

The Ministry of the Night

If God has singled you out to be a special object of His grace you may expect Him to honor you with stricter discipline and greater suffering than less favored ones are called upon to endure.

And right here let me anticipate the objection someone is sure to raise, viz., That God has no "specials" among his children. The Holy Scriptures and Christian history agree to show that he has. Star differs from star in glory among the saints on earth as well as among the glorified in heaven. Without question the differences exist; but whether they are by the decree of God or by His foreknowledge of the degree of receptivity He will find among His children I am not prepared to say with certainty, though I would lean strongly to the latter view.

If God sets out to make you an unusual Christian He is not likely to be as gentle as he is usually pictured by the popular teachers. A sculptor does not use a manicure set to reduce the rude, unshapely marble to a thing of beauty. The saw, the hammer and the chisel are cruel tools, but without them the rough stone must remain forever formless and unbeautiful.

To do His supreme work of grace within you He will take from your heart everything you love most. Everything you trust in will go from you. Piles of ashes will lie where your most precious treasures used to be.

This is not to teach the sanctifying power of poverty. If to be poor made men holy every tramp on a park bench would be a saint. But God knows the secret of removing things from our hearts while they still remain to us. What he does is to restrain us from enjoying them. He lets us have them but makes us psychologically unable to let our hearts go out to them. Thus they are useful without being harmful.

All this God will accomplish at the expense of the common pleasures that have up to that time supported your life and made it zestful. Now under the careful treatment of the Holy Spirit your life may become dry, tasteless and to some degree a burden to you. While in this state you will exist by a kind of blind will to live, you will find none of the inward sweetness you had enjoyed before. The smile of God for the time will be withdrawn, or at least hidden from your eyes. Then you will learn what faith is; you will find out the hard way, but the only way open to you, that true faith lies in the will, that the joy unspeakable of which the apostle speaks is not itself faith but a slow-ripening fruit of faith; and you will learn that present spiritual joys may come and go as they will without altering your spiritual status or in any way affecting your position as a true child of the Heavenly Father.

And you will also learn, probably to your astonishment, that it is possible to live in all good conscience before God and men and still feel nothing of the "peace and joy" you hear talked about so much by immature Christians. How long you continue in this night of the soul will depend upon a number of factors, some of which you may be able later to identify; while

others will remain with God, completely hidden from you. The words "The day is thine, the night also is thine" will now be interpreted for you by the best of all teachers, the Holy Spirit; and you will know by personal experience what a blessed thing is the ministry of the night.

But there is a limit to man's ability to live without joy. Even Christ could endure the cross only because of the joy set before Him. The strongest steel breaks if kept too long under unrelieved tension. God knows exactly how much pressure each one of us can take. He knows how long we can endure the night, so he gives the soul relief, first by welcome glimpses of the morning star and then by the fuller light that harbingers the morning.

Slowly you will discover God's love in your suffering. Your heart will begin to approve the whole thing. You will learn from yourself what all the schools in the world could not teach you—the healing action of faith without supporting pleasure. You will feel and understand the ministry of the night, its power to purify, to detach, to humble, to destroy the fear of death and, what is more important to you at the moment, the fear of life. And you will learn that sometimes pain can do what even joy cannot, such as exposing the vanity of earth's trifles and filling your heart with longing for the peace of heaven.

What I write here is in no way original. This has been discovered anew by each generation of Christian seekers and is almost a cliché of the deeper life. Yet it needs to be said to this generation of believers often and with emphasis, for the type of Christianity now in vogue does not include anything as serious and as difficult as this. The quest of the modern Christian is likely to be for peace of mind and spiritual joy, with a good degree of material prosperity thrown in as an external proof of the divine favor.

Some will understand this, however, even if the number is relatively small, and they will constitute the hard core of practicing saints so badly needed at this hour if serious New Testament Christianity is to survive to the next generation.

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