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

**11. THE MIRAGE AND THE POOL by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"The mirage shall become a pool."*

*Isaiah 35:7*

"The mirage shall become a pool." The illusory shall become the substantial. "The mirage" -- a beautiful, airy nothing -- shall become a "pool," a gracious and refreshing possession. The life of disappointments shall become a life of satisfaction. Such appears to me to be the spiritual import of the figure. Let us try to get the figure itself before our minds in sharp and impressive outlines. In a book of travels, entitled A Journey Overland to India, I find the following description of a mirage which occurred between Palestine and the Euphrates: "About noon the most perfect deception that can be conceived exhilarated our spirits and promised an early resting-place. We had observed a slight mirage two or three times before, but this day it surpassed all I had even fancied. Although aware that these appearances have often led people astray, I could not bring myself to believe that this was unreal. The Arabs were doubtful, and said that, as we had found water yesterday, it was not improbable we should find some to-day. The seeming lake was broken in several parts by little islands of sand, which gave strength to the delusion. The dromedaries of the sheikhs (who were much in advance) at length reached its borders, and appeared to us to have commenced to ford. ... I thought they had got into deep water, and moved with greater caution. Their figures were reflected in the water. So convinced was one of our party of its reality, that he dismounted and walked towards the deepest part of it. He followed the deceitful lake for a long time, pursuing it farther and farther, and to our sight was strolling along its banks." It was only the hot and sandy desert plain! Such is the mirage, sometimes mocking the thirsty, heat-stricken traveller with the promise of abundant waters; at other times filling the prospect with gigantic exaggerations, making commonplace tufts appear as magnificent trees, and presenting blades of grass as the menacing front of a mighty jungle. Such is the mirage of the desert: an illusory phantom, an inapprehensible bewitchment, the mockery of unredeemed promise, the genius of disappointment and chagrin.

And now I am told that what some men have experienced in the sandy desert others have suffered in the common life. Humanity is mocked by a mirage more inviting and enticing than the semblance of the desert. There is the illusory in life, the mirage which allures with its promise of satisfying pools, and then mocks us with its leagues of desolating sand. The world abounds in the mirage. I labour for a competency, and the competency shapes itself to my longing eyes as a vision of "sweet security," in which "no evil shall befall me, neither shall any plague come nigh my dwelling." I reach the competency, but I do not attain the security! My environment is still the sandy waste. The citadel I foresaw was only the creation of vapour: it was "a castle in the air"; it was a mirage, the smiling, mocking face of the disappointing world.

Here I am, toiling and moiling, with body and mind on the rack from the dawn to the sunset, weary and perspiring, feverish and faint. But hearten, my soul! A little while, a tiny span of years, a few more steps across the burning sands, and then -- retirement! I see the green pastures and the still waters. Just across the sands there shines a pool; and the heart plucks up, and the body toils on, and the sands are crossed, and I leave the burdensome caravan for my season of retirement. But where are the "still waters" and the "green pastures"? Where can the tired heart find rest in perfect peace? The "still waters" I saw in the dreary distance are only the creation of the vapour of the air. The "green pastures" are only the dry and innutrient grass of the desert, which I saw beautified though the deceptive haze of the years. It is the illusory in life. It is the mirage of the world. I anticipated a pool; I found the continuance of the sand.

This mirage of disappointment, what multitudes it makes its victims! You can hear the wail of the disillusioned on every hand. Men and women are hurrying forward to the pools; and when you meet them again, you can tell by their hard and unillumined countenances that they have discovered the face of the mocker, and their soul is chilled to the core. There is nothing more tragical than to be in the presence of a man whose eyes have just been opened in disillusionment. The heart sinks, and as it sinks it draws the hope out of the face, just as the light is sucked out of the sky when the sun goes down. Here is one of the disillusioned! "The eye is not satisfied with seeing!" He had thought it might be. It was only a mirage! "The eye is not satisfied ... with seeing." Nature and art can never provide a pool in which the aspiring thirsts of the soul will be quenched. "The ear is not filled with hearing." He had thought it might be, so he followed in pursuit. He feasted his ears with ravishing music and exquisite song. But the angel of satisfaction never came to his spirit. "The ear is not filled with hearing." Music cannot provide the satisfaction which will steep the soul in a fruitful peace. It is only a mirage, and creates ultimate disappointment in the secret depths of the life. The mocked and dissatisfied seeker wandered hither and thither over the wide spreading desert wherever the inviting pools allured. "I said, Go to, I will prove thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also was vanity. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and paths, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit: I gat me men singers and women singers... . Whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them." Surely this man found the pools! No; he only discovered the mirage. His verdict remained the same. He dropped from disappointment into profounder disappointment, from chagrin to chagrin intensified. "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity."

Disappointments abound: is it possible for us to attain to satisfaction? Is it possible to get away from semblance to realities? Can life become satisfying, and not a cruel procession of bitter chagrins? There is something quietly suggestive in the fact that in the Old Testament the word "vanity" is found over a hundred times, while in the New Testament I think you will find it only thrice. In the New Testament life is more satisfying, and the word "vanity" is rarely found. Men have come into closer union with God, and we never find reality until we have entered into fellowship with God. A disappointing life means an undiscovered God. Yes, the unsatisfied means the undiscovered! The world presents the mirage: God offers the pool! "The mirage shall become a pool." The life of disappointments shall become the life of satisfaction. "Castles in the air" shall become "cities that hath foundations." Thou shalt no longer spend thyself in striving for satisfying treasure only to find that it is but a phantom wealth. Poor heart, thou shalt no longer be mocked! Life shall have its grand satisfactions. "Shadows shall flee away." Thou shalt deal with substances. In place of the mirage God shall give thee a pool.

Now, it is a heartening thing for the preacher to be able to say to himself and to his hearers that these pools of God have been found. Weary pilgrims, fellow-pilgrims with ourselves, who have trudged the same weary ways over the shadowless, burning sands, have found the pools, and have sung about them, and have left the story of their discovery in cheery gospels of grace. Some of the pools have been named, and their very names are full of soft and cool refreshment. Here is one of the pools of the Lord, around which the pilgrims are gathered. What is its name? The "wells of salvation"! Can you think of a more heartening word for the pilgrims of the desert sands? "With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation!" The "wells of salvation." "The wells of health!" They are medicinal waters, famed for the removal of heart-sickness, faintness, weariness of spirit! "Wells of health," purposed to annihilate any germs of moral disease which may have settled upon mind or heart, and to cleanse the spirit from all uncleanness. Their mission is not only to purify, but to strengthen and confirm. The "wells of health" are not only restoratives, but tonics, to put iron into the blood, to nerve the will, and to impart force and freshness to the conscience. I think this must have been the pool which John Bunyan puts at the foot of the hill Difficulty, to refresh the pilgrim after the exhausting monotony of the plain, and to reinforce him for the exacting climb which confronts him. "With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation." That is one of the pools of the Lord, and whosoever hastens towards its allurements will not be mocked by the disappointing sands. The world presents a mirage: God offers a pool. "God is faithful." "In Him is no lie."

But here is another band of pilgrims gathered round about another of the waters of the Lord. What do they call it? "The river of God's pleasures." In the desert? Yes, in the desert: "the thirsty land shall become springs of water." What is the refreshment of the pilgrims? "God's pleasures." Aye, and the real import is even sweeter than the phrase conveys, for its inner meaning bears this suggestion, "God's delicacies." Ask the question again, What are these desert pilgrims drinking as they gather about the pool? "God's delicacies." They are drinking into their spirits the most delicate essences in life, the finest flavours, the most subtle and exquisite sensations. "God's delicacies!" The pilgrims appear to lack the multitudinous and riotous revelries of life; but they have its finest distillations of joy. It is not always the man who owns the countryside who owns the landscape. He owns the estate; his almost penniless cottager, with the refined and purified spirit, owns the glory of the landscape. Which of them drinks of the river of "God's delicacies"? One man owns miles of costly exotics, and masses them for show in multitudinous congregation; another man does not own a single costly flower, but to him "the meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that do lie too deep for tears." Which of them has the finer perfumes? Which of them drinks of "God's delicacies"? Aye, but deeper and more subtle still are some of the delicacies of the Lord, "the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him." The "natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit." They are delicacies which he can neither appreciate nor apprehend.

The hill of Zion yields

A thousand sacred sweets,

Before we reach the heavenly fields,

Or walk the golden streets.

The world, too, offers its pleasures; but for the spirit they are coarse and dissatisfying. The enticing pleasures of the world are for the soul a disappointing mirage. The world offers happiness: God gives joy. The mirage becomes a pool.

Here is yet another band of desert pilgrims gathered round about the refreshing waters of the Lord. They call it "the river of peace." The pilgrims are sitting in "memory's sunlit air," and their souls are possessed by a heaven-born peace. The world offers the pilgrim peace; but how is the gift bestowed? In giving peace the world attempts to shut two doors -- the door of the past and the door of the future. It seeks to stifle memory and to put anticipation to sleep. When the Lord gives peace, He throws both doors wide open. He opens the door of memory, and converts the remembrance of yesterday's sin into a sense of sweet forgiveness. He opens the door of anticipation, and converts the fear of to-morrow into a radiant and alluring hope. These pilgrims, gathered about the waters of peace, gaze back into their yesterdays, and sing, "Goodness and mercy hath followed me"; and they gaze into futurity with the further strain upon their lips, "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." The world offers peace, but it is the peace of benumbment, a mirage which mocks the soul. In place of the mirage God offers the pool of perfect and satisfying peace.

What is the testimony of the pilgrims who have been to the Lord's pools? Shall we listen to their story? Here is a strain from the pilgrim's song: "My soul is satisfied as with marrow." The weary pilgrim has been feasting upon marrow, upon the superlatives and the excellences of life. That is the way of the Lord. He leads His people among the excellences. He gives them "the finest of the wheat," and His command is always for the highest: "Bring forth the best robe." Here is another pilgrim witness: "He satisfieth the longing soul." That is the testimony of an eager heart; for the "longing soul " is the soul which has been seeking greedily, like a wild beast hungeringly hunting for his food. He has been possessed by an aching hunger and thirst, and his testimony proclaims that in God his restless, aspiring soul is satisfied. Such are the stories of the desert pilgrims.

Ten thousand, thousand are their tongues,

But all their joys are one.

We shall find satisfaction among the realities of the good Lord. Let us go to our God, and the enticing mirage shall mock us no more. We shall move, not amid the transient, but the eternal. Our faith will be justified. Our hope will be gratified. Our love will be satisfied.