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

**22. NO BREATH by JOHN H. JOWETT**

"THERE was no breath in them." There was everything except breath. They were perfectly articulated bodies, but they were devoid of inspiration. The organized bones were as impotent as when they lay scattered over the desolate fields, organization had accomplished nothing. The lack was vital. There was an absence of life.

And this, says the prophet, is the symbol of a common tragedy in the lives of men and nations. Movements stop just short of inspiration. Fine organizations have no soul. There is "noise" and there is "shaking," but there is no quickening wind from God. There is combination, but no communion. Bone comes to bone, and there are sinews and skin, but there is no air, no enlivening power from the heart of God.

We may find an illustration of the prophet's symbol in the domain of words. A dictionary is a valley of dry bones. It is a mass of dismembered words scattered like dislocated bones, every word isolated from every other word, lying there bleached and dry. Well, a man thinks himself to be a poet, and he comes to the dictionary, and he begins to gather the words together "bone to his bone." He joins them in the friendliest concord. He organizes them in metrical rhymes. Every law of grammar and metre and melody is honoured. The association is sweet and soft and orderly and--dead! It is a beautiful corpse, but there is no breath in it; it jingles, but it is not poetry.

Or we may go to the verbal valley of dry bones, and we may gather the scattered members together and construct a prayer, fitting bone to bone, giving it sinews and covering it with flesh and skin. And there it is, a decent orderly thing, but dead! We say our prayers, but we do not pray. We marshal our words, but we do not aspire. We present a corpse instead of a breathing. And here is a poor publican, with a meagre little handful of words, which he sobs out rather than repeats: "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner," and "the words stand up an exceeding great army," and they take the kingdom of heaven by storm.

Sometimes we go to the dictionary, the valley of dry bones, and we gather its words together to construct a creed. The articles of the creed are most carefully shaped and fitted together with exquisite association. Word is joined to word in precise succession, and sentence linked with sentence in exact logical agreement. It is strengthened with the sinews of philosophy, and furnished with the flesh and skin of tender emotion, and there it is, an organized statement of belief! And we may repeat it with the semblance of life. There may be a "noise" and the "shaking," but no inspiration, no aspiration, no lowly confession of trust or prayer; and the mystic unseen ministers, who watch the souls of things, proclaim the heavenly judgment, "there is no breath in them." Another man gropes for a little handful of words, and fits them uncertainly together, and stammers them out before the Lord: "Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief." And the Kingdom is taken.

In the Church that bears the name of Christ we may have everything but the essential thing. We may have order and decency and reverence, and the appearance of fraternity. Bone may come to bone, and there may be the sinews and even the flesh and skin, and yet there may be no pervading breath, no mysterious and unifying life. We may have a congregation, but not a communion; we may have an assembly, but not an army; we may have a fellowship roll, but not of those who are counted alive, and whose names "are written in the Lamb's Book of Life." We may be just a crowd, and not "the family of the living God."

We may have prayers, but no prayer. We may have petitions, but no real intercession. We may have posture and homage, but no supplication. We may have exquisite ritual, but no holy worship. We may have what men call "a finished service," and yet there may be nothing of the violence of a vital faith. We may have benevolences, but no sacrifice. We may have the appearance of service, but no shedding of blood. The Church may be only an organized corpse.

But when the breath comes, how then? The breath of God converts an organization into an organism, it transforms a combination into a fellowship, a congregation into a church, a mob into an army. That breath came into a little disciple-band, a band that was worm-eaten by envy and jealousy, and weakened by timidity and fear, and it changed it into a spiritual army that could not be checked or hindered by "the world, the flesh, and the devil." And when the same breath of God comes into a man of "parts," a man of many faculties and talents, sharpened by culture, drilled and organized by discipline, it endows him with the veritable power of an army and makes him irresistible. "And Peter filled with the holy breath!" How can we compute the value and the significance and the power of that unifying association? Peter himself becomes an army, "an army of the living God." If the Church were filled with men of such glorious spiritual endowment, what would be the tale of exploits, what new chapters would be added to the Acts of the Apostles?