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

**15. THE UNBELIEF OF THE FOOL by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God."*

*Psalm 14:1*

"The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." That is what the fool said, but it is the way in which he said it that revealed him to be a fool. There are souls that just whisper to themselves, "There is no God," and the secret utterance seems to chill their blood and fill them with benumbing fear. Repeated calamity comes upon a man. The floods are out. All his ways are broken up. The lines of his life are filled with perversity. Confusion reigns. He moves amid his desolation, himself confused and desolate, and now and again a thought sweeps across his heart with the chilling touch of a cold night -wind, "There is no God." Is he a fool, the fool of the text? He is eagerly groping his way, as though feeling for some longed-for presence, like a blind man reaching out for some tangible support, and he touches nothing. He sighs in his failure, and whispers, "There is no God." But again he gropes; "Oh that I knew where I might find Him I" In his sorrow and calamity he is like a little child in the evening time, lost amid the multitudinous windings of some great city, inquiring his way home. He is feeling his way to God; and if in the sense of a great vacancy his heart should fearingly say, "There is no God," it deepens his sense of orphanage, and fills him with an aching loneliness and pain. No; that is not the man of my text. He is seeking, and "he that seeketh findeth," and shall at length find himself at home with God.

Who, then, is this fool of the text? Let us read it again, and let us read between the lines. "The fool hath said" -- now we must insert a shout of Satanic laughter -- "There is no God." We miss the meaning of the words if we leave out the laugh. How much the laugh reveals! I am told that a band of soldiers bowed before the Saviour and said, "Hail, King of the Jews." It sounds like reverent worship: "Hail, King of the Jews." But if we put the soldiers' coarse laugh into the spoken words, they are revealed as cruel and horrible blasphemy. And so with the words of my text. Into the fool's words we must put the fool's laugh. The fool said, "There is no God," and he said it with a laugh, a flippant laugh, a laugh that suggested a glad relief. Now, Scripture affirms that the man who can say, "There is no God," and say It jubilantly, with an air of welcome triumph, with a laugh, is a fool; and by fool is meant something more than silly, unwise, or senseless. The word "fool" as used in the Scriptures is much more than a merely intellectual term denoting want of judgment. It is a moral term denoting lack of virtue. The fool of the Scriptures is a man who has fallen away, little by little, degree by degree until he is a degraded man. A fool is a vile man, morally degenerate. Here, then, is the full force of my text -- the man who says, with an air of laughing and self-satisfied triumph, "There is no God," is a vile man; at his heart there is moral rottenness; he is a fool!

There is, therefore, in addition to what we call honest unbelief, a laughing and bragging unbelief, which is born out of sin. If we track it to its root we shall find that it is the outcome, not of a sensitive and groping spirit, but of a violated conscience, a broken moral law. Its source is vicious. Its root is immoral. The man is a fool at his heart. Let us follow this for a moment. "The vile man hath said in his heart, There is no God." Why does the vile man say, "There is no God"? Because that is what the vile man has wished to believe. The wish was "father to the thought." In that familiar phrase we express a profound philosophy. Our wishing is the father of much of our thinking. Our desires colour and determine many of our judgments. I do not think we sufficiently consider the power and often the tyranny which our wishes exercise over our minds. We sometimes speak about an idle wish. Wishes are not always idle; perhaps they are never so. They play about our thoughts and influence them, leading them along particular lines to particular conclusions. That is an everyday occurrence. It is a very simple way along which we travel. I wish that a certain thing may happen. That wish will not travel alone. Let it continue, and it will drag the judgment after it. I shall come to think that the certain thing will happen. The wish may become an assumption. Ay, let the wish be strengthened and intensified, and I may come to judge that the certain thing has happened. The wish may become an assumption; the assumption may become a conviction. A strong wish may influence me into thinking that a certain thing is which is not! My judgment may be based not upon the fact of an occurrence, but upon the strength of my own wish. The wish is father to the thought. Here, then, is the fool of my text, who has come to think there is no God. He has wished it so long that he has come to think it. His wishes have determined his thoughts. But what has determined his wishes? His character. The nature of the man's wishes is determined by the nature of his inner life. Our wishes rise as naturally and as inevitably out of our being as sweet fragrance exhales from a rose, and a noisome stench from a cesspool. A heart that is as a beautiful garden, filled with the flowers of the Spirit, will exhale wishes full of sweet and pleasant influence; but a heart that is only a moral cesspool will exhale wishes of vicious and poisonous stench. As we are, we wish; as we wish, we think; as we think, we judge. This man of the text had the cesspool in his heart. He was ungodly at the core. He began to wish there was no God; and at last, with impious hilarity and with a note of unholy triumph, "the fool said in his heart, There is no God." Here, then, is the truth I wish to emphasise, that the tendency of sin is to make for unbelief, and that much presumptuous scepticism may be traced to the violation of the moral law of God.

Let us look at this a little more closely. Let us see how the principle operates on the plane of merely human relationship. Let me assume that I have deliberately done another man a serious personal injury. Well, what is my disposition in regard to him? It is not necessarily one of sorrow that I have wronged him. I may be far more concerned about my own feelings than about his. He lives in the same city, and it is very unpleasant for me to meet him. It would be a great relief to me if I heard he was about to leave the town and make his home elsewhere. I wonder how I should take it if some morning I were to be told that he was dead? Do you think it has ever happened that one man, who has injured another, has given a great sigh of relief when he heard that the injured one was dead? If that be so between man and man, when one has broken the moral law, is there any analogous relationship between rebellious man and the great God? If it could be authoritatively announced to-day in this city that God was dead, do you think there is any man who would give a great sigh of relief? Are there people in our midst who would be thankful to be rid of God, and who would be glad to be able to say, "There is no God"? That is how sin works. It creates a desire to be rid of God, a wish that there was no God, and the wish deceives us into the practical judgment that there is no God. A man rebels against his Maker. He violates the King's law. What follows? He is pursued by a haunting sense of fear. In the quiet interludes of his life he is possessed by a vague uneasiness. Even the bold, bad man has his frights and his fears. What then? Those fears must be allayed. How? Laugh at them! Say they are childish fancies, illusory phantoms, churchyard ghosts! The evil man wishes that they were nothings. He comes to think they are nothings; and so he says they are nothings. That is the only way for the persistently bad man. The only way by which he can escape the fear of God is to say, "There is no God"; and to this impious conclusion he is driven by the terrible force of his own sin. "The fool says in his heart. There is no God."

This is as true in the history of nations as it is in the history of individuals. You will find that a period of coarse, dogmatic unbelief, of blunt and almost savage negation, has ever been coincident with national folly, with wide-spread national shame. The nation has again and again sunk into obscurity and profligacy, and from its degradation you can hear the wild, triumphant shout, "There is no God." Go into the latter part of the seventeenth century, or into the early part of the eighteenth, and you will find that the national thought was shaped and determined by the national life. Ungodly living was the father of ungodly thinking. Much of the nation's unbelief sprang from the nation's sin. The corrupt nation desired to be rid of the thought of God, and so it persuaded itself into an unbelief which affirmed, "There is no God." In men and in nations the frequent outcome of folly and of sin is a blatant and mock-heroic unbelief.

Now, I do not wish to say that the fool arrives at his savage unbelief in a day. That is often the ultimate conclusion attained through sin. But there are intermediate stages in this path of moral and spiritual degradation. It may be that a man's sin has not yet brought him to this final negation of God, while yet he may have assuredly started upon the steep decline which leads to it. It may be that there are souls who are in the way to a bragging and cynical unbelief, and who have not yet noticed the early symptoms which unmistakably reveal their decline. Let us look at it. When a man has taken some impurity into his heart, the first result may not be open and bragging unbelief. When a worm gets into the root of a sensitive plant, the first result may be a sense of general sickliness, a loss of brightness, an unhealthy drooping at the leaf. And when some worm gets into a man's heart, when some secret sin crawls into his soul -- when, say, the love of money gets into his roots, or some unnamable lust, or an evil spirit of bitterness or revenge, then there creeps over that man's religious life a general sickliness; its brightness departs; all its spiritual interests begin to droop, and his soul becomes languid and weary. Have we ever sufficiently marked that suggestive conjunction in the Book of Isaiah, where the sins of Israel are named and deplored, and where, after their rebellious acts have all been declared, God says, "And thou hast been weary of Me, O Israel"? One followed as the consequence of the other. They sinned, and their sins made them spiritually sickly, and they wearied of God. They sinned, and by their sin they lost their bright and eager interest in the Holy One. Let me quote from the Prophet even a more suggestive figure still. "Ephraim is joined to idols" -- well, what then? -- and "their drink is sour." Do we appreciate the force of that most graphic and powerful figure? They were wont to approach Jehovah in glad and eager worship. Yea, worship had been their meat and drink, sweet and refreshing to their souls. But now, they have gone the way of sin, and the worship which once was sweet to their hearts now tastes bitter and sour. "Ephraim is joined to idols -- their drink is sour." You know that in the physical life, when we are unwell and sickly, the sweetest food, which we have usually relished, is nauseous and unpalatable. The food has not changed. We have changed. Our palate has become diseased, sharing in the general disorder of the body. It is not otherwise in the spiritual life. When our souls are well, healthy, holy, the things of God are sweet unto our taste. The man of healthy soul can sing with the Psalmist, "My meditation of Him shall be sweet." To him God's thoughts and words are "sweeter than honey and the honeycomb." But when some unclean thing enters into us, and makes us morally diseased, spiritually unhealthy, then the sweet things become sour, and the things we relish become unpalatable. That is the first result of indwelling sin, a sense of weariness and distaste in the things of God. When sin enters into a man's heart, the brightness of his interest in religious things departs. His spiritual appetite loses its edge, and he prays and worships with that yawning weariness and reluctance in which a sickly man partakes his food. Let us regard the symptom with intense suspicion, as the index of a decline which leads to a swaggering and licentious unbelief. I have sometimes had conversation with young men, who have been lamenting to me their loss of spiritual eagerness and religious relish, and the encroachment of a deep weariness in the worship and service of God. Every man knows when that most dangerous season begins. In nine cases out of ten it means that we are morally disordered. We have opened the heart to some insidious anti-Christ. We are entertaining some unclean spirit, some secret sin, which is corrupting our spiritual taste, and rendering us incompetent to discern and appreciate "the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him." That is the first step in spiritual degradation!

But now follow on a step farther. A man becomes possessed by this feeling of religious weariness. He loses his relish for the things of God. His prayers are just long yawns. What then? Then he begins to sceptically inquire about the use of prayer. A decision is easily reached that for him, at any rate, there is no use in prayer. But he cannot stop there. He needs must justify himself, and he finds the amplest and most comfortable justification in the more general statement that all prayer is useless, a vain farce, a mere baying at the moon. I know that along the line of intellectual inquiry some men have reached the conclusion that prayer is useless. Of that I speak not now. I am now tracing the line of moral and spiritual degradation, and I say that sin begets a deep spiritual distaste and weariness, and this distaste begets a sense of the uselessness of prayer. Unbelief in prayer is one of the foul offsprings of the outraged conscience. When, therefore, I hear a man triumphantly and laughingly declare that there is no use in prayer, I must know his manner of life before I can estimate the value of his conclusions. How has he come by his unbelief? Is it the production of disease? Has he been a fool? Has his moral palate become perverted? I will not take my opinions of spiritual verities from an unclean man. In these matters it remains unwaveringly true that it is the pure heart that sees God, and that moves about in rare discernment among the forces of the spirit.

One farther step in this degeneracy will bring us to the conclusion. A man who has lost all belief in prayer to God will speedily pass to the judgment that there is no God to pray to. Here, then, is the range of spiritual degradation. It begins in folly; it ends in unbelief. The man begins by defying God; he ends by denying Him. Uncleanness has worked to spiritual death. What, then, shall be the fruitful warning which we may apply to the guidance of our own spirits? Beware of the entrance of all uncleanness. "Create in me a clean heart, O God." A life which is preserved in spiritual purity will move in constant homage before the revealed presence of the Eternal God. "Search me, O God, and try me, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."