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

**25. THE MINISTRY OF THE CLOUD by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"His pavilions round about Him were ... thick clouds of the skies."*

*Psalm 18:11*

*"The clouds drop down the dew."*

*Proverbs 3:20*

His pavilions are thick clouds! Then the cloud is not a destructive libertine, some stray, haphazard, lawless force, the grim parent of shadow and chill and tempest! "His pavilions are thick clouds." The clouds are the dwelling-places of God. He lives in them; He moves through them. He pervades them with the gentle ministries of grace and love. "The clouds drop down their dew." Then the clouds are more than shutters; they are springs. They do more than exclude the sunlight; they are the parents of the fertilising rains and the drenching mists and dews. It is something of a triumph when we have got thus far in our religious faith. In the early days it was believed that only the sunlight was the token and vehicle of our Lord's appearing. But here is a man with a larger and more comprehensive faith. Not only the sunlight, but the cloud also Is the minister of His purpose and will. It is lot only prosperity which glows with the seal of His favour; adversity also may be a proof of His grace. The cloud may hide the light; it does not destroy it. The cloud does not disprove the light; it is really the proof of the light. Without the warm and genial light there could be no cloud; the cloud is the creation of light. When, therefore, the cloud is forming, it means the sun is working. Raindrops can be traced to sunbeams. Love yearns to send a gentle rain, and so love prepares a cloud. So, the cloud is part of the answer to our prayer for dew. The sable vehicle carries a brilliant jewel. If, therefore, I have been asking my God for a softening, fertilising rain, I must not be discomfited by the appearance of a chilling and darkening cloud. If I have been asking for a drenching baptism of dew I must not lose my heart when there comes a confusing mist. I asked for rain; there came a cloud! I asked for dew; there came a mist!

A few years ago, we were asking the Lord to bless our nation; there came a chilling disappointment; the answer was in the cloud! We asked the Lord to save and bless our King; to enrich him with the continual dews of His Holy Spirit; and deep shadows came upon the palace; the answer was in the cloud. We asked the Lord to weld our people together in purer and more fruitful sympathy; and over the people there descended a common sorrow; the answer was in the cloud! We asked the Lord for Coronation blessings! And when all was ready, all was stayed! The pageant halted! Gun and bell and trumpet were silenced! The Coronation ceremonial was checked! a deep gloom ran over the glory. But our answer was in the cloud; the Coronation blessing was more richly given in awakened thought, in more elevated vision, in deepened intercession, in moral increment, and in the spiritual enrichment both of the Sovereign and the people. "The clouds drop the dew."

"Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,

The clouds ye so much dread

Are big with mercy, and shall break

With blessings on your head."

And so I have thought it might be calming and cheering if I thus direct your meditations to the ministry of the cloud. Have you ever noticed how many of the dispositions of the perfected life can only be richly gained in the baptism of shadow and tears? We are accustomed to speak of them as the fruits and flowers of the Spirit. I sometimes think we might be nearer the truth if we spoke of them as the ferns. Flowers are suggestive of the sunny glare; ferns are more significant of the moistened shade. And when I contemplate the dispositions which are the creations of the Spirit, I feel that for their perfect nourishing something is needed of moistness and of shade. Here is a short list of the beautiful things: "Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, temperance, faith." I say, I am more inclined to call them ferns than flowers! I don't think they would come to any luxuriant profusion and beauty if they were grown in the prolonged and cloudless glare! They need not only the upward calling of the light, but the feeding baptism of waters and the restfulness of the shade.

Here is an exquisite fern--"gentleness." Where will you find it growing in richest profusion? You will find it growing in the life that has known the shadow and the tear. There is no touch so tenderly gentle as the touch of the wounded hand. There is no speech so insinuatingly sympathetic as the speech of those who have been folded about by the garment of night. Gentleness is a fern, and it requires the ministry of the cloud. Here is another rare and beautiful fern--"long-suffering." How can you grow that in the "garish day"! You may as well plant out your ferns in the middle of the unprotected lawn, and let the fierce darts of light strike upon them through the long day, and expect to have a mass of broad, healthy, graceful fronds, as expect to find "long-suffering" flourishing where there is no shadow of trial, no chill of darkness and tears. "Long-suffering" is a fern, and it needs the ministry of the cloud. And is it otherwise with the ferns of "goodness" and "love"? How this love-fern expands when life passes into the shadow; when husband or child is laid low, how love puts on strength and beauty, whether the lover be peasant-wife or queen! When I remember these things, when I recall the purpose of all living, to make perfectly holy our dispositions, I do not wonder that, for the sake of the fern-like qualities of the spirit, we are sometimes taken out of the brightness of "the green pastures" into "the valley of the shadow," and are put under the gracious influence of the ministry of the cloud.

Now, I do not think we have any difficulty in perceiving the influence of the cloud in the individual life. Perhaps we may find its best expression in the familiar words of the Psalmist, "In my distress Thou hast enlarged me." Enlarged! It is a very spacious word, and includes the complementary meanings of broadening and enrichment. "In my cloud-experience Thou hast enriched me!" Some little languishing fern of tenderness or thoughtfulness has been revived by the ministry of the moistened shade. Is that an altogether unfamiliar experience? A man goes into the cloud rough and boorish, and full of domineering aggression, and he emerges from its ministry strangely softened and refined! He entered the cloud hard and dry as a pavement; he emerges with disposition suggestive of the fernery. "In my distress Thou hast enriched me!"

The cloud experience is the minister not only of enrichment, but of enlargement. It is in the cloud that men grow the fern of a spacious tolerance. Narrowness is transformed to breadth. I have known a man of very stern, severe, and rigid creed, who definitely relegated to damnation all who lived beyond its sharp and imprisoning fence; and I have met him again in after years, and I found that the barbed wire was down, and the field of his sympathy was immeasurably enlarged. "But that is not what you used to believe ten years ago?" "No, but many things have happened since then." Then I learned that he had been in the valley of the shadow! Adversity had wrapped him in its clammy embrace! He had become very familiar with the grave; the way to the cemetery was well worn by his accustomed feet; he had been under the tuition and ministry of the cloud, and in his distress he had been enlarged The clouds had dropped their dew! In the personal life, if it were not for the cloud we should become and remain dry and infertile as the Sahara; it is the providential cloud that calls forth the hidden growth, the sleeping ferns, and transforms the dust-heap into a thing of grace and beauty.

It is not otherwise with the ministry of the cloud in the sphere of the home. There is many a family which never realises its unity until it is enveloped in the folds of a chilling cloud. Health and luxury are too often divisive; sickness and sorrow are wondrous cements. Luxury nourishes a thoughtless individualism; adversity discovers hidden and profounder kinships. There is many a home, whose light has been as the glitter and the dazzle of a garish day; and the daughters of the house have been the creatures of levity and flippancy and of an endless trifling. And the cloud has come, and gloom has filled the house; the father is stricken, and adversity shows its famine-teeth at the door; and these flippant daughters awake from their luxurious sleep, and they put on moral strength and beauty like a robe. The family has found its unity in its distress. "We shall know each other better when the mists have rolled away!" Ah! but we sometimes never know each other until we meet together in the mist! It is in the common cloud that the family finds its kinship. It is in our sorrow that deep calleth unto deep, and our communion is revealed.

Is it otherwise in the larger life and family of the nations? Does the cloud-ministry exercise its influence in the State? Surely we may say that the common life of a people is deepened and enriched by the ministry of the shade. A people is not consolidated by common material interests and aims. It is not by free trade or by reciprocity that we shall forge the links of enduring fellowships. These ties are only skin-ties, and they are the subjects of skin disease. Juxtaposition is not fellowship. You may place men in a common schedule and yet not make them more akin. Men may march together without being agreed. We may revise our commercial relationships, and yet the springs of unity may not be touched. We shall never owe our deepened fellowship to the dazzle; we shall owe it to the shade. It is not the prosperous glare that makes us one. We fall apart in the noontide; we draw closer to each other in the night. It is in the national clouds and shadows, and in the nation's tears that you will find the forces of a true consolidation. It is not in the nation's shout, but in the nation's hush that the unifying forces are at work. There has been a marvellous growth in the mutual attachment of sovereign and people during the last twenty-five or thirty years. Has the cloud had any share in the enrichment? Even twenty-five years ago there was a broad republican sentiment prevalent in the nation. It was shared by some who now occupy exalted positions of state. In our own day it has weakened almost to the point of extinction. It is rarely, if ever, whispered in the broad plains of public life. How is the change to be explained? Instinctively we think of the late Queen's goodness, of her sane and healthy judgment, of her unfailing tact and discretion, of her single-minded devotion to her subjects' weal. And certainly all these were forces of integration, but having named them is the situation now explained? I confess to you that much as I esteemed Queen Victoria's mental and spiritual resources, it is not to her endowments but to her sorrows that I would point if I wished to find the primary causes of this deepened attachment and regard. I think her clouded experiences accomplished as much as her sovereign gifts, and that in the sharing of common sorrow monarch and people approached in ever deeper and richer communion. It was not by the passing of imperial pageants that the welding was effected, but by the so-often repeated passing of the funeral train as it made its sombre journey from the palace to the grave! No, not by the dazzling splendour of her sovereignty, but by the grey and sober ministry of the cloud, revealing the kindred humanness of monarch and people, and in its vital depths creating the mutual bonds of loving and reverent attachment.

The clouds, in their courses, have been the friends of the national life.