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

**38. THE HIGHER MINISTRIES OF HOLIDAYS by JOHN H. JOWETT**

WHY did our Lord go "every night" into the mountain? And why was it His custom to walk so frequently in the garden? It was because He felt the boon companionship of Nature, the friendly helpfulness of the vast and the beautiful. Mountain and garden were allies of the spirit, silent Greathearts who ministered to Him in the pilgrim way. He sought the mountain when He was pondering over great decisions. He was found in a garden "in the night in which He was betrayed." He heard wondrous messages in her voices; in her silences, too. He listened to mysterious speech. He read the evangel of the lilies. He understood the language of the birds. He read the face of the sky. He shared the secrets of the soil and the seed. He walked through the cornfields on the Sabbath day, and the ears of corn ministered to a richer Sabbatic peace. He stooped to hold intercourse with the grass of the field. The wind brought Him tidings of other worlds. The vineyards gave Him more than grapes and wine; they refreshed and strengthened His soul. Everywhere and always our Saviour was in communion with His willing and immediate friends in the natural world. Nature was to Jesus a blessed colleague in the soul's commerce and fellowship with the Highest.

And we, too, seek rest and recreation by the seashore or countryside. Our bodies become like lamps that are in need of oil; they burn a little dim and uncertain; and sometimes because we are a little spent and weary we become very unpleasant to other people, like lamps that have begun to smoke. We are consuming wick rather than oil, and it is attended with offensive consequences all round. And so we must get our lamps refilled, and we find the precious oil in the green pastures or by the deep-sounding sea.

Now, it is good for us to remember that a jaded body can be greatly helped through the ministry of a refreshed mind. A noble thought in the mind has ennerving communion with the entire circle of our life. And the principle is even still more deep and certain in its influences when for a noble thought we substitute an exuberant soul. "Thy faith hath saved thee," said the Master, and the extraordinary physical convalescence was directly related to a mood and disposition of the soul. And, therefore, although we may get valuable stock of oil for our spent and sputtering lamp by just lying down on the slopes of the hills, or throwing ourselves on the sands, yet the filling would be greatly helped if to a prudent physical indolence we added refined and noble thought. Golfing will be all the more effective as a tonic if a man is open to the Divine. We cannot get the best out of Nature if we are closed against her deepest secret. We may depend upon it that when Jesus prayed upon the mountain He got the very best that the mountain had to give. When He knelt in the garden of Gethsemane the olive groves contributed far more than restful shade and perfume. Our bodies draw upon Nature's finest essence when our spirits are in communion with Nature's God. And so in all our thinkings about rejuvenation let us include the interests of the spirit. The most refreshing holiday is that which is pervaded by an abiding communion with God. Our spiritual habits are the ministers or the masters of our bodies, and we do a very ill turn to our tired bodies if, by the manner of our holiday, we choke the channels of the highest life.

I know that Nature has frequently an unconscious and a very blessed influence upon our minds and souls. A revelation of vastitude may have a most expansive influence upon us, even if the Divine do not consciously possess our thoughts. The bounding wave may give us a very exhilarating influence, and so may the jocund daffodils, or the bright loneliness of the uplifted hills. Nature may soothe us, or she may excite us; she may be a stimulant or a sedative. But this unconscious influence is by no means sure. If the presence of broad spaces and towering heights were always ministers of expansion how do we explain those multitudes in our rural population whose minds are small, and dull, and unresponsive, and who have no conscious or unconscious communion with the subtle beauty or the far-stretching glory of their surroundings?

But why go to a farm labourer for our example? We may find the witness in our own experience. We have often been to the royal seats of Nature's majesty or beauty, we have climbed her awful mountains, we have walked her broad domains, we have sailed her immeasurable seas, and in very truth we have returned home as small as we went away. The body has gained something, but not the mind or the soul, and, because the mind and the soul have been locked up like the rooms we have left behind in the city, our very bodies have not recovered that exuberant strength which was intended for them in the gracious purpose of God.

In all our holiday-making let us deliberately commune with the Divine. I am painfully aware that the very form of the phrase I have used is suggestive of a task, and appears to be uncongenial to the holiday mood. But there can be nothing in all our plans more holiday-like and more holiday-giving than just this simple purpose to commune with God. Does it stint our holiday feeling to recall the face and the tenderness of our little child? When we are in some almost awful splendour, is the thought of love an intrusion which darkens the privilege into task? Surely the thought of the beloved deepens and chastens the joy! And so is it in the highest realms and reaches of thought; the right thought of God deepens and enriches the holiday mood and puts us into communion with the very springs of life and joy and peace. We are going back to the old place, on the hill, on the moor, or by the sea. Have we ever met the Lord there? Have we ever seen the mystic cloud upon the hills? Have we ever seen Him come walking on the waters? Have we ever felt His Presence in the cornfields? Has He ever talked with us as we stooped to pick a flower by the way? Never met Him? Ah! then, we don't yet know our holiday place as we may know it, and as, please God! we may know it before we come back home again. We have only seen it in the light of common day. Wait until we have seen it in His blessed fellowship and we shall be amazed at the glory! We have seen the common bush and we think it wonderful; wait until we have seen the bush burn with the radiant Presence of God. Wait until we have been up the hill with the Lord, and in. the far-reaching glory He has become transfigured before us. The sense of His Presence never spoils our freedom or chills our pleasure; it adds sunshine to light and delightful music to all our songs. When He walks with us as we journey to Emmaus He opens up everything.

What, then, shall we do on our holiday? First of all, let us quietly cultivate the sense of the Presence of our Lord. Let there be no stress about it and no strain; the quieter it is, the more natural and familiar, the better it will be. All that we need to do is just to call Him to mind and to link Him with the beauty of the glory we contemplate. Call Him into your mind as freely and as naturally as you would recall the thought of a loved one whom you have temporarily forgotten. You are climbing the slope of some glorious hill, or you stand upon its shoulder or its summit; quietly call to your mind: "The strength of the hills is His also." "Who by His strength setteth fast the mountains, being girded with power." "Faith has still its Olivet and love its Galilee." Or you are walking by the shores of the incoming sea: "The sea is His and He made it." "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea." Or you are gazing upon the wonders of sunrise and sunset, upon their gorgeous harmony of colours, upon the mighty architecture of embattled clouds: "He clothed Himself in light as with a garment." "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth His handiwork." "The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing on His wings." Or you are swept by the fresh, health-giving wind, from the deep, or on the heights: "He rideth upon the wings of the wind."

Thy bountiful care,

What tongue can relate,

It breathes in the air.

"And He breathed upon them and said, Receive ye the Holy Ghost." Or you are amid the perfumed loveliness of the flowers of the field:

&gt;Thy sweetness hath betrayed Thee, Lord;

Dear Spirit, it is Thou!

Would this gentle recollection interfere with the holiday? Would it impoverish it? Would it chill it? Or would it not rather warm and enlarge it, making every avenue bright and luminous, changing commandments into beatitudes:

And our lives would be all sunshine

In the sweetness of our Lord.

"Thou shalt remember the Lord thy God," and His statutes shall become thy songs.

And then I would give a second counsel. Let us seek the mystic mind of God in the creations of the natural world. For these material presences are speaking to us. They are the wonderful shrines in which are to be found still more wonderful messages. Do not let us confine our wonder to the shrine and ignore the message. Let us hold ourselves receptive to the secret, spiritual thing. Our Saviour elicited the secret of the lilies. He read an evangel as He saw the birds on the wing or in their nests. Everything was to Him a kind of envelope, and He reverently opened it and found the mystic scroll. And so was it with the psalmists and the prophets. Material things were the bearers of spiritual things, and these old seers continually gather the secret treasure. Charles Kingsley said that whenever he went down a country lane he felt as though everything about him, every leaf, and bud, and flower, were saying something to him, and he was pained by the feeling of his density. But he heard many, many things, and he has told them again to us. And in our own degree we all may do it. At any rate, we can question these sublime and beautiful things, and rightly to ask a question is to put oneself in the mood for receiving a reply. Why not begin with a flower? "What message hast thou here for me, thou tender, beautiful, gracious thing? What tidings dost thou bring?" Maybe not all at once will our spirit discover the answer, but it will not be long before we are sensitive enough to catch some whisper from our God. Material presences, continually wooed by the spirit, will yield their spiritual treasure, and the jubilant heart will store up its growing wealth of grace. And so, I say, cannot we quietly interrogate our surroundings, without fuss or obtrusion, and by wise questioning prepare ourselves for great replies? "What hast thou to say to me, O breaking wave, the lifted hill, flying cloud, gentle breeze, or roaring blast?" And if some day our holiday plans are broken by the broken weather it will be a blessed thing to consult the falling rain, and ask what secret messages it may have for men, and what news it brings of things Divine! These are simplicities, but they will lead us into profundities, and without any weight or burdensomeness they will keep our souls "alive unto God."

What sweetness on Thine earth doth dwell!

How precious, Lord, these gifts of Thine!

Yet sweeter messages they tell,

These earnests of delight Divine.

These odours blest, these gracious flowers,

These sweet sounds that around us rise,

Give tidings of the heavenly bowers,

Prelude the angelic harmonies.

And thus let us imitate the Scriptures in regarding the ministries of Nature as illustrative of the ministries of grace. While we look at the seen, let us also look at the unseen. Let the symbol become a veil through which we can see Him "who is invisible." Let us use our happy surroundings as modes of expression between God and the soul, and the soul and God.

Such communings do not detract from the worth and wealth of a holiday, they rather enrich and augment it. They give freedom and height and expansion to the soul; and high spirits are good spirits, and good spirits are the very first essential to bodily health and exuberance. To "sit in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" makes one akin to the secret power which dwells in the blowing corn and the rolling wave.

We do not need to have vast panoramas, or gigantic mountains, or immeasurable seas, before we can enter into sacred communion with the spirit of Nature. We can begin at home in more limited surroundings. We have always with us the pageant of the clouds. We have the wonder of the sky. "The noblest scenes of the earth can be seen and known but by few; it is not intended that man should live always in the midst of them; he injures them by his presence, he ceases to feel them if he is always with them; but the sky is for all ... fitted in all its functions for the perpetual comfort and exulting of the heart,--for soothing it, and purifying it from its dross and dust." We have always, not far away, the treasures of the gardens and the flowers of the fields. We have the birds, and our Lord found a great evangel in the sparrows! Yes, it is altogether true what Stevenson said: "The spirit of delight comes often on small wings." Let us watch the commonplaces in Nature. We shall find them vistas opening into the infinite and eternal. "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein." "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord. The fulness of the whole earth is His glory."