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

**12 CONCERNING THE COLLECTION by JOHN H. JOWETT**

(Preached at the inauguration of the Wesleyan Twentieth Century Fund.)

*"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law; but thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ... . Now concerning the collection. "*

*1 Corinthians 15:55 - 16:1*

Are you conscious of a sudden and painful descent in the plane of the thought? Do you perceive a chilling change in the temperature? "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? ... Now concerning the collection." Is the association unworthy? Is the transition harsh and jarring? No such feeling of the incongruous possessed the consciousness of the Apostle Paul. He passed from one to the other without any perception of unwelcome change. The intrusion of a duty did not mar the heavenly music, but rather completed it. The apostle bore the sublime about in him, and so everything he touched was sublimed. "I bear about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus," and everything derived its significance from the quickening light of that transcendent sacrifice. "Thanks be unto God, who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ ... Now concerning the collection." The tiniest bit of broken glass, lying in the rudest highway, can reflect the radiant splendour of the infinite sky, and every fragment of earth's commonest day may become a heavenly constellation, owned by the "Father of lights," with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? ... Now concerning the collection." Let us rid ourselves of the sense of the incongruous. It feels like passing from bracing mountain-heights to sweltering vales. Say, rather, it is like passing from the springs to the river, from the vast gathering-grounds to the rich and bountiful stream. The fifteenth chapter of the Epistle to the Corinthians is the country of the springs; the sixteenth opens with a glimpse of the river. The fifteenth is the country of the truth, fundamental Christian truth, in which our personal hopes and triumphs have their birth; with the opening of the sixteenth I catch a glimpse of the shining graces which are the happy issue of the truth. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? Thanks be unto God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." That is the land of the springs. "Now for the collection." That is the beneficent river.

Look away for a moment to the springs. The apostle is joyfully recounting our hopes and triumphs in Christ. "O death, where is thy sting?" It is almost the laughing, mocking taunt of one who dare go quite near to the old terror without being afraid. "O death, where is thy sting?" The once grim, black, frightful, affrighting terror has lost its only weapon. Death is now harmless as a stingless bee. To those in Christ death has no poison, only honey; its burden is sweetness rather than pain. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" O grave, thou dark abyss, thou ever-open mouth, ever-swallowing, never satisfied, always a victor, never a victim. Never a victim? Christ is risen! "O grave, where is its victory?" That is the place of the springs. "Christ is risen!" Add to that the firm, clear, heartening trumpet-note of the Gospel: "He that believeth in Me shall never die," he shall never feel death's sting; there shall be no poison in its touch; his passing shall be a light sleep, not a hopeless servitude. There shall be no sense of separation, no outer darkness; the hour of death shall be the hour of transition into the calm light of eternal day. "He that believeth in Me shall never taste death!" That is the land of the springs!

Now, let me repeat the statement that we may the more clearly mark the issues. Christ dies, and by His death sucks the poison out of death. Death becomes stingless in Christ. He hurls back the gates of the grave, and emerges incorruptible and undefiled, converting the closed tomb into an open thoroughfare. The emancipation is not exclusive. Christ has established for every man a right-of-way into the peace and blessedness of the eternities. The angel with the flaming sword has been removed from the east of the garden. I may lift my tearful eyes in hope, and gaze along the "living way" into the prepared palace of the ageless life. And what is the import of this? It means that the possibilities of the individual life have been raised to the powers of the infinite. The impenetrable walls have been broken down. I have received an illimitable enlargement of sphere. I have been lifted out of narrowness and impoverishment I am no longer "cribbed, cabined, and confined." My feet are set in a land of broad spaces. I can behold the land that is very far off. That is the glorious burden of chapter 15, the emancipation and enlargement of life in the risen Christ. Now see the beautiful succession, taking its rise in the last verse of chapter 15, and emerging clearly into view in the first verse of chapter 16. The larger life is succeeded, say rather accompanied, by larger living. More gathering -- ground, more springs, more resources -- a larger view! More income -- more expenditure! "Wherefore," says the apostle, if these things are so, -- death stingless, grave crownless, life and immortality brought to light -- "be ye steadfast, unmovable," let your walk be characterised by strength and firmness and confidence don't be shaken into timid uncertainties by ever little whiff of hostile speech: "be ye steadfast an unmovable" -- "always abounding in work," your cup running over in rich and gracious ministry Having larger life, now largely live! "If ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others?" The vaster ground must produce a more copious volume of service. The grander faith must be creative of a richer beneficence. The larger hope must generate a nobler sentiment. Christianity emerges and expresses itself in a passionate enthusiasm for humanity. "Thanks be unto God, which giveth us the victory... . Now for the collection."

What was the occasion of this collection? There was a large body of poor Jews in Jerusalem who had eagerly received the Christ of God. Their hearts were as dry as a blasted heath, and they panted for the water of life. They found the refreshment they sought in Jesus the Christ. They turned to Him, and offered Him the homage of their minds and hearts. For this they were excommunicated, outlawed, banned. Because of their life they were denied a living, and they began to be in want. I don't think we are able to form any adequate conception of the intense hatred and repulsion with which the Jews regard those whom they consider renegade members of their race. During my ministry in Newcastle it was my privilege to baptize a young Jew, who had been wooed by the beauty of the Christ into the warmer light of the Christian faith. At once the parental instinct seemed to be benumbed. His father and mother forsook him. He was turned adrift. He was regarded as a dog. He was denied his daily bread. These were precisely the conditions which prevailed in Jerusalem, only in Jerusalem the ban of excommunication almost annihilated the chances of earning one's bread, and inevitably drove the outlaw into poverty and want. But Christianity fostered humanity; faith evoked philanthropy; and from their fellow-believers in wider fields there flowed a steady stream of beneficence to alleviate their distress. From Galatia, from Corinth, and from Rome there flowed the gracious river of brotherly sentiment, which makes glad the city of God. In all this there was something quite unique. It was a novelty in the history of the world. It was a beneficence that overflowed conventional boundaries. In earlier days there had been beneficence that was patriotic; now there arose beneficence that was humane. It was not the sympathy of Jew with Jew, or of Roman with Roman, or of Greek with Greek. The race-lines crossed. It was the sympathy of Roman with Jew, of Gentile with Jew, of man with man, and this I say was a stupendous novelty in the intercourse of men. "Henceforth there was neither Jew nor Gentile." The stern, hoary race-limits were quite submerged in the voluminous sentiment of philanthropy born of a common faith in the redeeming Christ of God. Now see how this acted. There is nothing that so welds people together as a common sentiment. A common passage through a common grief has united many sundered hearts. It is not otherwise with the radiant sentiment of joy. I have known two sundered brothers united again at the wedding of a sister who was loved by both. A common object has ended many an isolation. Get people to have a common sentiment towards a common thing, and you have taken a very vital step towards a fruitful union. Let the Roman be beneficently disposed towards the outlawed Jew, let a similar sentiment possess the hearts of the Corinthians and the Galatians, and you may be sure that Roman, Corinthian, and Galatian will be cemented together in the bonds of a closer kin-ship. That is one of the most gracious ministries of the Christian religion. Let a man hold the essential virtues of the Christian faith, -- say rather, let him be held by them, let them possess him, -- let the transcendent truth of this fifteenth chapter constitute his convictions and hopes, and from his life there will inevitably proceed a river of beneficent sentiment which will mingle with other gladsome streams, flowing from men of kindred faith, and they will become one in the common enthusiasm of humanity, as they are one in the common glory of a great redemption. The birth of Christianity was the, birth of a new philanthropy.

Now, it is this vital association that I desire to emphasise. Truth and activity are related as springs and rivers. If we want the one to be brimming, we must not ignore the other. Beneficence will soon become thin and scanty if it does not take its rise in the hills. Begin with chapter 16, "Now concerning the collection," and the result will be a forced and chilling artifice. You begin without momentum, without the impulse of adequate constraint. Begin on the heights of chapter 15, and chapter 16 will emerge with the sequence of inevitable result. This collection is related to the resurrection, and if we hide and minimise the truth of the resurrection, or regard it as obsolete or impertinent, our beneficence will only be a spasm, a transient emotion, and not the full and sustained volume of the river of water of life. That was the cardinal and all-determining weakness of Robert Elsmere. He erased chapter 15, and began with chapter 16. He denied the resurrection, and all the spacious and heartening truths which gather about it; and out of the dry, vacuous heart of its negation sought to educe a river of benevolent energy for the permanent enrichment of the race. "Will a man leave the snow of Lebanon?" Will he really try to make rivers, and ignore the pure, creative heights across the snow-line? That is our inclination and temptation. We try to make rivers, when sometimes in our lives there is no hill-country, no land of plentiful springs. "I will open rivers in high places!" and only when we have the "high places" in our life, the enthroned and sovereign truths of atonement and resurrection, and the sublime and awful prospect of an unveiled immortality, only then will our life be a land of springs, musical with the sound of many waters, flowing with gladsome rivers to cheer and refresh the children of men.

This is the interpretation of the glory of Methodism. Methodism is now a vast and complex organism, but the organism is not the life. Before there was any organisation there was a river. The organisation was devised for the direction of the river, not for its creation. It had been created elsewhere. Organisation turned it here or there, just as we concentrate the volume of a stream and divert it to the particular service of the mill-wheel. Robert Elsmere hugged the delusion that the mill-wheel creates the water-power. It simply uses it. The drought is the truest interpretation of the function of the wheel. No; organisation is not creative; it is only directive of what already exists. Methodism began to organise when the river had begun to flow. Where was the river born? Forgive me if I remind you of a classical passage of which indeed you need no reminder, words which constitute a comparative commonplace, but which I trust will never lose their inspiring glory. You want to know the birthplace of your river? Here it is. "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." "I felt my heart strangely warmed!" "I felt I did trust in Christ!" That is where the river of Methodist beneficence and ministry was born! "He that believeth on Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water!" Methodism was born when John Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed," warmed while he believed and appropriated the saving efficacy of a Saviour's death and resurrection. His heart was "strangely warmed"; genial currents, that had been frozen, were thawed and unloosed, and the waters of life began to flow in quickening and beneficent ministry.

The truth which created Methodism is the truth by which it is to be sustained. Methodism can never become independent of the "word of truth" by which it was begotten. The gospel that kindled your fire provides the fuel for its maintenance. We need the truth that warms the heart. Let the heart of Methodism grow cold, and its river will soon be frozen. The evangelical revival was just a "strange warming" of the nation's heart, and you know how the heightened spiritual enthusiasm let loose redeeming energies which had been locked in icy bondage. How varied and voluminous were the rivers of beneficence which began to flow from the enthused and awakened heart! John Howard, who "lived the life of an apostle and died the death of a martyr," began "to dive into the depths of dungeons, to plunge into the infections of hospitals, to survey the mansions of sorrow and pain, to gauge the dimensions of misery, depression, and contempt; to remember the forgotten, to attend the neglected, to visit the forsaken, and to compare and collate the distresses of all men in all countries." Robert Raikes had his eyes opened to the existence of multitudes of depraved and ignorant children, spending the Sabbath in cursing and swearing, in noise and in riot; and he conceived the possibility of gathering them under kindly influences, and refining them into the apprehension of a sweeter and larger life. Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, and William Wilberforce heard the lone cry of the slaves as they suffered under the English flag; and stung with a sense of shame, they laboured long, and laboured triumphantly, to remove this great blot on the character of the British nation, and to mitigate one of the greatest evils that ever afflicted the human race. William Carey's "strangely warmed heart" was burdened with the irresistible vision of the benighted myriads of India, and he gathered about him kindred hearts, and led them to the glorious task of the evangelisation of that stupendous empire. Now mark the succession and suggestiveness of these remarkable dates. John Wesley began his ministry in 1726. He laboured for sixty-five years, and died in 1791. In 1792 the Baptist Missionary Society was founded; 1795 witnessed the establishment of the London Missionary Society; four years later, in 1799, saw the birth of the Church Missionary Society; five years later the Bible Society was founded, -- and "their lines are gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." Is the conjunction of the evangelical revival and this vast brimming river of beneficent energy a mere coincidence, or does it suggest a vital and enduring relationship? The river flowed out not only to relieve the gaping wants on distant shores; it flowed in healing ministry round about the sores and needs of our own land. "Everything shall live," says the prophet Ezekiel, "whither the river cometh." Most of our great hospitals were built when the nation's heart had been "strangely warmed." The great energising truths of this fifteenth chapter of Corinthians had been proclaimed, appropriated, believed, and in the belief there had been begotten an eager disposition of benevolence which sought the well-being and redemption of the race.

I therefore count it my function to thus remind you of your birthday and of its significance for our own time. If you wish the river of your beneficence to be brimming, keep near the saving truth. By all means multiply your channels, broaden and extend them, but keep open your resources. If you "lengthen your cords," take care to "strengthen your stakes." Keep your heart warm, and your hand will remain kindly. I would set your affections upon the things above Christ died for you. He rose again. He is now enthroned in glory. Every hope that is worth cherishing centres in Him. Every glory that is worth possessing proceeds from Him. The purity of your soul, the sweetness of your home and the hope of its permanency, the ennobled fellowship of the race, the glorious expectancy of a life incorruptible and undefiled, all are ours in "Christ Jesus our Lord." ..."Lord, lift up our eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh our help." "Lord, increase our faith." "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain." "Lord, we believe; help thou our unbelief."