

Christ Jesus, the Way which we knew not.*Isaiah 42:10-16*

Sing unto the LORD a new song, and his praise from the end of the earth, ye that go down to the sea, and all that is therein; the isles, and the inhabitants thereof. ¹¹ Let the wilderness and the cities thereof lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar doth inhabit: let the inhabitants of the rock sing, let them shout from the top of the mountains. ¹² Let them give glory unto the LORD, and declare his praise in the islands. ¹³ The LORD shall go forth as a mighty man, he shall stir up jealousy like a man of war: he shall cry, yea, roar; he shall prevail against his enemies. ¹⁴ I have long time holden my peace; I have been still, and refrained myself: now will I cry like a travailing woman; I will destroy and devour at once. ¹⁵ I will make waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their herbs; and I will make the rivers islands, and I will dry up the pools. ¹⁶ And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them.

Dear Christian Friends,

Jesus, our Lord, must go His way to the Father. He cannot remain on the earth to dwell with His disciples as a man dwells with his family, nor as an earthly King rules over his people, for in the Father's grand design for the salvation of the World, it must be that Christ Jesus takes away His visible presence from the world, so that He be present in a more intimate and powerful manner than before. He sends to us His Holy Spirit, who works mightily within and among us. So He told His disciples. He must go away, and none of them asked Him where He was going, because the mere thought of their Lord going away filled their hearts with sorrow.

Their sorrow was misplaced, but it was understandable. When a dearly loved friend announces that he must go away, the only thing that he can leave behind is his memory. We sorrow when we part with such friends because they are, after all, mortal. While they are gone, we can only remember their voice, their face, or their companionship, and since our times belong not to ourselves, but to God, we do not know whether we will ever see our friends again, for the Lord may choose to end their sojourn on this earth at any time.

There is no greater friend than Jesus, and with great friends comes great sorrow when they must go away. But Jesus is not like our mortal friends, for when He departs, there can be nothing better for us, for He has promised to be with us in a more personal and powerful way than would otherwise be possible if he remained among us just like He walked with His disciples. The Lord Jesus is not like other men. He can go away, and be with us still. No, not like we mean when we say that our friends are in our hearts or our memories. Much better. He can leave the world and yet be present in it everywhere. He can ascend to heaven, and yet rule the nations with an iron rod as if

He had never left. And for us, most precious of all, He can give us His Spirit, a dear Friend and Comforter who will remain forever, speaking the words of our Savior in our ears, moving us with holy thoughts, inspiring our hand to great works of love and charity, teaching us to abhor evil and love good, revealing unto us the will of God, and imparting to us understanding and trust in our Savior by which we are saved from our sin, from death, and from the enemy's power. The disciples did not yet understand how it could be better to have only the Spirit of their Lord, but this was well before they learned just how mightily God works through the Holy Spirit.

Now, dear friends, here we are, in the world, after Jesus has ascended, and what do we see? Sorrow often fills our hearts as it did the disciples'. But so also does joy, gladness, and singing. Whence comes the sorrow? It comes because we do not often see the hand of our Lord moving among us. We do not perceive the working of His Spirit. We see, rather, our sins, and the oppression of the truth and the persecution of the Saints who confess it. The Lord declares in v. 14 of our lesson, "I have [for a] long time held my peace; I have been still and refrained myself." But why then should we sing? Because, as our God continues, "Now will I cry like a travailing women; I will destroy and devour at once. I will make waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their herbs; and I will make the rivers islands, and I will dry up the pools." In other words, our enemies only seem to prevail because God is patient, not because He is gone, or not paying us any attention. We rejoice and sing because we know that God is with us even when we do not see Him.

Even when we are filled with the faith of Christ, we are still as blind men in this world. How much more blind are we without Christ! Without His Spirit, we do not know the Lord rightly, or see the path unto eternal life and righteousness. Left to ourselves, we can only stumble about the earth and fall. But though we be blind to the working of God's Spirit among us, we are not alone. Jesus has sent His Spirit of truth to us. Where we did not see our own sins, the Spirit of the Lord showed us His commandments, and by them we learned that we, and all men, are unholy and vile. In our blindness, we did not know the mercies of our God. We could only assume, and that rightly, that God hates us for what we are. But the Spirit of God takes our hand once more, as a true Comforter, and shows us a path that we did not know existed. It is the path of forgiveness and grace. It is the Way which is Jesus. Did not our Lord declare, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6)? On that path, our blindness departs, and what is darkness, is now light. What is a crooked and treacherous road is now straight and plain. The hidden knowledge of God, which can only be known through His Spirit, is that God is gracious and full of compassion to poor sinners. He loves them with an everlasting love, and mercifully saves them.

Nevertheless, this hidden path, known only by the Spirit of God, is a narrow way, because there is no room there for our pride to lead and guide us. The gate unto eternal life is narrow, and few there be that find it and enter, and that is so not because the way is too hard, or asks too much of men, but because the way is Christ alone, and none can find it unless God the Father, which has sent His Son, draw him. (John 6:44). Therefore, our only guide on the path of Salvation is the Spirit of God, and if we for a moment let go of His guiding hand, the darkness would overcome us immediately, and we would leave the only path of Salvation, and blindly blunder about once more trying this thing, then that, in a vain attempt to save ourselves. After all, if a blind man does not know the way, what else can he do? Either blunder about, or accept the guiding hand once more that can lead him rightly. The only way to walk the path of Salvation which is Jesus Christ is to be led. One could well say, that when it comes to the path of Salvation, "better led than dead." Truly, there is only death, apart from the leading of the Spirit of God.

But where does the Spirit lead us? Where do we find His hand? It is sad that many look to their own hearts, their inner feelings, or the thoughts which pop into their heads uninvited for the voice of the Spirit. You might be surprised to learn it, but nowhere in all of God's Word is there one word about looking into your own heart for God's voice. But this we do hear in Psalm 119: "Thy Word have I hid in mine heart that I might not sin against Thee." Always in the Scriptures, God teaches us *not* to trust the thoughts of our heart, but to believe His Word. We may hide this word in our heart, and be led by that Word in our memories, yet even then it is still God's objective Word. We can go to the Scriptures at any time to verify that our memories of His Word are true. It is not so with anything else that men call the Spirit of God. You have no way of knowing where the thoughts of your heart come from. To follow some inner light is the same thing as leaving behind the hand of God's Spirit and wandering in the darkness.

What does the Lord say? He says, "I will lead them in paths that they have not known." *He* will lead. We will not lead ourselves. This promise would be false if God were to leave us to our own notions and thoughts, trying to sort out which came from God, which from our own sinful nature, and which from the devil. What kind of leading would that be? It would be as if we were standing there with three doors in front of us, and, like the gameshow "Let's make a deal" have to guess which door is the right one. No, if God has promised us that He will lead us on the unknown path, it can only be that He will lead us certainly and surely, in an un mistakeable way, a way which is not subject to the whim and will of our hearts. The only objective leading which God has given to men is His revealed and written Word, and His visible Sacraments which He instituted in His written and revealed Word, that we might be saved. Anything else that pretends to be the

Spirit of God is an impostor. At best, the foolish ramblings of the human heart. At worst, Satan himself attempting to deceive and seduce us. It matters not which, because the end is death either way.

Jesus has not left us in death, but Has given us the Spirit of life. God has given us a promise, "These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them." This promise is made without conditions, and God cannot break it. Jesus told His disciples, "I will send the Paraclete to you" the Helper. In Him, God has kept His promise, and you, my friends, are the proof of it. Your faith stands today, nearly two thousand years later, because Jesus has given you His Spirit to lead you on the path of Salvation, which is by faith in Jesus Christ. God, who has kept you until this day, will preserve you until the end, and will not leave you nor forsake you. For if in Christ Jesus, He gave His dearest treasure unto eternal death, and raised Him from the dead, how could He *not* also finish the work in you which Christ Jesus died to achieve?

It is for this reason that, even though we lack the ability to *see* or *feel* the work of the Holy Spirit among us, we can yet sing a new song unto the Lord, and declare His praise to the farthest reaches of the earth. For there is no one who has been exempted from the promise of Salvation which is in Christ Jesus. The Word of our Lord has been preached in every nation. In the rugged wilderness, in the cities and towns, in the mountains and valleys, in the jungles and the plains, in every continent and island, there is God's Spirit, proclaiming Christ Jesus, the Way to everlasting life. And there, where the glory of God has been declared among men, God has made for Himself a people who speaks with one voice giving glory unto Him who has redeemed them from the wrath of God against all sin.

Where then is sorrow? Though it is often with us for a season, it must finally depart, for God's glory will bring us joy and gladness, and that is His sure promise. Therefore, let us join together with not only the angels, but the saints every age, and sing unto the Lord a new song, and His praise from the end of the earth! His right hand and His holy arm hath gotten Him the victory! His righteousness He has *revealed* in the sight of all the nations! Hallelujah! Amen.