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

**15. THE MIDNIGHT PRESSURE by JOHN H. JOWETT**

THERE is something very weird and haunting about the midnight. It is one thing to be called out to visit the sick at noontide, but there is something awful when the call comes at the midnight. A telegram at the noon may be something or nothing, but a telegram in the stillness of the midnight is startling. And so we use the midnight as the symbol of our deepest and most desolate need. The majority of us have had experience of the season. The lights have gone out, and the soft, genial breeze has changed into a nipping night wind, and there is no companionable sound in the streets. We feel lonely and desolate and cold. And yet God's saints have had some wonderful happenings in the midnight. "Which of you shall have a friend and shall go unto him at midnight?" And countless numbers have turned to the heavenly Friend, and they have found wonderful light and provision in His presence. The Word of the Lord is full of song rising from the hearts of those whose night time has been changed into morning through their communion with the heavenly Friend. Here is a little chorus of praises: "Thou hast visited me in the night"; "In the night His song shall be with me"; "At midnight I will arise and give thanks"; "At midnight Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises." All these pilgrims of the night felt the pressure of the cold loneliness and they were driven to the heavenly Refuge and found the grace of God.

But the very parable from which I have taken this sentence about the visit of the friend in the midnight seems to suggest that God may delay His bounty and that importunity is needed if we are to obtain His aid. Looked at superficially it would seem that the all-comfortable and self-engrossed friend was unwilling to arise from bed and give the loaves that were asked by the shameless knocker at the door. But the teaching is rather this: if continued knocking can overcome the surliness of a well-bedded friend, what will it accomplish when the Friend is the ever-ready, all-compassionate, and sleepless Lord? If continued prayer can overcome reluctance, how will it fare when it deals with goodwill? It is one of the "how much more "arguments of Jesus Christ. If your friend, snugly ensconced in his bed, and unwilling to go out in the cold night, and angry at being disturbed, will at length respond to your importunate knocking, "how much more shall your Father which is in heaven!" And, therefore, we are bidden to ask and to go on asking, to knock and to go on knocking, and the desires of our heart shall be satisfied.

Why should there be any delay at all? Why does not God answer the first knock? First of all, let us again repeat the good news that our God is never imprisoned in sleepy indifference. He is awake and willing before we knock at all. Why, then, should we have to knock again? What is He doing? He is preparing the answer. There are some things we ask for that have to be grown. They cannot be given to us like coins or manufactured goods! They could only be given as fruits and they have to be grown in our souls. We ask for a fruit and the Lord immediately answers our prayer by planting a seed. We may think the prayer is unanswered, while all the time the answer is already working in our life towards consummation. We ask for certain blooms of finished character. The Lord does not attach them to our lives as we might tie fruit to a sickly tree. He begins at once to enrich the character that creates the blooms. For instance, I ask for joy. I expect to receive an immediate ecstasy. I ask the second time, but it does not come. My heart is sad in the midnight and there is no speedy transformation. But that does not mean that my Friend is indifferent or indolent. I ask for joy and He begins to make me a little purer and more refined. He works upon the strings of my soul and endows them with more sensitiveness, and by the preparation of the instrument He will prepare me for the final music and song. I ask for perfect peace. It does not come with the first asking, but the answer begins as soon as I knock at the door. There are broken cogs in the life that have to be repaired. There is much gravel of sin that has to be removed. And if the Lord is repairing some cog or cleaning some wheel, is not this the answer which will bring the peace for which I pray? It may be said that in order to give peace He may have to give pain. The resetting of a joint may mean the temporary increase of my suffering, but God is directing the process which will issue in blessing. But why keep on knocking, knocking; why keep on praying, praying? Why be importunate? Because importunity provides the atmosphere in which implanted seeds become matured. In prayer I receive the seed. By prayer I shall receive the fruit. Men ought always to pray, and the seeds will not faint.

One thing must be added. Sometimes the Lord's answer has really come, but we have not prayed for eyes to see it. It has not come quite in the dress we expected, and, therefore, we did not know it. A friend was appointed to meet me at a railway station. He looked for a man in clerical attire, and we wandered about little knowing that we were brushing shoulders with each other all the time. He thought I had not arrived, but I was there in another dress. And, therefore, it is well to look at our ordinary circumstances when they do not come to us in familiar and expected guise. "He was in the world and the world knew Him not." God sometimes appears in these unexpected ways, but they are the very answers to our prayers. The Apostle Paul was cast down in Macedonia. "Without were fightings, within were fears." And the comfort came in a strange way. It was not given in some immediate lighting of the fires of joy, by some mysterious gift in his secret soul. "The Lord comforted me by the coming of Titus." That is where Paul found the answer to his prayers. A fellow-man came to share his burden and to enhance his joys.