**THINGS THAT MATTER MOST - DEVOTIONAL PAPERS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**03. FORGETTING GOD by JOHN H. JOWETT**

THERE is one word of God which runs through the Scriptures like a sad and poignant refrain, "My people have forgotten Me." "Forgotten" is an intense and awful word. It surely expresses the final issue in human alienation from the Divine. Open and deliberate revolt against God shows, at any rate, some respect to His power. And even formal prayer, empty though it be, offers some recognition of God's existence. But to forget Him, to live and plan and work as though He were not, to dismiss Him as insignificant--this is surely the last expression of a separated life. People are never really dead so long as they are remembered. The real death is to be forgotten. How, then, do we come to forget God? In what sort of conditions is this appalling forgetfulness brought about? I wish to quote two or three descriptive words from the Scriptures in which I think some of these cases are described.

"Afraid of a man that shall die, and forgettest the Lord thy Maker." The fear of man destroys the nobler fear of God. I suppose that one may say that two commanding fears cannot occupy the soul at one and the same time. One fear can drive out another. The fear that is created by the cracking of a whip can drive out the fear which possesses a shying horse when he sees some unfamiliar object upon the road. If a fire break out on a cold wintry night, the fear of the flames can drive out of the soul the fear of the frost. It seems as though one fear draws to itself the energies of the mind, and other fears are left with no sustenance. A big tree in a garden-bed sucks into its fibres the juices of the soil for many yards around, and other growths are starved, and they wither and die.

So it is with "the fear of man." It drains to itself the mental energy and devotion which ought to feed the fear of God. A politician who is moved by fear of man, and who tacks and trims to avoid his hostility, can never retain an efficient thought of God. So it is with a minister who is afraid of man; his mind is not filled with a vision of "the Lord high and lifted up." But, indeed, the same is true of anybody. If the barometer we consult for our guidance is the opinion and conventions of man, God Himself will be nothing. If we are always consulting man, moved and governed by his expediencies, God will vanish away. "The fear of man is a snare," and the power of the snare is found in its fascination to allure our minds from the Lord of Hosts. "Afraid of a man that shall die, and forget-test the Lord thy Maker."

And here is another type from the portrait gallery of the Bible. "Thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the Rock of thy strength." Here is a forgetfulness that is born when we have recovered from some weakness. Pride of strength makes us forget the rock out of which we were hewn. This is a most common and insidious peril. Our weakness helps our remembrance of God; our strength is the friend of forgetfulness. Perhaps this is most apparent in our physical weakness. In our weakness we remember the Lord, and the dim things of the unseen come clearly into view. But when our strength is regained the vivid vision fades again, and is sometimes entirely lost. And so our strength is really our drug. It is an opiate which ministers to spiritual forgetfulness. And so it is with every kind of strength. Frailty in any direction makes us lean upon the power of the Almighty, and in every frailty our remembrance of Him is keen and clear. But our strength helps to create a feeling of independence, and we become unmindful of our God. And therefore it is that a man who never knows weakness has a stupendous task in maintaining communion with God. People who never know what it is to be ill have so many more barriers to overcome in their fellowship with the Unseen.

And here is a third Scriptural type of spiritual forgetfulness. "They have gone from mountain to hill, and have forgotten their resting-places." It is the figure of a flock of wandering sheep roaming away over the distant hills and mountains. They have gone from one place to another, and in the range of their goings have forgotten their place of rest. Their very vagrancy has made them insensible to their real home. That is to say, their vagrancy has induced forgetfulness.

Now I think this word is very descriptive of much of our modern life. It is a vagrancy rather than a crusade. We go from "mountain to hill," and from hill to mountain. We are always on the move. We are for ever seeking something else and never finding satisfaction. We get weary and tired with one thing and we trudge to another! We are here, there, and yonder, and our lives become jaded and stale. But the extraordinary thing is that in all our goings we forget our resting-place. "Return unto thy rest, O my soul." Yes, but we turn anywhere and everywhere rather than to this. Our lives can become so vagrant that God is exiled from our minds. It seems as though there is something in vagrancy that stupefies the soul, and renders us insensitive to our true home and rest in God.

When I first came to New York, during the first few months of my ministry, .I was continually asked by people, "Have you got into the whirl?" The very phrase seems so far removed from the words of the psalmist, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters." Not that the psalmist luxuriated in indolence, or spent his days in the fatness of ease; the rest was only preparative to a march. "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness." But from the march he returned to his resting-place. But we can be caught in such a whirl in our modern life that we just rush from one thing to another, and we forget the glorious rest that is ours in God. I think the enemy of our souls must love to get us into a whirl! If once we are dizzied with sensations we are likely to lose the thought of God. "They have gone from the mountain to the hill, and have forgotten their resting-place."

Let me give one further example from the Word of God. "According to their pasture, so were they filled; they were filled, and their heart was exalted; therefore have they forgotten Me." Here is a rich pasturage, and in the enjoyment of it there is born the spirit of forgetfulness. And surely this is the stupefaction of abundance. In Southern France, where attar of roses is distilled, a very curious ailment imperils the workers. The very abundance of the rose-leaves induces a sort of sleeping-sickness. And surely it is even so in the abundances that are sometimes given to man. They are prone to sink him into the sleep of spiritual forgetfulness.

A man's devotion is apt to dwindle as he becomes more successful. Our piety does not keep pace with our purse. Absorption in bounty makes us forgetful of the Giver. We can be so concerned in the pasturage that the Shepherd is forgotten. Our very fulness is apt to become our foe. Our clearest visions are given us in the winter-time when nature is scanty and poor. The fulness of the leaf blocks the outlook and the distance is hid. And the summer-time of life, when leaves and flowers are plentiful, is apt to bring a veil. And the very plentifulness impedes our communion.

These are some of the types of forgetfulness which are mentioned and described in the Word of God. Is there any help for us? There is a very gracious promise of the Master in which I think all these perils are anticipated, and in the strength of which they can be met and overcome: "He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." Here is the promise of a gracious minister to the memory, strengthening it in its hold upon the unseen. I suppose that one of the most urgent needs of the common life is the sanctification of the memory. If the memory were to be really hallowed it would forget many things which it now remembers, and it would certainly remember many things which it now forgets. We are apt to retain worthless things, and destructive things, things that ought to have been dropped and buried and left in their graves in past years. But we carry them with us to our undoing. The ministry of the Holy Spirit will deal with this unwise retention, and will make a memory leaky where it is wise for it to lose. But, more than that, it will strengthen its powers of spiritual comprehension, and will enable it to keep hold of the unseen and the eternal. What should I most like to remember? I should like to remember with unfailing constancy the glorious, holy Being of the eternal God. I should like to remember the unspeakable ministry of His grace, which worked in my redemption in Christ Jesus, my Lord. I should like to remember the benefits of His daily providence which shine along my road in unfailing succession. I should like to remember the eternal significance of transient events, and hold the lessons of yesterday's happenings to guide me in my march to-day. And when new occasions and new duties arise, and I am face to face with novel circumstances, I should like to be reminded of those words of the Lord Jesus which would give me the needful illumination: "He shall bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."