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

**08. THE ABIDING COMPANIONSHIP by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"My Presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest."*

*Exodus 33:14*

THE other morning I went for a walk up the valley of the Tees. My path left the home, passed under the shadow of the County School, crossed the Recreation grounds, wound in and out among the wide-spreading meadows, now and again coming within sight and sound of the swift, eager river, and now veering round and threading the crowded street of the busy market-town, and now narrowing to the little track that led to a new-made grave. And through all the varying way this evangel possessed my mind, "My Presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest."

And then suddenly I realised that my walk had been parabolic, and that in all its shifting changes life itself had been pourtrayed. My walk had been a Pilgrim's Progress, every turning laden with spiritual significance. I had touched life at all its emphases, and the gracious evangel was fitted to all. "My Presence shall go with thee," in the serious affairs of the home, in the serious place of education, in the relaxations of amusement and sport, in the broad, quiet spaces of Nature's strength and beauty, in the stress and speed of business, and along the narrow road that leads to the open grave. The changing road: the unchanging Presence! The shifting environment: "the Friend that sticketh closer than a brother!" "My Presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest."

Whither is our road going to lead? What sudden and unexpected turnings shall we experience? Shall we find the road firm and smooth and easy, or shall we find it rough and "rutty," straining and tiring to the limbs? Will it provide a pleasant saunter, or will it involve bleeding feet? Will it be a green lane, or a stony steep? Will the way be clear and legible as a turnpike, or will it sometimes be faint and doubtful, like an uncertain track across the moor? We do not know: we are alike in a common ignorance: culture and wealth ensure no favour: all distinctions are here wiped out: we are all upon an unknown road, and for everybody the next step is in the mist! "Thou knowest not what a day may bring forth." If it were good for us to know it, we should be taken into the counsels of the Almighty. The knowledge of the future path really matters nothing: the perception of the present companionship matters everything! What of the road? "Thou knowest not now." What then? "My Presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." And so our text entwines the gracious offer of a Companion for the unknown and changing road. It promises the destruction of loneliness, but not the dispersal of the mist. Let me remind you of some of life's lonelinesses which this wonderful Companionship will destroy.

There is the loneliness of unshared sorrow. Is there anything more solitary than sorrow that can find no friendly ear? Sorrow which has an audience can frequently find relief in telling and retelling its own story. How often the bereaved one can find a cordial for the pain in recalling the doings and prowess of the departed! It is a wise ministry in visiting the bereaved to give them abundant opportunity of speaking about the lost. The heart eases itself in such shared remembrance. Grief is saved from freezing, and the genial currents of the soul are kept in motion. But when sorrow has no companionable presence with which to commune, the grief becomes a withering and desolating ministry.

"When I kept silence, my bones waxed old." Aye, there is nothing ages people like the loneliness of unshared grief. And there are multitudes of people who know no friendly human ear into which they can pour the story of their woes. The outlet manward is denied them. What then? Is the desolation hopeless? "My Presence shall go with thee." The story can be whispered into the ear of the Highest. The Companionship is from above. Said one lonely soul, who had been nursing his grief in secrecy, as the stricken dove seeks to hide the arrow that rankles in its breast, "I will pour out my soul unto the LORD," and in the sympathy of that great Companionship his sorrow was lightened, and transfigured, like rain clouds in the sun.

"In the dark and cloudy day,

When earth's riches flee away,

And the last hope will not stay,

My Saviour, comfort me.

"When the secret idol's gone,

That my poor heart yearned upon,

Desolate, bereft, alone,

My Saviour, comfort me."

There is the loneliness of unshared triumph. I asked a little while ago if there is anything more lonely than sorrow that can find no friendly ear? I am bound to say that I sometimes think that lonely triumph is as desolate as unshared grief. My memory recalls with vivid clearness one of the boys in the school where I received my earliest training. He was an orphan-boy, but more than that, he was perfectly friendless. Those who were nearest to him were all dead, and the entire interest of his guardian exhausted itself in paying the school-fees as they became due. When the holidays came, and we all bounded home, he remained at the school, for he had nowhere else to go. I thought little or nothing about it. Certainly his position did not move me to pain, until one day his loneliness broke upon me with appalling reality, when in the class-lists he appeared as the premier boy in the school. His triumph was most distinguished and brilliant, but he had no one to share it! No father, no mother, no kinsman, no friend! I felt that in his success he was more desolate than in his defeats! His bereavement seemed to culminate in his triumphs!

Let me illustrate further. I had a friend who in mature life published a book on which he had bestowed the hard labours of many years. Some time before its publication his wife died, and he was left alone. The book received an enthusiastic welcome, and now enjoys high eminence in its own department of learning. I spoke to my friend of his well-deserved reward, and of the triumph of his labours. His face immediately clouded, and he quietly said, "Ah, if only she were here to share it!" I say, his loneliness culminated there, and his sharpest pang was experienced in his sunniest hour.

It is not otherwise with the moral triumphs of the soul. When I sin and falter, I feel I need a companion to whom I can tell the story of my defeat: but when I have some secret triumph I want a companion to share the glow and glory of the conquest, or the glow and glory will fade. Even when we conquer secret sin the heart calls for a Companion in the joy! And here He is! "My Presence shall go with thee!" If you will turn to the book of the Psalms you will find how continually the ringing paeans sound from hearts that are just bursting with the desire to share their joy and triumph with the LORD. They are the communings of victory, the gladsome fellowship of radiant souls and their GOD. His Presence shall go with us, and He will destroy the loneliness of unshared joy.

And there is the loneliness of temptation. Our friends can accompany us so far along the troubled way, and by GOD'S good grace they can partially minister to our progress by re-arranging our environment, and removing many of the snares and pitfalls from our path. But in this serious business of temptation it is little that friend can do for friend. The great battle is waged behind a door they cannot enter. The real fight, the death-grip, is not in some public arena, with friends and spectators gathered around: it takes place in awful and desolate loneliness! In the secret place of every temptation no earthly friend can be near. A man might possibly fight with wild beasts, if the theatre were a public one, and amid the plaudits of assembled crowds: but to contend with beasts in secret, to slay them behind the closed and muffled door, is desperate and lonely work. But we need not be alone! One Presence can pass the door that leads to the secret place. "My Presence shall go with thee," not as an interested or applauding spectator, but as Fellow-worker, Fellow-fighter, Redeemer, and Friend. The loneliness of the wilderness is peopled by the ubiquitous presence of the LORD.

And there is the loneliness of death. It is pathetic, deeply pathetic, how we have to stand idly by at the last moment--doctor, nurse, husband, wife, child--all to stand idly by, when the lonely voyager launches forth into the unknown sea! "It is the loneliness of death that is so terrible. If we and those whom we love passed over simultaneously, we should think no more of it than changing our houses" from one place into another. But every voyager goes alone! Alone? Nay, there is a Fellow-voyager! "My Presence shall go with thee." The last, chill loneliness is warmed by the Resurrection Life. There is a winsome light in the valleys, as of the dawning of grander days. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." "My Presence shall go with thee!" "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee, and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee."

Now, if we only firmly believed this, and clearly realised this gracious Presence, what would be the ministry? Well, we should work without worry. We should step out without dread. We should waste no energy in fruitless fear and sapping care. We should face the unknown not daunted by our ignorance. The great Companion may still think it good to deny us the light of comprehension: but then, though we may not comprehend the nature of the entire way, He will see to it that we have light at the next turning of the road. Don't let us be afraid of our ignorance. Our Companion is a great husbander of light, and at the appointed moment, when "His hour is come," He shall "bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday."

And do not let us be afraid of our weakness. You feel about as little like carrying the possible load of the new day as a grasshopper! Never mind! Perhaps that is how we ought to feel. We must leave something for the great Companion to do! Do not let us try to carry our GOD and our burden too! You remember that passage in Isaiah where, with pathetic irony, the prophet declares that the people are busy carrying their gods, when all the time the great Jehovah is waiting to carry the people! No, our little strength will soon leak out. The real combatants are not our weakness versus the burdens and difficulties of the day, but all these things versus our Almighty Friend! "My Presence shall go with thee," and thou shalt lack neither light nor might; "as thy day so shall thy strength be," and "at eventide it shall be light."

But we must lean upon Him and allow Him to carry our load. An aged, weary woman, carrying a heavy basket, got into the train with me the other day, and when she was seated she still kept the heavy burden upon her arm! "Lay your burden down, mum," said the kindly voice of a working man. "Lay your burden down, mum; the train will carry both it and you." Aye, that's it! "Lay your burden down!" The LORD will carry both it and you! "I will give thee rest": not by the absence of warfare, but by the happy assurance of victory: not by the absence of the hill, but by the absence of the spirit of fainting. "I will give thee rest."