

The Perfect Day

Proverbs 4: 18.

Substance of an Address at Bath, by F. B. Hole.

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The verse I have read compares the path of the just to "the shining light," but the words more literally translated would read, I understand, "the light of dawn." This makes Solomon's allusion far more clear and striking.

The wicked have their "path" as the four earlier verses indicate. This figure of speech is a familiar one: life is compared to a way. The living of our lives is, therefore, like the treading of a path. The path of the wicked is the order of life that the wicked live, and that is to be avoided at all cost, for, as the nineteenth verse indicates, it leads into the darkness of night, where stumbling is certain sooner or later.

The "just" — those in right relations With God — live another order of life and pursue quite different objects. They have their "path." It is like the light of dawn, which though it comes up softly, yet increases in brightness and strength. The sun rises and sheds its beams, which increase in power as it mounts the heavens to its zenith at mid-day.

There the allusion stops. In nature the sun is only at its zenith for an instant, and then begins the inevitable decline towards evening and night. Not so in grace; for the path of the just is not going to arrive at "the perfect day" until glory is reached, and when glory is reached our sun will no more go down. It will remain in the splendour of its zenith for ever. The path of the just is like that.

This is a remarkable assertion, truly! Have we all taken it in? If so, the remark most likely to spring to our lips will be: "Well, the path of the just may be like that, *but usually it does not look like it!*" Usually it certainly does not: indeed, we believe we might go as far as to say it *never* looks like it in this world.

First of all, let me remind you of One who was pre-eminently "*the JUST One*" (Acts 7: 52). No other just one can be mentioned in the same breath as He. He is beyond all comparison; solitary and alone in His perfection. What was His path? Well, it was prophetically anticipated in Isa. 49, and we hear in that chapter His voice saying to us, "Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent My strength for nought, and in vain" (verse 4). We turn to the Gospels and we see how fully these words of His were verified in His life.

When first He came forth in public service His sun appeared to be rising in the heavens. At Nazareth, when first He spoke in their synagogue, the people marvelled at the words of grace He spoke. Yet very soon His faithfulness stirred them to fury, and they would have killed Him. Again and again later there were moments that gave promise of more prosperous things - times when the people wished to make Him a king, or when they met Him shouting, Hosanna! at the entrance into Jerusalem on the foal of an ass, and His enemies ground their teeth in impotent rage saying the world was gone after Him. Yet these moments were exceptions; the general trend of His path was in the reverse direction. He was more and more hedged about with foes and apparent failure, until that last fatal week in Jerusalem which ended in His death.

The secular historian dwelling in Jerusalem in those days would have put it on record that the Jesus of Nazareth, who had excited such large hopes in the breasts of a few visionary folk — fishermen from Galilee and the like — suffered a rapid and sensational eclipse. His sun set amid dark thunder

clouds. His path was not at all like the light of the dawn that shone more and more unto the perfect day, but rather like the dim light of a very stormy winter afternoon that faded more and more into the inky blackness of the night. That clearly enough was the verdict of the world.

Which was right? The verdict of the world or the verdict of the inspired Preacher of Israel? Do he not sometimes sing:

"Thy path, uncheered by earthly smiles,
Led only to the cross"?

Only to the cross? Yes, certainly, if we confine our thoughts to His earthly path as the hymn so sweetly and appropriately does, in its place. If, however, we lift our eyes beyond His earthly path, then we can say with triumph it did not lead to the cross *alone*, but to the glory also, as Ps. 16 makes so manifest.

The fact is, of course, that the divine eye sees in every path what is not known to the mere historian. As the Father looked down upon His beloved Son, what did He see? He saw everything that was beautiful in its season. Grace was shining everywhere; in His infancy, His boyhood, His early manhood, His maturity. As He increased in wisdom and stature so the light that had dawned in Him increased in strength. When He came forth at length in public ministry, then the "great light" burst forth upon 'the people which sat in darkness' (Matt. 4: 16). Heaven's sun had risen upon them. And in spite of all that was done against Him the light continued to shine against the dark background of man's sin. The more He was tested the more the light shone to the glory of God. When at last it looked as if man had finally extinguished Him in death, then really His shining reached its zenith, for it was in anticipation of death that He said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him. If God be glorified in Him, God shall also glorify Him in Himself, and shall straightway glorify Him " (John 13: 31, 32),

As man saw it, His death was the end of everything for Him. As God saw it, it was the beginning of everything. To the one it was the lowest point of His humiliation: to the Other the highest point of His glory. To the one it was the quenching of His sun in night: to the Other the permanent establishing of His sun in its zenith of splendour, for the display of moral glory to an infinite extent which took place in His death was immediately followed by His exaltation into the Father's glory, which will yet be displayed in this world and before the universe.

The path of "the Just One," in spite of what it appeared to be, has reached "the perfect day" in the Father's presence. His path is a finished path in a sense which can be so spoken of no other. No other has completed it as He has. Yet all who have been privileged to be servants of God have been alike in this, that apparent defeat and failure have followed their steps, and this not always because of their own personal failure, but sometimes just because of their personal faithfulness. This stands true whether we think of Old Testament or New Testament saints.

Think of Moses. What a marvellous beginning when in God-given faith and courage he withstood the mighty Pharaoh and his magicians. See him standing on the further bank of the Red Sea with the rod of God in his outstretched arm! Listen to the chantings of victory from a million throats! Was it not splendid! Should we not all have said that his sun had reached noontide height? But then we trace the story of the forty years in the wilderness. His meekness and patience were truly remarkable; yet the people beneath his hand were increasingly trying and disappointing, until nearly at the end of that long testing time the great Lawgiver broke down and spoke unadvisedly with his lips. Let us not marvel at this. We should have broken down before forty days had gone, whereas he endured it for nearly forty

years. At last, however, he broke forth with, "Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock?" smiting the rock twice in his anger.

Alas! poor Moses. Those lips of his which had been taken up by God to be His mouth, had emitted angry words which were emphatically not God's words, but misrepresented Him. His sin, therefore, was great and his punishment correspondingly great. He lost his entrance into Canaan. The triumphal entry into the land of promise, which he must have looked forward to as the fitting sequel to his triumphant exodus from Egypt, was never to be realized by him. What would the secular historian say? He would unquestionably have said that while the sun of Moses' prosperity reached high noon at the time of the exodus, it declined during the wilderness sojourn and set in clouds on the confines of the promised land.

But was it really so? Turn your eyes to the Mount of Transfiguration, as recorded in the Gospels, and see him appear in glory in companionship with the Son of God. Did his sun decline? No, it shone more and more unto the perfect day.

Think of Elijah, another outstanding Old Testament figure. In his case do we not see things working in exactly the same way? When we see him, alone and unaided, confronting the eight hundred and fifty prophets on Mount Carmel, with Ahab, Jezebel, and the people at their backs, he appears the most heroic of all Old Testament heroes. When the fire fell from heaven, what overwhelming triumph! It was high noon indeed with him. Yes, but behold him a few days after, under the juniper tree and filled with fear of Jezebel. His sun had indeed gone down while it was day. And after that Horeb, and another prophet anointed in his room. How his light appeared to have been quenched! But was it?

On the Mount of Transfiguration he too stands with Jesus. He too has glory shining on his head. It is not night for him after all. It is the perfect day.

There is only one amongst the followers of the Lord of whose life much is recorded in the New Testament. But there *is* one, the Apostle Paul. What was his path like?

His path as a Christian started when the Son of God, brighter than the noonday sun, shone upon him from glory. He became the chosen vessel for bearing the Saviour's name to the Gentiles, and we all know something of his devoted labours. We remember how he evangelized from Jerusalem round about unto Illyricum with great power and God-given success; so much so that to his bitterest opponents he and his helpers became known as, "These that have turned the world upside down." We think of the churches that he founded as a wise master-builder, and how for a time it seemed as if nothing could stay his progress.

But suddenly a halt seemed to be called. Bonds and imprisonment not only awaited him but actually held him fast. And then defection definitely set in amongst the churches, and his own children in the faith turned away from him and deserted him in the hour when most they might have been a comfort to him. At last he stood, aged, war-worn, forsaken, like a poor old beggar who was of the offscouring of the world, before the powerful Caesar, and ended his career under the axe outside the imperial city. The path of this pattern Christian was no exception to the rule. It also appeared to be like the setting sun, declining more and more unto the darkest night.

Thus it appeared to be. But in reality it was far otherwise. To Paul himself his approaching martyrdom was but his offering up, his departure, and his eye was by faith on the "crown of righteousness" which awaited him when the upward path he trod should end in the perfect day of the Lord's appearing.

And now I have a question to ask. Why should we twentieth-century Christians expect that the

path should be different for us? Is it our prescriptive right to be carried to heaven on downy beds of ease, amid sunshine and flowers, whilst all others sail through stormy seas of trial and persecution? Is it for us to feel shocked and scandalised if difficulties seem to dog our footsteps? By no means. It is just what we should expect. It is as true today as nineteen centuries ago that "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14: 22). We may not get the tribulation in the form of outward persecution from the world. Still we get it within the bosom of the professing church, if not from without.

There are many difficulties today. They throng thickly around us — church difficulties, business difficulties, family difficulties — all of them difficulties which we should not feel were we not Christians, with some desire to walk in a way that is pleasing to God. What do they mean?

Do they mean that our poor little sun is fast declining and our day is nearly over? They do not. Only go through them in faith, and with the courage begotten of faith in God, and they will work out patience, experience and hope within us. Thus there will be made room within for the inshining of the love of God, shed abroad in our hearts like sunlight by the Spirit of God given to us. There will be great spiritual gain.

Instead of the shining of that light growing less and less, paler and yet paler with days' decrease, it will be more and more, brighter and yet brighter with the day's increase — unto the perfect day.

The perfect day will have fully and finally arrived when Christ is established in His place of glory according to the counsels of God. For that moment we all wait, whether Moses, Elijah, Paul or ourselves. When the king is crowned in Westminster Abbey the peers of the realm are present, every man with his coronet in his hand; and in his hand it must remain until the king is crowned. Then, when the crown imperial rests on the sovereign's head, each peer assumes his own coronet and not before.

This is as it should be, and as it will be in the age that is coming. When Christ is glorified in public we shall be glorified with Him. When He is crowned "the perfect day" will have arrived for Him, and for us as well.