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

**19. THE CENSER AND THE SACRIFICE by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips. Incline not my heart to any evil thing, to practise wicked works with men that work iniquity; and let me not eat of their dainties."*

*Psalm 141:2-4*

"LET my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. Set a watch, O Lord." How priestly is the entire exercise! Incense! Sacrifice! Supplication! When I had read the verse I rejoiced that I, too, was a priest unto God, and that in Christ Jesus we all have access to the same incomparable privilege and glory. "He hath made us kings and priests unto God." We can all swing the censer; we can all lay the sacrifice upon the altar; we can all engage in the marvellous ministry of intercession.

And then I read the words over again, and I observed the process and order of their thoughts, and I think I can discern in them the primary and all-essential elements in all personal communion with God. These are three in number, and their healthy order is prescribed for us, and it is because we forget or ignore one or two of the three that the fruitfulness of our communion is impoverished. When we draw near to our Lord, all three elements are required of us if our fellowship is to be fruitful, and if we are to return laden with the gifts and glories of the kingdom of grace; first, the incense, then the sacrifice, and then the intercession.

"Let my prayer be set before Thee as incense." The first thing we have to do when we come into the holy Presence is to swing our censer, and send the odour of our praise upwards to our Lord. The figure is taken from a very popular Eastern custom. Every Oriental is exceedingly partial to sweet odours. He always offers sweet perfume to those whom he delights to honour. In the olden times it was customary in India to scent the roads when the king went out. And what is the significance of the act? It is an acknowledgment of sovereignty, and a tribute of honour and praise. "Let my prayer be set forth as incense"! Let it be "set forth": that is to say, let it begin in adoration and thanksgiving! I think it would be well if sometimes we were to go into the presence of our King just to swing the censer and nothing more. A private praise-service would be an exceedingly efficient and memorable ministry. I remember that Thomas Carlyle, in a letter he wrote to a young friend, offered him this counsel: "Loyal subjects can approach the King's throne who have no requests to make there except that they may continue loyal." I think we may approach the King with just this act of glad obeisance and the pouring forth of the tribute of a grateful heart. We can begin with the incense. It is probable that the worshippers of our day are more inclined to neglect this than our fathers. With what magnificent thanksgivings they preluded their intercessions! Look at the vestibule of this grand hymnbook which ministers to our worship here. Mark the opening section of praise, and see how large is the portion which Dr. Dale has given to the subject of praise. And I think that the proportions of our hymnbook ought to pretty well represent the proportions of our devotion. What sort of vestibule has our private communion? What time do we give to the censer before the suppliant begins? William Law has this very pertinent word in his Devout Life: "When you begin your petitions use such various expressions of the attributes of God as may make you most sensible of the greatness and power of the Divine nature." And then William Law gives various examples, which, I am bound to say, would not be helpful to me, as they would imprison my spirit in a coat of mail. But I want to emphasise and commend the principle of it, which is, that our fellowship should begin with the primary elements of adoration and praise. "Let us come before His Presence with thanksgiving."

I do not think we sufficiently appreciate the effect of praise in the enrichment of our fellowship. The old monasteries used to arrange for relays of monks to be engaged in chanting ceaseless praise, and thereby keeping the entire community susceptible and sweet. The heart is always at its best when it is in the genial influence of praise. There is first of all the preliminary exercise of observing the amazing providences which crowd our ways; for the man who is to praise must become an expert at discernment. It is the man who sees the love-tokens of his Lord crowding about him who comes into His house "in the multitude of His mercies." If we have little or nothing for which to offer praise it is a clear proof that we have been making a most; infrequent use of the censer. Let us go into our life, let us ransack its provinces, let us look for the marks of the King's coming and goings, and we shall soon take up the censer. And then when we are in the atmosphere of praise we are one with the spirits of just men made perfect, for it is the atmosphere they breathe in the land of glory. So let us swing the censer:

"Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,

To His feet thy tribute bring,

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,

Who, like thee, His praise shall sing?

Praise Him, praise Him,

Praise the everlasting King."

And let "the lifting up of my hands be as the evening sacrifice." What is the lifting up of the hands to be like? As a sacrifice. That itself is almost startling. The lifting up of the hands has come to mean an act of supplication, a petition, but here the primary significance is the offering of something to God. It does not betoken a pleading, but a giving, not a request, but a sacrifice. It is like unto the lifting up of the hands of the Roman soldiers when they swore fealty to their emperor and lord. It is our sacramentum. It is our pledge. It is the yielding of ourselves to the Lord, for whose goodness we have just swung the censer.

Now our sacrifice must never be vague, and therefore meaningless. It is quite easy to sing, "Were the whole realm of nature mine," and to jubilantly proclaim what then would be our sacrifice. The whole realm of nature is not ours, and our responsibility begins and ends with what we have. And therefore we must not lose ourselves in vast professions which have no heart. We must bring the spirit of sacrifice into our present possessions, we must take these things into our hands and lift them up in willing surrender to the Lord. We must hold up our apparent trifles, and let them receive the King's seal. A halfpenny can bear the face and superscription of the king as well as a sovereign. "Let the lifting up of my hands be the sacrifice" of my soul! But even here we must not lose ourselves in a generality. Let us take our powers one by one; our reason, our conscience, our will, and all the manifold spiritual gifts of our God, and let us lay them all upon the altar of sacrifice. "Let the lifting up of my hands be the sacrifice" of my body. And here again, let the surrender be detailed and particular. Let us take our several limbs and members, and brand each one of them with the marks of the Lord Jesus. "Present your body a living sacrifice." And "let the lifting up of my hands be the sacrifice" of my possessions. Let us take the things that bring us comfort and delight and hold them up for the service of the King. There is a tribe in Central Africa which periodically brings its spears and clubs and bows and arrows, and puts them down at the feet of its chief. Then the whole tribe takes again those warlike implements and goes away to fight the battles of their lord. Such must be our way with all our gifts and all our powers. Let us, first of all, swing the incense of our praise, and then take all we are and all we have and lift up our hands in holy sacrifice.

And now, having swung the censer, and sent to heaven the odour of acceptable praise, and having erected the altar and offered to Heaven the sacrifice of our gifts, what remains for us to do? After these primary exercises the Psalmist feels himself justified in proceeding to the gracious ministry of supplication. And see where his petitions begin: "Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips." I do not wonder he begins there. He asks for the strength of silence. I say, I do not wonder, for he is a persecuted man, and the hardest of all things to a persecuted man is self-restraint. Indeed, it is the severest test of everybody, this controlling of the speech. The Psalmist begins with his cardinal weakness, he goes to the place where he most easily breaks down, he invokes the Divine help at the door of his lips. "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." And then he moves from speech to inclination. "Incline not my heart to any evil thing." He goes down among his biases, his leanings, his prejudices, and he prays that he may have an initial bearing toward goodness and virtue and truth. He prays that the elementary bias of his life may be on the side of God. He asks that when many courses are presented to him, he may instinctively lean to the worthiest and the excellent. He beseeches the Lord that he may have the right angle of vision, and that he may survey everything appreciatingly from the standpoint of the Almighty. He prays that his dispositions may be pure and true. And lastly his petition moves among his personal pleasures, and he prays for their purification and enrichment. Let me not "practise wicked works with men that work iniquity: and let me not eat of their dainties." Aye, that is our peril. When men threaten us we instinctively resist them, but when they offer us dainties we are more easily overcome. If they come to us with a sword we draw our sword in response. But when they come to tickle our palates we easily take the bait. And so the Psalmist prays that these things may never taste dainties at all. If our mouths are perfectly pure, then bitter things will never taste sweet. Our discrimination will be all right if our moral sense is in no wise impaired. And surely our prayer ought to be, "Lord, give me a clean mouth, that the bitter may taste bitter, and the sweet may taste sweet!" We require that re-palate that we may enjoy "the river of pleasures." We have got a long way in the Divine life when we appreciate the delicacies of the Lord's table, and find our sweetest things at the King's feast. We are well on the road to holiness when our mouth "is satisfied with these things."

Here, then, is the trend of the Psalmist's thoughts, beginning with speech, and passing through inclinations to his daily delights. And he moves to the larger trend of the Psalmist's communion with his Lord, beginning with the glad swinging of the censer of praise, and moving through the priestly act of sacrifice to the precious ministry of supplication.