

The Bride's Prayer

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“Awake, O north wind: and come thou south; blow upon my garden that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat of his pleasant fruits. I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse.” (Songs. Ch. 4:16 and Ch. 5:1)

There are seasons in the life of God’s people when their souls cleave to the dust, and when the shadow of spiritual decline may lie heavily over their spirits. At such times they seek “a little reviving in their bondage,” and, in the words of the Psalm, they ask the Lord to quicken them according to His word. And when the Lord draws near to them, and breathes upon them with the warm breath of His mouth, not only are their own hearts revived but their prayers also ascend to God that He might visit all His people with a time of refreshing and with a day of His power. This, we think, is the way the Church prays here. “Blow upon my garden.” Then she goes on to plead that He would visit His own garden everywhere and that both His gracious presence and the fruits of the Spirit might rejoice and encourage His waiting people everywhere. In making a comment on these words let us consider:

I. The Prayer and its Plea

This prayer, we believe, is for the awakening power of the Holy Spirit. Under this figure the Spirit of God, in His saving operations, is often brought before us in the written Word. “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” When God’s prophet stood helpless before the valley of dry bones God commanded him to pray for the living breath, “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.” It was as “a rushing mighty wind” that He descended on the Church on the day of Pentecost. So mighty was His power on that day that the holy repercussions of the Spirit’s descent are still felt in this world, and shall be to the end of time.

The immediate situation which moved the Church to utter this prayer was her awareness of the spiritual decay which had spread over God’s vineyard everywhere. In the words of the prophet death had come up into her windows and had entered her

palaces. In his own day Isaiah speaks of the ominous stillness, the dark symptom of spiritual death, which everywhere prevailed. "There is none that calleth upon Thy name, that stirreth up himself to lay hold upon Thee". Spiritual silence and sleep always go together. It is when we sleep that Satan, "the boar out of the forest" plays havoc with God's vine. It is then that the enemy sows his tares in the field. The Church knew that when the enemy, through the neglect of those who should keep watch upon the walls of Zion, came in like a flood only the Spirit of the Lord could arrest his power. Therefore she prays, "Awake, O north wind and come thou south."

In the presence of such a state of decline the Church is aware of her own helplessness. There is so much that men can do. They can initiate unspiritual, and often unscriptural, movements within the visible Church, but it is not by might or by power on the part of man that God's cause is rescued and revived but by His Spirit. The question was asked of old "By whom shall Jacob arise for he is small?" "Lord thou knowest." The prophet could see the Church in his own day drawing, as it were, its last breath, and only by a miracle of divine power could Jacob arise again. By proclaiming the word of the Lord the prophet Ezekiel brought all the dry bones of the house of Israel together. They even assumed the appearance and order of life, but as yet there was no breath in them. There was much stir and noise. There was a form of godliness, but no power at all. Only when the prophet, at God's command, prophesied unto the breath did they arise to newness of life. When, conscious of his helplessness, he combined his pleading with earnest supplication did the miracle of a spiritual resurrection happen. It is comparatively easy to assemble men and women together, to assume a religious complexion and to create noise and stir in the religious world; but without the Spirit it can avail, little or nothing.

There was something else of which the Church was aware. She knew that only the Holy Spirit could give its proper exercise to the grace which lodges within the souls of believers. The Holy Spirit is given to God's people as the Spirit of grace and of supplication. But there are seasons when they are at ease in Zion, and when they "rest on their lees." But "woe to them that are at ease in Zion." Her earnest prayer, therefore, was that with the coming of the wind "the spices" of grace in the hearts of God's people might flow forth in continual prayer to God that "in a day of small things" He might arise and plead His own Cause.

It is encouraging to observe how in other days the prayers and conscious helplessness of the Church coincided with mighty displays of God's power. It was often when the Church was on her knees that her Lord went forth in His chariots of salvation and His right hand performed "terrible things". Look at her in Egypt under sentence of death. But she was not silent. "I have surely seen," said the Lord to Moses, "the afflictions of my people who are in Egypt and I have heard their cry . . . and I am come down to deliver them." Their sighs went before their songs — their night of weeping preceded their morning of joy. The wind which dried up the sea before her was the evidence of His saving power. He came in answer to her prayers. Her deliverance out of the bondage of Babylon answered to the same pattern. There they sat and wept as they thought of Zion in her desolation. There they wrestled with God that He might pluck His hand from His

bosom and save them. Then it happened. “When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion we were like them who dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter.”

Look also at what happened in Europe during the midnight darkness of the papal age. Throughout those long years of spiritual decay and death God’s “hidden ones” were crying to Him to visit His own desolate vineyard with a day of power, Then the wind began to blow, driving before it the idolatries, superstitions and blasphemies of the papal system which had for so long ensnared and defiled the nations of Europe. God’s vineyard was again revived and purified. The Church of the Reformation — the perfect counterpart of the apostolic Church — was born, never to die.

Do we not at this hour live in “a day of small things”? But with all its terrors, lawlessness and apostasy the Lord has still many people in the world whose prayer is that His Kingdom might come and His cause be uplifted. We believe that the day will come when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Many today have this same prayer on their lips and in their heart — “Awake O north wind and come thou south.” And what is the promise? “When the Lord shall build up Zion, He shall appear in His glory. He will regard the prayer of the destitute and not despise their prayer.”

In this prayer there is a just recognition that a true awakening is accompanied by both sorrow and joy. The north wind, we believe, is typical of the Spirit’s work in convincing men of their sin. “When He is come He will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment.” He brings the sinner to the bar of God’s Word where he sees that he is without God and without hope in the world. There also he sees that all his righteousnesses are as filthy rags and that at the bar of His just judgment he cannot but bow his head and plead guilty before Him. He also looks to Him whom he has pierced, and mourns. He mourns over the fact that he hated Him without a cause. When this strong wind blows through our souls we are left with nothing but our sin and its shame.

There have sometimes been so-called “revivals” from which this godly sorrow was absent, and too often they bore no lasting fruit. There are those who, like Bunyan’s Pliable, receive the word with a false joy only to return to their old haunts and environment. But true believers have their seasons of sorrow before their time of love and their hour of deliverance. Before their Bethel comes their Bochim. We agree that there are different degrees of this in the experience of God’s people but repentance unto life is a saving grace and can never be divorced from grief over sin. Let me give an illustration of this. One of the most genuine revivals that ever took place in our land had this wholesome characteristic. On one occasion over seven thousand people gathered in a small picturesque Highland valley to hear the Gospel. At the end of the day, and as the last Psalm was being sung, only the preacher and the two leaders of the praise were able to sing. What had happened to the rest? God’s Spirit like a mighty wind had swept over them. Arrows from the King’s bow had pierced through many hearts. God had convinced them that they were sinners under wrath. Apart from their weeping they

were silent. But the warm south wind of His grace, love and forgiveness soon brought them into a state of joy. They were given a new summer and a new song.

The Church herself could tell the story of that hour when she passed from death to life. "My beloved spake and said unto me, Rise up my love, my fair one and come away; for the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing of birds is come." The winter of sin, with its snell north wind, had given place to a new and everlasting summer. The warm wind of His love now wafted through her soul.

You notice that there was another great reason why the Church prayed for the reviving breath of the Spirit. It was that Christ's presence might be known and felt within His own vineyard or Church. "Let my beloved come into His garden." The power of the Spirit and the presence of the Lord always go together. There may be many choice flowers in the garden; but it is Christ the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valleys, who gives grace and fragrance to His own vineyard.

**"That I thy power may behold,
and brightness of thy face,"**

was the prayer of one who knew that without God's presence in His own Church there could be only weakness and darkness. The greatest chastisement that the Lord can bring upon us in this life is to withdraw His presence from His Church, or, in the wider sphere, to become a stranger in the land. It is true that the believer may have, like Moses on the Mount, a personal enjoyment of God's presence while He may become a stranger within the visible Church. Do we mourn, then, over His absence in those places of which it could be said in other days that "the Lord was there"? The Church had that measure of spiritual discernment which enabled her to differentiate between His presence in the means of grace and the means of grace without His presence. Her cry: "Saw ye Him whom my soul loveth?" is the proof of this. In our worship we may be satisfied with ourselves and with one another while He may be absent. But it is His presence among us that lends solemnity and sweetness to the public means of grace. It is through His presence and power that the dead are raised and that sinners are converted unto Him.

Once I was present at a prayer meeting in a certain church. God truly was among us. After the benediction was pronounced a good woman present gently asked the presiding minister if we could still tarry there. But we had to part, for here we have but the tabernacle of a wayfaring man. Do we know what this means? Have we truly the spiritual discernment to know when He is present in, or is absent from, His garden. A few years ago a certain lady visited the North of Scotland. During her sojourn there she worshipped in a number of congregations where sound scriptural preaching was proclaimed from each pulpit. But she entered one church, and as soon as she sat in the pew she could say, "the Lord is in this place". It was this that endeared that place to her soul in after days. It was to her a season of heaven on earth.

Let us plead with Him that He might once again visit those parts of His vineyard where He is now a stranger. When we read, for example, of other days in places like our native Highlands, where men like Dr John Macdonald, Mr Hector MacPhail, "Big" John MacRae, Dr John Kennedy, Alexander Stewart, and many others, once reaped such a great harvest, we can only pray:

"To these long desolations Thy feet lift, do not tarry."

Without His power and presence among us the vineyard and the fruitful field may become dry parched land. O, then let us seek to discover and disown those sins which have grieved His Spirit and alienated His gracious presence from our midst.

Now you will notice that after such gracious visitations the Church is not ashamed to ask her Lord to come into His own garden. She has ample fare to set before Him. "Let Him eat of His pleasant fruits." These words mean that where the Spirit is present His fruits are to be seen in the lives of those whom He blesses and among whom He works. This is what satisfies, or is pleasing to, the Lord. The fruits of the Spirit cannot be concealed in the lives of those who bear them. "But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance — against such there is no law." To this end Christ has chosen and ordained all his people. "I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain." The Church is God's vineyard or garden, and each believer is His planting. His people are the subjects of His care, love and interest. "What could have been done more for my vineyard that I have not done in it?" Do these spiritual fruits show themselves in our lives? How ought we to bow our heads in God's presence as we see our own barrenness and spiritual dilatoriness. This grief was in the heart of the Church when she said: "They have made me a keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept." We who are Christian ministers, Christian elders and witnesses are all professedly interested in the preservation, purity and increase of God's cause. And yet through our neglect and prayerlessness our own lives, our own homes, our own congregations, may fall under the shadow of spiritual decline. Is it not so? Are our lives pleasing to God? He conies for fruit, but we have little to show. This truly is often the grief of the gracious soul. But while we mourn over our own leanness and the low state of His cause we hope and long for the day when, through the outpouring of God's Spirit, the wilderness shall again blossom as the rose.

We mentioned some of the fruits of the Spirit which show themselves in the true Christian life, but there are others also. Our Lord Himself spoke of other spiritual fruits which His people bear. Where does he begin? "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled." If this cluster of blessings is found in our lives then the Lord is with us and dwells in our heart as in a garden. "With this man will I dwell, even with him who is of a poor and a contrite heart and who trembles at My Word." O, dear friends, do we not long for the day when our garden shall be His

entirely, or when our souls shall be for ever delivered from all that is of self and of sin?
But consider now:

II. The Lord's Answer to Her Prayer: "I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse."

As she would provide Him with the pleasant fruits of His own Spirit, He comes to her laden with blessings. Christ never visits His Church or the soul of the believer empty-handed. He comes to furnish our table. And if the gifts are precious, the presence of the Giver is what lends sweetness to each one. The blessings mentioned here are the choice fare of the heavenly Canaan. The fulness which He communicates to His Church resides in Himself. Here we have the sincere milk of the Word, the wine of His love, the honeycomb of His promises. These all carry the pure aroma of Heaven. In the written Word we have the ecstatic testimonies of those who had tasted of these blessings. "Thy words were found and I did eat them; and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart." "More to be desired are they than gold, yea than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb." "Thy love is better than wine." "O, taste and see that the Lord is good." These indeed are enjoyments, the nature of which it is impossible to describe. Only by personal participation in them can we know their unspeakable sweetness.

We once heard a story of a boy who lived a primitive life in a heathen land. The missionary working among the tribe presented this lad one day with some sweets. He had never seen or tasted such things before. He ran home and told the others about what he had in his hand and in his mouth! They plied him with questions, but he had no words which could describe his enjoyment. At last he said: "Here, you must taste it yourselves."

This enjoyment of the Church was "under the tongue" or in her heart while she was still on her pilgrimage journey. She had in this world of time the earnest of good things to come. And if our blessings here are mixed with many bitter herbs these only increase our longings for that full and eternal enjoyment of God which awaits us at the table above where all tears shall be wiped away from our eyes.

If the Giver and His gifts are so desirable so is His welcome to partake of His feast. "Eat, O friends, drink, yea drink abundantly, O beloved." He who supplies all our needs and who has in Himself an infinite fulness of grace and truth would have us eat abundantly. Sometimes the public means of grace may be destitute of the spiritual nourishment we require. We cry with David — "Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem which is by the gate!" But when, like David's mighty men, our graces are in exercise, we often break through every barrier and overcome the sins which would deprive us of the needed blessing. When prayer, faith and patience do their perfect work, the Lord extends the royal sceptre of His promise to our souls. "What is thy request and what is thy desire?" We are led into his banqueting house where we say with the Psalmist — "A day in thy courts is better than a thousand."

In these days when we see not our signs, our only hope is to plead with God that He might once again stir up His strength and send His Spirit both to arrest the flood of evil and to revive us in the midst of the years. In such a day our silence is our greatest sin. If we open our mouth wide in holy longings, He, on His side, will open the windows of heaven and pour us out a blessing so that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And if we fail in our duty let us remember what is written — “I shall yet be enquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them.” May the Lord give us the grace to continue instant in prayer.

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