**THINGS THAT MATTER MOST - DEVOTIONAL PAPERS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**28. NEEDLESS REGRETS! by JOHN H. JOWETT**

"IF Thou hadst been here my brother had not died." That is a Scriptural example of a very familiar experience. It illustrates a most commonplace form of grief. It is an example of needless regrets. "If Thou hadst been here my brother had not died." If we had arranged things a little differently, how different might have been the issues! If we had taken another turning, what a contrast in our destiny! If only we had done so-and-so, Lazarus might have been with us still! My readers will recognize the familiarity of the utterance. It is the expression of a common human infirmity. Its sound travels through the years like the haunting sigh of a low moan. "If only ... !" "If only ... !" And the pathetic cry is with us to-day. It is usually born on the morning after a crisis, and it sometimes continues until the plaintive soul itself goes home to rest. It is a sorrow that consumes like a gangrene. It drains away the vital strength. If by some gracious ministry it could be ended, and the moan changed into trustful quietude, an enormous load would be lifted from the heart of the race. Men and women are being crushed under needless regrets. And here is one of them: "Lord, if Thou hadst been here my brother had not died!" It was a regret that shut out the kindly light of the stars which God has ordained should shine and cheer us in our nights. I wish, therefore, to look at the incident with the utmost simplicity, in the prayerful hope that similar burdens may be lifted from the hearts of some who may read these words.

It was a beautiful friendship which united the Lord with the family at Bethany. Their home was very evidently one of His favourite resorts. He turned to it for its friendly peace. Perhaps He found in this little circle a love that was not tainted with interested ambition. Perhaps He found a friendship that sought no gift and coveted no place. Perhaps He found a full-orbed sympathy, unbroken by suspicion or reserve. Perhaps He found a confidence which was independent of the multitude, and which remained quietly steadfast whether He moved in public favour or in public contempt. At any rate, Jesus was at home "in the house of Martha and Mary," and here all unnecessary reticence was changed into free and sunny communion. He loved to turn from the heated, feverish atmosphere of fickle crowds to the cool and restful constancy of these devoted friends. When the eyes of His enemies had been following Him with malicious purpose, it was spiritually recreating to look into eyes that were just quiet "homes of silent prayer." After the contentions of the Twelve, and their constant disputes as to who should be greatest, it was good to be in this retired home where friends found love's reward in love's sacrifices, and the joy of loving in the increased capacity to love. It is therefore no wonder to read, as we do so frequently, that "Jesus went out to Bethany."

And now a darker record begins. "A certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, of the village of Mary and her sister Martha." We know. nothing about Lazarus, except that Jesus loved him. Not a single lineament of his character has been offered to our imagination. And yet, somehow, I feel as though I know him well. He was one of those glorious men about whom our modern Press could scarcely compose a single readable paragraph. He was a gracious, lovable nobody. He was a "home-bird." He was a lover of the fireside. He was a beautiful commonplace. He did nothing except live a noble life. He was one of the nobodies whose presence constitutes the very sanctity of home. And he was sick.

What will the sisters do? They know of the Saviour's mysterious power over sicknesses. They had heard of it; they had probably seen it. Should they send for Him? Lazarus would not hear of it! These good souls never will. Said Lazarus: "He has got something better to do than trouble about me. Trouble not the Master. Let Him go on telling His good news unto men." And the sisters heeded their brother. But he grew gradually weaker, and they took counsel together, perhaps unknown to their forbearing patient. And then a sort of compromise was born which paid respect to their brother's wish while giving expression to their own. "We won't exactly ask Him to come! We will just send Him the news and leave the decision to Him." "The sisters therefore sent unto Him saying, Lord, behold, he whom Thou lovest is sick."

What will the Master do? Surely He will haste with all speed to the stricken home! He will take comfort where He has so often received it. He will lift the burden where the burden has been so often lifted from Him. "When therefore Jesus heard that he was sick He abode at that time two days in the place where He was." It was one of those mysterious delays which so often burden our life. There were the sisters in Bethany, waiting, wondering, saddening. Will He never come? Has He forgotten? "Then after this He saith to the disciples, Let us go into Judaea again." And so He came to Bethany, but it was too late. Lazarus was dead.

"If Thou hadst been here! If only we had sent two days earlier! If only we had done it without consulting our brother! If--if--if only!" This is, I say, a type of needless regret. It was a retrospect which darkened sorrow. It added a deeper gloom to the night. And it was all so gratuitous, so needless, so unwise. Why should they now go back, and fetch remorse from yesterday, and load their heart to the point of bursting?

And the same remorseful "if" rankles in human life to-day. How often I have heard it when loved ones have been taken away. Poor laden hearts have added to their burden by their sharp regrets. "If we had only gone south instead of north." "If I had taken the first illness more seriously." "If I had only got her away when she began to grow tired." "If I had only given up that engagement." "If I had never gone away." "If we had called in the doctor earlier." And so the poor, weeping souls moan on as if our God was dead.

And how often I have heard the wail when some choice or enterprise has apparently failed. "If we had only put him into a trade instead of a profession!" "If only we had put him in a profession instead of a trade!" "If only we had never sent him away from home!" "If only we had taken the other alternative!" "If only we had listened to this man's counsel instead of that man's counsel!" "If only! If only!" Or perhaps there is some decision concerning ourselves about which we have now become uncertain when it is too late to make a change. We thought about it, we took counsel about it, we prayed about it. Then we acted, and now we think we see. "If only I had waited another week!" "If only I had taken the first post that offered!" "If only I had been contented with good instead of fondly looking for better!" And so there comes a seeming "after-wisdom." We assume that we are "wise after the event." Our lamp is now burning, but it has been kindled too late, and its only use is to reveal to us our tragic and irremediable mistakes.

Now in the case of Martha and Mary the remorseful regret was altogether needless. "If Thou hadst been here!" But He had been there all the time. He had been with them in deepest sympathy, in kindly thought, in gracious intention, in tender and yet ample plan. What they were thinking to be a lamentable mischance was a vital part of a larger scheme, begotten and inspired by unfailing love. They had scarcely, if ever, been out of His mind since He heard the news. There was no need for regret; everything was just exactly right.

And so it is with most of the "ifs," the remorseful "ifs" that ravage and devastate our peace. If there be a personal devil, who makes it his work to sow seeds of unhappiness and discord and unrest, multitudes of these "ifs" must be of his unholy planting. And for this reason. They destroy filial trust; they destroy spiritual peace; they destroy the wide sweeping light of Christian hope. The devil sows these needless regrets, and the thorns choke the good seed, and our spiritual harvest is starved or destroyed.

And even supposing we have made mistakes, and we would dearly like to have the choice back again that we might take the other turning, what then? Who is our God? And what are His name and character? Cannot He knit up the ravelled bit of work, and in His own infinitely gracious way make it whole again? With all our mistakes we may throw ourselves upon His inexhaustible goodness, and say with St. Theresa, "Undertake Thou for me, O Lord."

It is the very gospel of His grace that He can repair the things that are broken. He can reset the joints of the bruised reed. He can restore the broken heart. He can deal with the broken vow. And if He can do all this, can He not deal with our mistakes? If unknowingly we went astray, and took the wrong turning, will not His infinite love correct our mistakes, and make the crooked straight?