**APOSTOLIC OPTIMISM AND OTHER SERMONS - SERMONS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**01. APOSTOLIC OPTIMISM by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"Rejoicing in hope."*

*Romans 12:12*

That is a characteristic expression of the fine, genial optimism of the Apostle Paul. His eyes are always illumined. The cheery tone is never absent from his speech. The buoyant and springy movement of his life is never changed. The light never dies out of his sky. Even the grey firmament reveals more hopeful tints, and becomes significant of evolving glory. The apostle is an optimist, "rejoicing in hope," a child of light wearing the "armour of light," "walking in the light" even as Christ is in the light.

This apostolic optimism was not a thin and fleeting sentiment begotten of a cloudless summer day. It was not the creation of a season; it was the permanent pose of the spirit. Even when beset with circumstances which to the world would spell defeat, the apostle moved with the mien of a conqueror. He never lost the kingly posture. He was disturbed by no timidity about ultimate issues. He fought and laboured in the spirit of certain triumph. "We are always confident." "We are more than conquerors through Him that loved us." "Thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

This apostolic optimism was not born of sluggish thinking, or of idle and shallow observation. I am very grateful that the counsel of my text lifts its chaste and cheery flame in the 12th chapter of an epistle of which the first chapter contains as dark and searching an indictment of our nature as the mind of man has ever drawn. Let me rehearse the appalling catalogue, that the radiance of the apostle's optimism may appear the more abounding: "Senseless hearts," "fools," "uncleanness," "vile passions," "reprobate minds," "unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, whisperers, backbiters, hateful to God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil things, without understanding, covenant-breakers, without natural affection, unmerciful." With fearless severity the apostle leads us through the black realms of midnight and eclipse. And yet in the subsequent reaches of the great argument, of which these dark regions form the preface, there emerges the clear, calm, steady light of my optimistic text. I say it is not the buoyancy of ignorance. It is not the flippant, light-hearted expectancy of a man who knows nothing about the secret places of the night. The counsellor is a man who has steadily gazed at light at its worst, who has digged through the outer walls of convention and respectability, who has pushed his way into the secret chambers and closets of the life, who has dragged out the slimy sins which were lurking in their holes, and named them after their kind -- it is this man who when he has surveyed the dimensions of evil and misery and contempt, merges his dark indictment in a cheery and expansive dawn, in an optimistic evangel, in which he counsels his fellow-disciples to maintain the confident attitude of a rejoicing hope.

**1.**

Now what are the secrets of this courageous and energetic optimism? Perhaps, if we explore the life of this great apostle, and seek to discover its springs, we may find the clue to his abounding hope. Roaming then through the entire records of his life and teachings, do we discover any significant emphasis? Pre-eminent above all other suggestions, I am impressed with his vivid sense of the reality of the redemptive work of Christ. Turn where I will, the redemptive work of the Christ evidences itself as the base and groundwork of his life. It is not only that here and there are solid statements of doctrine, wherein some massive argument is constructed for the partial unveiling of redemptive glory. Even in those parts of his epistles where formal argument has ceased, and where solid doctrine is absent, the doctrine flows as a fluid element into the practical convictions of life, and determines the shape and quality of the judgments. Nay, one might legitimately use the figure of a finer medium still, and say that in all the spacious reaches of the apostle's life the redemptive work of his Master is present as an atmosphere in which all his thoughts and purposes and labours find their sustaining and enriching breath. Take this epistle to the Romans in which my text is found. The earlier stages of the great epistle are devoted to a massive and stately presentation of the doctrines of redemption. But when I turn over the pages where the majestic argument is concluded, I find the doctrine persisting in a diffused and rarefied form, and appearing as the determining factor in the solution of practical problems. If he is dealing with the question of the "eating of meats" the great doctrine reappears, and interposes its solemn and yet elevating principle: "destroy not him with thy meat for whom Christ died." If he is called upon to administer rebuke to the passionate and unclean, the shadow of the Cross rests upon his judgment. "Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price." If he is pourtraying the ideal relationship of husband and wife, he sets it in the light of redemptive glory: -- "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself up for it." If he is seeking to cultivate the grace of liberality, he brings the heavenly air round about the spirit. "Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor." It interweaves itself with all his salutations. It exhales in all his benedictions like a hallowing fragrance. You cannot get away from it. In the light of the glory of redemption all relationships are assorted and arranged. Redemption was not degraded into a fine abstract argument, to which the apostle had appended his own approval, and then, with sober satisfaction, had laid it aside, as a practical irrelevancy, in the stout chests of mental orthodoxy. It became the very spirit of his life. It was, if I may be allowed the violent figure, the warm blood in all his judgment. It filled the veins of all his thinking. It beat like a pulse in all his purposes. It determined and vitalised his decisions in the crisis, as well as in the lesser trifles of the common day. His conception of redemption was regulative of all his thought.

But it is not only the immediacy of redemption in the apostle's thought by which I am impressed. I stand in awed amazement before its vast, far-stretching reaches into the eternities. Said an old villager to me concerning the air of his elevated hamlet, "Aye, sir, it's a fine air is this westerly breeze; I like to think of it as having travelled from the distant fields of the Atlantic!" And here is the Apostle Paul, with the quickening wind of redemption blowing about him in loosening, vitalising, strengthening influence, and to him, in all his thinking, it had its birth in the distant fields of eternity! To the apostle redemption was not a small device, an after-thought, a patched-up expedient to meet an unforeseen emergency. The redemptive purpose lay back in the abyss of the eternities, and in a spirit of reverent questioning the apostle sent his trembling thoughts into those lone and silent fields. He emerged with whispered secrets such as those: "fore-knew," "fore-ordained" "chosen in Him before the foundation of the world," "eternal life promised before times eternal," "the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Brethren, does our common thought of redemptive glory reach back into this august and awful presence? Does the thought of the modern disciple journey in this distant pilgrimage? Or do we now regard it as unpractical and irrelevant? There is no more insidious peril in modern religious life than the debasement of our conception of the practical. If we divorce the practical from the sublime, the practical will become the superficial, and will degenerate into a very lean and forceless thing. When Paul went on this lonely pilgrimage his spirit acquired the posture of a finely sensitive reverence. People who live and move beneath great domes acquire a certain calm and stately dignity. It is in companionship with the sublimities that awkwardness and coarseness are destroyed. We lose our reverence when we desert the august. But has reverence no relationship to the practical? Shall we discard it as an irrelevant factor in the wealthy purposes of common life? Why, reverence is the very clue to fruitful, practical living. Reverence is creative of hope; nay, a more definite emphasis can be given to the assertion; reverence is a constituent of hope. Annihilate reverence, and life loses its fine sensitiveness, and when sensitiveness goes out of a life the hope that remains is only a flippant rashness, a thoughtless impetuosity, the careless onrush of the kine, and not a firm assured perception of a triumph that is only delayed. A reverent homage before the sublimities of yesterday is the condition of a fine perception of the hidden triumphs of the morrow. And, therefore, I do not regard it as an accidental conjunction that the Psalmist puts them together, and proclaims the evangel that "the Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear Him, in them that hope in His mercy." To feel the days before me I must revere the purpose which throbs behind me. I must bow in reverence if I would anticipate in hope.

Here, then, is the Apostle Paul, with the redemptive purpose interweaving itself with all the entanglements of his common life, a purpose reaching back into the awful depths of the eternities, and issuing from those depths in amazing fulness of grace and glory. No one can be five minutes in the companionship of the Apostle Paul without discovering how wealthy is his sense of the wealthy, redeeming ministry of God. What a wonderful consciousness he has of the sweep and fulness of the divine grace! You know the variations of the glorious air: "the unsearchable riches of Christ"; "riches in glory in Christ Jesus"; "all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ"; "the riches of His goodness and forbearance and long-suffering." The redemptive purpose of God bears upon the life of the apostle and upon the race whose privileges he shares, not in an uncertain and reluctant shower, but in a great and marvellous flood. And what to him is the resultant enfranchisement? What are the spacious issues of the glorious work? Do you recall those wonderful sentences, scattered here and there about the apostle's writings, and beginning with the words "but now"? Each sentence proclaims the end of the dominion of night, and unveils some glimpse of the new created day. "But now!" It is a phrase that heralds a great deliverance! "But now, apart from the law the righteousness of God hath been manifested." "But now, being made free from sin and become servants to God." "But now in Christ Jesus ye that once were far off are made nigh in the blood of Christ." "But now are ye light in the Lord." "Now, no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus." These represent no thin abstractions. To Paul the realities of which they speak were more real than the firm and solid earth. And is it any wonder that a man with such a magnificent sense of the reality of the redemptive works of Christ, who felt the eternal purpose throbbing in the dark backward and abyss of time, who conceived it operating upon our race in floods of grace and glory, and who realised in his own immediate consciousness the varied wealth of the resultant emancipation -- is it any wonder that for this man a new day had dawned, and the birds had begun to sing and the flowers to bloom, and a sunny optimism had taken possession of his heart which found expression in an assured and rejoicing hope?

**2.**

I look abroad again over the record of this man's life and teachings, if perchance I may discover the secrets of his abiding optimism, and I am profoundly impressed by his living sense of the reality and greatness of his present resources. "By Christ redeemed!" Yes, but that is only the Alpha and not the Omega of the work of grace. "By Christ redeemed!" That is not a grand finale; it is only a glorious inauguration. "By Christ redeemed; in Christ restored "; it is with these dynamics of restoration that his epistles are so wondrously abounding. In almost every other sentence he suggests a dynamic which he can count upon as his friend. Paul's mental and spiritual outlook comprehended a great army of positive forces labouring in the interests of the Kingdom of God. His conception of life was amazingly rich in friendly dynamics! I do not wonder that such a wealthy consciousness was creative of a triumphant optimism. Just glance at some of the apostle's auxiliaries: "Christ liveth in me!" "Christ liveth in me! He breathes through all my aspirations. He thinks through all my thinking. He wills through all my willing. He loves through all my loving. He travails in all my labours. He works within me to will and to do of His good pleasure." That is the primary faith of the hopeful life. But see what follows in swift and immediate succession. "If Christ is in you, the spirit is life." "The spirit is life!" And therefore you find that in the apostle's thought dispositions are powers. They are not passive entities. They are positive forces vitalising and energising the common life of men. My brethren, I am persuaded there is a perilous leakage in this department of our thought. We are not bold enough in our thinking concerning spiritual realities. We do not associate with every mode of the consecrated spirit the mighty energy of God. We too often oust from our practical calculations some of the strongest and most aggressive allies of the saintly life. Meekness is more than the absence of self-assertion; it is the manifestation of the mighty power of God. To the Apostle Paul love expressed more than a relationship. It was an energy productive of abundant labours. Faith was more than an attitude. It was an energy creative of mighty endeavour. Hope was more than a posture. It was an energy generative of a most enduring patience. All these are dynamics, to be counted as active allies, co-operating in the ministry of the kingdom. And so the epistles abound in the recital of mystic ministries at work. The Holy Spirit worketh! Grace worketh! Faith worketh! Love worketh! Hope worketh! Prayer worketh! And there are other allies robed in less attractive garb. "Tribulation worketh!" "This light affliction worketh." "Godly sorrow worketh!" On every side of him the apostle conceives co-operative and friendly powers. "The mountain is full of horses and chariots of fire round about him." He exults in the consciousness of abounding resources. He discovers the friends of God in things which find no place among the scheduled powers of the world. He finds God's raw material in the world's discarded waste. "Weak things," "base things," "things that are despised," "things that are not," mere nothings; among these he discovers the operating agents of the mighty God. Is it any wonder that in this man, possessed of such a wealthy consciousness of multiplied resources, the spirit of a cheery optimism should be enthroned? With what stout confidence he goes into the fight! He never mentions the enemy timidly. He never seeks to underestimate his strength. Nay, again and again he catalogues all possible antagonisms in a spirit of buoyant and exuberant triumph. However numerous the enemy, however subtle and aggressive his devices, however towering and well-established the iniquity, however black the gathering clouds, so sensitive is the apostle to the wealthy resources of God that amid it all he remains a sunny optimist, "rejoicing in hope," labouring in the spirit of a conqueror even when the world was exulting in his supposed discomfiture and defeat.

**3.**

And, finally, in searching for the springs of this man's optimism, I place alongside his sense of the reality of redemption and his wealthy consciousness of present resources, his impressive sense of the reality of future glory. Paul gave himself time to think of heaven, of the home of God, of his own home when time should be no more. He loved to contemplate "the glory that shall be revealed." He mused in wistful expectancy of the day "when Christ who is our life shall be manifested," and when we also "shall be manifested with Him in glory." He pondered the thought of death as "gain," as transferring him to conditions in which he would be "at home with the Lord," "with Christ, which is far better." He looked for "the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ," and he contemplated "that great day" as the "henceforth," which would reveal to him the crown of righteousness and glory. Is any one prepared to dissociate this contemplation from the apostle's cheery optimism? Is not rather the thought of coming glory one of its abiding springs? Can we safely exile it from our moral and spiritual culture? I know that this particular contemplation is largely absent from modern religious life, and I know the nature of the recoil in which our present impoverishment began. "Let us hear less about the mansions of the blest, and more about the housing of the poor!" Men revolted against an effeminate contemplation, which had run to seed, in favour of an active philanthropy which sought the enrichment of the common life. But, my brethren, pulling a plant up and throwing it upon the dung-heap is not the only way of saving it from running to seed. You can accomplish by a wise restriction what is wastefully done by severe destruction. I think we have lost immeasurably by the uprooting, in so many lives, of this plant of heavenly contemplation. We have built on the erroneous assumption that the contemplation of future glory inevitably unfits us for the service of man. It is an egregious and destructive mistake. I do not think that Richard Baxter's labours were thinned or impoverished by his contemplation of "the saints' everlasting rest." When I consider his mental output, his abundant labours as Father-confessor to a countless host, his pains and persecutions and imprisonments, I cannot but think he received some of the powers of his optimistic endurance from contemplations such as he counsels in his incomparable book. "Run familiarly through the streets of the heavenly Jerusalem; visit the patriarchs and prophets, salute the apostles, and admire the armies of martyrs; lead on the heart from street to street, bring it into the palace of the great King; lead it, as it were, from chamber to chamber. Say to it, 'Here must I lodge, here must I die, here must I praise, here must I love and be loved. My tears will then be wiped away, my groans be turned to another tune, my cottage of clay be changed to this palace, my prison rags to these splendid robes'; 'for the former things are passed away.'" I cannot think that Samuel Rutherford impoverished his spirit or deadened his affections, or diminished his labours by mental pilgrimages such as he counsels to Lady Cardoness: -- "Go up beforehand and see your lodging. Look through all your Father's rooms in Heaven. Men take a sight of the lands ere they buy them. I know that Christ hath made the bargain already; but be kind to the house ye are going to, and see it often." I cannot think that this would imperil the fruitful optimisms of the Christian life. I often examine, with peculiar interest, the hymn- book we use at Carr's Lane. It was compiled by Dr. Dale. Nowhere else can I find the broad perspective of his theology and his primary help-meets in the devotional life as I find them there. And is it altogether unsuggestive that under the heading of "Heaven " is to be found one of the largest sections of the book. A greater space is given to "Heaven" than is given to "Christian duty." Is it not significant of what a great man of affairs found needful for the enkindling and sustenance of a courageous hope? And among the hymns are many which have helped to nourish the sunny endeavours of a countless host.

There is a land of pure delight

Where saints immortal reign;

Infinite day excludes the night,

And pleasures banish pain.

What are these, arrayed in white,

Brighter than the noonday sun?

Foremost of the suns of light,

Nearest the eternal throne.

Hark! hark, my soul! Angelic songs are swelling

O'er earth's green fields and ocean's wave-beat shore.

Angelic songs to sinful men are telling

Of that new life when sin shall be no more.

My brethren, depend upon it, we are not impoverished by contemplations such as these. They take no strength out of the hand, and they put much strength and buoyancy into the heart. I proclaim the contemplation of coming glory as one of the secrets of the apostle's optimism which enabled him to labour and endure in the confident spirit of rejoicing hope. These, then, are some of the springs of Christian optimism; some of the sources in which we may nourish our hope in the newer labours of a larger day: -- a sense of the glory of the past in a perfected redemption, a sense of the glory of the present in our multiplied resources, a sense of the glory of to-morrow in the fruitful rest of our eternal home.

O, blessed hope! with this elate

Let not our hearts be desolate;

But, strong in faith and patience, wait

Until He come!