II

THE SPRINGS OF LIFE

Jeremiah II, 13—"They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

PALESTINE is a land of violent contrasts. Some parts of the country have water springs which never become dry because they are fed from everlasting snows. Other parts, and, chief among them, the plateau of Judea, do not possess a single gushing stream.

Judea, as the prophet Jeremiah knew it, was a waterless plateau. In no place which fame has made immortal was water so precious. The problem of water supply was so acute on the world's most famous plateau that its inhabitants gouged out cisterns in the solid rock to store the rain. Brackish and unwholesome though the water in those cisterns was, tasting of earth or stable, it was jealously treasured by the people. Yet, how often a householder would find that a crack had appeared in his rocky reservoir and that all the water so zealously stored had oozed away!

The religious history of Palestine has also violent contrasts. God had disclosed Himself to the Hebrew people as the one living God, the fountain-head of truth and goodness, the abiding source of their welfare. But in Jewish history devotion to the living God was frequently succeeded by an orgy of idol worship. In some periods the worship of Jehovah and the crassest paganism lived side by side.

1Baccalaureate sermon of the thirty-first commencement of the Rice Institute, delivered in the Court of the Chemistry Laboratories by the Reverend John Alexander Mackay, D.D., LL.D., President of the Princeton Theological Seminary, at nine o'clock, Sunday morning, June 24, 1945.
Thirty-First Commencement

Time and again people who had been used to drink at the eternal spring tried, figuratively speaking, to slake their thirst with water stored in dank and leaky reservoirs of their own making. In view of this situation the great prophet Jeremiah put these sorrowful words into the mouth of God: "They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

Foolishly but deliberately, the most privileged people in religious history set themselves to create other sources of spiritual supply. Turning from God the everlasting Spring of life, they made themselves idols. Bitter disappointment, however, became their lot. To use another figure employed by Jeremiah with telling effect, "They followed after the Bubble and Bubbles became." Or, as it has also been rendered, "They went after empty idols and became empty themselves." They sought emptiness and, to their horror, they found it. Their devotion to hollow gods gave them hollow souls.

Today something is happening in our world which recalls what took place in the life of Israel in this ancient time. God, the living God, continues to be, as he was twenty-eight centuries ago, the true source and sustainer of life. But once again an attempt is made on man's part to become self-sufficient and to nourish life at some artificial spring. In consequence of that attempt a pattern of life is emerging which is both hollow and dry and from which, in extreme cases, every vestige of humanity is lost.

As we survey human life today the overwhelming fact that comes home to us is this: We suffer from an exhaustion of spiritual resources. A certain dryness linked to spiritual
emptiness is a paramount and most disturbing feature of contemporary life.

Poets, when they are true poets, are spiritually sensitive to the human situation in their day. One of the greatest of our American poets has given expression to the prophetic truth which Jeremiah passionately expressed.

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water.

Another describes voices that speak out of
Empty cisterns and exhausted wells.

He means hollow voices, voices as empty as the milieu in which they live. A third, writing not many months ago, speaks of

Voices rising up from the cities, where the people are—but only voices.

By which he meant this: In our great centers of population many voices which we hear are simply hollow sounds, without meaning.

Consider a concrete, if extreme, example of dryness, in our time. A terrifying illustration of moral drought, of a spiritual desert in the world of today is associated with a locality called Buchenwald. Never has history provided such an example of waterless wasteland in the realm of the spirit. Those responsible for the sadistic orgy unveiled in the Buchenwald camp had lost all trace of manhood. They had become transformed into warped and frizzled demons. From their scorched spirits the last drop of humanity had been drained.

What had happened to those men? Especially, what had happened to their masters? What was the secret of that sordid hell? Its secret was blazoned unashamedly above the gateway to the place. Those who entered read these words,
"There is no God." Buchenwald and its works were dedicated to the repudiation of religious faith. Refusing to believe in God, the men who conducted that camp failed to act like men; for man without God ceases to be man. Buchenwald is the logical consummation of atheism. It will live in history as a parable to all coming generations of what can happen when religious faith utterly dies in times of great stress. Let any man or group of men say with Nietzsche, "God is dead," and soon thereafter people will begin to die to all those qualities and graces which faith in God has created. The terrible words of Paul in his letter to the Romans will receive fulfillment, "As they disdained to acknowledge God any longer, God had given them up to a reprobate instinct, for the perpetration of what is improper, till they are filled with all manner of wickedness, depravity, lust, and viciousness." How terribly contemporary those words are when we consider the Nazi horror!

But someone will say Buchenwald has no relevancy for the rank and file of American people. Is it not the case that on our coins is blazoned still, "In God we trust"? Yet, underneath the titanic war effort in which we are all engaged, who can fail to sense a certain dryness that begins to invade our spirits. A languor and indifference, a disturbing spiritual drought begin to make their presence felt. In these last years we have become so accustomed to tales of horror in different parts of the world that we are no longer stirred with moral indignation as we were before. Many take it for granted that there is little that can be done, or that should be done, by normal, tolerant Americans, about the liquor traffic. We find ourselves strangely inhibited when we are asked to rally to a cause where human rights are being violated and human personality is being degraded. The lack of religious liberty and the horrors of religious per-
secution in certain parts of the world do not make us excited. Spiritual enthusiasms are fewer; boredom is more common, the art of killing time is more assiduously cultivated.

In academic circles we keep ourselves under very severe restraint. We have come to regard it as a violation of academic poise that students and scholars should commit themselves with crusading passion to a great idea or to a great cause. Some intellectual circles frown upon a leader who exalts devotion to human causes above the routine of institutional life. We are chary about giving anything or anyone too great admiration. An American educator recently made the remark that “The failure to admire for fear of being duped is a progressive disease of the spirit.”

Even in religious circles, within the sacred precincts of the Christian Church, people become scared of anything that would make religion the most exciting and enthralling concern on earth. Cold ethicism, dry convention, threaten to take the place of bubbling enthusiasm. Soul-stirring emotion in religion tends to be left more and more to the so-called sects and cults. Some of us churchmen are as scared as academic leaders are of the presence of a consuming enthusiasm.

When we survey the approach to international statecraft it is lamentably and disturbingly true that the pursuit of security has taken the place of a passion for righteousness. Do the rulers of the nations know that security without righteousness is a broken cistern that can hold no water? Have they forgotten that security when pursued for its own sake is “mortals’ chiefest enemy”? Let them remember this:

Those who put their faith in worldly order
Not controlled by the order of God,
In confident ignorance, but arrest disorder,
Make it fast, breed fatal disease.
Degrade what they exalt.
The chief source of our trouble, the broken cistern which we have most reason to fear, is the devotion to a wilting relativism, to a subtle belief in nothing. It is a failure to believe in anything with soul-kindling passion. Listen to the words of a contemporary American:

O my country,
It is Nothing that we must fear: the thought of Nothing: The sound of Nothing in our hearts like the hideous scream Of fire-engines in the streets at midnight: The belief in Nothing.

In all these respects we hew ourselves "cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." We follow empty idols and become empty ourselves. Hollow souls are the outcome.

If this is our situation, what is to be done? One thing is needful. We must recognize that life becomes true life and worthily fulfills its meaning only in the measure in which God is its fountain-head and source of constant renewal. We must learn to say again, "With Thee is the fountain of life . . . All my well-springs are in Thee."

But, in this connection, if we are to guard ourselves strictly from mere poetry, and still more from what might be regarded as sentimentality, certain very practical questions arise. These it becomes necessary to formulate and to answer.

The first question is this: Where is the fountain of living waters to be found? God as life's fountain-head and perennial source of life's renewal is to be found in the Bible. There His inmost nature is disclosed to us. There we meet Him. There are the "still waters" and the "green pastures" of His presence. There His everlasting love gushes forth.
There His redemptive purpose begins to flow through history. There our soul's thirst for truth and goodness and beauty can be satisfied.

It is not enough to admire the Bible or to say exultantly that it continues to be the world's best seller, that it is the greatest monument of English prose and the most transforming influence in all literature. It is time that admiration began to pass into exploration. The sad truth is that our generation is sadly ignorant of the Bible. The classes and the masses do not know it as they should. Above all, in our great centers of culture it is little more than a memory. Our generation, it has been pointed out, is the first generation in the history of English letters, since Beowulf and Chaucer, in which our leading writers do not know the Bible. That is the reason why modern literature is so notoriously barren and impoverished, a veritable wasteland. The time has come when steps must be taken to secure that this greatest source of inspiration is made available in all the schools and colleges of our country. Never will the present dryness pass, and the inhibitions that enthrall us be overcome, until the river of Biblical inspiration begins to surge again through the minds and hearts of our American people.

A second question arises: How shall we recognize the fountain? That is to say, How can the Bible be read to such purpose that we shall inescapably be led to the central core of it, the reality of God Himself, and so drink at the everlasting Spring. The "living waters" which we need and which alone can solve life's problems flow forth from the influence of a person, Jesus Christ. He is the Fountain of life. It was He who said with strange daring, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." Seated once by a well-side in the midst of a dusty plain, Christ said to a woman
who had come weariedly in the hot sunshine to draw water, "He that drinketh of this water shall thirst again, but he that drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst. But the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of living water springing up into everlasting life." Those who have taken that word seriously and sought in Christ the satisfaction of all their human wants have borne testimony to the fact that He is life's true fountain.

Oh Christ, He is the fountain,
The deep sweet well of love.

The cross upon which He was crucified on a bare rock in the Judean plateau became for Christian experience and world history the fountain-head of spiritual renewal.

See, the streams of living waters
Springing from eternal love,
Well supply thy sons and daughters,
And all fear of want remove:
Who can faint, while such a river
Ever flows their thirst to assuage?
Grace which, like the Lord, the giver,
Never fails from age to age.

And how strange and striking it is, and true to the genius of the Christian religion, that the last invitation with which the Bible closes runs thus: "Let him who is athirst come and take the water of life freely."

But now the final question. What must we do to make this fountain ours? By that I mean, how can we appropriate the living water? There is one answer. Take. Verify. Don't talk merely about God and religion. Don't reduce them merely to poetry or history or theology. Experience them. Take, drink, let the living water from the eternal fountain enter into you and flow through you. A definite decision regarding God and a definite commitment to God are needed if the living water that flows from God is to mean anything
in our lives. This is the great adventure upon which we must embark if we are to know what is deepest in life and if life in all its spheres, in the secular as well as in the religious order, is going to be what it should be.

Let me close with the vision of another Hebrew prophet, Ezekiel, whose penetrating insight related the bleak Judean plateau to a transforming influence. In a bold and sublime passage the prophet describes how a mighty river had its source in the Judean tableland, on the rock upon which the temple was built. A plateau entirely devoid of springs, as we have seen, entirely dependent upon water stored in rocky cisterns, suddenly became the source of a river which from a small beginning expanded into a mighty stream. It coursed down the blistered desert from the Holy City to the Dead Sea. It literally made the desert “to blossom like the rose.” The banks of the river became lined with trees that provided fruit for the dwellers of the wilderness. The leaves of those trees possessed medicinal virtues to heal their sicknesses. The river as it swept into the great salt sea purified its water and made it a home for fish.

How could it possibly happen that such a life-giving torrent was born among the rocks of the plateau? The glowing prophetic imagery of Ezekiel provides the answer. Through the open doors of the temple God entered into the inmost sanctuary. The entrance of the Divine Glory into a house of stone built on waterless rock gave birth to a fountain.

Here is a prophetic parable of history’s most notable fact, its most transforming event. The living God became associated with human life in a unique way upon the waterless upland of Judea. The consequence was that a piece of earth that had no water springs in its rocky bosom gave birth, in the realm of the spirit, to an everlasting spring of
spiritual renewal, to a mighty current which changed history. It is this stream which must become today, as it was yesterday, the fountain of renewal for the life of mankind. This river of God must engirdle the globe.

Learn the secret of the river. I address myself especially to you young men and women who are about to graduate from this great center of culture. Learn the secret of the river. God's entrance into a temple of stone, built upon a rocky waste, gave birth to a mighty, transforming stream. That is the secret of true living. Open your life to God. Let His living, transforming influence flow through you. By so doing you will become true men and women, and your lives will become relevant to all the tremendous problems of our time.

Be clear about this: Your greatest need is personal religion. It will also be your greatest asset. And be assured of this also: If civilization and culture are going to be what they should be, if life in the city and in the home, in the school and on the farm, in the centers of government and the centers of industry, in the state and in the Church, is going to get a fresh start, God must become the fountainhead. We must drink long and plunge deep in the living waters that flow from life's great Upland.

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