**THIRSTING FOR THE SPRINGS - SERMONS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**03. THE DEGENERACY OF A SOUL by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"Help, Lord; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men. They speak vanity every one with his neighbour: with flattering lips and with a double heart do they speak. The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things: Who have said, With our tongue will we prevail; our lips are our own: who is lord over us? For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the Lord; I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him. The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O Lord, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever. The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted."*

*Psalm 12*

"Help, Lord" This is the wailing supplication of a soul oppressed with the degeneracy of society. Disease has broken out in the body corporate. The commonwealth is rotting. Human fellowships are falling to pieces. Wickedness is triumphant, and the smothering contagion is imperilling the peace and vitality of the saints. "Help, Lord!" It is a cry for security amid an evil epidemic. It is an appeal for divine reinforcement amid prevalent collapse. It is the prayer of the individual, threatened by the engulfing floods of moral and spiritual degeneracy.

This Psalm marks off the steps of social degradation. The steps of transition are clearly indicated. We can see the progressive descents from the worship of God to the exaltation of vileness. Sense after sense is benumbed; nerve after nerve is atrophied; perception after perception is impaired; until the entire body of human relationships, which was intended by God to be the home of all manner of refined and delicate sympathies, becomes a mass of hard and callous selfishness, in which all the ties of rarer communion are destroyed.

I do not propose to regard these stages of decline in their relationship to society, but in their relationship to the individual. Society only reflects the individual man. What we find in the one, we may translate into the other. Let us then regard the passage as a vivid description of the degeneracy of a soul. At the one extreme we have the worship of God; at the other extreme we have the exaltation of wickedness. What is the first stage in this appalling decline? Where does the decay begin?

**The decay of the sense of reverence.** "The godly man ceaseth." The beginning of degeneracy is to lose touch with God. We lose our touch of God when we cease to "feel after Him." It is the effort to feel, that preserves the sensitive touch. The intense effort to discern a thing through the finger tips gives the blind almost a new sense, and the intense striving to feel God, endows the soul with the powers of fine apprehension. It is here that so many of us fail in the attainment of a lofty spirituality. We only exercise ourselves in "feeling," in the crisis and emergencies of life, and as these are only of rare occurrence, our exercisings are infrequent. Men who are to become spiritual experts in apprehending God, must feel after Him through the common places of the ordinary day. They must feel after Him in their daily bread, in the humble duty, in lowly affection, in the little ministries of the obscure way. They must feel after Him in prayer, in aspiration, in meditation. They must "practise the presence of God," that in the persistent groping after Him, they may attain unto a sensitiveness of touch that perceives Him everywhere. If we give up the practice, if we only feel after Him in the great contingency, in the hour of sorrow, in the shadow of bereavement, in the heavy disappointment, and if we are indolent and sluggish in the long level road of the commonplace, we shall lose our touch of God, and shall inevitably become ungodly.

**The decay of the sense of honour.** " Faithfulness faileth from among the children of men." "Faithfulness faileth"; the dependableness of character is impaired. When reverence is benumbed, trustfulness is broken. When men lose the sense of the august, they lose the sense of the honourable. They do not fulfil their promise. They are no longer what Martin Luther called "the Amen folk"; they do not support their speech by the strong steady buttress of their life. They become insincere. And note how the insincerity blossoms where all character reveals itself, upon the lips. "They speak vanity everyone with his neighbour" Their conversation is full of emptinesses, trivialities, nothings. When the eternal goes out of life, speech is not preserved in its greatness. The little life spends and exhausts itself in little topics. "With flattering lip and with a double heart do they speak." Not only is the subject matter of speech belittled, but the speech itself is perverted, and rendered insincere. With the loss of reverence men lose the sense of the sacredness of words. Flattery is usually associated with its still more diseased companion, duplicity. It was a quaint saying of an old Puritan that "Flattery is the sign of the Inn of which Duplicity is the host." The flatterer speaks with a double heart. He has one heart for your face, and another for behind your back. One for the Church, and another for the market. His nerve of honour is no longer finely sensitive, and is either dying or dead.

**The decay of the sense of responsibility.** "Our lips are our own, who is lord over us?" The decay of reverence leads to the perversion of honour; the perversion of honour destroys the sense of responsibility. Men become self-centred, and therefore blinded. They see their own desires, but they do not recognise their brother's rights. Their own appetites bulk large, but they have no vision of their brother's needs. They see their possessions; they do not recognise the responsibility of possessions. "Our lips are our own, who is lord over us?" How much more beautiful it were to say, "My lips are my own, but for the service of my brother! What can I say to help him? What message can I take to comfort him? What song can I sing to cheer him? My hands are my own, but for the service of my brother! How can I use them to enrich him? What letter can I write to encourage him? What gift can I take to inspire him? My feet are my own, but for the use of my brother! What errand can I run to serve him? What journey can I take to save him? "Such is the responsible use of possessions. When reverence is alert, and honour is active, my brother stands revealed in the clearest light, and the sense of responsibility is creative of manifold ministries for his good.

**The decay of the sense of humanity.** "The spoiling of the poor, the sighing of the needy." Where irresponsibility reigns, cruelty abounds. When men lose the sense of fellowship with their brethren, they tramp through life regard less of the cries of those whom they may crush beneath their heel. The birth of cruelty synchronises with the death of reverence. Cruelty will never lurk where reverence dwells. The saints are the very homes of kindliness, therefore am I comforted with the words, "The saints shall judge the earth." There will be no harshness and no severity in that judgment. Masters are never cruel where they revere their servants. Husbands can never be unkind when there is reverence for the wife. But when reverence is gone, and honour is impaired, and responsibility is dead, the sense of humanity withers away and men become as hard as flint.

**The decay of the sense of right.** " Vileness is exalted." This is the last stage in the appalling degradation. Evil at length becomes man's God. He enthrones it, pays homage to it, finds all his delight in it. He no longer knows it to be evil. He has lost his moral discernment. The talent has been taken away. He calls good evil and evil good. He calls the sweet bitter and the bitter sweet. He wallows in wickedness and loves it, and the kingdom of sin has become the realm of his delights. "My soul, come not thou into his secret!" Such then is the darkening path of degeneracy. A soul loses its reverence for God, and at last pays willing homage to the devil. From irreverence and through unfaithfulness and irresponsibleness and inhumanity, the soul descends to the absolute worship of vice.

How can we be saved from this perilous decline? First of all let this be said: The wish to be saved is the beginning of salvation. "Exercise thyself unto godliness." Exercise thyself in feeling, and thou shalt become an expert in touching. Everywhere and at all times be reaching out for God. Feel for Him in thy pleasures, in thy pains, in thy failures, in thy conquests, in thy noontides, and in thy midnights. Pray for Him everywhere ; "pray without ceasing," and thy little life shall be filled with the presence of the divine, girding it with power, and making it fragrant with the delightful perfumes of grace. How can I be assured of this? "We have God's own promise, and that cannot fail." He will "keep" us ; He will hedge us about in strong defence. He will "preserve" us ; He will give us sustenance, even the very bread of life. "Hath He not promised, and shall He not do it?" The good Lord is dependable. He is better than His word, and "the words of the Lord are pure words, as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, purified seven times."