

GOD'S STRONG HANDS

by
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[1951]

But I remember them

all those I have known who "in extremis" have sought to take
life into their own fumbling hands and just to them
I sometimes must preach.

And the Message?

Simply put, the Gospel says that there is no earthly cross before
which a man must stop and say 'this is all, I can never pass this.'

God has strong hands to deal with crosses.

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When the morning was come, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death: and when they had bound him, they led him away, and delivered him to Pontius Pilate the governor. Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, what is that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.

MATT. 27: 1-5

And the angel answered and said unto the women. Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you.

MATT. 28: 5-7

GOD'S STRONG HANDS

Some of them have no name in my memory. I can't remember the name. I have no right to remember it. It is good for them to know I can't remember when we pass each other on the street. So some of them have no name in my memory. Like anonymous letters, there are no names signed to the things they revealed in their extremity.

Some of them gave me false names. They did not know I can't remember anyway, but they knew that I knew their name was assumed and we passed it by. The things they were tortured to narrate to a stranger were true enough.

Some of them are just faces in my memory . . . disembodied,
agonized,
pulled up by
their unanswerable dilemma.

Some of them are just voices on a telephone. Voices in the night-time—occasionally drunken, always confused—never seen, only voices came to speak of their being held in the grip of manacles from the forge of their own smithy.

I remember a set of knuckles, bony and pale, almost bursting from the skin of the hands that gripped cell-bars.

I remember a pair of tired old heels on high lace shoes, tapping, tapping out a tale of misery across and back from a door to a window.

I remember an ancient walking stick rattling against the walls of a sour little room that enclosed and held frustrate its ancient inhabitant.

I remember hands—grubby, gnarled, nervous; I remember tendons swelling in a thin neck to raise a scarred head from a soiled bed in a back room. I remember the noxious fumes of cheap whiskey and garlic around the long story “he” croaked out in a “Hay-Market” mission.

Any pastor who has ever been asked "what do you do all day?" by some well-adjusted friend showing his politeness can remember such faces, hands, feet,

and the eyes—

haunted,

feverish,

eyes.

But he doesn't keep any list of them. The owners of those hands have a right to anonymity. Tragedy was not meant to be card-indexed in a file. Wreckage, human wreckage is not subject to the confines of a catalogue. Not even God would do *that*. Let the heart keep the face and the trouble—throw the name aside until he reminds you again. His story would likely be yours given the same torturing pressures.

So I remember them—all those dear people I have known who "in extremis" have sought to take life into their own fumbling hands—and just to them

I sometimes must preach.

And the Message?

Simply put, the Gospel says that there is no possible earthly cross before which a man must stop and say "This is all, I can never pass this."

Simply put, the Gospel says that God has strong hands to deal with crosses.

Simply put, the Gospel says that a man must never let his disgust with the performance inveigle him into leaving before the play is over. If he should, he will miss the Resurrection that closes these episodes of Cross and Travail.

For:

The Gospel is no theoretical system of doctrine given for the occupation of theological minds.

The Gospel is no philosophy of the universe given to compete with some "one-eyed" and abstract monism.

The Gospel is not even doctrine except as it proclaims
the reality of God the Father in Jesus Christ,

and even that
is just
Given!

Oh, how we have cluttered it up!

The Gospel is no *panacea* for all troubles of the liver,
pancreas, thyroid, and hemo-globin. It is neither *cure-all*
nor *tonic*.

Nor is the Gospel a *condiment* to be sprinkled to taste
on the fat dishes served up by life to those who achieve the
proper combination of prosperity and humility—frugality
and philanthropy.

The *Gospel* is simply the *glad message* that tells us of
Life Eternal in Jesus Christ. By treating of Life Eternal it
tells us how to live in Life-Present with all its crosses. It
talks of the Soul, Humility, Mercy, and Purity. It speaks
of the Cross,
and,
of the worthlessness
of *things*.

Above all, it says,

Wait on God—see what He can make of your defection.
His strong hands work differently and most skillfully.

The Gospel was given to assure you that in spite of all
your struggles, something indestructible inside will crown
the Gospel-led life in terms of peace and certainty. *There is
no cross that certainty cannot pass.* You must not fail to
catch this deep meaning of the Gospel.

Once, even in thought, you give yourself to the conjecture
that our Gospel has no such deep meaning . . . that moment
you give yourself over to fatal passions within which men
live like animals, no restraint upon you except your fear of
other men made cruel by their fear of you.

Without this Gospel-depth, you are forced to lean on psychology which has discovered that man is sick, but does not yet know he has been wounded by sin.

When you lose, even for a moment, this Gospel-depth-of-assurance, then you are seized by *Care*.

The *Care* which Jesus compared to paganism;
the *Care* which makes us fearful slaves of today;
the *Care* which makes us fall prey to the world bit by bit;
the *Care* which Jesus felt an outrage against the
Great God who watches even sparrows and lilies;
the *Care* which gnaws at your vital relations with
the Father, eats your child-like trust,
rots your inmost soul,
and winds you up in witless spiritual idiocy,
pointless activity,
hopeless confusion,
beggarly self-pity,
and bankrupt judgment.

The *Care* which always issues in Sensuality and leads us to try to get out of the prison we have made for ourselves by finding our god in some diverting process outside ourselves—leads us to try to get out of the confusion sin has caused us by taking up new refuge in old flesh and its aged, unsatisfied appetites;

That *Care*, which will always lead us sooner than late to the dread sin of *Self-disgust*.

Will you hear this!

The Gospel has a *deep* purpose:
to bring men out of fatal passion,

care,
sensuality,

and,
the sin of Self-Disgust
which is,
the sin of not loving one's self!

Without this Gospel purpose Life becomes the foulest brew. *They look at me in unbelieving wonder when I tell them they must learn to love themselves!*

In the final analysis it is this Self-Disgust that sends those we remember to seek the help of men they trust.

Self-Disgust is the Great Culprit!

Have you heard it said of old-time, "Thou shalt not love thyself?"

The Gospel says to all these who fumble at life that there is a *Self-Love* which we ought to have in accordance with God's Will.

The Gospel is your bulwark against the main force that produces human suffering—

disgust with yourself—

inability to love yourself.

The last person on earth you will love is yourself.

The last person on earth you will forgive a weakness
is yourself.

The last person on earth you will forgive an inability
is yourself.

The Scripture says we must love our neighbors as ourselves. Then, we must love ourselves, too!

as God's creation,

as God's image

created anew!

Many people have lost this Gospel meaning—or never had it. Many people do not love themselves at all; many feel a positive aversion to themselves.

If a man does not love himself he cannot forgive it to anyone. He will vent upon other people his bitterness against himself. It makes him touchy,

proud,

vindictive,

haughty,

surly.

Oh the things a man will do to those he loves out of his bitter dissatisfaction with himself!

Outside the Gospel, which one of us can go on loving—forgiving himself? You have found out already how unlovable you are to yourself? Aside from the Gospel, Life becomes that foul brew of self-disgust.

The meaning of the Gospel for this day's journey is this:

Only in the Gospel can men go on loving themselves.
Therefore,

Wait On God!

*See what His strong hands will fashion out of
your defection!*

David did not wait to see what God's strong hands would make of his sin with Bath-sheba. It was Self-Disgust as much as anything else that sent that cursed letter to Joab.

Moses did not wait on God's strong hands and it was Self-Disgust that smote the rock and barred him from Canaan.

Elijah, seized by self-disgusting fear, could not wait for God's strong hands and ran a hundred miles to get away from Jezebel at Shechem.

And *Judas* did not wait. What an Encounter if he had! But Judas did not give God's strong hands a chance—Life had turned sour,

fermented,
blown-up!

He could no longer love himself and Judas knew far ahead of Oscar Wilde that

“each narrow cell
in which we dwell
is a foul and dark latrine,
and the fetid breath
of living death

chokes up each grating screen,
for all but lust,
is turned to dust,
in humanity's machine."

Who ever saw a man who looked "with such a wistful eye"
upon what he had done and wished so earnestly that he had
not done it?

So Judas hanged himself.

Thereby, as Dorothy Sayers says it, Judas committed the
final, the fatal, the most pitiful error of all

For *he missed the Gospel meaning—*
he despaired of God and himself
he never waited to see *resurrection*.¹

Had he waited—

had he not taken life into his own hand—
had he waited to see what God's strong hands could do—
had he stayed on-stage as the script commanded;
there would have been a Meeting—Jesus and Judas!
an encounter to leave bankrupt our
imagination!

The Gospel message is this: Wait on God! Let Him make
what He will of your weakness.

Judas saw the dreadful payment made and never knew
what victory had been purchased with the price. But the
final tragedy of Judas was not his betrayal, nor was it his
love of money,

nor of power,
nor was it his "political idealism."

The final tragedy was that he did not wait to see what the
strong hands of God would do to his defection.

¹ I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Charles Pierce who
called my attention to this idea and others in Dorothy Sayers,
Creed or Chaos.

He failed to wait for Resurrection.
He despaired of God and Himself,
He left before the play was over.
He missed the final curtain.

He forgot that God can swallow weakness!

For you to ask, "Why, if God's hands are so strong, does God not smite all evil dead?" is a question far removed from this. Better ask why He did not strike you dumb before you uttered that baseless and unkind slander day before yesterday. ¹ Or, better ask, why did He not strike you paralytic before you submitted to the claims of that fleshly temptation?

or,

why did He not turn me imbecile before some shoddily prepared sermon is allowed to fall on eager ears?

O, God's strong hands work differently. He takes our sins and our errors and turns them into victories.

He makes crucifixion's crime into world salvation.

He twists the crown of thorns into a crown of Glory.
"O Felix Culpa," cried Augustine, "O happy guilt" of mine!
*"O marvelous defection that doth deserve
so great a Redeemer!"*

The disciples had misunderstood nearly everything that Christ had said to them, but now, since Resurrection, it didn't matter. It all added up. It made sense with a meaning far beyond their wildest hopes.

Christ in the strong hands of God
Conquering my defection!
This is the Gospel!

For these men a means had been found to look upon His face and live. They had seen God's eternal face turned upon them in their defection and self-disgust, and,

because the face of God was that of a
suffering and rejoicing man they
knew themselves safe in His strong hands.

¹ *Creed or Chaos. g. v.*

And they were persuaded that life is worth living, that death
is a triviality

They had found a way to conquer Care,
to process Passion,
to over-rule Sensuality.

Now they could love themselves
and all other of God's Creatures!

When a man waits to see what God can make of his
defection, in the strong hands of God
the *Cross* becomes a *Throne*,
the *Crown* of Thorns twists into a *Glory*,
the solid back of a *Sepulchre* becomes *Gateway*.

In God's strong hands,
exit is *entrance*,
death is *life*,
mourning is *laughter*.

The *Nazarene* is *International*,
fanatic *Saul* is giant *Paul*,
pain becomes *pathway*,
lostness is made *salvation*,
the great *dread* becomes the grand *victory*,
defeat becomes *conquest*,
loss becomes great *gain*,
the great *burden*—the great *opportunity*.

The Church in travail becomes the Church at rest,
The meeting house on the corner
becomes the heart of civilization.
Little Palestine becomes the focal center of earth,
and in God's strong hands,
publishers rush to get to print words said by a man named
Schweitzer lost in a jungle.

In God's strong hands
last becomes *first*,
and *least* is *greatest*.
This is Gospel!

Wait and see what God's strong hands will make of your weakness. Then you can love yourself again.

I know a friend who, where she lies, is trying the best she knows to mount up on enough strength to be able to endure the rest of this pain-racked day. Dear friend, wait and see what God will make of that pain.

I have other friends who face today in their own hearts the tremendous, eroding waste of a great washing grief. Wait! See what God will make out of grief.

Look what He made of betrayal—

a Resurrection!

And to that little friend of mine whom life has blocked from every door and window—there is no peace inside and life can express itself only by slapping back at the life she lives. Wait! He can fix frustration too,

and bored loneliness.

and misery,

and misfittedness,

And to that friend of mine, listening today, Wait! Call me a thousand times if you need to, but wait! See what God means to make of your self-disgust.

The sin of Judas was that he forgot that Jesus, along with Judas' sin, was in the strong hands of God. And I forget, too. Nearly every day I forget—

And when I remember, I cry,

O, God, help me to wait to see—

There is so much defection,

Such critical weakness,

here, inside.

Save me from Self-disgust!

I wait for Thy Strong Hands to

Make what they will,

of My defection.

"Name of God," he swore in shock and delirium, "If I could get to that river I'd fix this mess." And in my own heart almost I could have helped him get there if it would have fixed it—but it wouldn't have changed anything. In my ignorance I thought not even God could fix it—foolish youth!

Down an orderly hall, along another corridor, another day, dying brown eyes whose name I can't remember and whose depth I can't forget, pleading "don't let my family see me—yet."

Huge bulk wallowing on thick carpet, wild eyes not too wild to recognize doctor and preacher, hoarse voice shouting—

why in the ——— did
you send for them?

Am I gonna die?

Am I gonna die?

Calm voice, cultured voice, influential voice, coming up out of pain—

"I sent for you—I don't know how to pray."

White knuckles below red wrists tensely gripping bed rail—sergeant's stripes, Scandinavian shoulders, fixed eyes glued to a sick little body while a Catholic Nun

and a preacher
pray.

Whiskey bottle bulging side pocket, weepy bleary eyes, voice of self-pity drooling its woes—"Sure, I roughed her up a little—God knows I didn't mean to do *that* to her." But I can't give up the kids!"

Loyal, devoted, poverty-stricken, forsaken, at the end of her row I remember her .

Betrayed, penniless, crippled I remember him. His brother was a famous preacher in a far away place.

Compromised, seduced, no answer but a criminal one they thought I remember them. Across the years and the pastorates I remember them.

The point is that *God does too!*

Melodrama? Tinted by imagination? Dreamed up emotional binge? Bid for sympathy? Scum of the earth? Riff-raff getting what they deserve? Tales told by an overwrought fanatic

Not on your life! Rather, the cross section of memory of any honest workman in any kind of pastorate through any ten year span of life.

And the point is that *God remembers them too!*

*There is a Message for them
and for all those whose
fumbling hands pluck at life's coverlet.*

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