

Night, and Jesus Absent

J.R. Miller:

A whole picture lies in a sentence, or part of a sentence. Thus John describes a scene on the Sea of Galilee, "It was now dark--and Jesus had not yet come to them." The disciples had been sent out on the sea alone. Evening was drawing on. Moreover, a storm was gathering, adding to their anxieties and fears. Their distress was very great.

The experience is repeated continually in the life of Christ's friends. They are out upon the sea. Darkness is coming on. Storms are rising. Yet they seem to be left alone. Jesus has not come to them. Why does He leave us thus, to enter the night without Him? If we read this gospel incident through to the close, and use it as a parable, it will have rich instruction for us.

It was not the disciples' own doing, this being out on the sea that night; the Master had sent them out. This should have been a comfort to them, when the darkness came on and the waves began to rise. No disobedience of their own, had brought them into their present circumstances of danger. They were in the way of obedience.

The path of duty does not always lie in the sunshine; sometimes it passes into the darkness. The voyage of life is not always over calm seas, with gentle, favoring breezes; sometimes the winds are contrary, and we must move in the teeth of the tempest. Darkness and tempest are not always intimations that we are in the wrong way. We may be in the path of duty, of obedience, and yet find gloom and contrary winds.

In these cases, the consciousness that we are doing the Master's will, ought to be to us a strength and a comfort. We need never be afraid of the night or of the storm, into which Christ sends us. If we go into danger by our own wilfulness or reckless disobedience, it is different, for then we go without the presence and help of Christ. But when Christ has bidden us take the course in which we meet night and storm--we may keep on our way, sure of emerging beyond the gloom and the wild waves--into morning and calm.

Another comfort in the darkness of that night, was that, though Jesus had not yet come to His disciples in their danger, He was not forgetful of them. One of the Gospels tells us that from His place in the mountain, He saw the disciples distressed in rowing. He was caring for them--as really as if He had been with them. We may be sure that this picture is realized in the life of every Christian who seems to be left alone in any gathering night-storm. Jesus is still on His mountain of intercession. Though we may not see Him--He sees us. He looks upon us in love. He is aware of all our struggles and all our fears. The confidence that we are ever under the eye of the watching, loving Christ--ought to give us strong comfort.

In one of the old English prisons, there was an underground dungeon which was used as a place of punishment for those who fell under disfavor. Among the prisoners, at one time, there was a man of refinement with exceedingly nervous temperament, to whom the horror of this dungeon was a haunting terror. Then one day he offended in some way, and was sentenced to twenty-four hours in this cell. He was led to the place, the door was opened, and he passed down the stairs into the dark depths. The shutting of the door sent its echoes through the gloomy dungeon. Then all was still--a stillness that was terrible in its oppressiveness. Nervous and full of fear, the poor man sank to the floor. His brain throbbed as with fever, and mocking voices seemed to sound on all sides. He felt that the terror would drive him mad.

Suddenly he heard footsteps overhead, and then a voice gently calling his name. Never was any music so sweet, "God bless you!" He gasped. "Are you there?" "Yes," answered the prison chaplain; "and I am not going to leave this place until you come out." "God bless you!" cried the prisoner. "Why, I do not mind it at all now, with you there." The terror was all gone. The darkness was powerless to harm him while his friend was so near, close above him, though unseen.

So in all the hours of our darkness, in the blackest night, in the deepest sorrow, in the sorest perplexity, when we think we are alone, while we long for Christ's presence and wonder why He does not come--He is really near us, watching us, caring for us, though unseen by us. There is no darkness where a friend of Christ gropes--that is not viewed by the eye of divine love. There is no child of God in the midst of any wild storm--who is not watched over and sheltered by the divine care.

There is another comfort. There was a time of waiting--but at last Jesus came walking on the tossing waves, as if they had been a smooth marble floor. It was well-near morning when He came. He seems to have waited until the last moment. "Man's extremity--is God's opportunity." But He came in good time to deliver His friends. When He came--He soon brought peace. At His word, the terror of the disciples vanished. The wind also

ceased, and the sea became calm.

Our human hearts crave revealings of Christ. We are not fully satisfied with knowing that He is looking down upon us from above the stars; we want to hear His voice. It is a sore trial to get no answer to our continued calling. The silence of Christ to us when we pray--is very oppressive. No wonder the old Psalm-writer pleads, "Be not silent to me--lest, if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down into the pit." We crave answer when we pray.

When at length, after long waiting, the voice of Christ falls upon our ears in our darkness and sorrow--the gloom does indeed flee. Even the voice of a human loved one speaking in the darkness, calms the tempest in our breast, and fills the darkness as with gentle light. We feel afraid no longer; the voice reveals a presence, and we are comforted. But the revealing of Christ in our time of dread, means infinitely more of peace and comfort. When He comes--fear flees and peace fills the lonely, trembling heart. And He will surely come. His delays are not desertions. At the right moment, when He has taught us all the lessons we need to learn by His absence and His silence to us--He will return, driving away the darkness and quieting the storms by His presence and His words of love.

This picture, entering the night and the storm with Jesus absent--has another suggestion for us. These disciples who put out to sea as the darkness came on, with the Master not yet come to them, represent all who enter life without Christ. Life seems bright and sunny to youth with its inexperience. It has no nights and no storms. But we do not pass far into the years that bring their duty, responsibility, and care--until we come to experiences of struggle and toil. Life soon grows serious.

In the Revelation, where the blessings of the kingdom of heaven are described, we learn that all noble attainments in spiritual character, and all life's rewards and prizes--lie beyond lines of battle. It is only to "him who overcomes" that these blessings are promised. The youth does not advance far until he learns that life is not play--but most earnest business. Nothing can be accomplished without effort. Toil is the price of success. To loiter is to lose all; to falter is to fail. At every point, antagonisms meet him--and he must fight for his very life. He soon learns, too, that if he has not the Lord Jesus Christ for his friend and helper--that he can never make his way to the worthy things which lie on the hill-tops, beyond the valleys of struggle.

No doubt, many people do live all their life without Christ. They do not confess their need of Him. They shut Him out of their experiences. They struggle alone. They meet their responsibilities unaided by divine grace. No doubt, too, they may seem to succeed. They prosper in the world. But they live only an earthly life. They ignore their own higher nature. They ignore God and heaven and immortality. They gain the world--and lose their souls. No life is worthy of an immortal being, which does not gain the higher things of the soul. A picture with only earth, and no sky, is tame, and lacks truest beauty. A life without sky and stars and heaven--is unworthy the name of life. Besides, its seeming success is really terrible disaster--the loss of eternal heaven. No one can meet life without Christ.

There is also the experience of temptation. We do not live many years before we come to it. No one can escape it. Even the sinless Jesus had to meet it. Temptation is oftentimes a black night for the soul that enters into it. The scene of the disciples struggling in the darkness with contrary winds, distressed in rowing, scarcely able to guide their boat through the tempest--is not too stern a picture of the experience of many a soul in the struggles of temptation, without Christ. We are such fools in our self-confidence, "Yes, others have fallen--but we shall not fall. Others have perished in the darkness yes--but we shall not perish. Yes, others have had to cry out for help when they had fallen, lying in their defeat until someone came to lift them up yes--but we shall not fall; we shall not be defeated." So we talk, as we foolishly pass into the darkness and the storm without Christ.

But we should not dare to pass into the dark night and out upon the wild sea of temptation, without Christ. Human help is something. We are to go to our brothers who have fallen, to lift them up, and our hands are to be as Christ's hands for this blessed ministry. But if human hands were the only ones--none could ever be kept from falling, nor could any ever be lifted up and helped on to the end. We must have Christ in our temptations, or we shall perish.

There is also the experience of sorrow, which every life must meet. In sunny youth, sorrow seems very far off. The skies are blue. Flowers spring up along the path. Soft breezes fan the cheeks. Joy is everywhere. Hope shines in all the future. But there comes a time, when it grows dark. Sorrow covers the heavens with blackness. If Christ is not present with His love and light and comfort as the soul passes into sorrow's night--it will be very dark indeed.

Then there is the darkness of death. We may miss many things in this world. Our path may lie all the way in sunshine. There are some lives which seem to be spared great conflicts and struggles, which are called to pass through no bitter griefs. But not one of us can hope to miss dying. We must come down to the edge of the valley of death. We must enter into the darkness. What will any of us do then--without Christ?

The disciples trembled and were afraid--when night came on, and when they had to put out upon the sea in the darkness without Jesus. But that sea was only a little lake, a few miles long; and they were familiar with every part of it, for they had spent their life about it and upon it. The darkness, too, would be but for a few hours, with morning following. Far more momentous an experience is it to go out upon the sea of death. We have never passed this way before, and all is strange and unfamiliar. Where the shores stretch--we cannot tell. What is in its deep, black night--no imagination can paint. But for the Christian, death has no terrors. Christ has made the way bright with peace. He walks with His own, and they sing: "Even when I walk through the dark valley of death, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me."

But it is a fearful thing to die without Christ. Saddest of all pictures is that of those whom these words describe as entering the night of death: "It was now dark, and Jesus had not come to them."

This lifting of the veil at a few points shows how real is the soul's need of Christ, and how dreary, sad, and perilous it is to pass into these experiences without Christ. If anyone thinks that life has been depicted here in too somber and serious colors, it may be said that without Christ--life is a most grave and serious matter. How can a man live entering life's battles, accepting its responsibilities, assuming its duties, passing into its sorrows, or think of taking its last walk into the shadows of death--without Christ?

A thoughtful man gave three reasons why he had not become an infidel, after reading all the books written against Christianity. "First, I am a man. I am going somewhere. Tonight I am a day nearer the grave, than I was last night. I have read all that the skeptics can tell me. They shed not one solitary ray of hope or light upon the darkness. They shall not take away the guide and leave me stone-blind.

Second, I had a mother. I saw her go down into the dark valley where I am going, and she leaned on an unseen arm as calmly as a child goes to sleep on its mother's bosom. I know that was a reality, not a dream.

Third, I have three motherless daughters. They have no protection but myself. I would rather see them dead than leave them in this sinful world--if you blot out from it all the teachings of the gospel"