

GOD'S STRANGE WAY OF TEACHING HIS LOVINGKINDNESS

Sermon preached by Mr. D.G. Crowter on Sunday morning
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"Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the
lovingkindness of the Lord."
Psalm 107 v.43.

Most of the mistakes which are made in personal religion are really due to ignorance - comparative ignorance of two persons. That applies to us all.

One of those persons is oneself. We tend to have much too high opinions of ourselves. Because of our native pride, self-confidence and self-righteousness we have very inflated views of ourselves, and what we can manage and what we can do. We may sing verses like that in the hymn:

"Needy, and naked, and unclean,
Empty of good, and full of ill,
A lifeless lump of loathsome sin,
Without the power to act or will."

But if someone else was to say half as much about us we might feel deeply resentful that anyone else should say such things as that. I remember the case of one church member (who should never have done such a thing) making a severe attack upon an elderly deacon. The members thought that afterwards this deacon would stand up and defend himself. But instead he simply rose and said, "What he said is all true, and the half has not been told." But how rare is such a spirit of humility and meekness! If we only had the right view of ourselves continually before us, many of our difficulties would disappear.

The other Person of whom we are comparatively ignorant is the Lord Jesus Christ. How we do need to learn of Him! And how we may feel that it is but little that we really know concerning Him.

There are various reasons for a lack of this knowledge. One is the immensity of the subject. We can never altogether know the wonder, the excellencies, of the Person of Jesus Christ; for He is the very Son of God, of infinite Majesty and glory and love.

Another reason is the mystery concerning His Person. We see Him in the Word. We see evidently His manhood, His human weakness and weariness; and how hard is it to realise that this Person is also Almighty God. We tend to under-estimate Him, and to have too low views of His glorious character.

Another reason is the special nature of that knowledge that we need - that revealed knowledge, that spiritual knowledge that we so need concerning the Saviour. We tend too easily to think that we do know Him, when our knowledge may only be in our heads and may be only a natural knowledge of Him. The apostle Paul says, "If any man thinketh that he knoweth anything (in these respects), he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know." If anyone thinks he has mastered any of these spiritual subjects, then he is deceived and he doesn't really know them at all. If he did know anything he would realise how little he knew, and how much more there was to know. This is very special knowledge. It is that knowledge that the Holy Spirit teaches, and nothing else.

Another reason why we learn so slowly is because of the difficulty of our circumstances and surroundings. It is hard to learn, when everything around us is opposed to that

knowledge. We live in a material and a materialistic world, which is altogether opposed to the true knowledge of Christ. Now in such conditions it is hard to learn in natural things. We know that during the last year or so at school it has been extremely difficult in many places for the children to learn, because the conditions have been altogether against it. In such circumstances a very special determination is needed if we are to attain to real knowledge. That is how the apostle Paul spoke when he said, "I determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

The final reason that I will mention is perhaps the most serious one of all. One reason why we know so little of the Saviour is because we often have not that desire and diligence in seeking after it. There is surely a lack often of that whole-hearted and constant resolve that the Apostle had. We do not sufficiently seek and desire that knowledge with all our hearts. And thus it is that we come so short with regard to these things. If we only knew ourselves better, and if we only knew the Saviour far better, then these spiritual difficulties and problems would be so far resolved. We do need that knowledge.

Now it is rather because of this ignorance, that the Lord often takes drastic measures with His children. They must learn. And because they do not learn what we might call the easy way, they often have to learn the hard way. They are brought into the difficulties, perplexities and dangers that are described in this Psalm for these very purposes, as this verse declares - that they might understand and learn the lovingkindness of the Lord. We might say that we are surrounded by evidence of His lovingkindness. In our daily life there is so much plain evidence of the Lord's goodness and of His lovingkindness towards His children. Yet how often we can become very careless and indifferent with regard to these things, until we are plunged into some great distress, and something makes us different. We so often need these severe ways in which the Lord brings His people to this wonderful end and conclusion - that they might "observe these things and understand the lovingkindness of the Lord."

So the subject really before us here is GOD'S STRANGE WAY OF TEACHING HIS REDEEMED HIS LOVINGKINDNESS. This is clearly the way which is brought before us in this verse. The Lord has this special way of bringing His people to know these things personally. For this observation is not so much somebody looking from a distance and surveying other people's troubles and sorrows, and what happens with regard to them. It is so much a matter of personal experience. These things are learnt so often in the cauldron, when you yourself are in the middle of this particular circumstance and you know in this deeply personal way what these experiences are. That is so often the way to learn. And even then we may be very slow in learning. The Psalmist does not say, "All these people will understand the lovingkindness of the Lord." He writes a very distinguishing word and says, "Whoso is wise" - this particular person, this one who stands out from the multitude. "Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the lovingkindness of the Lord." I well remember my late dear father, in his last protracted illness, saying to me with much feeling, "How solemn it would be if I were to come out of all this just the same!" And how we do need the Lord so to deal with us in these experiences as to transform our characters, to conform us to the likeness of the Saviour Himself, and to

reveal to us more of the great wonder of His lovingkindness.

Now the Psalmist looks at this matter from two aspect. The first is from an earthly viewpoint. In that way he draws four rapid, vivid sketches, or word-pictures, concerning these different experiences of the redeemed.

There is first the case of the wanderers in the wilderness. There they are, and they get very lost, wandering about with no city anywhere to find any comfort or refuge in. And because they are in that case they become very short of food and drink. They are hungry and thirsty as well as lost. Then at last they cry to the Lord, and He answers them. He wonderfully leads them by the right way and brings them to a city where they can find that sustenance that they need, that rest and shelter and provision that will save their lives.

Secondly there is the matter of the chained prisoners in darkness. You might notice that this condition and the following one are clearly ascribed to the sins of those who are in that situation. But the first and the last of these pictures does not indicate that at all. Some of our troubles we bring on our own heads; but some do not come for any particular reason, or any particular sin of our own. There is that distinction. Well, this second case of the prisoners in darkness and in the shadow of death is again a very doleful one. And the Lord has regard to them, even in that low condition. And when they cry to Him He hears them, and breaks their bonds, and brings them out of that dark and dismal prison, and sets them at liberty.

Then in the third case there are the sick in suffering, those who are so ill that they do not want anything to eat. Probably we have all to some extent come into that condition at some time. In that place they draw near to the gates of death. Then at last they cry to the Lord, and He wonderfully delivers them, sends His Word and heals them, and raises them up again.

And the fourth case is that of the sailors in the storm. That tempest suddenly arises, and the sailors are tossed up and down by the waves. They do everything they can to right the ship. Of course in those days, things were much more difficult in that respect, in those times of sailing vessels. But it seems, like Paul in that wind Euroclydon, all hope of being saved is lost; the storm is so violent. Then they cry to the Lord and He saves them. He makes that storm a calm, and brings them into a quiet, peaceful haven.

And so we have these four different instances - four very different cases. In each one of them those involved are facing imminent death. There is this familiar cycle in each case. There is first great peril; next there is the earnest cry in that time of need; then there is the Lord's miraculous deliverance in answer to their prayer; and lastly there is this call for praise and thanksgiving to God on that account. And the way that the Psalmist phrases that call does surely indicate that there is so often a sad shortfall with regard to this. He does not say that these people praise the Lord for His goodness and for His wonderful works. He rather says, "O that they would!" Is it not sadly true that we are more ready to cry to the Lord for help in our trouble, than we are to give thanks and render praise when He delivers? That is something we may sadly forget. So the Psalmist said, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits." And here he says, "O that men would praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to

the children of men." O that they would! With the angels of God, who are constantly praising the Lord for His wonderful works and His goodness, may it not be an amazing thing that there should be such a meagre return of praise and thanksgiving to God from this world? Surely it must be passing strange to the angels who observe these things, that there is so little praise and thanksgiving rendered to God.

Now my friends, do you know these experiences? There is of course a literal meaning to these things. There can be no doubt that the Israelites from time to time, and especially as they were brought out of captivity, did pass through experiences just of these kinds. And surely we all know at least something of some of them. I expect you have all been lost and haven't known which way to take. You have probably been to some extent hungry and thirsty. You have probably been unwell, and not felt like eating anything. You may have been shut up somewhere, probably not in a prison, but somewhere where you could not get out. You may well have been in a storm, if not actually on the sea; surely we have all been caught in sudden storms and felt some danger from them.

Well, these are literal circumstances in life, and the Lord does so graciously hear and answer those who cry to Him. This is very plain and very marked here. How rapidly the one follows the other, in this tremendous urgent need. They cry, and God answers. "Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble and He answered them out of their distresses." The one follows the other, as day follows night. The Lord does constantly answer prayer. Not always, of course, is an answer needed so quickly. The Lord often waits to answer prayer; but there are those instances where He answers at once, when there is such an urgent need.

But of course with regard to this there is a deeper spiritual meaning. And on similar occasions to these we see how Jesus Himself performed wonderful works of similar kinds. The calming of the tempest surely reminds us of the way in which He stood on the boat on the sea of Galilee and rebuked the winds and the waves, and immediately there was a great calm. How soon the disciples were safe in the haven. And we know how He wonderfully healed those that were sick, and how He gave sight to the blind, to bring them out of darkness and that kind of captivity that they were in. But often with respect to these things the Lord indicated that there was a spiritual counterpart, that in these experiences of natural things, there is constantly a reminder and almost a replica of those things which are spiritual. That lies below the surface here, and is really the most important part of it. There are those storms that arise with regard to our souls; there are storms of temptation and trouble with regard to spiritual things. There is that spiritual sickness to which we are subject with regard to our souls. Sin is a kind of leprosy and it affects and infects us so evilly. And so with regard to all these things. The Psalmist says in another place, "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy name. You may feel at times that your soul, as it were, is in prison; that it is shut up and cannot come forth. There are these spiritual experiences which lie parallel to these natural events. For those we do need the Lord's mighty deliverance by His grace. And what a wonder that is, that there is not only the counterpart of the trouble, but also the counterpart of the deliverance. Whether it is in natural or in spiritual things, our best course is to cry unto God in our trouble, and to know that He will surely hear if we do really cry to Him.

His ear is open to "the poor and the needy when he crieth". He heareth them, "the poor also and him that hath no helper." These people were brought in a natural way into deep straits. They were facing apparently certain death; and then the Lord so wonderfully delivered them.

Well that is really one aspect of this subject. Up to about verse thirty-two there are these four different, wonderfully-drawn pictures of human experience. Then there is the heavenly view of these things. It is as though the Lord says to His servant (as He said to John in the Revelation) "Come up higher; view these things as from a higher vantage point". John in the Revelation had seen the condition of the churches on earth and how they were troubled in various ways. Then the Lord said, "Come up higher". A door was opened in heaven and John saw these things from the heavenly view-point. And from that point in the Psalm, onwards, we read of how the sovereign Lord is working out His purposes, how the things on earth are governed from heaven. We are shown that all these events, which may seem very strange and very perplexing and very troublesome, are ruled and over-ruled by the Lord on high. We see that He is "mightier than the voice of many waters"; that He is in control of these things, of all things. So there we read, "He turneth the wilderness into a standing water"; "He maketh the hungry to dwell there"; "He blesseth them also;" "He poureth contempt on princes", and "He setteth the poor on high from affliction", and so on. It is He that is doing all these things. The emphasis here is on the Lord Himself, and on His absolute control, and His sovereign purposes, with regard to all these things that are taking place.

And what remarkable changes He brings about! The wilderness becomes a standing water, and the dry ground water-springs. And exactly the reverse also happens according to His own sovereign will. And we read of the way that He deals with men in judgement on account of their sins. My friends, how we need to see this point of view as well! Nebuchadnezzar, that great emperor, was brought to realise this in a very solemn and a very remarkable experience. And it was said to him that this occurred "that he might understand that the most High ruleth amongst the children of men", that He gives them the kingdoms according to His will. Or as it is also put there, "that you might know that the heavens do rule." The Word of God teaches very plainly that "the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth;" that all these things, however strange they may seem, all the matters in our lives, are under His supreme and sovereign rule. When we forget that, and look to second causes, it is no wonder that we come into all sorts of difficulty and trouble. There is not only the earthly view of these very human experiences; but there is the heavenly view of the sovereign Lord who rules from on high, and controls all things by His power, and performs all things according to His counsel. So we must remember this part as well. The Psalmist introduces that passage before he comes to his wonderful conclusion here. All these things are to be observed; not only the earthly experiences, but also the heavenly rule of the Lord Himself. And thus that is the strange and wonderful way in which the Lord so often teaches His people His lovingkindness. We do need to observe these things, if we are to know the lovingkindness of the Lord. To know that, O it is such an invaluable prize to set our hearts upon! And it is no wonder if we should come through

some very deep waters, and some very trying and testing experiences before we learn the lovingkindness of the Lord. But that is absolutely priceless.

Well, my friends, surely we must make some enquiry with regard to this. Clearly this is the way in which the Lord often brings His people. For the most part they are not constantly in these daunting experiences. They are not always in these very trying and difficult circumstances; but they are sometimes. They are brought into them, and they are brought out of them again. But they pass through these things especially so that they should understand the lovingkindness of the Lord. In the middle of the storm that might have seemed quite impossible - that there should be seen lovingkindness in those terrifying conditions. But in the end it is all so different.

Now, my dear friends, do you know these experiences? Especially we must look at that from the spiritual side. Do you know what these cases are in your own heart's experiences before God? To be emptied out; to be brought so low that there is none to help, none that can help you but God Himself. And then what do you do? Even you who are very young have your troubles. They may seem little to those who are older, but they may be very great to you. And that is really what matters with regard to them. If they are great troubles to you, then that is really what they are - they are great. And do you cry to the Lord in your troubles? Is there that faith in your heart which prompts you to do that? It does seem that in each of these cases the cry was rather late. It seems in every instance that only when the people had been brought down to their extremity, did they cry unto the Lord. It would be wise for us to cry much earlier in our needs. But so often it is in the depths of trouble that this real, earnest cry arises to God.

Well, do you come into these places? Have you been here? Do you know what these things mean? Some of us certainly do. They are so exactly described; they are so perfectly delineated by the master-hand of the inspired Psalmist. They are really masterly pictures of human experience.

Well, my friends, let us also consider as to what fruit there is out of these things. What comes out? Is there any real effect, any real spiritual benefit and fruit from being in these places? One effect that is so desired and is in fact promised, is that knowledge which we so greatly need. There is the knowledge of ourselves - of how helpless, and sinful, and weak we really are. We often need to be brought so low to realise what our spiritual condition really is.

"Afflictions make us see,
What else would 'scape our sight;
How very foul and dim are we,
And God how pure and bright."

Also, my dear friends, the lovingkindness of the Lord is plainly to be traced in these things. If we were always to be like children paddling safely in the warm, shallow waters at the ocean's edge, we might learn very little of what goes on in the deep. It is "those that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters", that "see the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep." Would you want to be always in the shallows, with everything easy and comfortable? How much greater are the wonders of God, even naturally, seen in the deep! Is there any knowledge of the Lord's wonderful

lovingkindness? Because really this is all in love. Samuel Rutherford, when he was imprisoned for the Lord's sake for so long, wrote such things out of his prison as this. At first he could only see the 'black' side of the Lord's cross, the cross that the Lord had laid upon him. But after a while he was brought to see the 'white' side. Then he realised that it was all love; it was all in love that this had been laid upon him. And those who are brought through these deep trials and these testing experiences are brought to see that that is so, that it is really all love from beginning to end.

"Trials must and will befall;
But with humble faith to see
Love inscribed upon them all,
This is happiness to me."

Much better, much better, dear friends, to be brought into these experiences, with all the sorrow and anguish that they may bring, so as to be brought out to see and to understand something of the lovingkindness of the Lord. Have you seen it?

Then there is also this repeated call to praise. Praise should also come out of these experiences. Surely if any should praise God, the redeemed of the Lord should do so - those who are brought out of these dark and difficult places, out of these places of such distress and danger. To be brought out and not to praise God - how sad that would be! We read that Hezekiah said, after he had been in sore sickness and facing death just like those in this Psalm, "The living, the living shall praise Thee as I do this day". He also wrote, "By these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit; so wilt Thou recover me and make me to live." But even so, although his praises are plainly recorded in that passage, it is also said that "he rendered not again to the Lord according to the benefit done unto him." There was some praise, certainly; clearly he did praise God at the time and it is very plainly recorded; but it also says that it was "not according to the benefit". And is that not often sadly so? Jesus healed ten lepers. As they went away, as He had told them, they were healed. And one came back and returned to give thanks to Him. And Jesus said, "Were there not ten cleansed. But where are the nine? They are not found that returned to give thanks to God except this Samaritan." Only one out of ten came back to give thanks to God! Is not that sadly human? Is not that the way we so tend to be, all of us? "O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good: for His mercy endureth for ever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so." "Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men."

"Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise."

May the Lord help us to praise Him more, and not to forget His many benefit.

Amen.