

BLOOD, BREAD AND FIRE

The Christian's Threefold Experience

by

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CHAPTER SIX

NEEDED —A PROPHET

Covet earnestly the best gifts (I Corinthians 12: 31).

Follow after love and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy (I Corinthians 14:1).

He that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort (I Corinthians 14:3).

SINCE here is something that a Christian is allowed to covet, it deserves our careful attention. The New Testament prophet is not so much a foreteller as a forth-teller, carrying on a threefold ministry. His is a ministry of edification, a strengthening ministry; a ministry of exhortation, a stirring ministry; and a ministry of comfort, a soothing ministry.

Bengel remarks: "The exhortation is to remove sluggishness and the comfort is to remove sadness!"

As a minister of edification, he is a teacher; as a minister of exhortation, he is an evangelist; as a minister of comfort, he enters into the field of the pastor. Yet he is neither teacher, evangelist, nor pastor; he is a prophet!

Just now we are concerned, not so much with the work of the prophet itself, but with the need of a prophet. The work itself might interest only a few of us; the need concerns us all.

I. Consider first, the need of a ministry of edification, a strengthening ministry.

Christians need to be built up in the Word today as never before. Our churches number thousands of members who, after years in the churches, are still babies in need of milk and who cannot bear meat; who ought to be teachers of the Word and need to be taught first principles.

Some have plenty of zeal, far more of it than knowledge. They present the sad spectacle of a locomotive with plenty of steam but off the track and with only the whistle blowing, for the track is the Word of God and the best locomotives with most steam only end in the bog when they leave the charted course of "**Thus saith the Lord.**"

We are not discrediting zeal. It is better to have more zeal than knowledge than to have more knowledge than zeal. It is better to run too fast than not to run at all, though one sometimes is reminded of the old church dignitary who was asked whether he thought a certain very enthusiastic sect of Christians would get to heaven. "Yes," he replied, "I think they will if they don't run past it."

Yet, for all that, one of the saddest mistakes a Christian ever makes is to try to live upon his experiences alone. More than one bases his hope on a "happy day that fixed his choice," forgetting that what gives that happy day its value is that the choice was fixed on "Him my Saviour and my God."

Years ago I trusted Christ; but I am not depending upon my experience of Christ to save me; I am depending upon the Christ Who is greater than all our experiences. Thousands of Christians are wasting time and driving themselves into snares of the devil, chasing this experience and that instead of growing strong on the bread of God. It is possible even to substitute studying the Bible for feeding upon the Bible, analyzing what the Bible teaches without being vitalized by what the Bible says. A man might live in a bread shop and study calories and vitamins and starve; and just so may one divide and dissect the Scriptures and yet never be edified.

When I say "edified," I do not mean that comfortable, cozy feeling that comes over one after hearing a good sermon. Nothing is more disastrous than hearing good things without translating them into practice.

Goethe said, "Thought without action is a disease," and many believers are so affected.

We are not edified merely by hearing the Word. The Word does not profit us until it is mixed with faith in us who hear. We were bidden by our Lord to teach them to observe all the things commanded, and we have neither learned nor taught a truth until we have learned to put it into practice and have brought others to do so. We are not edified until the Word has been not only appreciated but appropriated; not only heard but heeded; not only adored but obeyed; for it is by reason of use that our senses are exercised to discern good and evil.

II. Consider, in the second place, the need of a ministry of exhortation, a stirring ministry.

Isaiah lamented: "**There is none that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee.**" Paul admonished Timothy to stir up the gift of God within him. If ever God's people needed to be awakened and aroused and shocked and alarmed into a sense of their holy privilege and solemn duty, it is today. "**It is high time to awake out of sleep; for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed**" (Romans 13:11).

Sometimes I have thought that the most unappreciated man on earth is a Pullman porter who must go down that mahogany lane in early morning to awaken passengers who are in no mood to be aroused. But this business of arousing people is a thankless job whether it apply to a Pullman porter at 6 A.M. or to a minister of the gospel at 11 A.M.

TOO many Christians come to church on Sunday to rest at ease in Zion and across their faces one seems to see as upon hotel room doors, "Please Do Not Disturb!"

It is not enough to be orthodox: we must awaken to action. We have more apologists than apostles. Too many fundamentalists are sound—sound asleep! Our theology needs to go up in doxology. We have the facts but not the fire.

If we had as much vitality as we have had vocality, we would have set the world on fire long ago. We have talked much farther along than we have walked. We need to let our feet catch up with our tongues. We defend the truth, but we do not demonstrate the truth. We ponder it instead of proving it. We preach a dynamite gospel and live firecracker lives.

The power of the Holy Spirit is not a sedative but a stimulant. The early Christians were charged with being drunk on new wine. But the average Christian today seems more doped than drunk!

To believe that we are living in the last days; that we are in the midst of a world of emergency; that judgment is just around the corner; that without Christ men are lost and sure for hell — to believe all that and then wend one's way complacently through a world of sin and shame is not merely unfortunate; it is criminal.

An infidel lawyer said to a young preacher who had come to interview him, "If I believed what you claim to believe, I could not take it as lightly as you do. I would not rest day nor night. I would warn men and plead with them to be saved. If I plead my cases like you present Christ, I would lose all of them."

Truly we need today a ministry of exhortation. Finney used to say, "We must have exciting and powerful preaching or the devil will have the people."

We are interested, but only mildly interested, and this world has never been moved by mildly interested people. The saints who left their impression upon this poor world were men whom God made drunk and all the powers of Satan could not sober. If the gospel is not true, nothing matters; if it is true, nothing else matters. If it is not worth everything, it is not worth anything.

Lincoln used to say that when he went to church, he wanted the preacher to preach as though he were fighting a swarm of bees. This generation is terribly excited about the unimportant and terribly unexcited about the important. The same church-members who yell like Comanche Indians at a football game sit like wooden Indians at church on Sunday. If ever Presbyterian sepulchers and Baptist graveyards and Methodist mausoleums are to resound with revival, we must recover the ministry of exhortation.

III. *Finally, we need a ministry of comfort, a soothing ministry.*

While most of us need stirring, many of us need to be calmed in our souls. "Comfort ye my people" is still the Word of the Lord. The world is living in a nervous breakdown; even the saints have the "jitters." The world is full of broken hearts. The journey is too great for them.

They need to hear the Lord inviting the laboring and laden to His rest.

They need to cease from their own works, to enter into rest, and study to be quiet and roll their burden on the Lord.

They need a fresh experience of the Comforter; to wait on the Lord and increase their strength; to encourage themselves in the Lord their God.

They need to learn that they have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear but that God has given them the spirit of love and of power and of a sound mind.

This poor, shell-shocked world tries to drown its misery in mirth and laugh away its pain, but one has only to look at the faces on the street to see that while they may wear gay robes without, they wear sackcloth next to their flesh.

Some time ago, a poor, nervous wreck called on a famous London doctor.

Said the doctor, "You need to laugh. Go down to the theater and hear Grimaldi, that famous clown. All London is holding its sides laughing at him."

But the visitor straightened himself and said, "Doctor, I am Grimaldi."

No, we cannot laugh it off, but there is One whose cooling, healing touch has still its ancient power.

Jesus, the Name that charms our fears
And bids our sorrows cease:
'Tis music to the sinner's ear;
'Tis life and health and peace.

We need a ministry of comfort by which we may comfort others with the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. We need men who have been to Gilead and have found a Physician there. And what is the work of a prophet but simply to hold up Him Who, living within us, strengthens and stirs and soothes? Said Spurgeon: "In the days of Paul, the sum and substance of theology was Jesus Christ. I am not ashamed to vow myself a Calvinist. I do not hesitate to take the name of Baptist. But if I am asked what is my creed, I must reply, it is Jesus Christ."

That is the true theology of every prophet! **"For we preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake."**

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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