

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 154

As the brethren of the Lord Jesus, we have much to do with both light and darkness. In a sense, we have nothing to do with darkness. We have done with darkness: as Paul says, believers are all the children of the light and of the day. But though not of the night or of darkness, we are in the night and walking in the darkness, and cannot but be affected more or less by our contact with it. The contact is often times one that gives distress. We cannot but feel pain in the contemplation of the darkness. It is a darkness in many things. It is not merely the darkness of ignorance, but darkness in every sense in which the term can be applied to human experience.

A man says his way is all dark when his prospects are bad. He says a neighbourhood is dark that is immoral; or that a man is dark as night who has no understanding. In every sense, the world is shrouded in darkness. It not only lies in wickedness, as in John's day, but it is badly off; poorly housed, miserably fed, dreadfully overworked; unprovided with proper education or scope for turning any education into rational account: blighted in body and degraded in mind, without the prospect of any change in their situation. Many, no doubt, are well off, in material circumstances, and have a little light in the various ways (though of a sickly glow). But as regards the mass of mankind, their situation is that of darkness without hope of improvement.

There have been dreadful revelations recently to oppress the heart with a heavy burden. We require no special revelations to make us inexpressibly sad at the present lot of man. The everyday condition of the mass of mankind is quite sufficient. But when such disclosures of squalor and poverty, and oppression, and utter degradation are made, as those contained in recent descriptions of the state of the London poor, we feel weighed to the ground with a sense almost of stupefaction at the magnitude and the hopelessness of the evil that prevails in the very midst of civilisation.

Now the chapter we have read this morning (Acts 15) may not appear to have much to do with the subject one way or other. But there is one expression in it that struck me as containing a salve to the wound which such a state of things inflicts upon the inner man. It is the remark of James at the council of the elders called to consider the position of the Gentiles:

"Known unto God are all his works from the beginning."

The present dreadful state of things upon earth cannot in a direct sense be considered one of the works of God; but in an indirect sense it is included. The evil that prevails is one of the corollaries of man's forgetfulness of God. Evil is created by God, as He himself tells us (Isaiah 45:7) as the punishment of sin, as we learn from numerous declarations, and also as furnishing one of the conditions leading at last to perfect good. It comes out of the circumstances He establishes and permits. Indirectly, therefore, it is a work of God. And it is a work, with all His works, "known from the beginning." If so, we need not be too much downcast. We may be quite sure there is wisdom in it. We may even see it thus, with a little reflection, even if that reflection is limited to the present situation only. We see people dispirited and ground down to poverty: but where would they be if it were otherwise? What would their attitude be in plenty? We may find our answer in the state of well-to-do classes. The wealthy are arrogant and self-absorbed and as forgetful of God as the poor. If wealth were general, so would lawlessness be. Sodom and Gomorrah were not troubled with poverty.

"This was the sin of Sodom: pride, fulness of bread and abundance of idleness was in their hands."

We may therefore rest content that if poverty is a great curse to the world, wealth would be no less so. It would be curse in another form. Violence would probably be more general than in the present state.

To get the real comfort, we must take a larger view. The present moment is part of an age, and we must look at the age before we can understand the moment. We must look at the whole of a thing before we can understand a part. What could a man make of a small part of an ingenious machine if he found it lying on the road by itself? A part is only intelligible when comprehended in its relation to the whole. The mistakes that men make in regard to life and human destiny arise from confining their attention to the present moment upon earth. Looked at by itself, life as it now is, is, doubtless, an enigma, not only hard to understand but overwhelming to the heart that opens fully to all its painful features. We must not look at it by itself. We must look at it in relation to the plan that is being worked out for the ages. But who can show us this plan? God can do it, for the plan is His. And He has done it, for we have it in our hands with every authentication the subject is susceptible of. Men who are unenlightened in this plan are necessarily in the dark, and must find themselves, in relation to life, if they are thoughtful at all, like men groping in a subterranean cavern with no outlet.

We are privileged this morning to have the plan in our hands, and to understand it, and to believe in it. We look back to get the start of it. We see human life start, fair and beautiful, though imperfect. We see God apply the highest lesson of which it is capable, and the learning of which is essential to its highest good; the lesson that man is subject; that God is supreme, and must be obeyed. We see the lesson miscarry, as regards the particular individual (Adam) to whom it was applied. We see Adam disobedient, and we see a consequence as inevitable to disobedience as suffocation is to the absence of oxygen. We see death passed upon him, and through its effect upon his nature, we see it pass to all who should come out of that nature. And not only death, but exile; sent out of Eden; sent away from divine society and leading; sent into the world, to take care of himself. This was the dark valley into which the race stepped, in Adam, from the sunny uplands; and in this valley it has been floundering ever since, and is stumbling and struggling bootlessly today. Like an army penned in a narrow defile under the guns of the enemy, they are crowding and trampling each other to death. But the chaos is not a hopeless chaos. In the rout and rabble, there is a reorganising work going on. Messengers from the King of the uplands have the masses in hand here and there, slowly reforming it with a view to leading it out of the valley; to more glorious uplands on the other side. Out on to that other side the straggling mud-stained be-draggled mass will yet deploy, an orderly, glorious, rejoicing host, to triumphant strain of music. The human race, as a race, will one day emerge from the gloom and vanity of the present state into glory that will make it forget its woe, and its emergence will not be for a transient blessing. There will be "*no more curse, no more pain, no more death.*" The salvation conferred upon it will be an everlasting salvation in the absolute sense.

It is this upshot of things that we must take into account, in rightly estimating the circumstances of the present moment. The human race has come from the heights; it is now in the depths; but it is on its way to ascend heights more glorious than it ever stood on before. The world's present experience is God's way from the one to the other. It is all-known and fore-known to Him. We may, therefore, soothe our distresses and trust in God and leave to Him the burden that belongs to Him. Surely He is wise; it is not in man to criticise Him. If we are tempted to think this is poor consolation for the world's present woes, we may profitably ask ourselves, what else is there? The vanity is here; no man can remove it: If the revealed purpose of God be not the remedy, where is there one? It is not in man to remove mortality, weakness, inefficiency, and death. It is not in man to so arrange affairs on earth, as that man shall be a blessing to man, instead of a curse, as he is under present social and political arrangements. Are we to refuse God's remedy, because it does not come up to our ideas,

which we cannot carry out, and which, with His wisdom, we should see to be foolish ideas, even if we could carry them out? Of all the sublime absurdities of human logic, nothing could surpass the argument, that because Bible salvation is not broad enough, general enough, and quick enough (though substantiated by every token of truth of which the subject is susceptible), therefore we must shut our eyes to all salvation, and accept and proclaim the idea that the universe is nothing more than a vast death-mill, for grinding living creatures into nothing. This was the argument of a gentleman a very short time back—that the Bible plan seemed inconsistent with a God of love; therefore, while not denying the existence of a Supreme Being, and not denying that goodness was one of His attributes, as reflected in creation, he preferred to take things just as he found them in his own personal experience, and to say there was no hope at all. There is a worm at the root of such a philosophy as this. There is a radical flaw in the reasoning that leads to such a melancholy and demoralising conclusion, from such irrelevant premises. It is not difficult to put the finger upon it. Men who reason thus have not learnt to feel, even if they admit the elementary maxim of truth that might almost be called self-evident, viz., that man is not the first nor the highest in creation; that he did not make it or precede it; that it exists not for him; that he is but an element in it—only one of the many helpless, powerless, permitted transient forms of the eternal power out of which all things have come. The man realising this very obvious truth could never be guilty of the presumption of regulating the problems of the universe by their bearing on his individual feelings and interests. He must necessarily feel that in himself he is nothing, and that there must be a law and an aim in the existence and operations of the universe as much greater than he, as the heavens over his head are greater than the house he inhabits. This is so obvious as to rank as a primitive moral instinct. A man inaccessible to it must be lacking in some characteristic of the *genus homo*.

God has proclaimed to us what the intellect perceives on this point; that as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His ways higher than man's ways and His thoughts than man's thoughts. This being true, both by moral instinct and revelation, what difficulty ought the present form of things to present to enlightened intellect? There is a "way" visible in the whole sad history of our race since the day of its fall in Eden; and if it differs from us in our way, it is because it is God's way. That way is, to secure the supremacy of God's authority as the basis of everlasting life upon earth. Man may have no sympathy with this aim. As a matter of fact, he has none. His way would be one of indiscriminate philanthropy. "Let man be well off, comfortable, and happy, whatever becomes of the glory of God." This in an ungarnished way would express his philosophy of things. But this philosophy is shallow and foolish, exceedingly. Why should man have food for his stomach, clothes to his back, mirth for his empty heart, if he is to shut his eyes to wisdom, and turn away from the aims and exercises of heart that constitute both his highest beauty as a living being, and is the greatest delight of which his nature is capable? Is the universe only a cook-shop or a lodging-house? Has it been established by commercial speculators? The fools impatiently answer: "Universe! Universe! Why do you mope about the universe! Look after the pudding." Ah! good friends, but the universe is there for all that. It will not take itself off because you bury your snout in the trough; neither will it let you alone in your folly, though silent and making no sign. It will slowly clear you off the scene, and pass on to other and higher things, which, although they have no place in your heart, are higher and more glorious than anything it has ever entered into your minds to conceive of.

No; the pudding philosophy is the philosophy of fools. God's wisdom is the only wisdom. He aims at bringing the human race through a discipline that will teach it that it exists for Him, and that it can have no well-being apart from obedience to Him, and no existence at all apart from His power. This lesson will be learnt, and learnt effectually, by a sufficient number in the long run to constitute a wise population for the whole earth at last.

That they are few in every age is only because of the greatness of the plan and the greatness of the Worker-out of it.

“All nations before Him are as nothing.”

What if vast masses of the population pass away like the grass; they are but incidental to the plan of the great, wise, and irresponsible Maker of all. There is no violation of eternal justice—no ultimate heritage of trouble. They come (they had no right to come): they go (they have no right to stay): they vanish (they have no trouble in oblivion). They are as though they had not been. They are as a dream when we awake, which is the Scripture’s own declaration.

Let men once get into sympathy with God, and they have no trouble with these problems. He is eternal: He is holy: He is dreadful in His power and prerogatives. Mankind, as the mechanical propagation of a condemned stock have no rights before Him but the coffin and the cemetery. Of God’s own good pleasure, He has set in motion a glorious plan, which will fill the earth with glad hearts when He is enthroned in them all. We are well through the programme of the plan. We have the happiness to live in the time of the end, which is also *“the time of the dead, that they should be judged,”* and the time that the promised reward should be given to the servants of God. We have heard what are almost the dying echoes of the invitation to come out and be separate, and become the sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty. We have caught the sound, notwithstanding the Babel of voices that fill the air: and we are here this morning to rejoice in the prospect of the glory to be revealed. We are not unmoved by the spectacle of the world’s woes, but we are strengthened by the knowledge that God Himself will heal them in due time; and if it meanwhile suffer, we are not unmindful of the world’s wickedness against God, and its unfitness to receive the unmixed blessings of His hand, and we do not forget that even now it is in our power to offer to the world a panacea for all its woes. God has authorised us to re-echo His own words,

“Ho everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

It is our part, as vendors of the Spirit’s precious wares, to sound this invitation as the only true alleviation of the woe that now prevails. It is little we can do to arrest attention to it. What we can do, let us do. Let us at least maintain our own steadfastness, holding forth the word of life, calling men’s attention to the living oracles of divine truth, whether they will hear and whether they will forbear, that we may at least save ourselves from this untoward generation.

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