

The Valley of Vision

DR. PAUL S. REES

"It is a day of trouble, and of treading down, and of perplexity by the Lord God of hosts in the valley of vision."

Twice in five verses Isaiah uses this arresting phrase, "the valley of vision." If he had said "the mountain of vision," he would be easily understood. To be sure, the heights have their value as vantage points of beauty and of inspiration. Their advantages, however, have been sung over and over. Perhaps it is time we gave the valleys their inning. Perhaps they are not so visionless and cheerless as we have feared.

That life does have its valley experiences—even the life of conquering Christian faith—is obvious enough to all of us. We have been there ourselves. Our friends have been there. What is important about those experiences is not the depth of the valley or the length of it, but what we saw while we were trudging through it. Were we dejected and dull and visionless, or did we, like the Psalmist, lift up our eyes unto the hills? Did we discover, in some fresh and forceful fashion, that "our help cometh from the Lord?"

I

Take, for example, *the valley of our commonplace*, everyday living. In the valley of the humdrum we need to see the God who hallows all of life. But so many of us do not. The unglamorous becomes our undoing. We buckle under it. We sag—and lose our song. Cooking meals, swinging a hammer, operating a lathe—so it goes monotonously. It is the daily grind, and if there are any overtones of sweet music, our ears are deaf to them.

In the 24th chapter of Exodus there is a fragment of a verse that recently caught my eye. It is said of the children of Israel, on this particular occasion, that "they saw God, and did eat and drink." We would have written it some other way, would we not? We would have said, "They saw God, and did march off on some heroic mission." No, "They saw God," and instead of despising such ordinary necessities as eating and drinking, they looked upon those necessities with glory-touched eyes, and with clean hands they took hold of them as of things hallowed. In the light of the vision of the Eternal, even eating and drinking became a sacrament.

II

Or, consider *the valley of sorrow*, with which, certainly, we are all more or less acquainted. In the valley of suffering we need to see the God who sustains all of His children. The man of God who wrote our text knew the language of pain. "It is a day of trouble," he cries. He knew too that the reverses of life, whether of nations or of individuals, often have a bewildering effect. *It is a day of perplexity*," he confesses, meaning, I take it, the confusion of the pride-blinded leaders and people rather than any confusion in his own thinking.

Isaiah was with his people in the valley of their troubles, but they were not with him. They were, in fact, blinded both to the troubles that threatened them and to the Eternal God who was seeking to get their attention. A powerful enemy was about to descend upon them. And what were the people of Jerusalem doing? They were mocking their own fate by giving themselves to careless revelry. "Thou art full of stirs," says the prophet, "a tumultuous city, a joyous city." Then he adds, "Thy slain men are not slain with the sword, nor dead in battle." The prophet sees the city as undergoing a siege rather than a bom-

bardment. Privation and starvation will soon stalk Jerusalem's streets. No one, to speak of, believes it. No one wants to be dubbed a "crepe-hanger." So on they go, blind and frivolous as fools.

Now when trouble comes upon us there are just about three choices that are open to us: we may sneer it, sulk it, or sanctify it. If we take the first course, our aim will be to "get away from it all." The trip may be a long one, to a distant place; or it may be a short one, to the nearest tavern or a needle in the arm. If we take the second course, our spirit will simply corrode with bitterness. If we take the third way, the way of sanctifying our troubles and converting them into useful servants of the spiritual life, we shall have to open our eyes and look for God. The valley must have vision in it or it will be too dark for us.

Not many days ago I was calling in a hospital in a neighboring city. I was there to render what meager service I could to members of a dear Christian family who were passing through the deep waters of trouble. In one room was the husband, a gallant man of affairs whose simple faith in Christ was sustaining him during the last hours of his mortal pilgrimage. In another room was his devoted wife, not at all solicitous about her own disability but full of concern for him. In still another room lay a daughter-in-law, ill with pneumonia. The next day death made its quiet, resistless call at that husband's bedside. You will agree that for her who was left behind it was a deep valley of sorrow into which she was suddenly ushered. Very well, just listen to this, which I quote from a letter she wrote to me only a week ago:

"I seem to be living in two worlds, much more in the other than in this. I love to think of the joys he is experiencing. How I should love to be there to share them with him. I find myself eagerly looking forward to Christ's coming." My dear friends, there can't be any mistake about it, can there? For that bereft and sorrowing child of our compassionate God the valley has become a place of vision: the glory of the heights has poured down to dispel the gloom of the depths. So it should be, and so, thank God, it can be, with all of us whose trust is in the redeeming, comforting God of Jesus Christ our Lord.

III

There is still another direction in which I want to apply the truth of our text. Let me state the case in this way: In *the valley of world distress* we need to see the God who delivers all men who put their trust in Him.

What the prophet saw from his valley of vision was a picture drawn to a small scale. It was Jerusalem and Palestine. Yet everything he says about the tragic prospect that confronted him can be literally applied to the world scene today. Check it for yourself. Item one: "It is a day of trouble." Does anyone question that for sheer unalleviated trouble this planet has never known a period quite equal to the one through which it is now staggering?

Item two: "It is a day . . . of treading down." Does anyone dare to deny that oppression, exploitation, sullenness, and despair are over the face of the earth like some hideous pall.

Item three: "It is a day . . . of perplexity." What else but confusion tumbles about in the mind of the common man when none of our leaders seems to know how to meet the staggering issues of this crucial post-war world?

Item four: "It is a day of breaking down the walls, and of crying to the mountains." "Breaking down ('undermining,' some translators have it) the walls!" Will anyone dispute the claim that this is an accurate description of what is taking place in so many of the major areas in today's world?

All these features of his day were clearly seen by the prophet. They should be seen with equal clarity by God's sharp-eyed watchers of today. Helen Keller, at the close of an address one evening, gave her listeners an opportunity to ask her questions. One of the younger members of the group said, perhaps unthinkingly, "Miss Keller, isn't it awful to be blind?" Like a flash she replied, "Not half so bad as to have two good eyes and see nothing."

What we really see in this hour of the world's trembling and tragedy is of the utmost importance. Do we make a place of vision out of this international valley through which we are passing? Do we see Christian possibilities wrapped up even in these stark tragedies of human-kind?

Says Dr. John R. Mott: "200 millions of people lie down every night hungry in body. 1000 millions lie down without God, without Jesus Christ." Do we see that?

Ah, yes, these are valley days on this bomb-pocked planet. But, God be praised, they are not hopeless days. For those who look up and out with Christ-sharpened eyes, the valley is transformed into the place of vision.

Isaiah, however, would never be satisfied to say simply that in the valley experiences of life an opportunity is given to sharpen our vision. He would add, and with deep earnestness, that in the valley experiences a challenge is given to share our vision.

That was Isaiah's burden. It is the responsibility that vision always bears toward blindness: the seeing owe it to the sightless to bring them healing and light. It is the responsibility that strength always bears towards weakness: the strong owe it to the weak to lift up their hands and confirm their feeble knees. It is the responsibility that knowledge always bears towards ignorance: the informed owe it to the ignorant to instruct and enlighten. It is the responsibility that freedom always bears towards slavery: the free owe it to the enslaved to strike off their shackles and set them at liberty.

In that spirit and under the dominion of that law the ambassadors of Jesus Christ have gone forth among all peoples and kindreds, tribes and tongues. In that spirit they must now go forth, stronger than ever in the passion of Christ's love and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Eighty-nine years ago Dr. John Paton landed on the lonely island of Tama in the New Hebrides group of the south Pacific. They had come, he and his beloved wife, to serve the savage natives in the name of Jesus Christ. No Christian had been there before. Three months after their arrival a son was born to them. For two days both mother and child were doing well. Then Mrs. Paton's strength failed her. She died, and one week later the baby followed her in death. Thus in less than four months Dr. Paton was left humanly alone among the cannibals for whose sake he and Mrs. Paton had been so willing to endure exile from home and native land.

If ever a man was in the valley, Paton was that man. Its gloom was like midnight. What did he do? Well, for one thing he dug Mrs. Paton's grave with his own hands and in it he laid her body. He built a wall of coral round the grave, and covered the top with beautiful white coral which he had crushed small like gravel.

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