen, and repent: [we have the] duty of remembering our happiness in the estate of innocence. . . . Since therefore by the

Second Adam, we are restored to that we lost in the first: unless we value that we lost in the first, we cannot truly rejoice in the second (2.5)." Prefall Adam saw not the ambitions, inordinate affections, and casual and accidental riches invented since his fall, but only light in the midst of Paradise (3.5). To this, we are to move ourselves, that paradise might be regained.¹²

3. Lastly, Traherne used childhood as the bridge between the abstract and concrete so that the reader might gain firsthand knowledge based on experience. Childhood is a gift of God to humans, as Traherne suggests in "Innocence": "Whether it be that nature is so pure, / and custom only vicious; or that sure / God did by miracle the guilt remove, / and made my soul to feel His love."¹³ It is a divine object lesson meant to render us unhappy with all worldly accumulations.¹⁴ It is not meant to be taken literally, as some kind of statement by Traherne about truth embodiment in a child, but is only symbolic--a living parable. A careful reading of the poem "Improvement" reveals that Traherne reads back into children for teaching purposes what the child could not possibly know intellectually.

"But Oh! the vigor of mine infant sense
Drives me too far: I had not yet the eye
The apprehension, or intelligence
Of things so very great divine and high."¹⁵

Traherne uses both Adam's innocency and childhood innocency masterfully to show his readers that there have been two fallings for each person. The first is the general fall in Adam from created innocency. The second is the personal fall from God's gift of childhood innocency. In order for this symbolic use of childhood to work its teaching charms (by Traherne and God), it must closely resemble Adam's innocency.

Traherne viewed the soul at birth as void of act,¹⁶ but bent toward doing.¹⁷ It is minus all the wicked attachments later accumulated by it, full of potential.

Our Savior's meaning, when he said, [we] must be born again and become a little child that will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven is far deeper than is generally believed. It is not only in a careless reliance upon Divine Providence (trust), that we are to become little children, or in the feebleness and shortness of our anger and simplicity of our passions, but in the peace and purity of all our soul. Which purity also is a deeper thing than is commonly apprehended. For we must dissolve ourselves of all false colours, and uncloth our souls of evil habits; all our thoughts must be infant-like and clear; and disentangled from men's conceits and customs. Grit in the eye or yellow jaundice will not let a man see those objects truly that are before it. And therefore it is requisite that we should

be very strangers to the thoughts, customs, and opinions of men in this world, as things would appear to us only which do to children when they are first born (Meditation #3.5).

Traherne points back to the awareness born of first-truth intuition¹⁸ and the rapturous sense of joy God's objects brought upon discovery (Innocence, 19 lines 9-10) and says, "Remember from whence you have fallen, and repent." From such an awareness and experience humans fall; they apostatize (Meditation #3.2).

This childhood innocency is to be looked back upon and regained by sanctified reason (Meditation #3.2). This so that God can lead one to the knowledge of our Lord and Savior (Meditation #2.34). And from there we learn the depths of God's love as revealed in His infinite provision for His children (Meditation #2.26).

The soul in childhood innocency is not void of original sin, however. When the context dictates that Traherne deal with this issue, he does. When his purpose is to teach about the childhood's symbolic role in understanding felicity, he does not. In various places in Centuries, Traherne speaks of humans at birth, by way of Adam's fall, as needing reconciliation (Meditation #2.5); as being deformed (Meditation #2.3); as being wicked (Meditation #2.32); as being unworthy (Meditation #4.26); as being worse off (Meditation #4.26); as being cursed and barren (Meditation #4.23); and as being in danger of hell (Meditation #1.80). But the strongest statement is read in meditation Meditation #3.43: "In the estate of misery, we have his (Adam's) fall, the nature of sin, original and actual; his manifest punishments, calamity, sickness, death &c."

Thomas Traherne believed that God made humans for relationship with Himself. He believed that humans could actually touch the heart of God and that God was not a distant Being as the deists believed, but that He desired intimate contact with humans. And the ultimate proof of this, according to Traherne, was the appearance of Jesus Christ, God's Son, in the affairs of men and women. Jesus came to us, seeking our hearts. The Cross of Calvary breaks the receptive heart. Jesus gets our hearts through Calvary. That is why He did it! God is not distant, but He showed up on the human scene to experience our wounds and release us from bondage to sin. Traherne wants us to know that God cares and that He loves us. A heart that truly knows this will be moved toward felicity, or holy happiness.

Thomas Traherne was a remarkable writer. His teachings are truly insightful. And his prose writing style was simply beautiful. What made him a remarkable man and not just a magnificently gifted writer was his life. In keeping with his own teaching concerning the definition of a true philosopher being one who does as

well as thinks (Meditation #4.8), he lived his doctrine. He was not perfect by his own admission (Meditation #4.30), but the testimony of some who knew him personally testify to a devout, happy, godly man.²⁰ Contrast Traherne's heart with Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* ("I would rather rule in hell, than serve in heaven"): "I choose rather in a cave to serve Thee, than on a throne to despise thee" (Meditation #1.88). Traherne was a good man because he thirsted after a good God--felicity.

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References

¹Thomas Traherne, *Centuries* (Wilton: Morehouse, 1985) 182. Hereafter all

references to Centuries will be designated as (meditation number).

2Gladys I. Wades, *Thomas Traherne* (New York: Octagon, 1969) 184.

3C.S. Lewis, *Centuries* (Milton: Morehouse, 1985) cover.

4James J. Balakier, "Thomas Traherne's Dobell Series and the Baconian Model of Experience," *English Series* 1989: 241.

5Balakier 241.

6John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster) 43.

7Balakier 244.

8Stanley Stewart, *The Expanded Voice: The Art of Thomas Traherne* (San Marion: Huntington Library, 1970) 202-03.

9Leigh A. DeNeef, *Traherne in Dialogue: Heidegger, Lacan, and Derrida* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988) 30.

10Thomas Traherne, *Christian Ethicks* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press) 20.
11DeNeef 176.

12Louis L. Martz *The Paradise Within: Studies in Vaughan, Traherne, and Milton* (New Haven: Yale, 1964) 95.

13Alexander M. Witherspoon and Frank J. Warnke, *Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) 1022.

14Wades 171.

15Wades 170.

16Stewart 104.

17Allan Pritchard, "Traherne's Commentaries of Heaven (With Selections from the Manuscript)," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, (vol. 53, no. 1, 1983) 19-21.

18Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1942) 52.

19Witherspoon 1022.

20Stewart 13-14.