**THE SILVER LINING - MESSAGES OF HOPE AND CHEER BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**01. UNDER THE FIG TREE by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"When thou wast under the fig-tree I saw thee."*

*John 1:48*

"WHEN thou wast under the fig-tree I saw thee." But was there any special significance in this? There must have been something of very deep significance, for it inspired Nathaniel to an outburst of joyful faith: "Thou art the Son of God." Perhaps there was something in the tone in which the words were spoken; for revelations are not always contained in the literal words, they are often found in the way in which they are spoken. It is possible to say to a sorrowful and mourning widow, "I saw you," and the words will suggest nothing more than bare recognition; and one may use the same phrase and it would be weighted with warm and helpful sympathy. There was surely something in the tone of the Master which called forth the exuberant response of Nathaniel's heart. But there was more than this. "Under the fig-tree," was a phrase which recalled a deep and personal experience. Nathaniel had been in the habit of retiring in the shade of the fig-tree, away from the crowd, and away from his labour, depressed by feelings of saddened loneliness and alienation. His was a chaste and sensitive soul, and there was much in his day to fill his delicate spirit with despondency and pain. So he was often found apart, under the fig-tree. The neighbours thought him moody; in reality he was thoughtful. He was described as dreamy; in reality he was prayerful. Sometimes he was esteemed a little proud; in reality he bore the burden of oppressive sadness. He used to retire into the quiet garden, lock the gate, and under the fig-tree, with no one near, he would pour out his soul before God.

Can we exercise a prudent imagination, and attempt to realise Nathaniel's state? I think he was probably burdened in worship. He felt his spirit fettered by the multitudinous rules and regulations which had gathered round about the acts and offices of worship. He sought to be punctilious in their observation, but he laboured under the heavy load. A certain amount of harness is helpful to a beast; it directs and concentrates his strength at the needful points, and makes the yoke tolerable and easy. But it is possible so to multiply the harness that it adds to the burden, rather than reduces it. And rules and regulations can be helpful to the movements of the spirit, but if they are multiplied they increase its strain. In Nathaniel's day the rules and regulations had increased until every natural movement was harassed and irritated, and life became a galling bondage. Nathaniel hungered for free intimacy, for the emancipation of a friendly walk with God. And then I think he was weary in service. The attempts to do good seemed so fruitless in their issues. The streets of town and village rang with hypocrisy and vice, and his own little efforts appeared to have no more purifying influence than the dropping of white snowflakes into an open sewer.

And then, too, I think he was faint in waiting. The promised deliverer was long in coming. He looked out with aching, weary eyes, but the emancipator did not appear. And his spirit grew faint and desponding. There is nothing so exhausting as mere waiting. Work does not tire a man so much as the looking for work. The hour of labour speeds like a weaver's shuttle; the hour of waiting drags like a cumbersome load, How long the minutes seem when we are waiting for the doctor! The loved one is passing into deeper need, and we listen for the hand upon the latch. Every moment seems an age. And there were many in the time of Nathaniel who were "waiting for the doctor"; the general life was sick and diseased, and the great Physician had not yet come! And these men waited, looking for "the consolation of Israel"! And Nathaniel was one of the waiters, and in the long waiting he had grown faint. Is it any wonder, then, that this man, burdened in worship, weary in service, and faint in waiting, should often be found apart in the retirement of some secluded garden, under a fig-tree, with downcast and despondent spirit, looking wistfully towards heaven and God? "When thou wast under the fig-tree I saw thee."

"I saw thee." And how much the seeing means! The phrase has infinitely more significance than that of bare recognition. It is not only that Nathaniel was noticed; it means that he was understood. Our Lord's sight is insight. The majority of us see, but only a few perceive. "See ye, indeed, but perceive not." We see a sign, but we cannot give it an interpretation. We see a wrinkle, a grey hair, a tear, a smile, a look of care, a bent back, but we do not perceive their spiritual significance. Our Master not only sees; He "in-sees." When He looked at Nathaniel He understood him. He interpreted his thoughts and fears. He saw him through and through. "He knew what was in man." But the Master's seeing implies more than this. It is not only that sight was insight; His perceptions were compassions. He was "touched" with the feelings of men's infirmities. He did not bring to bear upon men the mere dry light of understanding; the light was warm and genial, and sunny with the grace of sympathy. The apostolic word is very beautiful, He was "touched." But the sight means even more than this. The understanding and the sympathy were joined to the ministry of co-operation. The Master not only feels, He works; He not only sympathises, He serves. When He saw Nathaniel under the fig-tree, His understanding, His sympathy, His power, all combined in a ministry of benevolent and beneficent love.

Here, then, is the evangel. Our Lord sees us when we are under the gloom of the fig-tree, when in sadness and weariness we are turning tired eyes at the expectancy of help. "Before that Philip called thee," before he came out into the open, when he was half hidden, when his soul-life was secret and unconfessed, when in grave despondency he was turning his weary eyes toward heaven--"I saw thee." He sees and knows us then. He sees us in the gropings in the gloom. That is the glory of our Redeemer. Anybody can see an electric light, but to feel the current, when there is not enough to make a light, requires a more refined discernment. We all become aware of the electrical power when there is enough to ring a bell; but when the power which is stored in the wires is feeble and faint, it requires something as sensitive as the palate to detect it. Our Master discerns the feeble stirrings of spiritual life. When there is not enough to illumine the soul, or to make its powers ring out the truth, He detects the faint beginnings which to other people are unknown. The woman of Samaria comes to Him. She was only a common woman of the city. Far from being a light, she was like a burnt-out fire. But I think that in her desolate soul there were often faint and uncertain movements. She had long seasons of despondency, with little flickerings of aspiration after a better life. I think she often went apart, and in deep dejection of spirit sighed out her woe. We are not told that our Master spake to her of these seasons, and yet I cannot but think He did. He would mention one place and another place, and one thing and another thing, which would recall to her the experiences of these darker seasons. "When thou wast under the fig-tree I saw thee!" One after another the deepest things in her life were recalled to her, until at length she turned away to her friends, saying, "Come, see a man who told me all the things that ever I did."

And was it not so with Zacchaeus? Can we think that when Jesus looked up at Zacchaeus and bade him come and offer hospitality, it was the first time He had seen him? Nay, I think He had often passed him in the streets, He had seen the shadow over his face. There was unrest and trouble in his eye. He looked like a man who was often awake at nights. For Zacchaeus often went home with a full purse and a very empty and improvished heart. He was often "under the fig-tree," in gloom and despondency, casting fitful glances at the better life. And so when the Master called to him, there was something in the very tone which revealed that he was understood. We are not told what they talked about on their way to the publican's house, but I think I can hear the Master saying to His newly-found disciple, "when thou wast under the fig-tree I saw thee." I say this is the way of the Master. He sees us in the faint beginning and gropings of the spiritual life. "When he was yet a long way off his father saw him!" That is characteristic of the Divine eyes. He sees us in the long distance! The first faint impulses are recognised; the first turning is known. When we are under the fig-tree He sees us!

This, surely, is a word full of heartening and inspiration. We are never alone. Our Saviour understands us, sympathises with us, co-operates with us. He is with us under the fig-tree! And see how rich and wealthy is the promise. "Hereafter ye shall see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." How glorious and fitting is the issue! Nathaniel is to see heaven opened! The man who has been in the gloom of the fig-tree, with fitful and uncertain glimpses through the broken clouds, is to attain to firm, clear, and permanent vision. And the man who is so frequently timid, and wonders at the controlling power of life and the world, is to have his confidence steadied and stayed, and is to be made sure of the sovereignty of Christ.