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

**11. THE LORD'S GUESTS by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."*

*Psalm 23:5*

THIS is a desert scene. A hot, panting fugitive is fleeing for his life, pursued and hunted by the forces of a fierce revenge. His crime is placarded on his garments. The marks of blood are upon him. In a moment of passion, or in cool deliberateness, he has maimed and outraged his brother. And now fear has spurred him to flight. Nemesis is upon his track. He takes to the desert! The wild, inhospitable waste stretches before him in shadowless immensity. No bush offers him a secret shelter. No rock offers him a safe defence. He can almost feel the hot breath of his pursuers in the rear. Whither shall he turn? His terrified eyes search the horizon, and in the cloudy distance he discerns the dim outlines of a desert-tent. His excited nerves play like whips about his muscles, and with terrific strain he makes for the promised rest. The way is long! The enemy is near! The air is feverish! The night is falling! The runner is faint! Spurring himself anew, and flinging all his wasting resources into the flight, with the pursuers even at his heels, he stretches out toward the mark, and with one last tremendous exertion he touches the tent-rope and is safe! He is now a guest of the desert-man, and the guest is inviolable. All the hallowed sanctions of hospitality gather about him for his defence. He is taken into the tent, food is placed before him, while his evaded pursuers stand frowningly at the door. The fugitive is at rest. If he can speak at all I think his words will be these, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." Such is the undimmed glory of Arab hospitality. To injure a guest is the mark of the deepest depravity. Many of the Bedouins light fires in their encampments to guide the travellers or fugitives to their tents. Many of them keep dogs, not only for the purpose of watching against perils, but in order that, by their bark, they may guide the tired and benighted wayfarer to their place of rest. And so the fugitive finds food and shelter. To touch the tent-rope is to enter the circle of inviolable hospitality. The host is the slave of the guest as long as the guest remains. All the resources of the tent are placed as his disposal. He can lie down in peace, and take his rest in safety. The pursuer is stayed beyond the tent. He can only "look" the revenge he dare not inflict. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."

Such is the desert symbol. What is its spiritual significance? The soul is a fugitive, in flight across the plains of time. The soul is pursued by enemies, which disturb its peace, and threaten its destruction. The soul is often terror-stricken. The soul is often a "haunt of fears." There are things it cannot escape, presences it cannot avoid, enemies that dog its track through the long, long day, from morning until night. What are these enemies that chase the soul across the ways of time? Can we name them?

Here is an enemy, the sin of yesterday. I cannot get away from it. When I have half-forgotten it, and leave it slumbering in the rear, it is suddenly awake again, and, like a hound, it is baying at my heels. Some days are days of peculiar intensity, and the far-off experience draws near and assumes the vividness of an immediate act. Yesterday pursues to-day, and threatens it!

"O! I have passed a miserable night,

So full of ugly sights, of ghastly dreams,

That, as I am a Christian faithful man,

I would not spend another such a night,

Though 'twere to buy a world of happy days,

So full of dismal terror was the time."

And what were the "ugly sights" which filled the time with "dismal terror"? They were the threatening presences of old sins, pursuing in full cry across the years! The affrighted experience is all foreshadowed by the Word of God. Whether I turn to the Old Testament or to the New Testament the awful succession is proclaimed as a primary law of the spiritual life. "Evil pursueth sinners." That sounds significant of desert-flight and hot pursuit! "Be sure your sin will find you out!" as though our sin were an objective reality. The hounds of Nemesis have found the scent, and they are following on in fierce pursuit! "Be sure your sin will find you out." If I turn to the New Testament the dark succession is made equally sure. "Their works do follow them." I know these words are spoken of the good, the spiritually-minded, the men and the women who have spent themselves in beneficent sacrifice. "Their works do follow them!" They are attended by the radiant procession of their services, a shining, singing throng, conducting them in jubilation along the ways of time into the temple of the blest! But the converse is equally true. The spiritually-rebellious and unclean are followed by the dark and ugly procession of their own deeds, every deed a menacing foe, reaching out a condemnatory finger, and pursuing them through the portals of death into the very precincts of the judgment-throne. "Their works do follow them." The sin of yesterday is chasing the soul across the plains of to-day! "Since thou hast not hated blood, even blood shall pursue thee."

Here is another enemy, the temptation of today. Yesterday is not the only menacing presence; there is the insidious seducer who stands by the wayside to-day. Sometimes he approaches me in deceptive deliberateness; sometimes his advance is so stealthy that in a moment I am caught in his snare! At one time he comes near me like a fox; at other times he leaps upon me like a lion out of the thicket. At one time the menace is in my passions, and again it crouches very near my prayers! Now the enemy draws near in the heavy guise of carnality, "the lust of the flesh"; and now in the lighter robe of covetousness, "the lust of the eyes"; and now in the delicate garb of vanity, "the pride of life"! But in all the many guises it is the one foe. In the manifold suggestions there is one threat "The enemy that sowed them is the devil." If I am awake I fear! If I move he follows! "When I would do good evil is present with me." "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" The soul is in the desert, chased by the enemy of ever-present temptation.

Here is a third enemy, the death that awaits me to-morrow. "And I looked and beheld a pale horse; and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him!" Man seeks to banish that presence from his conscience, but he pathetically fails. The pale horse with his rider walks into our feasts! He forces himself into the wedding-day! "To love and to cherish until death us do part!" We have almost agreed to exile his name from our vocabulary. If we are obliged to refer to him we hide the slaughterhouse under rose-trees, we conceal the reality under more pleasing euphemisms. I have become insured. What for? Because to-morrow I may---- No, I do not speak in that wise. I banish the word at the threshold. I do not mention death or dying. How then? I have become insured, because "if anything should happen to me----?" In such circumlocution do I seek to evade the rider upon the pale horse. Yet the rider is getting nearer! To-morrow he will dismount at the door, and his hand will be upon the latch! Shall we fear his pursuit? "The terrors of death compassed me," cries the Psalmist. "Through fear of death they were all their lifetime subject to bondage," cries the Apostle of the New Covenant. It is an enemy we have got to meet. "The last enemy ... is death." Here, then, we are, lone fugitives crossing the desert of time, chased by the sin of yesterday, menaced by the temptation of to-day, threatened by death to-morrow! The enemies are about us on every side. "My heart is sore pained within me, and the terrors of death are fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me." "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away and be at rest." Whither can we turn? On the whole vast plain, is there one tabernacle whose tent-ropes we may touch, and in whose circle of hospitality we may find food and refuge and rest?

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." In the Lord our God is the fugitive's refuge. "In the secret of His tabernacle shall He hide me." In the Lord our God we are secured against the destructiveness of our yesterdays, the menaces of to-day, and the darkening fears of the morrow. Our enemies are stayed at the door! We are the Lord's guests, and our sanctuary is inviolable! But what assurance have we that the Lord will take us in? I will give you the assurance. "Hath He not said, and shall He not do it?" I will give you the assurance. The most inspiring way to read the commandments of God is to interpret them also as evangels. Commandments are not only expressive of duties, they are revelations of God. Look into a commandment and you can see what you might be; look into a commandment and you will see what God is. Therefore commandments are not only human ideals, they are expressive of Divine glory. I would know, therefore, what the Lord has commanded, in order that I may look into it for a vision of His face. He has commanded us to be "given to hospitality," to have the camp-fires lit that lost and fear-stricken pilgrims may be guided to shelter and rest! Then, are His camp-fires burning, and is He standing at the tent-door to give the fugitives welcome? I have heard Him apportion the rewards of His kingdom, and these were the terms of the benediction, "I was a stranger, and ye took Me in." Then will the Lord Himself throw back the tent-curtain, and take me out of the fright and darkness into the light and warmth and rest of His own abode!

"If I ask Him to receive me,

Will He say me nay?

Not till earth, and not tin heaven

Pass away!"

This, then, is my assurance. What He wants me to do, He does. What He empowers me to be, He is!

"Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift, That I doubt His own love can compete with it? ... Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man,

And dare doubt he alone shall not help him, who yet alone can? ... .

Could I wrestle to raise him from sorrow, grow poor to enrich,

To fill up his life, starve my own out, I would ...

Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst Thou--so wilt Thou!"

"I will flee unto Him to hide me."

And what shall I find in the tent? "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." There is something so exuberantly triumphant in the Psalmist's boast! It is laughingly defiant in its security. The enemies frown at the open door, while he calmly sits down to a feast with his Lord. "Yesterday" glowers, but cannot hurt. "To-day" tempts, but cannot entice. "To-morrow" threatens, but can. not destroy. "O death! where is thy sting?" They are like the enemies which John Bunyan saw just outside the Valley of the Shadow, two giants by whose power and tyranny many had been cruelly put to death, but who can now "do little more than sit in the cave's mouth, grinning at pilgrims as they go by, and biting their nails because they cannot come at them." We taste our joys in the presence of our discomfited foe.

In "the secret of His tabernacle" we shall find a sure defence. "Who can separate us from the love of Christ?" We shall find a refreshing repose. The shock of panic will be over. The waste of fear will be stayed. We shall "rest in the Lord," and "hide under the shadow of His wing." We shall find an abundant provision. Our Host is grandly "given to hospitality." As quaint John Trapp says, "There is not only fullness, but redundance." He giveth "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over!" On the Lord's table there is provision for everybody, and the nutriment is suited to each one's peculiar need.

The only time I have ever heard a sermon on this text was twenty years ago, when I heard Horatius Bonar proclaim its good news to a great company of blind people gathered from the many institutions and homes of the city of Edinburgh. "Thou preparest a table before me," a poor, burdened pilgrim, groping sightless through the ways of time! Aye, there was provision on the table for the blind! And for all of us there is a table prepared and arranged for our need. "In my Father's house there is bread enough and to spare." The desert is cold and weird; in the tent there is warmth and cheer The desert is the lurking-place of the enemy; in the tent is the glorious fellowship of God! "In the time of trouble He shall hide thee in His pavilion." "Knock, and it shall be opened unto you."

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me,

Let me hide myself in Thee."