

## **A LIGHT THAT SHINETH IN A DARK PLACE**

Light is sweet to the eyes. This is true in all senses. There are various kinds of light, as there are various kinds of darkness. When we are young, the most oppressive form of darkness is the natural darkness of the night when the sun has set. When we are old, it is another form of darkness that distresses us the most—the darkness caused by God’s averted face and man’s unloving and unholy ways—the darkness that broods everywhere in the prevalence of pain and death. We can mitigate the natural darkness of night by artificial light, and have comfortable times round the pleasant fire. The other darkness that covers all the earth finds its only alleviation in the Bible.

It has been well said that the Bible is lit up from the beginning to end. We find it to be really so when we become acquainted with it. Wherever we dip into it, we find ourselves in the presence of light and comfort. Our methodical reading keeps us in continual contact with it. The light does not shine for the haphazard or the casual reader. The Bible is so constituted that it requires constant faithful familiarity to make visible and available the light that is in it. To this kind of familiarity, light yields itself everywhere—even in parts where to the uninitiated there seems none. Let us see the illustration afforded of this in the readings of today. The first does not seem very promising. The narrative of Esther, consummate in construction and diction, does not even mention the name of God. What light can there be here? Let us see. The narrative concerns the Jews, God’s nation, at a moment of extreme peril. A decree had been obtained for their extermination—not a part of them, but the whole. The decree applied to the Persian empire, and the Persian empire practically meant the whole world. Its execution would have meant the destruction of the entire Jewish race. The catastrophe it is, and the mode of its prevention, that contains light for us. That God was not in the process, it is impossible to suppose; for God had said to Israel,

*“Though I make a full end of all the nations among whom I have scattered thee, yet will I not make a full end of thee.”*

Here a “full end” was threatened. Consequently, its prevention was a divine necessity. How was it brought about? In a perfectly natural way. The hand of God was not visible in any part of the transaction. A quarrel between Artaxerxes and his queen leads her to be put away. The selection of a successor falls upon a Jewish maiden. She is to be used in obtaining the repeal of the decree; but in order to predispose the king in favour of the Jewish race, a plot against the king’s life is discovered by her Jewish uncle, Mordecai, whose friendly part is recorded in the court chronicles, and brought vividly to the king’s notice through his having had a sleepless night which he seeks to beguile in the reading of the chronicles. Then comes Esther’s invitation of the king to a banquet at which she makes a petition for the repeal of the decree against the Jews, and the king’s hearty granting of the same, to the great joy and deliverance of the Jewish race everywhere. In all this there is nothing but what is perfectly natural on the surface, yet by means of these perfectly natural circumstances a divine result was accomplished, as has been celebrated by the Jewish race in all the centuries since in the feast of Purim.

Now the light here for us lies in a direction where we are most liable to feel in the darkness. We live in a time when there is no visible interference of God in the affairs of men; and we are liable to feel as if God has nothing to do with our affairs. It is truly written that if we *“commit our way unto the Lord, he shall direct our steps;”* that *“a good man’s steps are ordered of the Lord;”* and that *“all things work together for good for them who love God and are called according to His purpose.”* But it would seem as if our circumstances did not correspond with these statements. If we gave in to the impressions of natural experience, we should conclude there was no element of divine guidance in our life—all is so intensely dark—so perfectly natural.

There is nothing in our life on which we can put a finger and say “This is divine,” as contrasted with something that is human. We have no burning bush; no dry fleece; no angelic visit. Without instruction, we might suppose that therefore there is no god in our life—no guidance to our steps. In this, we should make a great and demoralising mistake. Here is where the Esther narrative comes to our aid. God may direct a line of circumstances apparently natural entirely throughout. Our inability to detect His participation is no proof that His hand is not there. It will not follow that His hand is in any particular set of circumstances. It is only in certain cases where His guidance takes part.

It all depends upon whether they stand related to His purpose. The point lies here, that our circumstances being natural does not mean that they are not also divine. We stand related to the purpose of God if we are children of God, and we are children of God if we are obedient believers of the Truth in the love and life thereof. It is therefore no presumption for us to believe that in the dreary lives of our probation, our affairs, though not apparently, are really guided to those issues of life which God has appointed, and in the realisation of which we must utterly fail if left to ourselves. It is not in man that liveth to direct his steps.

We get light of another kind in our reading from Amos. It is sometimes the enquiry of unbelief how it can be that God ever did anything in the earth, seeing He is inactive now; how can it be that the Jews are God's nation seeing they are scattered; how Jerusalem can ever have been the dwelling place of His name, seeing it is down-trodden. Those who put those questions sum them all up in a further, and, as they think, decisive question. If there was a revelation, why is there none now? Why is God silent? Why are things all dark? If we do not understand these questions, they would necessarily distress us. This chapter in Amos gives us the understanding. Here we have the very state of things which now exists foretold, and the reason of it explained. The reason is placed first. It is introduced under a figure. Amos is shown an object, and asked what he sees. Amos answers, "*A basket of summer fruit.*" What can that signify? Ripeness—shortlivedness—perishability. How was this applied? To the people of Israel.

*"Then said the Lord unto me, the end has come upon my people of Israel; I will not again pass them by any more."*

Had they been passed by before? Yes, often. God had long forborne with their wickedness; He would now do so no more. He would bring judgment as foreshown by Moses at the beginning. "*In that day,*" continues the Word of God by Amos, "*the songs of the temple shall be howlings; there shall be many dead bodies in every place; they shall cast them forth with silence.*" How terribly this was fulfilled we have recently had occasion to realise in the recital of things testified by Josephus in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem—piles of corpses on all the highways, vast numbers daily thrown over the city walls, till they formed a mass of putrefaction that compelled the Romans to remove their camp to a distance; the temple enclosure, usually a place of singing, crammed with a shrieking multitude towards the close of the siege. The occurrence of such things, so far from discrediting the Word of God, has the opposite meaning, did the objectors but understand. Jesus himself had foretold these things—"*great distress in the land and wrath upon this people*"—Jerusalem given up to captivity and the sword—her place down-trodden. If Jerusalem were not trodden down; if the Jews were not scattered; if the Gentile powers were not in the ascendant—if things were not just as we see them, then might the scoffer ask with some effect, why is this? The very things that he stumbles at are the strong foundations of faith. So also with the absence of active revelation, the truth of God's Word requires it. Amos throws light on this otherwise dark point also. God by him foretells the cessation of that to which Israel had been accustomed, and of which we have the written form,

*"Behold the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread nor a thirst of water but 'of hearing the words of the Lord.' And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to 'seek the word of the Lord,' and shall not find it" (Amos 8:11-12),*

or as it is expressed in Micah 3:6,

*"Therefore (because of iniquity) night shall be unto you that 'ye shall not have a vision' and it shall be dark unto you, that ye shall not divine; and the sun shall 'go down over the prophets, and the day shall be dark over them.' Then shall the seers be ashamed and the diviners confounded; yea, they shall all cover their lips; for there is no answer of God."*

In view of these predictions, what can we say to the absence of revelation now but just the reverse of what unbelief would suggest. The very fact that there is now no revelation is evidence of there having been a revelation once, for had the past revelation been merely a human performance, it would have perpetuated itself like all other human accomplishments. Further, had it been merely a human performance, how can we imagine it predicting its own discontinuance? For in that case, it could neither know nor desire such a consummation. If it were not divine revelation, it must have been human imposture, and what account could be given of a human imposture predicting its own cessation? What object could be served? What motive suggested? And lastly, what explanation could

there be of the fact that the prophecy has come true? Revelation is the one thing not found on the earth except in the Bible. Men who have the opportunity, wander far and wide (the late Mr. Oliphant did) to find it, but in vain. There is no answer from God. This, in one way is distressing, and gives unbelief the opportunity for cavil, but it is as it ought to be. If revelation were a current phenomenon it would be inconsistent with the prophecy before us. The darkness is dreary and the divine silence difficult to endure; but a discernment of these things will help us. The eclipse is only transient. The same word that foretells the cessation foretells also the resumption of divine communication; and on a far larger and more glorious scale:

*"I have long time holden my peace; I have been still and refrained myself. . . Yet now hear, O Jacob, my servant . . . I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground. I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring."*

*"He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when He shall hear it, He will answer thee. And though the Lord (for a time—even now) give the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers, and thine ears shall hear a word behind thee saying, this is the way: walk ye in it . . . in the day that the Lord bindeth up the breach of His people and healeth the stroke of their wound."*

*"Neither will I hide My face any more from them; for I have poured out My Spirit upon the house of Israel, saith the Lord God."*

*"The Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee."*

*"The glory of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea."*

*"The Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended."*

Thus, we have but to wait to see a very glorious sequel to the present dark phase of God's dealings with Israel. It is not without fulness of meaning that it is written:

*"They shall not be ashamed that wait for me."*

Joy and honour and gladness will attend the resumption of revelation in the earth, for those who may have been enabled faithfully to wait through the present time of drouth and famine. It is that we may be so enabled that it is profitable to review these things as they present themselves from time to time in our readings . . . They strengthen the mind in this attitude as nothing else can, unless it be the good hand of God upon us in response to that prayer without ceasing which comes to be the characteristic habit of the new man.

Our third reading brings us the same light in another form. There is always light in the apostolic writings. We have not to seek for it: no windows to open—no veils to lift. It shines out upon us bright and full, even in such a letter as Paul to Philemon, even in the very first verse, where we have Paul *"a prisoner,"* and *"a prisoner of Jesus Christ."* Here at once is Paul's life, and the meaning thereof projected in a sentence before us—a life devoted to the preaching of Christ, and a life that brought persecution—in which, when logically worked out, we have the strongest guarantee of the truth of what Peter says, that he and the apostles did not follow *"cunningly devised fables, when they made known the things concerning Christ."* They were matters of actual fact and sober truth, the resurrection of Christ a matter of personal witness—out of which comes *"The Light,"* that waits in the future—the light of the glory of God, which when exhibited symbolically, becomes a city having *"light like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal."* This is the light that lights up our forward horizon (like the aurora borealis rays), with the glory of the dazzling sun, not yet risen. Apart from the resurrection of Christ, which gives us the pledge of his coming again, there is no light on the horizon at all, but the darkness of mystery and despair. But the horizon cannot in true knowledge be contemplated apart from Christ, for true knowledge embraces the work of the apostles which has its only explanation in the purpose of god already partly accomplished: and with that part accomplishment, giving pledge of what remains—even the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in power and great glory to take to himself *"the kingdoms of this world,"* and fill the earth with glory for ever. To all this we have become related by the very gospel that Paul preached—whose work, in a sense not very indirect, all Gentile believers of this century are, in the Lord. Related thus to the resurrection of Christ by faith, we are also related to his present existence in heaven, for being raised he lives for ever, with *"all power in heaven and earth"* centred in his hand—the work of developing

the community that are to be his everlasting associates in the coming perfect day. This is a work, could we but know the details, of special interest to Christ. Paul in one place describes the upshot of the work thus:

*“That he might present it (the ecclesia) to himself a glorious ecclesia, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish.”*

To this end, he now makes intercession in his capacity as High Priest, without which we could have but poor hope—nay, not any. To this end, as his Apocalyptic messages to the ecclesias show, he guides and regulates the affairs of his brethren that by various means—sometimes the heavy hand of correction (Rev. 3:19)—they may be brought into harmony with his mind. The guidance, though invisible, is none the less real, so that we can heartily join in the words of Paul’s enquiry:

*“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.”*

The result of the guidance is at last very glorious. We will see it only in *“The general assembly and ecclesia of the firstborn,”* surrounded with that *“innumerable company of angels”* of which Paul speaks in Heb. 12. Think of it, that every man admitted to that assembly is *“without fault before the throne of God”*—iniquity forgiven, nature perfected, blemishes removed. Think of it, that not a flaw will disfigure—not a weakness mar a single member of that glorified assembly—all of them *“jewels”*—so described by God Himself—*“made up”*—in splendid cluster and setting for His royal use in that glorious day. Then only will the truly *“finished work of Christ”* be manifest, and its greatness be seen. It is being done in detail now, in the preparation of the sons of God. It is a work to which Christ is accessory. It is greatly an individual work—each in the separateness and privacy of his own case, getting tried and polished—sometimes in darkness and friction, sometimes the sharp rasp of the file, sometimes the smart blow of the hammer. The process is often painful; sometimes the alleviations of love and light are permitted, but ever forward it goes to that final attainment when the heart, weaned from all carnal things, and fully opened and quickened to the high and mighty and the subtle things of God, is prepared as a *“polished stone most precious”* for use in the heavenly city.

We bring our three beams of light to a focus. Esther tells us that God may be at work in the circumstances of daily life when He appears to take no part. Amos shows to us that the very chaos that now prevails with all divine things on the earth at the present moment is part of the truth and reality of these things, and that any other state, such as the unbeliever mockingly suggests, would be inconsistent with their true character. And finally Philemon reveals to us that in the midst of the chaos, a divine constructive work is going, by means of the Word of the truth of the gospel, supplemented by the Lord’s own providential control, which out of the darkness is providing the materials for glorious light. With such clear and guiding light, it remains for us to walk as children of the light, in all faith and goodness and truth, waiting, in the patient performance of the will of God, for that promised day of gladness which will surely come, and which, when it comes, will never pass away, but shine on for ever in ever-varying, ever-progressing forms of well-being to the glory of God and the joy of all His ransomed sons and daughters.

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