

## God a Sun and Shield

“So much the more as ye see the day approaching:” these are words that increase in their emphasis as each month rolls by. The signs of the approaching end multiply as the end approaches. The Eastern Question, spread out on the political sky, tells us, above all other signs, that the Lord is near. That question is entering upon a transformation phase, which is likely to see England in her appointed position in Egypt and the Holy Land. When this happens, we may expect the long knocking at the door to cease, and the door itself to open and the Lord to appear; for England, in that position, forms part of the adventual tableaux.

The long talk of the Lord's coming will end in the event itself, and that end is close upon us, though how close we cannot exactly say. The great prophetic periods are nearly all elapsed; and the tokens are visible on every hand to the eyes able to see, but the exact place in the latter-day programme at which the Lord appears to his house is unknown. We are like a ship at the end of a long voyage. We have traversed the great ocean for many months, letting the months stand for the centuries that have passed since Christ's departure. We know by the general reckonings that we are not far from land; and our conclusion on this head is confirmed by the altered appearance of the sea, the shallowness of the soundings, the land-mists on the horizon, and certain tokens in the shape of birds, sea-weed, and other things; but exactly how many miles we are from port, we do not know. We know we are so near that the pilots may come in sight at any moment.

Such a situation is full of an interest almost painful. The effect of it is to make us look more earnestly than ever in the face of the great principles that affect our relation to the Coming Deliverer. These are always brought before us in the symbols once more before us on the table; and generally in a more or less direct way in the Scripture portions read. Let us look at those a little on the present occasion for comfort; for the Word of God is intended for comfort as well as for reproof. For everything there is a season and a time: all things by turns. Yet in looking for the comfort, let us never forget that it is for them only who are in a position to lay hold of it, in having humbled themselves entirely before the God of all comfort in His crucified Son, and given themselves freely to Him a living sacrifice, and in being of those who do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father by him in everything; and who run in the way of his commandments. Assuming this foundation to exist, as proclaimed by our participation in the emblems of the broken body and shed blood of the Lord, let us look at the consolation there is for those who have fled for refuge to the hope set before them in the Gospel.

It is brought before us in a certain form in the words of the Psalm: *"The Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly."* Here we have a most encouraging picture of the kindness of Him with whom we have to do. This character is the central glory of revelation. We fail, perhaps, at all times to remember it sufficiently. Many things help to cloud it from our view. Our weakness, our shortcomings, our pre-occupations in other directions, the weariness of the constant fight of faith, and other things, prevent us from realising as constantly as we might, that the Eternal Father, who invites us to Himself by Christ, is full of tenderness and compassion, and overflowing with loving-kindness to such as keep His covenant, and even abounding in long-suffering and goodness towards those who are far from Him. Our failure in this respect is part of the weakness of our present nature; but our failure to apprehend does not interfere with the fact. God is love, even if we faint and fail. The everlasting hills are not endangered when we grow tired and sleepy. The strength of God is in no way diminished when we die. So His loving-kindness is none the less because we forget. Yea, it operates sometimes in the inverse ratio of our weakness. *"Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them who fear Him; for He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are but dust."* He loved us while we were yet enemies. He provided His Son to die while death and darkness reigned throughout the world; He raised him when none comprehended the loving mystery. He established this propitiatory—this meeting point of reconciliation—while we yet wandered far from Him in disregard and alienation; not that He required to be propitiated; not that He needed reconciliation: The kindness was with Him: the

advance was from Him; it was our reconciliation that was sought by "*God who was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.*" In Christ crucified He gave us the declaration of His righteousness, that bowing down before this, and identifying ourselves with it in baptism, we might exalt His holiness and remember His forgiveness and friendship. All this was arranged before we knew anything about it; and the goodness that contrived this kindness is as great to-day as before it was announced by the apostolic ministration to the world. "*His mercy endureth for ever.*" Its reality and its greatness will be fully manifest when we attain unto "*the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.*" We shall then see the full meaning of Paul's words: "*He hath raised us up together and made us sit together in heavenly places, that in the ages to come, He might shew the exceeding riches of His grace, IN HIS KINDNESS TOWARD US through Christ Jesus*" (Eph. 2: 6, 7). Well might the apostles, to whom the ministry of reconciliation was entrusted, entreat men to be reconciled to God. The mode of the reconciliation is contrived on such a principle that His glory is the upshot of it in the mouth of everyone reconciled; but individual well-being in the most exquisite form it is possible to conceive of it is none the less the result to them on this account. In fact their individual well-being is all the more glorious because realised on the foundation of God's exaltation. It has been well said that the highest glory of God is the supremest good of man. We see it in measure even now, but in the day of the consummated purpose, we shall see it in a manner that hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive.

It is profitable to let the mind rest thus in the contemplation of what God has revealed concerning His goodness. It is a stay and a comfort and a defence in the present time of evil. It is a star of hope in the midnight sky, a great uplifting power in the present depressing animal state of existence. It acts with the mighty influence of well-founded hope, purifying and ennobling the mental man, and saving us from the slavery of petty temporal life. It is a soothing balm and a stimulating cordial. It comes closer even than hope; it gives faith in a present beneficence. It is a pledge of present goodness. God is a sun and a shield even now. It is to the present time peculiarly that these same words apply. They were written concerning those who walk uprightly in a time of evil; in the ages to come there will be no evil to be protected from. It is now, when the wicked walk on every side, and when snares through all our way are strewn, that righteous men most need the comfort of the fact that the Lord God is a sun and shield. What an expressive figure it is! How cheerless and gloomy and unwholesome is the earth without the sun. Let the sun arise, and what a change takes place! He seems to fill the expanse with an ocean of light and life, in which we bathe with sensations of exquisite delight. There is healing and joy and beauty in his beams.

Such is God, and more: a shield also. In the finest sunlight, violence might assail or the beast of prey devour. Defence is needed, therefore, to complete the picture. If God defend, no evil can befall. Jesus teaches us to pray for this: "*Deliver us from evil.*" But let us judge wisely in the matter. A father who defends his child continually from mortal calamity may himself inflict upon him pain by the rod, or assign him for his good a part to fulfil which will be irksome or even painful; the child would judge wrongly if he were to say his father did not act a beneficent part because he subjected him to chastisement and hard tasks. So we must not say that because God is a sun and a shield to those who walk uprightly, nothing but prosperity will be their lot. True blessing may require them to be put through sharp adversity. Every case must be judged by its issue. A man flourishing in this life to the loss of life eternal, is not blessed. If in order to guide a man into the kingdom of God a crooked path is needed, then God shows Himself a sun and shield in twisting his path for him: a sun in shining upon him unto life; a shield in fencing him from those circumstances that would be fatal to his steps. This is a most important discrimination. Apart from it, many mistakes will be made. The Psalmist himself gives us an illustration of this. He says, "*My feet were almost gone: my steps had well-nigh slipped; for I was envious at the foolish when I saw the prosperity of the wicked . . . until I went into the sanctuary of God: then understood I their end. Surely thou didst set them in slippery places.*" It is very natural to argue that prosperity is an evidence of Divine favour and adversity the reverse; but it is often far from correct. God does sometimes prosper the righteous, as in the case of Joseph in Egypt; and, in the final sense, there is nothing but prosperity in reserve for Joseph's class, and nothing but adversity and ruin for the accursed of God; but in the present provisional and preliminary state,

trouble is more frequently the portion of the chosen of God than the reverse—the explanation being that trouble is a necessary part of the process by which they are developed for the endless ages of blessedness to come after. It is in this relation of things that we comprehend Paul's doctrine of chastisement: "*What son is he whom the Father chasteneth not? If ye be without chastisement, whereof all (the sons) are partakers, then are ye bastards and not sons.*" "*Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth.*" The practical application of all these principles lies here: "*ALL things (good things and evil things) work together for good to them who love God: who are the called according to His purpose.*" God knows when the good things are safe and when the evil things are needed; and the scriptural attitude is to accept, with a reverential submission, whatever comes; if good, with thanksgiving; if evil, with resignation. It would be altogether a mistake to assume that goodness only will be our lot, or that God regards us not if He suffer evil to happen.

Job is ever a helpful illustration on this point. A man of the thoroughly approved stamp, God overthrew him in all his affairs without letting him know that he was being subjected to a test. Job, while asserting his integrity, took it all in submission, on the ground that God was supreme and did as He willed, and that man, as a created being, had no room to murmur if evil, as well as good were his lot. In this Job took the right ground; for his judgment of the case was divinely endorsed as against that of his three friends, who argued that because Job had fallen into evil, therefore he must have been unrighteous. Now, why was Job's case recorded? Like all other ancient examples, it was "*written for our instruction*"; "*it happened to them for ensamples (to us)*" (I Cor. 10: 11). If so, it follows that we may sometimes be put to a similar proof if we are worthy of the test. Consequently, we shall argue wrongly if we say God has forsaken us when something has gone wrong, or that things will always and necessarily go well with us. Can we expect to be better off in these things than the servants of God who have gone before? And what is their history? One and all, they came through sore trouble. The Lord himself was the greatest sufferer of all, and is it not written, "*We must suffer with him*"? Nay, is it not the very characteristic of the great assembly of which we hope to form a part that they came out of "*great tribulation*"? Paul told the disciples that "*we must through tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.*" We do not live in the days of their tribulation, but we must not marvel if we have our share, peculiar to our own times. It is a necessity if we are ever to be worth anything in the Master's service. What preparation is a bed of roses for the great muster of those who have been tried and purified and made white?

There is one form of suffering with Christ which is in every man's reach—nay, in his very bosom—who has the root of the matter within him. It is referred to in the very Psalm that tells that "*the Lord God is a sun and a shield.*" It is expressed in these words: "*My soul longeth, yea even fainteth for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.*" "*How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts.*" There are no iteral tabernacles of Divine institution towards which we can set our hearts in strong desire as David did; but the feeling that led David in that channel dwells deeply in every mind that is kin with David. It is a craving for the manifestation of God and the delights of His worship. It is a hunger and a thirst after righteousness, as Jesus expresses it. Hunger and thirst are due to the absence of the objects of their desire. This is just the present condition of things spiritual. Famine prevails. The world is without God, whether we regard the vulgar masses or the high places of refined society. They are very busy, most of them, and tolerably honest and neighbourly (though not too much of that), but "*God is not in all their thoughts.*" They desire not the knowledge of His ways. They, therefore, "*lie in wickedness*" according to the scriptural standard, which is the only standard in vogue with spiritual men. Even wickedness, in the grosser sense, is in the ascendant. Human aims, in all the walks of life, are governed by the lowest instincts. To selfish objects every high principle and noble consideration is sacrificed. Men everywhere labour with diligence, often unscrupulous as to means so long as they keep out of the clutches of the law, for their own selfish behoof, and millions are trampled in the gutter, with blasphemy against God and the execration of man on their lips. The world is a great wilderness: a dry and parched land, wherein there is no water. There is a day coming when it will be said, "*Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.*" Of this tabernacle of glory in the future age, the

tabernacle of Mosaic pitching was typical. David's heart on the type—ours on the antitype—join together from the same feeling, and say "*How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts*": and from the same sense of present desolation we groan together, heart and flesh crying out for the living God. This made up the principal part of the sufferings of Christ. In the midst of much people, he was as a sparrow on the house-top—a pelican in the wilderness—alone in the surrounding desolation. This is an experience that continues for every son of God. There are plenty of people and plenty of activity, but neither the people nor what they are doing has any interest for those who are Christ's. In this respect we suffer with him, even if we are not the objects of direct persecution. We are not at liberty to unite with the present world as regards its aims and principles and pleasures. We do not belong to it if we belong to Christ; for he expressly said "*I am not of this world*," and he affirmed the same fact of his disciples, saying, "*Ye are not of this world*." There are some who say, "That was all very well for Christ and his apostles, but we are not Christ nor his apostles." Those who speak in this style give evidence that they are yet strangers and foreigners, and aliens from the commonwealth of Israel; for the house of God is one, and the principle appertaining to one part belongs to all. John says, "*He that saith he abideth in him, ought himself so to walk EVEN AS HE WALKED*"; and Paul tells us as concerning his own case, that he obtained mercy that Christ might set him forth "*for a pattern to them that should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting*" (I Tim. 1: 16). He also plainly commands us to be followers of him as he was of Christ (I Cor. 11: 1). From this it will appear how unscriptural and dangerous is that style of talk which would seek to excuse modern believers from aiming at the standard exhibited in Christ and the apostles. There is no other saving standard. If we fail of this, we fail altogether: for it is by this we are to be tried. The standard men set up for themselves and one another, will be nowhere in the great day of judgment. They will vanish as the snow does before the heat. Men may comfort themselves now in measuring themselves by themselves, and by the wicked world outside; but where will be their consolation when Christ refuses to try men by any rule but his own?

Therefore it remains that the saints are not of this world. Their sentiment is the one expressed in the Psalm read: "*I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness*." The world, as at present constituted is, in the aggregate, "*the tents of wickedness*." It is founded on "*the lust of the eye, and the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life*." It is, therefore, impossible that a man of God can be a dweller among them or even be content to enjoy their recognition. The saints cannot be friends with the world. The world hated Christ, and it will hate his friends if they are so in deed and in truth. The world's friendship is a dangerous thing. Its countenance is almost certain death. A man may say "I like it," but it is the old man that says that. The new man, who counts all things but dung that he may win Christ, would feel he was betraying Christ if he accepted recognition at the hands of those who despise God. What the old man likes is something to be on our guard against. The new man should be allowed to rule in all things. Nay, he **will** rule in the elect of God, for where he rules not, God's choice does not lie. Christ's words on this point are plain: "*If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be*." It is not sufficient that a man enrol himself as a servant; he must be a servant in more than name if he is to be of any acceptance with the Father who sent Christ as one who served. He must "follow" Christ, and, following him, is doing as he did, in all the particulars he has indicated for our guidance. Preaching true doctrine is apart, but only a part of this service; it largely includes righteous and benevolent deeds performed in the glory of Him from whom comes all power to perform deeds of any kind, and to whom, therefore, all glory belongs.

The way of life is narrow, because the life to be entered is glorious, and glorious by reason of the things that constitute the way narrow; for where would be the glory of the future age if it were not for the righteousness that will be at its foundation, and the glory to God in the highest that will form its top stone of renown? Immortality would be a creature delight, no doubt; but divorced from its appointed coordinate of spotless righteousness, it would be like a precious stone in the dark. And in the wisdom of God, the foundation of all this righteousness and glory is being laid in these times of evil, when the way of obedience is a way of self-mortification. Let us recognise the situation and act the part of wise men. The present order of things will not endure for ever. The trials we endure in the

weakness of flesh and blood are but for a moment. They began only yesterday, and they will be all over tomorrow: and what a morrow will that be, if we successfully fight this no uncertain fight, pressing towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus! The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. Endowed with the immortal vigour of a new and imperishable body, and clad in the joyous vesture of cloudless wisdom and irrepressible thanksgiving and praise, we shall be invited to go forth on the work of reformation and blessing amongst millions of benighted men. First, the sword will clear the path, bringing down the power and abolishing the authority of kings in all the kingdoms of the world; then the pouring wealth of the nations will come to the feet of Jehovah's kings and priests; then the willing ears of countless multitudes will listen while the New Order of Governors teach them everywhere new laws, and uprear for them new and righteous institutions, by which all nations will be blessed, and the glory of Abraham's God set on high. Thenceforth in glory and honour and wealth, and greatness and joy and renown, the righteous will shine forth in the kingdom of their Father, a glorious galaxy of deathless benefactors, prepared in former days of trial and humiliation, but now exalted as the resplendent stars of the new heavens, and shining therein to the glory of Him who created them.

(Taken from "Seasons of Comfort" Volume 1 pages 28-34 by Bro. Roberts)