

Convention Sermon preached
by Dr. James H. Landes.

THE UPWARD LOOK

In Mark 7:34 we have the thrilling account of Jesus healing a poor, deaf stammerer whom the disciples had brought to him. This incident occurs during the period of wandering in foreign countries forced upon our Lord by the hatred and jealousy of the religious authorities of the Jewish nation after the one brief year of his acceptable ministry. As he was returning to Galilee they brought this poor afflicted man to him. Never indifferent to the appeal of sorrow, Jesus led the man aside; and, raising his eyes to heaven in prayer to his father, he sighed and said Ephphata, "this is, "Be opened."

This is not the only record of the sighs and groans of the troubled heart of Jesus, but what is the meaning of this sign or groan that escaped his lips?

Our Lord was touched with the feeling of all our infirmities. He was moved with compassion at every sight of sorrow. His eyes have been lifted up to heaven a moment before - a land where there is no sickness, no suffering, no pain, no sin. Now they are fixed upon an example of the woes and miseries of the earth. Possibly the contrast between heaven with its happiness and perfection - and earth - with its suffering and sin - called forth this groan.

He sighed because behind the individual - and beyond the individual - he saw myriads of people, afflicted physically and spiritually. In that poor, afflicted man he saw another sign of the alien element of sin. He was the

sinfulness of waste, the baseness of dishonesty, the selfishness of luxury, the mad greed of gain, the fires of hell mixed with the heart, the riot of the prodigal, the anguish of the adulteress, the shame of the publican, and the tears of the penitent harlot who had fallen at his feet. This, I think, is why he sighed.

The first thing Jesus did after he had taken the man aside was this -- he looked up to heaven.

Why did Jesus look up to Heaven? And what did he do when he looked up to heaven? Undoubtedly, he looked up to pray. The heavenward look is still the foundation and condition of all work for Christ.

Our greatest failures are prayer failures. Lack of vision, lack of compassion, lack of joy, lack of victory -- all of these are due to our prayerlessness. Our indecision, our faltering steps are due to prayerlessness.

A Vision Renewed

The strength and prevailing power of the early disciples were the products of their upward look. In a life of captivating beauty, grace, and power, they had read God's purpose for their own lives and for the world. Living, Christ, wrought wonderful works on the minds and bodies and souls of men. Dying, he had put away the world's sin. Triumphant over death, he had commanded them to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. His deepest humiliation had become his chief victory. The cross upon which he died had become the throne from which he reigned. They went forth, therefore, with conviction upon their lips and the fire of intense belief in their hearts.

It was the certainties growing out of their face to face experiences with God that made those early disciples glowing witnesses. They throbbed in every fiber of their being. The fire of Pentecost sat upon the lips of all. Each soul passed on the fight to another -- each convert was as good as two, for each one made a second.

If we are to witness effectively, our convictions must be forged in the furnace of a prayer experience with God. Our directions must be given by the Holy Ghost. The promises which inspire us must be promises from divine lips. We must know him in whose name we go forth to be the Christ of God in whom there is eternal life. Our credentials must be indisputable, a Commission whose authority is beyond question. We must have a purpose which is proof against the timidity of disloyalty and fickleness of doubt.

We cannot lift others on the rock unless our feet are there. No man has ever wrought conviction in his fellowmen until conviction has first swept hesitation out of him. If there is no certainty, there will be no fervor -- no enthusiasm -- no pathos in the voice -- no pity in the eyes -- no thrill of sympathy. If we are to prevail, it must be with language and with feeling such as are written here -- "We know whom we have believed!"

If we have looked up in prayer, we will go to the heathen world not to repeat sweet philosophies and moral axioms. Rather, we will go to show them the unveiling of a Father's face -- to open to them a new world of infinite pity and forgiveness.

We must believe that we are of God, if we are to succeed in Christ's work.

We will have such firm convictions only as we pray. We must know that men are lost, blind, sinners without feeling it -- guilty without a thought of forgiveness -- outcasts from the love that is waiting for them -- dead to the life they might live -- groping in darkness, lighted only by funeral torches -- without God and without hope.

God cannot carry out his work unless his people are a praying people. It is in prayer that he gives to them fresh visions. It is when they pray that he pours into their hearts the power of the spirit. This upward look is the sole secret of every forward movement in the Kingdom of God from the beginning of time.

Prayer is the thermometer of the church, but it is more than that -- it is the power gauge of the church. "This kind," -- the kind of ills we face today "can come forth by nothing, but by prayer."

A Sympathy Brought

"When he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion." Evils exist around us unnoticed, wrongs unremedied, and lost unredeemed. Our eyes are spiritually blind, and our ears spiritually deaf. Angels looking down from eternity must regard with horror our lack of concern for those who are lost in darkness and degradation.

We shall learn to pity only as we look up. Only when we think of God do we learn something of his purpose with reference to men. It is only when we see man as he was meant to be that we shall pity him as he is. That is what we want for a revival of our zeal -- a vision of man as God sees him and as he was meant

to be -- a recovery of the lost passion for souls.

Such an upward look would allow us to see man as he is. Everywhere man is groping in darkness. Everywhere man is a sinning, fallen creature -- unable to rise himself -- and yet an infinitely receptive and improvable creature that can be lifted and redeemed by the power of God, waiting in darkness for the light which will make his world new, waiting in ignorance for the kiss of the Prince of truth.

But wait, the upward look will enable us to see what man can become by the power of God. We will see men like John Bunyan, a swearing tinker, transformed into matchless witnesses for Christ -- men like Henry Barrowe changed from dissolute, flippant men into matchless preacher, confessors, and martyrs for Christ's sake -- men like Onesimus, the runaway slave, whose names are written down in the Lamb's Book of Life -- men like Simon, vacillating, weak creatures, men of sand, turned from unstable, unreliable men into men who were spiritual giants. In Christ they found immediate, personal, direct knowledge of God.

Wherever the world has pursued any sore of upward path -- wherever it has made any permanent progress -- wherever nations have advanced and moved slowly toward better things -- wherever men have broken through the swamps and jungles of superstition and barbaric wrongs and come forth to justice and liberty -- wherever they have shaken off the chains of lust and hatred and come out of dungeons of ignorance and brutality to the freer world of knowledge and human rights, it has been because they have followed Jesus Christ.

A Labor Given

The sigh of Jesus followed his upward look, but the sigh was but an instant's episode in a life of toil. He was not content just to see in pity. For the sake of these hard Pharisees, these niggardly misers, the lying critics, and the gay young fool -- in all their conceit and misery, in all their hardness and malignity, in all their weakness and shame -- he left heaven. He emptied himself of his glory. He took on himself a slave's semblance. He chose the poor man's lot. He left the high hallelujahs of the seraphim for the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth of this world's outer darkness. He not only sighed for the world, he died for it.

If our convictions do not make us eager to have some part in the work of Christ, they are as dead furniture of the brain and have no lodgment in the heart. The words are mockery, if they do not mean prayerful pity and saving zeal. Only those who are brimming over with the emotion of Calvary in giving themselves to redeem the world have the right to say, "We know we are of God." The sigh of Christ pledges us to carry his gospel to the whole world -- to tell the glad tidings of his salvation. The Christian faith is not a creed that can be locked up in a safe. You might as well try to lock up flowers and expect to find them sweet and fresh and beautiful when you look at them in after years. The command is clear -- we are to take our individual share in the work of Christ. The promise is clear -- not a cup of cold water given in Christ's name to Christ's little ones shall miss its reward. And the fulfillment of the promise is clear -- God has ever blessed with fruitfulness the

honest labor of those who have labored in his cause. We have the high privilege of being fellow laborers with him. We are where God has placed us, and there we must stay until he gives us the signal to fall out of the ranks.

A Life Dedicated

The upward look will guard us from the temptations which surround all our service and the distractions which lay waste our lives. Unless we live as Christ would have us live, our wings are clipped -- the work is weakened. We must cast out the beams from our own eyes; then we shall see clearly to take the mote out of our brother's eyes. We must come out of the world and be separate.

If we would serve Christ, we must live clean lives -- we must be his servants. If we would help heal the evils of the world, we must ourselves be free of them. If we would tend the plague-stricken, there must be no plague in our own hearts. It is in vain for us to declaim the temptation of luxury, if we ourselves are set upon luxury.

Too many of our lives do not differ in any perceptible excellence from the lives of the world -- lives which everyone else can live. We get and grudge -- spend and save -- surround ourselves with comforts -- secure what luxuries we may. We do what we can for ourselves and show but little care for the lost multitudes of the world. The men of God who have blessed the world have been impractical enthusiasts -- derided sentimentalists -- have been grandly simple and nobly poor and spirit filled. If we will draw close to our Lord, the fullness of his life and glory of his pity will flow

into our hearts and limbs. We must not only present Christ; we must represent Christ. We cannot lecture men into the love of Christ. We can win them to it only by showing Christ's love to them. Not the least important element in that process is the exhibition of our own love. We will only be able to preach the gospel with persuasive power if our lives are recognizably like the life which we declare to be "the way, the truth, and the life."

A Sacrifice Taught

There can be no great victories without sacrifice. Everywhere the deed costs something. No high thing can be easily done. No great thing can be accomplished without the shedding of blood.

And though we cannot have a share in the perfect oblation -- the sacrifice for the world -- we are called upon to fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ. Before we can truly live for him, we must die. There must be a Gethsemane in the lives of Christ's servants who are largely used. That Gethsemane means a dying to self. The bloom of life must come out of death. The resurrection follows Gethesemane.

If we would truly follow Christ, we must dedicate all that we have to him. We must shake off the baser objects of earthly desire as nothing better than dust. So Christ taught us, and so he lived. It is upon souls -- enthusiastic and devoted, full of heaven -- that God has played his music. Although it is the tendency of the day to tame goodness and greatness out of their splendid passion, and although enthusiasm is now a term of ridicule in the realm of religion, without singleness of mind -- without devotion of heart -- without enthusiasm -- without sacrifice -- there can be no real progress in the Kingdom

of God. We must be willing to pray. "Thy will be done."

And if we have that heavenly vision, hear that voice, see that hand, we, too, will be beckoned to efforts for heaven's eternal treasures rather than earth's perishing gold. "Oh, Lord, let me not live in vain. Let me not live only for my own miserable, shivering, hungry self. Thou hast work to do -- let me do it. Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do? Here am I; send me."

A Future Faced

Remember the story? Jesus sighed over the plight of the deaf and dumb man, but it was not a hopeless sigh, for he knew at that very moment that he would repair the ravages which sin had mad.

And it is exactly so with us. The sight of the world's sin and pain ought always to stir us to tenderest and deepest pity; but if we will look up to God, it will never stir us to despair. For we shall know that he who is able to save to the uttermost can repair the ravages of sin -- can set the most broken and marred, perfect before his throne. In a day when we are tempted to speak with doubting voice, and there is angry opposition, contemptuous denial, complacent assumption that a belief in the old fashioned evangelical truth is proof of a mental weakness, let the world not rob us of our confidence. Let us look up, and be assured of the victory.

Do you long to see the churches of the living God speak with words of power? Do you long to see them declaring the gospel with authoritativeness? Do you long to see blind eyes opened -- deaf ears unstopped -- dead hearts quickened? Here are the conditions; we must look up to God in prayer; we

we must surrender our lives to him; we must pray, "Thy will be done"; we must be tireless workers.

The church that has a great compassion and a great surrender with a great faith in God will have great and irresistible power. If we take Christ for our Saviour -- Christ for our Lord -- Christ for our example -- Christ for our motive -- Christ for our strength -- Christ for our theme -- Christ for our reward, we may look to Christ as the prophecy of our success; and the sigh, the cross, the passion will be followed by resurrection joy and victory.

Tell me that we have seven million Southern Baptists, and I know nothing when you have told me that. These seven million men and women and boys and girls may be winning to themselves the curse of Meroz by taking no part in the Lord's battle. They may be gathering around as empty candlestick from which the Christ-light has gone out.

They may be salt that has lost its savor and good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under the foot of men. On the other hand, they may be like a Gideon's army -- each one endowed with the might of an army -- each one a king in the battle ranks of men -- each one turning many to righteousness and so destined to shine as the stars forever and ever.

A few hundred devoted, Christ-like people could transform our convention, a few thousand could transform the southland, and ten thousand could convert our nation. There is power -- power aplenty. Our God is not poor. His resources are infinite. It is only when the Spirit of God has breathed life into these dry bones that we live. Surely we should look up, and look out, and pray, "Come

from the four winds, O breathe divine, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

The only sufficient answer to the threat in the world today is the faith once delivered to the saints, duly interpreted, obediently realized in action and life by men and women moved by the compulsion of divine love.

What is all this to us? Nothing, if life be nothing! If the chief and market of our time be but to sleep and eat -- nothing! If the main object of life be to get on -- nothing! If to push our way into rank and to toil for money and then to spend it on ourselves be deemed a worthy life -- nothing! If we are born to indulge like natural brute beasts our meanest passions -- nothing! Nothing, if the sigh, the sob, the cross of Calvary, and the upward look of Jesus mean nothing!

But if there are forty million people in the southland who are lost and without God -- if there are multiplied hundreds of millions around the world who know not Christ -- if there are people to redeem and elevate -- if there are ears that are deaf and eyes that are blind -- if life is a serious affair, a task assigned to each of us, a duty to learn, a work which must be done according to his will - if there is wondrous power in the blood -- if all things are possible to him that believeth, then we will look up, we will become tireless workers, we will live clean, dedicated, and sacrificial lives.