

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

NIGHT, AND JESUS NOT THERE!

A Sermon

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“And it was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them.”—John vi. 17.

CHRIST'S disciples, when they joined him, had some very happy times with him; and they had just had a very grand day in feeding the multitude. I wish I had been there to help in the feeding of five thousand men. Everyone, who had a share in that service, was highly honoured, and those who were not there might well regret their absence on such an eventful day. But some fair days have foul eventides, and the Christ manifested during the day may become a Christ hidden during the night. Close on the heels of the intense excitement of great success comes the relapse into darkness of spirit and absence of joy. The very same men, who had been rejoicing, with joy unspeakable, in the divine power of their Master, are now left to endure that which is a very sad experience for anyone to have,—everything dark, and Jesus not there!

I am going to talk about the condition of the men described in our text: “It was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them.” And, first, I shall speak about *the affliction of his absence*; secondly, about *some considerations which may cheer us under it*; and then, thirdly, I shall take a *very different, and far more terrible, view of this condition*, and apply it to quite another class of persons.

I. First, then, “It was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them.” This suggests to us THE AFFLICTION OF HIS ABSENCE.

It was a great affliction for these disciples to have Christ away from them at all. Whenever he was away, they were as sheep without a shepherd, and as soldiers without a leader; but for him to be away when they were at sea,—when they were at sea in the dark,—when they were at sea in a storm,—all this made it much worse for them; for, although we always need Jesus, yet we more peculiarly recognize the value of his presence when we can derive no comfort from anything else.

Christ's absence was in itself an affliction to his disciples; and, in proportion as we love him, we shall own it to be an affliction

to have him absent from us. Those who never knew the sweetness of the society of Christ do not feel any sorrow that he is absent from them. A person, who had never tasted pure water, but had always had to drink some foul draught, would not sigh for the cooling spring, because he had never known its sweetness. There is no poverty in the world so dire as the poverty of those who have been rich, and there are none who can know the value of the Saviour, in his absence, but those who have enjoyed his preciousness by dwelling in his presence. If your love to Jesus Christ be chilled, you will not miss him much. Prince Emmanuel went away from Mansoul, and when he was gone, the Mansouliaus did not miss him; but had they been enjoying continual fellowship with him, and he had departed from them only for a little while, they would have begun to sigh and cry in the bitterness of their souls, and would not have been content till they had him back again, and would have been ready to die if he did not come back to them at once. To those who intensely love him, it is in itself an affliction to be without the Saviour, and it is an affliction just in proportion as they love him.

These men were put to many inconveniences by Christ's absence. To be without the Saviour, made the darkness seem all the darker. Had he been there, they might have sung,—if the lines had then been written,—

“Mid darkest shades, if he appear,
My dawning is begun.”

If Christ be in the boat with us, I do not know that it matters much whether the sun shall shine or no; for, if the sun shall shine, we shall see HIM, and delight to see him, by the light of the sun; but if it be dark, we will see Christ by his own light, and rejoice to see, in that brighter light, what we might not have recognized had the sunlight still shone upon us. You all know what it is to be in the dark, and you know that material darkness is not comfortable. I remember being in a third-class railway carriage, with a large number of other people, travelling a long journey at night; and somebody struck a match, and lit a candle. That became the most cheerful part of the carriage, and our eyes could not help turning in that direction, for we did not like the darkness. Nobody does. There is a kind of mental darkness, in which you are disturbed, perplexed, worried, troubled,—not, perhaps, about anything tangible; you could not write down your troubles, it may be that you really have not any, but you feel troubled and dismayed. Other people say that you are nervous, and they blame you, and say, “You ought not to give way in this manner.” That is what they think; but when a person gets into your present condition, that is the unkindest thing that anyone can possibly say, and the least likely to do any good to the poor troubled soul. I do not mind a trouble which I can see and understand. Manfully would I shoulder it in my Master's strength; but when the spirit itself is in the dark, one imagines a thousand evil things. Even good things themselves seem to be evil, and what should be to your

encouragement becomes often a source of discouragement. Have any of you ever been in that condition? If you have, and if Jesus has not come to you then, I am sure that you have felt it very hard, and you have greatly needed his presence.

There are a great many of you who appear to have a large stock of faith, but it is only because you are in very good health and your business is prospering. If you happened to get a disordered liver, or your business should fail, I should not be surprised if nine parts out of ten of your wonderful faith should evaporate. I have noticed that certain brethren, who talk about being perfect, are generally persons of robust constitution, with a very comfortable income, and not much to do except to go about to conferences and conventions, and talk about themselves; but the tried people of God do not often ride upon those high horses. They have to cry out very frequently, and they have so many anxieties and cares which, although they cast them upon the Lord, make them realize that they are not yet pure spirits, but are still in the body. Let a man have a bad headache for about half an hour, and let him see whether he does not feel himself to be mortal, and to have something sinful about him still.

Another part of the affliction of the disciples when "it was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them," was that *their toil became very wearisome*. They were rowing, and they had rowed their boat several furlongs from the shore, but it was wearisome work in Christ's absence. When he was with them, and favoured them with a cheering glance, and spoke comforting messages to them, I can well imagine how merrily that boat went along,—how they tugged the oar as the Venetian gondolier tugs his to the sound of song, and how the vessel would glide over the waves; but now they had to toil by themselves, and there was no sweet word from Jesus, no gracious promise from his lips, no loving glance from his dear eyes, which were to them "like the fishpools in Heshbon, by the gate of Beth-rabbim." Now that their Lord was absent, it was all tugging and straining till muscle and sinew were weary. It is just so with our Christian service; if Christ be with us, it is glorious work to teach in the Sunday-school or to preach in the congregation; and going from house to house is light work to the visitor, for he is conscious of the presence of his Master. But if the Lord's presence be withdrawn, you feel that you must do these things from a sense of duty, and you will do them, and you will nerve yourself up to persevere with the task, but it is hard, trying work.

Not only did the darkness seem to get darker, and the toil really become more wearisome, but *the way grew rougher*, for we are told that "the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew." When our Lord Jesus Christ is with us, rough roads grow smooth; but when he is absent, smooth roads grow rough. It is marvellous how a man, who lives in the light of Christ's countenance, makes light of losses and crosses. He takes them as a matter of course; or, better still, he accepts them as gifts from God, and believes that they will be overruled for good, and so keeps on singing as he passes over the rough road; but if Jesus Christ be absent, a comparatively

easy lot appears to be a heavy one, and where we should have seen a thousand mercies, we only have an eye to observe our discomforts. It is trying travelling when the waves are rough, and it is dark, and Jesus is not there.

Worst of all, when Jesus is away, *all perils become more terrible*. Many a boat has perished on the Galilean lake, beneath those waters which sometimes gleam so placidly as though they tempted the boat to float upon their surface; and many a man has found a watery grave in that land-locked sea when it has wrought tempestuously beneath the gusts from the surrounding hills. If Jesus had been with his disciples on that stormy night, if he had been awake to speak to and cheer them, they would have rejoiced to see the boat go up and down, from the trough of the wave to the billow's crown, like some great sea bird in its play; they would have felt a sort of hilarity of spirit at being in such a brisk gale when the Lord High Admiral of all the seas was in command of their boat; but now that he was away from them, they feared that the vessel would go down; they would never survive that storm, they would drift on to a rock, and not one of them would again reach the shore. The perils are indeed great when it is dark, and Jesus is not there. You will say, dear friends, that I am describing a very sad condition of things. Well, it is no fancied one to me, at any rate; and I think it is no unusual thing for those whom Jesus loves to be put into such a condition. There are many saints, of whom we read in the Word, who were precious in the sight of the Lord; but, among them all, where do you find one who was not tried? "O man greatly beloved," was said to Daniel; and, therefore, it might have been added, "O man greatly tried, and passed through stern processes to prove whether thou really art what thou seemest to be." Whatever God keeps away from his servants, I do not think he ever keeps away the rod from them. He had one Son without sin, but he never had one son without chastisement. If there are many of God's children who have not yet had any trial, I would not recommend them to pray for it; that would be very wrong. The Lord's children need not ask to be whipped, but I would advise them to reckon that, somewhere between here and heaven, they will have to realize the truth of that saying of the apostle, "If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?"

There I leave this first point,—the affliction of Christ's absence.

II. Now, secondly, I am going to mention SOME CONSIDERATIONS WHICH MAY CHEER US WHEN IN THIS CONDITION.

The first consideration I would mention is this. Dear friend, *perhaps it may not really be as you think it is*. You say that Christ is absent from you; but, possibly, he is not. Perhaps you have not really lost his presence. "Oh, but I am not so happy as I once was!" I do not know that Christ's company in the soul necessarily makes that soul consciously happy continually. I know that Jesus was very near to Peter when a look from him made the sinful disciple go out and weep bitterly. I think that the presence of Christ may sometimes tend to breed in us a certain holy sorrow

which, though not so sweet, is yet as precious as holy joy itself. Perhaps, dear friend, you are not just now in a right state of body, or in a right mental condition, to get joy and happiness from the presence of Christ. At any rate, if he were not there, your spirit would have sunk much lower than it does now. Sad as you are, you would have been much sadder if it had not been for the sacred influence of his more than magnetic presence which is really staying your soul. You might have fallen into despair, but you have not come to that condition yet; and it is because his left hand is under your head that, although you do sink, you do not sink lower still. You might have been utterly overwhelmed if it had not been for the divine supports which have been given to keep you where you are.

I will tell you a secret from my own experience. I have had times in which I have blamed myself, and grieved before God, and if anyone had asked me, "What is your soul's condition?" I should have said, "Bad." Yet, in a month or two's time, I have longed to have that very condition over again, for I have said to myself "I am happy now, but I wish I could grieve over sin as I did then. I think I have strong faith now, but I wish I had the same tender consciousness of the least touch and taint of sin that I had in what I regarded as my dark days." We are very bad judges of our own spiritual experiences; we often undervalue what God esteems, and set great store by that which God does not prize. So it may be that Christ is really with you, dear friend, although you are writing such bitter things against yourself, and mourning his absence.

If he be indeed absent, there is one thing to comfort you, namely, that *you have not driven him away by your sins*; that is to say, if you are in the same condition as those disciples were in the vessel. Their Master had bidden them go, and they had gone at his command. He had left them; they had not left him, so they had not to blame themselves because he was not there when the darkness came on.

If you are conscious that you have been living in some known sin, go and bitterly repent of it before God. If you have grieved the Spirit of God, and driven him away from you, listen to the voice which says, "Return, ye backsliding children." But that is not the subject upon which I am now speaking. I am addressing those who think they have lost the presence of Christ, those whose conscious joy has departed, who, nevertheless, are not aware that there has been anything in them which should separate them from their God. You, dear friends, may derive comfort from this fact. Say, "Well, as the Lord has sent us to sea, and left us, we are where he put us; and as this is his sovereign appointment, even if it be the post of trial, so let it be. We will kiss the rod, and even in the dark we will believe that all is well; and just as a child, when it is put to bed without a candle, must not cry, but must go to sleep, so will we not weep, but bow submissively to whatever our Lord ordains."

Further, if Jesus Christ is not in the boat with his disciples, although it is dark, they have this thought to comfort them,—that *he loves them still*. He is not there, but he loves them, so his heart is with them. They seem to be alone, but their names are

written on his heart just as they used to be. Yes, beloved, our condition before God does not depend upon our conscious enjoyment. Do you believe that we are children of God to-day because we are happy, and that we may be children of the devil to-morrow because we may then be desponding? Oh, no!

"If ever it should come to pass
That sheep of Christ should fall away;
My fickle, feeble soul, alas!
Would fall a thousand times a day."

But the mercy is that, even though we believe not, he abideth faithful. We change, but he changeth not; and when his servants are in a storm or under a cloud, the love of Jesus Christ for them is just the same as when they rejoiced in the full sunlight of conscious enjoyment of his presence.

Recollect also that, *although you cannot see Jesus, and he is not with you, he knows where you are.* You cannot see him, but he can see you. "What a terrible blast came down from the hills just now!" The Lord knows all about it, and how it made the ship rock and reel, and stagger like a drunken man. "That wave seemed to come right over us, and to wet us to the skin." Yes, but Christ knew every drop that was in it, and just where each drop would fall. "But see how every timber in the vessel starts; it must surely go to pieces soon." But Christ knows all about the starting of the timbers, and the straining of the masts. He is not ignorant of the condition of any one of his children; and if he has put them in a position of trial, he himself watches over them with a tender and sympathetic eye, and knows exactly their perils and their needs.

And, more than that, our blessed Lord not only knows where we are, and all about our circumstances, and loves us, and feels for us, but *he can come to us.* "How can he come to us? We are some furlongs out at sea." Yes, but he can come to you. "But there is no other boat near; and if there were, how could it live in such a storm as this? Would you have us believe that he will come riding upon the wings of the wind or walking upon the waves? It cannot be." Yet it was, you know, for Jesus did come to them. And if you say, in the time of your distress, that the Lord Jesus cannot come to you, I must tell you that you know not what you are saying. His people never can be in a place where he cannot get at them.

And what is more,—let this comfort you,—*he will come to you, for he did come to his disciples.* He came walking on the water, and so reached them, and he will come to you also. Though he may tarry a little while, for the trial of your faith, he will come to you ere long. If you believe in Christ even when it is dark with you, the clear shining will come to you before long.

"When thine eye of faith is dim,
Still trust in Jesus, sink or swim;"—

and in due time Christ must come to you. He cannot finally forsake one of his people; and when he comes, he will say, "For a

small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer." So be of good cheer, for Jesus Christ will come to you even when it is all dark around you.

And here is another word of cheer for you, namely, that *when he does come, it will be in a way that will give you a higher sense of his glory than you ever had before.* You have seen him on the land, but you have never yet seen him on the water. Well, you could not see him walking on the water, unless you were on the water yourself; and you could not see Jesus Christ calming the storm unless there was a storm to be quieted; and if the wind did not blow, you could not tell whether he could control it. Trial is absolutely necessary in order to reveal to us some of the attributes of our gracious God. We cannot, ordinarily, see the stars in the daytime; but if we go down a mine or a well, we can; and, often, in the deep mines or wells of trouble, as we go down, down, down, we see the brightness of our Lord Jesus Christ as we never saw it before. You know that there is a certain kind of ink, with which you may write, but no one will perceive that there is any writing on the paper until it is held near the fire; but the heat of the fire makes the writing legible. There are many precious promises that are written with this invisible ink; and, until you hold them to the fire of affliction or trial, you will never read them and understand them. You must be brought into this trial, you must be in the dark, or Jesus will not come to you with such a splendid display of his marvellous power and love as he gave to his disciples on that stormy sea. But, look! over the tops of those rolling billows he comes,—the man, the Christ, the God,—swift to help and deliver you in your hour of greatest peril. Oh, it is worth while to miss his presence for a while, and to be in darkness for a time, if we may afterwards see him in a still nobler character, and understand more of his mighty power to save!

It is very possible that, when your Lord comes back to you, *his return will be to you the end of a great many troubles, and toils, and difficulties.* I do not understand how it was; but when our Lord came walking on the water, and entered the little vessel, "immediately the ship was at the land whither they went." There was some sudden lift, or darting forward of the vessel, and immediately it was at the shore. Have you ever noticed how, when you have had a time of great spiritual darkness, and perhaps of great labour and trial, and you have worried yourself because you could not see the Lord's hand in it all, and could not trace the Lord's love over-ruling it, Jesus Christ has at last come to you, and there has been an immediate end to your spiritual trouble, and what has been possibly more remarkable, there has been an end to all the rest of your trials? Perhaps, for months afterwards, you have not had any spiritual darkness, or stormy winds or contrary waves. There was a great calm after all your trials, just as, when the children of Israel had been so oppressed in Egypt, and were about to be delivered from the hand of Pharaoh, the Lord said,

"Against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue." I have had those seasons of wonderful calm when not a dog has moved his tongue against me, although I have had all the harriers of hell at my heels a little while before;—there have been no troubles from above, around, or beneath, not a devil has dared to tempt me, and nothing external has afflicted me; all seemed to come exactly as I would have it, and all in a moment. Perhaps it would not be safe for us to get to land so quickly without having first been in the dark a little while. We cannot bear sudden prosperity; great success is one of the worst perils of mankind. Many a man has been elevated until his brain has grown dizzy, and he has fallen to his destruction. He who is to be made to stand securely on a high place has need to be put through sharp affliction. More men are destroyed by prosperity and success than by affliction and apparent failure.

These are some of the considerations which may cheer those of God's people who, for a time, walk in darkness, and see no light. May God bless these words to any mourning saints who may hear or read them!

III. But now, in concluding my discourse, I am going to make a very different use of the text. There are some of you,—I am glad to see you here, and I pray the Lord to bless the message which I am about to give you,—there are some of you, who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ, and who are not trusting in him. Your condition may be described in those wonderful words of the apostle Paul, (to me, they are very wonderful,) "*Without Christ.*" That is one of the saddest things that can be said of anybody,—"*without Christ.*" Possibly, you say that you do not see any sadness in your present condition. You enjoy yourself very much; you are young, in good health, the world is bright, and life seems to be one continual dance to you. It is true that Jesus has not come to you; but you do not want him, and you think that you can do very well without him. But, one of these days, it will be very dark all round you; and it is a very terrible thing for a man when it is dark, and Jesus does not come to him.

I have seen such people; I saw some of them during the recent financial panic; they were men of considerable business, and they were making money, but everything around them seemed to be shaking. Many firms were failing, and presently the news came that there was a failure in a certain house which would involve them in its ruin. All was gone in a moment, and there was nothing to be done but to call their creditors together, and tell them the truth. In such a time as that, a man, who has a large family depending upon him, and who occupies a high position in society, may have to come down to almost absolute poverty. I do not know what some men, whom I saw then, did, for they had not any Christ to go and talk to, they had not the Well-beloved, into whose ear they could whisper the sad tale of their troubles. I know that some of them were glad to get anybody to listen to what they had to say, and it was a sorry story. Well now, some of you have been prospering in worldly matters, God has blessed you with temporal goods; but

reverses may come to you, and what will you then do without Christ?

But there is something worse than that. It may be that your worldly business may continue to prosper, but there may come to you a mental trouble. It does come to you sometimes, does it not? You have been out to a very merry party; but when you come home, you feel dreadfully flat. Do you not occasionally get into that state? Perhaps I am addressing someone, who used to be very interested in the theatre; he has been again lately, but, somehow or other, the plays are not so interesting as they used to be, or else he has changed his aspect towards them. The fact is that the man has not the tastes and desires that he once had. If he goes where he used to go, he does not any longer find the mirth and merriment that he used to find there; the laughter seems to him to be folly and madness, he cannot enjoy it. Well now, if you have lost your taste for this world, it is a sorry thing for you if you have not acquired a taste for another and a better world; if your old friend has gone from you, it is a sad thing if the new best Friend does not come to you. I pity those of you who once thought yourselves so very good, and whose self-righteousness is all gone, but who have nothing better in the place of it; it is very dark, and Jesus has not come to you. I pity you who were once so self-contained and dogmatic, but who now begin to tremble and to be afraid because Jesus does not come to you. It is night with you,—mental night; and it is night in your circumstances, yet Jesus has not come to you. What I would bid you do is, just look through the thick darkness, for on the crest of the wave the crucified Saviour is standing; and if you will but look to him with the eye of faith, he will come into your vessel, and deliver you. He will sanctify your trouble, clear away the affliction from your mind, and give you peace and rest.

Remember also that, in a very short time, all of you will die. Will you picture yourself lying upon the bed of sickness? I cannot describe the room, for I have not seen it; but I can well imagine you propped up with pillows, for you can scarcely get your breath, and the physician has told your wife that, in a few hours, it will be all over; and you have been very gently told—at least, you have spelt it out for yourself,—that they have given you up, and that the sweat that they are wiping from your brow is really the death-sweat. It is very dark. There, bid “good-bye” to your wife and children, for you must leave them; look out of the window, and see what you can of the surroundings of the old homestead, for you are going to leave it, and you have no home to dwell in for ever. It is very dark. Money cannot help you now; the honours you have gained cannot help you now; and the fondness of affection, which would help you if it could, cannot help you now. It is very dark; but, worst of all, Jesus has not come to you.

“Jesus can make a dying bed
Feel soft as downy pillows are;”—

but if he does not come to you then, man, what will you do? What

will you do? What will you do? To die in the dark is terrible. To live in the dark is more than I would choose; but what must it be to die in the dark, and not to have Jesus with you? May God deliver you! But if you will not have Christ as your Saviour in life, how can you expect to have him in death? Fly to him now, lest to-morrow should see the picture, which I have sketched, executed to the very life, and you be the subject of it.

But if it be dreadful to die without the Saviour, what will it be to wake up in the unseen world without him; and, at the last, what will it be, when the great trumpet sounds, to have no Saviour to welcome you, but, instead thereof, to see him far away, seated upon that great white throne as your Judge? What will it be to have no Jesus coming to help you when the earth is rocking and reeling, and the heavens are on fire, and the books are opened, and the Judge is dividing, to the right and to the left, the sheep and the goats; and, all the while, he has not darted one glance of love at you, or opened his lips to say one friendly word to you? Think what will be your despair when, at last, it comes to your turn to hear the terrible words, "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."

"Ye sinners, seek his grace,
Whose wrath ye cannot bear;
Fly to the shelter of his cross,
And find salvation there."

Look to him, and live. God help you to look now; and, then, when it is dark, Jesus will come to you; nay, better still, he will abide with you for ever and ever.

God bless you all, for Jesus Christ's sake! Amen.

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

JOHN VI. 14-40.

Verses 14, 15. *Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world. When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.*

Our Lord Jesus had just wrought the miracle of feeding the five thousand men with five loaves and two small fishes, so he was very popular at that time. The people even wanted to come and take him by force, and make him a king, but he escaped from them, for he knew the value of that popularity. What was it but a puff of wind? Probably, many of the very people, who tried then to crown him, were among the crowds in Jerusalem who cried, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" And, nowadays, there may be a great deal of anxiety to hear the gospel, yet very little result may follow from it. A crowded house of prayer is certainly a very hopeful sight, yet it may end in disappointment to those who are looking for souls to be won for the Saviour.

16-26. *And when even was now come, his disciples went down unto the sea, and entered into a ship, and went over the sea toward Capernaum. And it was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them. And the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew. So when they had rowed about five and twenty or thirty*