

Light at Evening Time

A Sermon

(No. 160)

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at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens.

“It shall come to pass that at evening time it shall be light.”—[Zechariah 14:7](#).

I SHALL NOT stay to notice the particular occasion upon which these words were uttered, or to discover the time to which they more especially refer; I shall rather take the sentence as a rule of the kingdom, as one of the great laws of God’s dispensation of grace, “that at evening time it shall be light.” Whenever philosophers wish to establish a general law, they think it necessary to collect a considerable number of individual instances; these being put together, they then infer from them a general rule. Happily, this need not be done with regard to God. We have no need, when we look abroad in providence, to collect a great number of incidents, and then from them infer the truth; for since God is immutable, one act of his grace is enough to teach us the rule of his conduct. Now, I find in this one place it is recorded that on a certain occasion, during a certain adverse condition of a nation, God promised that “at evening time it should be light.” If I found that in any human writing, I should suppose that the thing might have occurred once, that a blessing was conferred in emergency on a certain occasion, but I could not from it deduce a rule; but when I find this written in the book of God, that on a certain occasion when it was evening time with his people God was pleased to give them light, I feel myself more than justified in deducing from it the rule, that always to his people at evening time there shall be light.

This, then, shall be the subject of my present discourse. There are different evening times that happen to the church and to God’s people, and as a rule we may rest quite certain that at evening time there shall be light.

God very frequently acts in grace in such a manner that we can find a parallel in nature. For instance, God says, “As the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, even so shall my word be, it shall not return unto me void, it shall accomplish that which I please, it shall prosper in the thing whereto I have sent it.” We find him speaking concerning the coming of Christ, “He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass, as showers that water the earth.” We find him liking the covenant of grace to the covenant which he made with Noah concerning the seasons, and with man concerning the different revolutions of the year—“Seed-time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.” We find that the works of creation are very frequently the mirror of the works of grace, and that we can draw figures from the world of Nature to illustrate the great acts of God in the world of his grace toward his people. But

sometimes God oversteps nature. In nature after evening time there cometh night. The sun hath had its hours of journeying; the fiery steeds are weary; they must rest. Lo, they descend the azure steeps and plunge their burning fetlocks in the western sea, while night in her ebon chariot follows at their heels. God, however, oversteps the rule of nature. He is pleased to send to his people times when the eye of reason expects to see no more day, but fears that the glorious landscape of God's mercies will be shrouded in the darkness of his forgetfulness. But instead thereof God overleapeth nature, and declares that at evening time instead of darkness there shall be light.

It is now my business to illustrate this general rule by different particulars. I shall dwell most largely upon the last, that being the principal object of my sermon this morning.

I. To begin, then, "At evening time it shall be light." The first illustration we take from *the history of the church at large*. The church at large has had many evening-times. If I might derive a figure to describe her history from anything in this lower world, I should describe her as being like a sea. At times the abundance of grace has been gloriously manifest. Wave upon wave has triumphantly rolled in upon the land, covering the mire of sin, and claiming the earth for the Lord of Hosts. So rapid has been its progress that its course could scarce be obstructed by the rocks of sin and vice. Complete conquest seemed to be foretold by the continual spread of the truth. The happy church thought that the day of her ultimate triumph had certainly arrived, so potent was her word by her ministers, so glorious was the Lord in the midst of her armies, that nothing could stand against her. She was "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners." Heresies and schisms were swept away, false gods and idols lost their thrones; Jehovah Omnipotent was in the midst of his church, and he upon the white horse rode forth conquering and to conquer. Before long, however, if you read history, you find it always has happened that there came an ebb-tide. Again the stream of grace seemed to recede, the poor church was driven back either by persecution or by internal decay; instead of gaining upon man's corruptions it seemed as if man's corruptions gained on her; and where once there had been righteousness like the waves of the sea, there was the black mud and mire of the filthiness of mankind. Mournful tunes the church had to sing, when by the rivers of Babylon she sat down and wept, remembering her former glories, and weeping her present desolation. So has it always been—progressing, retrograding, standing still awhile, and then progressing once more, and falling back again. The whole history of the church has been a history of onward marches, and then of quick retreats—a history which I believe is, on the whole, a history of advance and growth, but which read chapter by chapter, is a mixture of success and repulse, conquest and discouragement. And so I think it will be even to the last. We shall have our sunrises, our meridian noon, and then the sinking in the west; we shall have our sweet dawns of better days, our Reformations, our Luthers and our Calvins; we shall have our bright full noon-tide, when the gospel is fully preached, and the power of God is known; shall have our sunset

of ecclesiastical weakness and decay. But just as sure as the evening-tide seems to be drawing over the church, "at evening time it shall be light." Mark well that truth all through the sacred history of the church. In the day when every lamp of prophesy seemed to have ceased, when he who once thundered in the streets of Rome was burned at the stake and strangled; when Savonarola had departed, and his followers had been put to confusion, and the black clouds of Popery seemed to have quenched the sunlight of God's love and grace upon the world; in those dark dim ages when the gospel seemed to have died out, no doubt Satan whispered in himself, "The church's sunset is now come." It is evening time with her. Only a few rays are struggling from the sun of righteousness to cheer the darkness. Satan thought mayhap the world should lie for ever beneath the darkness of his dragon wing. But lo! at evening time it was light. God brought forth the solitary monk that shook the world; he raised up men to be his coadjutors and helpers; the sun rose in Germany; it shone in every land, nor have we ever had an even-tide so near to darkness since that auspicious time. Yet there have been other seasons of dark foreboding. There was a time when the church of England was sound asleep, when the various bodies of Dissenters were quite as bad, when religion degenerated into a dead formality, when no life and no power could be found in any pulpit throughout the land, but when an earnest man was so rare that he was almost a miracle. Good men stood over the ruins of our Zion, and said, "Alas, alas, for the slain of the daughter of my people! Where, where are the days of the mighty puritans who with the banner of the truth in their hand crushed a lie beneath their feet? O truth! thou hast departed; thou hast died." "No," says God, "it is evening time; and now it shall be light." There were six young men at Oxford who met together to pray those six young men were expelled for being too godly; they went abroad throughout our land, and the little leaven leavened the whole lump. Whitfield, Wesley, and their immediate successors flashed o'er the Land like lightning, in a dark night, making all men wonder whence they came and who they were; and working so great a work, that both in and out of the Establishment, the gospel came to be preached with power and vigor. At evening time God has always been pleased to send light to his church.

We may expect to see darker evening times than have ever been beheld. Let us not imagine that our civilization shall be more enduring than any other that has gone before it, unless the Lord shall preserve it. It may be that the suggestion will be realized which has so often been laughed at as folly, that one day men should sit upon the broken arches of London Bridge, and marvel at the civilization that has departed, just as men walk over the mounds of Nimroud, and marvel at cities buried there. It is just possible that all the civilization of this country may die out in blackest night; it may be that God will repeat again the great story which has been so often told—"I looked, and lo, in the vision I saw a great and terrible beast, and it ruled the nations, but lo, it passed away and was not." But if ever such things should be—if the world ever should have to return to barbarism and darkness—if instead

of what we sometimes hope for, a constant progress to the brightest day, all our hopes should be blasted, let us rest quite satisfied that “at evening time there shall be light,” that the ends of the worlds history shall be an end of glory. However red with blood, however black with sin the world may yet be, she shall one day be as pure and perfect as when she was created. The day shall come when this poor planet shall find herself unrobed of those swaddling bands of darkness that have kept her luster from breaking forth. God shall yet cause his name to be known from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof,

“And the shouts of jubilee,
Loud as mighty thunders roar,
Or the fullness of the sea,
When it breaks upon the shore,
Shall yet be heard the wide World o’er.”
“At evening time it shall be light.”

II. This rule holds equally good *in the little*, as well as *in the great*. We know that in nature the very same law that rules the atom, governs also the starry orbs.

“The very law that molds a tear,
And bids it trickle from its source,
That law preserves the earth a sphere,
And guides the planets in their course.”

It is even so with the laws of grace. “At evening time it shall be light” to the church; “at evening time it shall be light” *to every individual*. Christian let us descend to lowly things. Thou hast had thy bright days *in temporal matters*: thou hast sometimes been greatly blessed: thou canst remember the day when the calf was in the stall, when the olive yielded its fruit, and the fig-tree did not deny its harvest; thou canst recollect the years when the barn was almost bursting with the corn, and when the vat overflowed with the oil; thou rememberest when the stream of thy life was deep, and thy ship floated softly on, without one disturbing billow of trouble to molest it. Thou saidst in those days, “I shall see no sorrow; God hath hedged me about; he hath preserved me; he hath kept me; I am the darling of his providence; I know that all things work together for my good, for I can see it is plainly so.” Well, Christian, thou hast after that had a sunset; the sun which shone so brightly, began to cast his rays in a more oblique manner every moment, until at last the shadows were long, for the sun was setting, and the clouds began to gather; and though the light of God’s countenance tinged those clouds with glory, yet it was waxing dark. Then troubles lowered o’er thee; thy family sickened, thy wife was dead, thy crops were meager, and thy daily income was diminished, thy cupboard was no more full, thou wast wondering for thy daily bread; thou didst not know what should become of thee, mayhap thou wast brought very low; the keel of thy vessel did grate upon the rocks; there was not enough of bounty to float thy ship above the rocks of poverty. “I sink in deep mire,” thou saidst, “where there is no standing; all thy waves

and thy billows have gone over me.” What to do you could not tell; strive as you might, your strivings did but make you worse. “Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.” You used both industry and economy, and you added “hereunto perseverance; but all in vain. It was in vain that you rose up early, and sat up late, and ate the bread of carefulness; nothing could you do to deliver yourself, for all attempts failed. You were ready to die in despair. You thought the night of your life had gathered with eternal blackness. You would not live always, but had rather depart from this vale of tears. Christian! bear witness to the truth of the maxim of the text! Was it not light with thee at evening time? The time of thine extremity was just the moment of Godly opportunity. When the tide had run out to its very furthest, then it began to turn; thine ebb had its flow; thy winter had its summer; thy sunset had its sunrise; “at evening time it was light.” On a sudden by some strange work of God, as thou didst think it then, thou wast completely delivered. He brought out thy righteousness like the light, and thy glory as the noon-day. The Lord appeared for thee in the days of old: he stretched out his hand from above; he drew thee out of deep waters; he set thee upon a rock and established thy goings. Mark, thou then, O heir of heaven! what hath been true to thee in the years that are past, shall be true to thee even till the last. Art thou this day exercised with woe, and care, and misery? Be of good cheer! In thine “evening time it shall be light.” If God chooseth to prolong thy sorrow, he shall multiply thy patience; but the rather, it may be, he will bring thee into the deeps, and thence will he lead thee up again. Remember thy Saviour descended that he might ascend: so must thou also stoop to conquer; and if God bids thee stoop, should it be to the very lowest hell, remember, if he bade thee stoop, he will bring thee up again. Remember what Jonah said—“Out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest me.” Oh! exclaim with him of old, who trusted his God when he had nothing else to trust: “Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.” Do thou so, and be blessed; for “at evening time it shall be light.”

III. But now we seek a third illustration from *the spiritual sorrows of God’s own people*. Godly children have two kinds of trials, trials temporal and trials spiritual. I shall be brief on this point, and shall borrow an illustration from good John Bunyan. You remember John Bunyan’s description of Apollyon meeting Christian. Bunyan tells it figuratively, but it is no figure: he that hath ever met Apollyon will tell you that there is no mistake about the matter, but that there is a dread reality in it. Our Christian met Apollyon when he was in the valley of humiliation, and the dragon did most fiercely beset him; with fiery darts he sought to destroy him, and take away his life. The brave Christian stood to him with all his might, and used his sword and shield right manfully, till his shield became studded with a forest of darts, and his hand did cleave unto his sword. You remember how for many an

hour that man and that dragon fought together, till at last the dragon gave Christian a horrible fall, and down he went upon the ground; and woe worth the day! at the moment when he fell he dropped his sword! You have but to picture the scene: the dragon drawing up all his might, planting his foot upon Christian's neck, and about to hurl the fiery dart into his heart. "Aha! I have thee now," saith he, "thou art in my power." Strange to say, "at evening time it was light." At the very moment when the dragon's foot was enough to crush the very life out of poor Christian, it is said, he did stretch out his hand; he grasped his sword, and giving a desperate thrust at the dragon, he cried, "Rejoice not over me, O mine enemy; for when I fall I shall arise again;" and so desperately did he cut the dragon that he spread his wings and flew away and Christian went on his journey rejoicing in his victory. Now, the Christian understands all that! it is no dream to him. He has been under the dragon's foot many a time. Ah! and all the world put on a man's heart at once is not equal in weight to one foot of the devil. When Satan once gets the upper hand of the spirit, he neither wants strength, nor will, nor malice, to torment it. Hard is that man's lot, that has fallen beneath the hoof of the evil one in his fight with him. But blessed be God, the child of God is ever safe, as safe beneath the dragon's foot as he shall be before the throne of God in heaven. "At evening time it shall be light." And let all the powers of earth and hell, and all the doubts and fears that the Christian ever knew, conspire together to molest a saint, in that darkest moment, lo, God shall arise and his enemies shall be scattered, and he shall get unto himself the victory. O for faith to believe that. O! for confidence in God never to doubt him, but in the darkest moment of our sorrows, still to feel all is well with us. "At evening time it shall be light."

IV. Bear with me whilst I just hint at one more particular, and then I will come to that upon which I intend to dwell mainly at the last. To *the sinner when coming to Christ* this is also a truth. "At evening time it shall be light." Very often when I am sitting to see inquirers, persons have come to me to tell me the story of their spiritual history; and they tell me their little tale with an air of the greatest possible wonder, and ask me as soon as they have told it whether it is not extremely strange. "Do you know, sir, I used to be so happy in the things of the world, but conviction entered into my heart, and I began to seek the Saviour; and do you know that for a long time, sir, when I was seeking the Saviour I was so miserable that I could not bear myself? Surely sir, this is a strange thing." And when I have looked them in the face, and said, "No, it is not strange; do you know I have had a dozen to-night, and they have all told me the same; that is the way all God's people go to heaven," they have stared at me as if they did not think I would tell them an untruth, but as if they thought it the strangest thing in all the world that anybody else should have felt as they have felt. "Now, sit down," I say sometimes, "and I will tell you what were my feelings when I first sought the Saviour." "Why, sir," they say, "that is just how I felt; but I did not think any one ever went the same path that I have gone." Ah! well, it is no wonder that when we hold little acquaintance with each other in spiritual things our path should seem to be solitary; but he

who knows much of the dealings of God with poor seeking sinners, will know that their experience is always very much alike, and you can generally tell one by another, while they are coming to Christ. Now, whenever the soul is truly seeking Christ it will have to seek him in the dark. When poor Lot ran out of Sodom, he had to run all the way in the twilight. The sun did not rise upon him until he got into Zoar. And so when sinners are running from their sins to the Saviour they have to run in the dark. They get no comfort and no peace, till they are enabled by simple faith to look for all to him who died upon the cross. I have in my presence this morning many poor souls under great distress. Poor heart! my text is a comfort to thee. "At evening time it shall be light." You had a little light once, the light of morality; you thought you could do something for yourself. That is all put out now. Then you had another light: you had the wax taper of ceremonies, and you thought full sure that it would light you; but that is all out now. Still you thought you could grope your way a little by the remaining twilight of your good works, but all that seems to have gone now. You think "God will utterly destroy such a wretch as I am! O sir! O sir!

'I the chief of sinners am.'"

There never lived a wretch so vile; or if there ever lived such an one, surely God must have cast him into hell at once; I am certain there is no hope for me. Why, sir, do what I may, I can not make myself any better. When I try to pray I find I can't pray as I should like; when I read the Bible it is all black against me; it is no use, when I go to the house of God the minister seems to be like Moses, only preaching the law to me—he never seems to have a word of comfort to my soul. Well, I am glad of it, poor heart, I am glad of it; far be it from me to rejoice in thy miseries as such, but I am glad thou art where thou art. I remember what the Countess of Huntingdon once said to Mr. Whitfield's brother. Mr. Whitfield's brother was under great distress of mind, and one day when sitting at tea, talking of spiritual things, he said, "Your ladyship, I know I am lost, I am certain I am!" Well, they talked to him, and they tried to rally him; but he persisted in it, that he was absolutely undone, that he was a lost man. Her ladyship clapped her hands, and said, "I am glad of it, Mr. Whitfield, I'm glad of it." He thought it was a cruel thing for her to say. He knew better when she explained herself by saying, "For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost; so then, he came to seek and to save you. Now, if there be any here who are lost, I can only say, I am glad of it too, for such the mighty Shepherd came to rescue. If there are any of you who feel that you are condemned by God's law, I thank God you are; for those who are condemned by the law in their consciences shall yet be pardoned by the gospel.

"Come, guilty souls, and flee away
To Christ, and heal your wounds;
This is the glorious gospel day,
Wherein free grace abounds."

Nay, this very hour, when you have no day in your heart, when you think the evening time has come, and you must perish for ever—now is the time when God will reveal himself to you. Whilst thou hast a rag of thine own thou shalt never have Christ; whilst thou hast a farthing of thine own righteousness, thou shalt never have him; but when thou art nothing, Christ is thine; when thou hast nothing of thyself to trust to, Jesus Christ in the gospel is thy complete saviour; he bids me tell thee he came to seek and to save such as thou art.

V. And now I am about to close, dwelling rather more largely upon the last particular—“At evening time it shall be light.” If our sun do not go down ere it be noon, we may all of us expect to have an evening time of life. Either we shall be taken from this world by death, or else, if God should spare us, ere long we shall get to the evening of life. In a few more years, the sere and yellow leaf will be the fit companion of every man and every woman. Is there anything melancholy in that? I think not. The time of old age, with all its infirmities, seems to me to be a time of peculiar blessedness and privilege to the Christian. To the worldly sinner, whose zest for pleasure has been removed by the debility of his powers and the decay of his strength, old age must be a season of tedium and pain; but to the veteran soldier of the cross, old age must assuredly be a time of great joy and blessedness. I was thinking the other evening, whilst riding in a delightful country, how like to evening time old age is. The sun of hot care has gone down; that sun which shone upon that early piety of ours, which had not much depth of root, and which scorched it so that it died—that sun which scorched our next true godliness, and often made it well nigh wither, and would have withered it had it not been planted by the rivers of water—that sun is now set. The good old man has no particular care now in all the world. He says to business, to the hum and noise and strife of the age in which he lives, “Thou art nought to me; to make my calling and election sure, to hold firmly this my confidence, and wait until my change comes, this is all my employment; with all your worldly pleasures and cares I have no connection.” The toil of his life is all done, he has no more now to be sweating and toiling, as he had in his youth and manhood; his family have grown up, and are now no more dependent upon him; it may be, God has blessed him, and he has sufficient for the wants of his old age, or it may be that in some rustic alms-house he breathes out the last few years of his existence. How calm and quiet! Like the laborer, who, when he returns from the field at evening time casts himself upon his couch, so does the old man rest from his labors. And at evening time we gather into families, the fire is kindled, the curtains are drawn, and we sit around the family fire, to think no more of the things of the great rumbling world; and even so in old age, the family and not the world are the engrossing topic.

Did you ever notice how venerable grandsires, when they write a letter, fill it full of intelligence concerning their children? “John is ill,” “Mary is well,” “all our family are in health.” Very likely some business friend writes to say “Stocks are down,” or, “the rate of interest is raised,” but you never find *that* in any good old man’s letters; he writes about his

family, his lately married daughters, and all that. Just what we do at evening time; we only think of the family circle and forget the world. That is what the gray-headed old man does. He thinks of his children, and forgets all beside. Well, then, how sweet it is to think that for such an old man there is light in the darkness! "At evening time it shall be light." Dread not thy days of weariness, dread not thine hours of decay, O soldier of the cross; new lights shall burn when the old lights are quenched; new candles shall be lit when the lamps of life are dim. Fear not! The night of thy decay may be coming on, but "at evening time it shall be light." At evening time the Christian has many lights that he never had before; lit by the Holy Spirit and shining by his light. There is the light of bright experience. He can look back, and he can raise his Ebenezer, saying, "Hither, by thy help I've come." He can look back at his old Bible, the light of his youth, and he can say, "This promise has been proved to me, this covenant has been proved true. I have thumbed my Bible many a year; I have never yet thumbed a broken promise. The promises have all been kept to me; 'not one good thing has failed.'" And then, if he has served God he has another light to cheer him: he has the light of the remembrance of what good God has enabled him to do. Some of his spiritual children come in and talk of times when God blessed his conversation to their souls. He looks upon his children, and his children's children, rising up to call the Redeemer blessed; at evening time he has a light. But at the last the night comes in real earnest; he has lived long enough, and he must die. The old man is on his bed; the sun is going down, and he has no more light. "Throw up the windows, let me look for the last time into the open sky," says the old man. The sun has gone down; I can not see the mountains yonder; they are all a mass of mist; my eyes are dim, and the world is dim too. Suddenly a light shoots across his face, and he cries, "O daughter! daughter, here! I can see another sun rising. Did you not tell me that the sun went down just now? Lo, I see another; and where those hills used to be in the landscape, those hills that were lost in the darkness, daughter, I can see hills that seem like burning brass; and methinks upon that summit I can see a city bright as jasper. Yes, and I see a gate opening, and spirits coming forth. What is that they say? O they sing! they sing! Is this death?" And ere he has asked the question, he hath gone where he needs not to answer it, for death is all unknown. Yes, he has passed the gates of pearl; his feet are on the streets of gold; his head is bedecked with a crown of immortality; the palm-branch of eternal victory is in his hand. God hath accepted him in the beloved.

"Far from the world of grief and sin,
With God eternally shut in,"

he is numbered with the saints in light, and the promise is fulfilled, "At evening time it shall be light."

And now, my gray-headed hearer, will it be so with thee? I remember the venerable Mr. Jay once in Cambridge, when preaching, reaching out his hand to an old man who sat just as some of you are sitting there, and saying, "I wonder whether those gray hairs are a crown

of glory, or a fool's cap; they are one or else the other." For a man to be unconverted at the age to which some of you have attained is indeed to have a fool's cap made of gray hairs; but if you have a heart consecrated to Christ, to be his children now, with the full belief that you shall be his for ever, is to have a crown of glory upon your brows.

And now, young men and maidens, we shall soon be old. In a little time our youthful frame shall totter; we shall need a staff by-and-by. Years are short things; they seem to us to get shorter, as each one of them runs o'er our head. My brother, thou art young as I am; say, hast thou a hope that thine even-tide shall be light? No, thou hast begun in drunkenness; and the drunkard's eventide is darkness made more dark, and after it damnation. No, young man; thou hast begun thy life with profanity, and the swearer's even-tide hath no light, except the lurid flame of hell. Beware thou of such an even-tide as that! No; thou hast begun in gayety; take care lest that which begins in gayety ends in eternal sadness. Would God ye had all begun with Christ! Would that ye would choose wisdom; for "her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace." Some religious men are miserable; but religion does not make them so. True religion is a happy thing. I never knew what the hearty laugh and what the happy face meant, till I knew Christ; but knowing him I trust I can live in this world like one who is not of it, but who is happy in it. Keeping my eye upward to the Saviour, I can say with David, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name." and bless him most of all for this, that I know how to bless him. Ah! and if ye in your prime, in the days of your youth, have been enabled by the Holy Spirit to consecrate yourselves to God, you will, when you come to the end, look back with some degree of sorrow upon your infirmities, but with a far greater degree of joy upon the grace which began with you in childhood, which preserved you in manhood, which matured you for your old age, and which at last gathered you like a shock of corn fully ripe into the garner. May the great God and Master bless these words to us each, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

CAUTION.

A spurious and very incorrect edition of Mr. Spurgeon's Sermons having appeared, persons regularly purchasing the "New Park Street Pulpit" are cautioned against purchasing any Sermons without the heading "New Park Street Pulpit," which is the only authorized edition.