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

**14. THE DAYSPRING by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"The dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

*Luke 1:78,79*

"Them that sit in darkness." Let us lay hold of the intense and powerful figure. How beautiful and refreshing it is to sit in the twilight, the cool, clear, calm twilight, after the hard, oppressive glare of a perspiring summer day! How benumbing to sit in the darkness in the winter-time, with no genial companionable fire, and no cheery enlivening light! "Them that sit in darkness." The figure is not suggestive of the twilight of a summer's eve, or the trembling expectant twilight of a summer's morn; it is the midnight of the winter season. The darkness is cold, clammy, and chilling. It is burdensome and spectral, weird and prolific of fears, "Them that sit in darkness," Not the twilight that fosters fruitful meditation, but the darkness which is the parent of bewilderment. We all know the power of the darkness. How intense and feverish becomes the imagination in the still dark hours of the night! How erratic and untrustful our judgments! What easy victims of exaggeration! Some faint and almost insignificant sound is magnified into the prelude of a burglarious encounter. With exaggeration there goes misinterpretation. In the night-time every crack of the timber is the click of the enemy's gun. The rustle of your own garments is the sweep of the enemy's robe. The night season is the period of nervous intensity, of exaggeration, of misinterpretation, of many-faced and chilling superstitions.

"Them that sit in darkness." That was the condition of the race before the Saviour was born. The world was dark and clammy and cold. Life was full of chills, and therefore full of fevers. Faith was numb; the nerves were wakeful. Imagination was wild and undisciplined. The God that touched them through the darkness was conceived as a large-scaled and magnified man. "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself," fickle, passionate, revengeful, morally uncertain, proud. Exaggeration reigned. The natural became the ominous; the momentary became the momentous. Life had lost its true proportions, and was fallen into false and perilous emphases. Pain was regarded as an enemy. Infirmity wore the features of a foe. Adversity was the malediction of an angry God. And still in the night there was a deeper midnight; in the darkness was a grosser darkness still. Even in the blackness there was a shadow, a more awful pall, a chillier and more affrighting presence. "Them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." What did death mean to these tenants of the night? It meant the dissolver of the body. It meant the jailor of the soul. It meant the cruel and irretrievable break-up of all the tenderest bonds. It meant a plunge into what they described as "the pit"; and "the pit" meant a huge and painful query, an appalling abyss whose outlines they could not discern. Death was the vehicle of poison, a presence whom they only knew as a "sting," an agent of destruction, a "victory," an overbearing and overwhelming tyrant. This was the shadow in the darkness, the midnight in the night; they "sat in darkness and in the shadow of death."

If you want to know the explanation of much of the darkness, you must turn to the first and second chapters of the Epistle to the Romans. The light that lighteth every man had flickered down into its socket. Rebellion against the light had turned their conscience into smoke, which broke only into infrequent light, as you have seen the smoke of your fireplace burst into occasional flame. "Their senseless heart was darkened." In the night their affections became anaemic. The beautiful, graceful, trailing sympathies of human life became cold and bloomless. Hope lost its power of wing, and all the coronal faculties of the life were oppressed and dwarfed in the circumventing hindrances of the powers of darkness and night.

Such was the darkness of the race prior to the first Christmas-time. "They sat in darkness and in the shadow of death." ..."Now, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem"... what? The morning dawned upon that night-burdened, shadow- haunted, fear-filled world. "The day-spring from on high hath visited us." "The dayspring!" Could anything be more appropriate to the fearful hearts of the tenants of night? "The dayspring!" Not the full day, but the spring of the day, the light-fountain. Heaven's East! Even the tenderest eyes can bear to look at the dawn! How sore and distressing and bewildering it is, in the hours of darkness, to have flashed upon your eyes the harsh glare of the gaslight! We say, "Turn it down a little" The little light is a better minister than the big one. "Turn it down a little until I have become accustomed to it." That is the principle. "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now." The children of night must march into the noontide through the softer splendours of the dawn. I wonder how the Eternal Son will visit these shadow-haunted regions of night. He might have come, attended by all His holy angels, wearing the imperial robes of ineffable glory, engirt with the super-natural splendours of the eternal day. "When Jesus was born in Bethlehem," He dawned upon the world as a carpenter. He beamed upon the night-realms in the soft warm rays of a summer's morn. He came as "the dayspring," the opening fountain of the day, the first little spring which is to issue at last in the immeasurable glory of Eternal light and truth. We should only have been bewildered with an apocalypse of dazzling glory. We should have been "blinded with excess of light" So He dawned upon us; the light fell upon the sore and wearied hearts of men with the soft warmth of an infant's kiss "Soft and quiet as the breast-feather of a motherly bird."

"The dayspring from on high hath visited us!" "Hath visited!" Another word which helps to heap up and multiply the comforting suggestion. "The dayspring hath visited us!" It is a relief-mission. There is another strain ringing in my ears which I will call to aid in the interpretation of this. "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction." "To visit the fatherless and widows." "The day-spring from on high hath visited us." It is a visit of sympathy, of healing, of relief, of release. Such is the infinitely gentle and delicate coming of the omnipotent God. I do not wonder that my text is heralded with the explanation that the beautiful and glorious mission was born in "the tender mercies of our God "! That is one of the phrases whose wonderful content we are not going to be able to appreciate until we stand in the heavenly places, and apprehend something of the stupendous powers and majestic glories of Immanuel's land. Go into the village smithy, and see the swarthy smith at work, with mighty blows beating the reluctant iron to shape and use. He looks the embodiment of exuberant power, and the "muscles of his brawny arms are strong as iron bands." Now see him lay aside the hammer, and with those strong hands and arms, with which he smote the iron, see him lay hold of his frail little toddling child, and with infinite delicacy and tenderness lift her and hug her to his breast. The tenderness of the lifting is all the sweeter because of the massive strength of the man who lifts. Strength is the fountain of the fairest delicacy. The softest water is the water that has flowed over granite. And when "we reach the home of glory," and our eyes are opened, and opened fearlessly upon the wonderful power and majesty of the King, we shall be able to enter more deeply into the apprehension of the "tender mercies of our God," the sweet soft river of the water of life which flows out of the throne of God and the Lamb.

What was the purpose of the dawning? "To give light to them that sat in darkness." To illumine the world. "To guide our feet into the way of peace." To redeem the world. "To give light." The mission of the dayspring was the ministry of illumination. The purpose of the Incarnation was to go into the realms of shadow and night to the poor victims of self-delusion, of exaggeration, of misinterpretation, of terror, and of superstition, and reveal to them the true shapes and proportions and colours of things. The Dayspring was not first of all a redeemer. He must first reveal before He can redeem. He must give light before He can give peace. He must show me things as they are, their very selves, bereft of all perversion. He must un-cover masks, remove glosses, strip away paint, and show me things as they are, in their essential and innermost reality. He must "give light." He must show me the real shape and colour of sin. I must see my "secret sins in the light of His countenance." He must "give light," I must see life in true perspective. I must discern what are really hills and what are really valleys; what things I must regard as major and what I must regard as minor; what must be treated with gravity and what can be lightly skimmed. He must "give light." I must see myself. I must see my brother. I must see my God. I must not be left to the impositions of the darkness, the sport of exaggeration and superstition. I am blinded with darkness! I want to see! "What wouldest thou that I should do unto thee?" "Lord, that I may receive my sight!"

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But not only as revealer did He come. As redeemer also did this Dayspring visit us. He reveals that He may redeem. He sets my secret sins in the light, that in the light they may be consumed. He "gives light" that He may guide our feet into the way of peace. He illumines the world and He redeems it. "To guide our feet into the way of peace." That is not the guidance of a street-lamp. It is the guidance of a pioneer. It is not a lamp darting its rays along a supposed and hypothetical way. It is the pioneer himself making the way. Pioneers are "living ways." Robert Morrison laid down his life in a long and laborious martyrdom in China, and he became a "living way" to guide our feet into the thought and need of the Chinese Empire. David Livingstone laid down his life in Africa, and became a ''living way" to guide our feet into the heart of that dark continent. The pioneer is the living way into undiscovered realms. There was a land called "peace," a land which the children of the shadow and the night were unable to find. We had heard of it, we had hungered for it, but we could never find the way. And he who was the Dayspring became our pioneer; and in ways ineffably exalted above the pioneers of transient time, He laid down His life for us, and became the "living way" through Whom we find the land and bliss of eternal peace.