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

**14. THE GUIDING HAND by JOHN H. JOWETT**

THERE is a familiar phrase which is twice repeated in the twenty-third Psalm: "He leadeth me," but the two usages have very different surroundings. In the first the surroundings are pastoral, a deep restfulness is in the air, and all things are significant of relaxation and repose. "He leadeth me beside waters of rest." It is like walking on the banks of a river on some serene Saturday night, when the work of the week is over, and the very beasts of the field seem to have begun their Sabbath rest. In the second usage the surroundings are altogether changed. Rest becomes action; relaxation becomes strenuousness. We leave the "waters of rest" for the exposed and storm-swept uplands. We turn to the frowning slopes, with their terrors of wild beasts and tempests. Life becomes militant. "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness." It is like leaving the sweet and fragrant vineyards of the lower Alpine slopes for the bare and craggy heights, and the dubious and treacherous ways of the snow. But the guide who leads through the vineyard leads also through the snows; and it is the same God who leads by the "waters of rest," who also leads into exacting and exhausting "ways of righteousness." The Lord of the restful valley is also King of the flood and Sovereign of the terrible heights.

And this brings me to the theme of the present meditation; the Divine leadership, the grace of the guiding hand. There is surely nothing remote or obscure in the theme. It is relevant and immediate to everybody. We differ in many things and in many ways; we differ in age and in calling, in physical fitness and in mental equipment; we differ in knowledge and accomplishments; we are greatly different in temperament, and therefore in the character of our daily strife. But in one thing we are all alike--we are pilgrims travelling between life and death, on an unknown road, not knowing how or when the road may turn; not knowing how or when it may end; and we are in urgent need of a Greatheart who is acquainted with every step of the way. We are all in need of a leader who will be our guide by the "waters of rest," and also in the perilous ways of the heights.

Now how does the Lord lead us? I want to find the answer in the word and life of the Scriptures. And when I turn to the Scriptures I find that the means and methods of Divine leadership are many, that the Great Leader is like a wise human leader, and He adapts His ministries to the nature of the child and the character of the immediate need. I can only mention two or three of these varied methods of leadership as I find them in the Word of God.

And here is the first: "And the Lord spoke thus to me with a strong hand." It is the speech of a young prophet, and it describes a leading of God. Let us apprehend the figure. The counsel of the Lord has come to Isaiah like a strong hand, as something he could not escape. The intuition laid hold upon him like an arrest. What was the nature of the counsel? He was called upon by the Lord to separate himself from his nation. by a solemn act of detachment. He was commanded to confront his people, to oppose them, to leave the majority and stand alone. He was bidden to prophesy the unpleasant and even to predict defeat. We know how such men are regarded--they are denounced as unpatriotic, as devoid of national feeling and fraternal ambition. The young prophet shrinks from the task; he is tempted to silence and retirement; he meditates retreat; but the Word of the Lord came to him "with a strong hand." The imperative gave him no freedom; heaven laid hold on him with holy violence; the invisible gripped his conscience as a man's arm might be gripped, until it ached in the grasp.

Now this is one method of leading--a grip like that of a powerful constable. This was the kind of leading that came to Saul as he journeyed to Damascus. It was the kind of violent arrest that laid hold of John Bunyan as he played on Elstow-green. Sometimes the violent leading takes the shape of a startling ministry of disappointment or affliction. Sometimes the Lord lays hold of us with the cold, stony grip of fear, and we are moved in the way of life by the terror of impending calamity. Yes, the holy Lord sometimes arises and "shaketh terribly the earth." He grips and He shakes; but the ministry is governed by infinite mercy and love. "By terrible things in righteousness dost Thou answer us, O God of our salvation."

And here is a second method of leading: "I will guide thee with Mine eye." How startling the change! We pass from the grip of the hand to the glance of an eye, from a grip as severe as a vise to a touch as gentle as light. We pass from a nipping frost to a soft and cheering sunbeam. I find the word in the thirty-second Psalm, and the Psalm itself has provided me with the figure of violent contrast. "Be ye not as the horse or the mule." The mule is headlong and headstrong, and he is to be guided by the "strong hand." But the Lord would guide us by His eye. How exceedingly delicate is the guidance of a look! What tender intercourse can pass through the eyes! There is a whole language in their silent communion. But let it be marked that this eye-guidance implies very intimate fellowship. Eye-speech is the speech of lovers. We may be guided by a "strong hand," even when we are heedless of God; we can only be guided by His eye when we are gazing on God.

Let me give two examples of lovers who were guided by the eye. And let this be the first: "They looked unto Him and were lightened." That is guidance by a look. Whilst they worshipped they received the light. Their minds were illumined while they gazed. "They caught the ways of God," and they had a certain radiance of spirit which assured them that they had found the King's will. We cannot say much about the delicate experience through the clumsy medium of words. There are some communions for which ordinary language is altogether insufficient. Who can explain the message that passed between souls in love with one another; and who can describe the gentle communion of souls in love with God?

But here is another instance of this delicate guidance of the eye: "Jesus turned and looked upon Peter." That, too, was a look from Lover to lover. I know that one of the lovers had failed, but his love was not quenched. He had failed at the test, but the love was still burning. And Jesus turned, and with a look of poignant anguish He led His disloyal disciple into tears, and penitence, and reconciliation, and humble communion, and liberty. Peter was guided by the eye of his Lord.

Let me give one further instance of the leadings of God, and this time from the experience of the Apostle Paul: "After they were come to Mysia they assayed to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit suffered them not." And what kind of leading was this? It was leading by impediment. It was guidance by prohibition. It was the ministry of the closed door. There came to the Apostle what the Friends would describe as a "stop in the mind." His thought was resisted and had no liberty. He felt that his purpose was secretly opposed by an invincible barrier. In certain directions he had no sense of spiritual freedom, and therefore he regarded that way as blocked. "The angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary." I think it is very needful to emphasize this. God sometimes leads us by negations. The closed door is the indication of His will. We assay to go, but the Spirit suffers us not.

But whatever form the Divine leading may take, it is not always clear and immediate. Our great Leader sometimes keeps us waiting before we know His will. It is often very difficult to find out what His will really is. Would it be well for it to be otherwise? Would it be best for His will to be known immediately, and without the faintest shadow of doubt? Is there no kindly purpose in obscurity? Has mystery no place in the curriculum of life's school? Is there no gracious ministry in delay? If we always and everywhere enjoyed perfect and immediate lucidity we should abide in the condition of babes. We gain immense wealth from the discipline of uncertainty. Uncertainty impels us to exercise our sight. We critically observe the issues. We estimate possibilities. We weigh scruples. If the scales of guidance always went down with a bang it might make it easy, but it would never make us strong. The scales of guidance often turn with a hair, and part of life's discipline consists in watching the scales to see how they turn. The consequence is that when we know God's will we have also strengthened our sight. We have refined our powers of discernment in the act of making the discovery. And as we gain from the discipline of watching we also gain from the discipline of waiting. We gain self-control and patience and the noble refinements of hope. And thus we see that obscurity and delay do not imply the Divine absence or indifference. The Divine Leader is at work, and His gracious purpose is active even in the apparent inaction.