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THE FIGURE OF A RIVER

Used By Preacher to Show Benefits of Serving God---Thy Peace As a River

Not As a Taunt; "I Told You So," But An Invitation to Return to the Way From Which They Have Wandered—What the River Teaches—The Conditions of Peace—The River of Triumph.

Entered according to Act of Parliament of Canada, in the year 1905, by Frederick Diver, of Toronto, at the Dep't of Agriculture, Ottawa.

Los Angeles, Cal., Feb. 12.—Under the figure of a river the preacher shows in this sermon the benefits that accrue to men who serve and obey God. The text is Isaiah xlviii, 18, "Then had thy peace been as a river."

What art thou doing, O prophet of Israel? Art thou taunting thy people with the blessing they had missed through forsaking God and disregarding thy teaching? When trouble swoops art thou one of those who say: "I told you so? If you had only taken my advice you would not be in the difficulty you are in today. If you will make your bed out of thorns and thistles instead of rose leaves, then upon the thorns and thistles you must lie." Are you like an executioner who upbraids and derides the trembling murderer whose life he is soon to strangle with the rope? In drawing your enchanting picture of peace flowing like a river before a people harassed by powerful foreign enemies and disturbed by internal dissensions are you not merely adding to their distress, as the mirage of the desert aggravates the thirst of the dying traveler? Are you saying to your miserable people: "Look at those beautiful banks watered by the river, rich in flora and tuneful with singing birds. They would have been all yours if you had not wandered into the desert of sin, but now they are lost to you forever."

"Ah, no," says the prophet Isaiah, "it is not to aggravate their thirst that I tell them of this river, but to invite them to return to the way from which they have wandered; not to exult over their misfortunes, but to warn them of the consequences of sin. I am not here glorying in the suffering of God's fallen ones. My river is not composed of the black waters of the river Styx, but from the flowing crystal waters of the river of life. I am like a loving father whose wayward son has disregarded warnings and has sinned and brought himself into trouble, and the father sorrows with him and pleads with him to repent and assures him that if he will forsake his sin his wickedness shall be forgiven and his peace shall be like a river, as though he had never sinned." May God help us as we use the banks of the Jordan or the Rhine or the Tiber or the Upper Thames or the banks of our own poetic Hudson for a sacred pulpit. Such a river bank today may become as sacred a pulpit as that in the chancel of Westminster Abbey or St. Paul's or Canterbury Cathedral, even though bishop's hand has not consecrated it or ecclesiastical convocation dedicated it.

The pleading river, in the first place, teaches us that the divine peace which comes to man must come as the result of natural law in the spiritual life. It is not the result of haphazard. It is not a miracle as we in the broad sense term a miracle. It does not come as a miraculous wind which might dig up a seed in some Italian garden and in its teeth lift it above Alpine crag and carry it over land and sea and without human aid plant it as an exotic upon the banks of the Ohio or the Monongahela rivers. But the divine peace comes to man as the result of a rational cause. It has a rational source, as a river has a natural source; it has a natural flow, as the Jordan has a natural flow, and it has a rational outlet, as the Amazon empties itself into the Atlantic or the Ganges finds a resting place in the huge reservoir of the Bengal gulf.

A river cannot disobey natural law. A river cannot become a free lance among rivers. A river cannot do anything that specific gravity says, "Thou shalt not do." This fact is demonstrated everywhere. I climb one of the tall pyramids of the Rocky Mountains. There upon the highest peak I find what is called a water shed.

But, though the mountain brooks may leap from the cool hills into the heat of the broad, arid plain, it makes a great deal of difference into what plain that falling raindrop shall go, whether it falls one inch to the right or one inch to the left of the Rocky Mountain water shed. One inch to the right it flows into the Gulf of Mexico; one to the left it flows into the waters of the Pacific. The waters of a river must obey natural law. Now, if God's laws are inexorable in regulating the source and the course of a river, are they not equally inexorable in reference to the source and the course his divine peace, which is like a river?

You must obey God's laws before you can enjoy God's peace. To resist them, to disobey him, is to set yourself against omnipotent power and infinite wisdom. It is not necessary that God should punish you for it; you bring the punishment on yourself in failure and disappointment and eternal wreck. Your whole nature is given over to anarchy and lawlessness. Only as you yield to his will do you put yourself in line with the eternal order and enter into peace. I do not care how much you may think your way is better than God's ways, one fact you must understand you cannot get the divine peace, which is like a river, unless you bring yourself into harmony with God's laws and obey God's commandments.

Naaman had to learn this lesson before he could be cured of his leprosy. His way was that the prophet should come out to him and stand and call on the name of the Lord and strike his hand over the place. God's way was that he dip seven times in the Jordan. When he took God's way he was cured, but not until he took it. God's way can cure you, O immortal, of your sin. Are you ready to welcome this divine peace, like a river, which will come to you through Jesus Christ? The way of the cross is the source of this peace. From the mount of Calvary that stream gushes forth, as from Mount Hermon flows the Jordon and from the Adirondacks the mighty Hudson.

But the pleading river teaches us another lesson about the divine peace which passeth all understanding. The longer a disciple of Jesus Christ lives a Christian life the deeper and wider does the river of his peace become. It should deepen and widen and grow more majestic in volume, even as the waters of the Hudson grow deeper and wider as they slip past the highlands and lap the feet of the Palisades and sweep on in their grandeur to the place where they are married to the waters of the mighty deep at the nuptial altar of Governors Island, in upper New York Bay. It should go on growing deeper and wider, even as become the waters of the River Orinoco, where they empty themselves into the unfathomable depths of the sea. When, in 1498, Christopher Columbus for the first time touched the mainland of South America and saw this great river, one of his officers congratulated him because he had discovered another island. The immortal explorer replied: "No such river as that flows from an island. That mighty torrent drains the waters of a continent." The pleading river of God's peace grows wider and deeper as we travel along its banks in the journey of life. At the beginning of our Christian course it may seem a small stream, but as the years pass and our feet come nearer and nearer to the great ocean of eternity the volume of the river increases until it becomes a peace that passeth understanding.

Is this increasing power true in reference to our spiritual peace? As you compare your present life with that of your spiritual life ten, twenty, thirty years ago are you conscious that you love God more now than you did then? Do you read the Bible more now than you did when you joined the church and prepared for your first communion? Is your enjoyment of prayer and your dependence upon it more intense now than it was at first? Are you striving more earnestly than formerly to gather the showers of blessing that are everywhere falling around you into your own spiritual nature? Are you more ready now than at the beginning of your Christian career to go into the house of a neighbor on whom sickness or bereavement has fallen to administer comfort and to cheer him with reminders of God's promises? There is something awfully wrong with a Christian who, while his wealth and mental power increase with the passing years, finds that his spiritual nature does not widen and deepen like the pleading river of God's peace.

Indeed, I sometimes think that our so called peace is not like a river at all. It is more like a brackish, stagnant pool or as a dried up well that gives forth no water. "There was a very good well here once," said an old farmer in reference to a certain drinking trough. "Indeed," answered a preacher on his vacation, "is that so? I wonder what is the matter with it. How did it get filled up?" "Neglect, sir," answered the farmer. "First a little rubbish got in it, then a little more and a little more and a little more. The dirt and refuse were not cleared out, and the water grew worse and worse and less and less until at last the well became choked up. I wonder if there is any water at the bottom of this well?" "Yes," said the preacher, "I wonder if there is any water at the bottom of the well?" Is that the figure of our peace? Is it a well and not a river?

As the Mississippi River is fed by the Missouri, the Ohio, the Tennessee and the Red Rivers and indirectly by the Allegheny, the Monongahela, the Yellowstone and the Platte, so from many sources might the river of our peace receive the waters of blessing, but instead we allow the dirt and refuse of this world to choke the passages by which they might enter and our river dwindles into a stagnant pool. Have we become dried up spiritual wells? As the tourists dropping pebbles into Jacob's well have choked it up, some of us have choked up our gospel wells. Years ago we dropped the pebble of Sabbath desecration into it. Years ago in went another pebble—absence from Sunday school and church worship. Years ago we took to reading the Sunday newspapers instead of the Bible. No wonder that our peace, which should pass all understanding and be like a river, widening and deepening each year, is like a brackish, stagnant pool or dried up, like Jacob's well. If it be not like a river, the fault is ours and not God's. God is pouring down upon us everywhere his showers of spiritual blessing, which we should gather, freshet-like, into the river beds of our hearts.

But the pleading river not only teaches our relationship to God, but also our practical spiritual relationship to our fellow men. It clearly and emphatically and distinctly says, "Gospel peace must be eyes to the blind, food for the hungry, clothing for the naked and happy firesides for the homeless." It teaches man that the first great commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our soul and strength and mind. And the second is like unto it; we must love our neighbors as ourselves. It is a law of our nature that peace and happiness come to us through service to others. No man is so happy as he who has made another happy. No pillow is so restful as that of him who has relieved the anxiety of his btother. The peace that passeth understanding never fills the heart that cherishes selfish desires or turns away from another's misery.

Are we temporal and spiritual "rivers of life" to our fellow men? Some of us are truly "rivers of death's" or "rivers of seclusion." Our lives are like the stygian stream in the great Mammoth cave of Kentucky. We are surrounded by grandeurs and beauties on every side, but we have walled ourselves in by solid rock, where we can do no good to others and where others cannot do any good to us.

Or our lives, if they are not like the Styx of a Mammoth cave, supporting only a few blind fish swimming hundreds of feet below the surface of the earth, may be like the wonderfully suggestive beauties of a Luray cave of old Virginia, which likewise are doing no good to any one. That Luray cave is a marvelous place. Though its beauties were buried for centuries, yet under the flash of light it looks as though its walls had been erected only yesterday and, like the Taj Mahal of India, are a glittering mass of dead precious stones. Yonder stand the columns of stalagmite as statuary in vestal garments of purest white. Here are the drippings of a cataract, as though the mad rush of a Niagara had been instantly halted and, like an open mouthed lion, dared not utter one growl, although even now we seem to hear the echo of its last wild, mad roar. Yonder is the "ball-room," where our imagination tells us the nymphs and the fairies used to sport and dance and make merry. Near to this "ball hall" is the "cemetery ridge," where those nymphs and fairies were buried ages on ages ago. Here are the "hanging veils of the goddesses," so thin that through them flashes the light of our guides' lamps. From yonder cathedral, with its domes and spires and steeples and minarets and strange carvings, there come echoing up the solemn notes of an organ which roll and swell and thunder and whisper and pray and chant and die. From out of every grotto stretches some hand or lifts some snowbank or flaps some wing or, like a cat's eye, blinks some emerald or, tiger-like, glares the bloodshot eyeball of some ruby or flashes some emerald And while all the chimes of all the towers are beginning to ring suddenly a stalactite many tons in weight breaks loose and crashes upon the floor. It shivers, rolls over once or twice and then lies still, to be decomposed by the coming ages. A marvelous and enchanting place is Luray cave of old Virginia.

But I cannot close this sermon upon this beautiful text without finding one more symbol. The pleading river is not only a river of consecration to God, but a river of triumph. It is not only the crystal gates through which, as the Jordan of death, we shall enter the tomb, but it is the crystal gates by which we shall leave the wilderness of trouble and earthly wanderings and enter into the promised land of heaven and eternal joy. Shall our peace, which is like a river, stop at the brink of the grave?

We have read how George Frederick Handel on the River Thames won his great musical victory over the irate George I. of England. When King George was Elector of Hanover he befriended the young unknown musician Handel and made him court musician. But after Handel had won musical fame he tired of the Hanover court and hied himself to London. This greatly enraged the Elector. When he became King of England as George I. he would have nothing to do with his old favorite. But one day the King gave a great fete upon the River Thames. As the royal barge moved along another barge followed, playing twenty-five concertos of music. These concertos, gathered together under one musical head, are known as the celebrated "water music" of Handel. Every musical instrument then known was utilized in the orchestra. "Ah," said King George, "no one could compose such music as that but my old court musician, Frederick Handel!" At once the King restored Handel to favor and gave to him a salary of $1,000 per year. But though Handel upon the River Thames was able to play himself into the good graces of an earthly king our divine peace, like a river, shall yet open for us a more triumphant entry into the royal courts of heaven. There we shall not have to play as Handel played, but we shall have all the celestial choir which sang for the shepherds above the Judaean hills sing for us the halleluiah chorus of a royal and divine welcome.

But I think myself of one suggestive fact about this same River Thames. Though Handel by sweetest harmony may have played himself into the good graces of an earthly king, yet he was playing his "water music" upon the stream which washed the iron gratings of the "traitor's gate" of the old Tower of London. Through this gate the English Kings sent their enemies for incarceration or decapitation. Oh, my friends, can it be that you or I must ever pass through the traitor's gate, which is to-day swinging over the river of death for those who love not God? Can it be that there shall ever come a time when God shall speak to us an eternal condemnation with the following words: "Oh, that thou hadst hearkened unto my commandments; then had thy peace been as a river and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea!" Oh, for the peace, the everlasting peace, of God, which is like a river!

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