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WALKING WITH GOD

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With an Introductory Memoir by

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experiences need not ultimately be waste at all, but the raw materials of the highest and most enduring blessing. Not wasted, that heartache of yours; not wasted, the tears and loneliness and loss and sacrifice. Everything depends on what we do with the trouble when it comes. Treat it negatively, brood over it bitterly, and it is dead loss and waste; but use it positively and creatively, see in it *your* share of the pain by which humanity's redemption is coming, offer it up as *your* sacrifice, provided you offer it up on the altar alongside the sacrifice of Jesus, then it becomes not waste, but power and character and peace — an alabaster box for God Himself, and the fragrance of the ointment fills the house.

You will notice that I said 'alongside the sacrifice of Jesus'; and I say now in closing that if ever the question might have been asked with apparent reason, it might have been asked of the life and death of Jesus. He came to save the world, and for nearly all His life He was set to drudge at a carpenter's bench. He came to inaugurate a Kingdom, and His lot was cast in a remote, provincial village, and Rome and Athens never saw Him. He came to face a task for which the longest lifetime would scarcely have been sufficient, and He died at thirty-three. He was born for a throne, and they hanged Him on a Cross. 'To what purpose is this waste' — this shocking, mad, incredible waste, this most glaring unpardonable waste in all the records of history? So cries the heart, staggered by the mystery of the ways of God.

But today we know the answer. Was it waste, that life, when it has been the inspiration of ten thousand Christ-like lives in every age? Was it a waste, that death, when it is drawing the whole world to His feet? Was it a waste, that breaking of the alabaster box of Jesus, when there has gone forth a fragrance that shall one day sweeten and redeem the earth? Waste? Let the Cross and Resurrection tell us that the most apparent waste, the most heavy, shattering sacrifice, can be the road to life, and to the coming of the glory of the Lord!

My friend, if you have some sorrow in your heart, some secret tale of sacrifice, will you go home today believing that your life, not in spite of that, but because of that, can be used by God to bless the world with fragrance? Or if there is some treasured thing you have never yet surrendered, some side of human nature never yet committed to the divine control, don't you think that that would be a fine alabaster box to break now at Jesus' feet?

CHAPTER 16

Coping with Life's Storms

Carest Thou not that we perish?

~ St Mark 4: 38 ~

THIS is the question — tonight — in our confused, bewildered world, battered by incessant storms of international upheaval. What is the world to do when God who created it seems to leave it to its own devices? Or, in the more personal arena where we have to live, what is any man or woman to do in face of the hurting insoluble problems of life? What are you to say in the day of trouble when heaven seems indifferent to your cry? 'Carest Thou not that we perish?'

Here were the disciples in the storm; and the first thing I observe is immensely significant: the storm came upon them *while they were obeying their Master's commands*. It was Jesus who was first on board that night. It was Jesus who had suggested, 'Let us go over to the other side'. And it was then that the storm befell them.

Isn't that strange? If they had been out on the sea against their Master's wishes; if they had wanted to sail and He had said, 'No! It is madness to go out tonight — let us wait till morning'; and if, in spite of that, they had insisted on risking it, then we could have understood the storm better. We could have said that the disciples got only what they richly deserved.

Suppose a nation defies the will of God. Has it any right to complain if it runs into frightful trouble? 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for what a man, a nation, soweth, that shall he also reap.' That, I say, we can understand.

But this was different. Here it was Jesus who was responsible. It was He who had suggested going across that night. And it was while they were obeying Him that the storm burst upon them.

Do you see the truth behind this? There are storms you are liable to encounter *even on the path of duty and discipleship*. There are troubles from which goodness and integrity offer no immunity. Being Christian — a Christian nation, a Christian disciple — is no insurance against calamity.

There are some good people who think religion *ought* to give a guarantee, who are quite at a loss when they find that in fact it does nothing of the kind, and that trouble falls indiscriminately on good and evil.

But now consider: If religion *were* a means of avoiding trouble in life, if God hid us from the storms, then being religious could be practically equivalent to taking out an insurance policy; and it is certain you would have people paying the premium and being 'religious' simply for the sake of the insurance. And that, of course, would be ruinous to Christ's whole conception of discipleship.

So the question is - What do we want? Do we think religion ought to give exemption? Do we think a Christian nation ought to find everything running its way in this troubled world? Do we call it unfair when someone who is a real saint is struck down by illness and misfortune, while another who is a rotter gets off scot-free? But if we do, don't you see the consequences of that position? We are making religion a sort of favouritism. We are asking God, in return for being worshipped and obeyed, to deal out preferential treatment. Is that a Christian idea? Would it be good for a boy at school to receive exemption from discipline just because his parent happened to know the headmaster?

The fact is - a world where religion is exempted from trouble would not be a better world: it would be definitely worse. Christ came into the world not to keep us safe: He came to keep us loyal. All the saints have witnessed to that fact - from Paul and Peter done to death by Nero, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer executed by Hitler. Jesus never said - 'Sail with Me, and I'll guarantee you smooth seas all your way.' He said - 'Sail with Me, and through the stormiest sea I'll get you to your desired haven.' I urge you therefore, for your comfort and your challenge, to ponder this feature of the story - that it was while the disciples were loyally obedient that they encountered the worst gale of their lives.

And then - look at this - the sleeping Christ! Did you ever stop to think of that? How utterly spent and weary Jesus must have been to sleep on through a night like that! Surely this picture of Christ asleep is a most moving commentary on that great word of the evangelist describing the strain of Jesus' crowded days - 'virtue was going out of Him'; 'Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses.' So here the sleep of utter exhaustion. 'The Son of Man hath not where to lay down His head.' But on this wild hurricane night, a couple of rough boards at the bottom of a boat were pillow enough for Christ's repose.

Of course it wasn't merely weariness. It was trust. It was the serenity of filial confidence. It was the knowledge that the tumultuous waters were the hollow of His Father's hand, and that underneath were the everlasting arms. And if we knew that too, in these violent, frightening days,

knew it and confided in it, our fretful hearts could share the strong ineffable serenity of Jesus. 'So He giveth His beloved sleep.'

But looking at that sleeping figure I wonder - what did the disciples think about it? They were expert sailors. They had beaten the elements scores of times. But this storm was no ordinary affair. Tonight the terror of the deep had got them in its grip. Tonight they knew that death was on the sea. And there was Jesus sleeping through it all! There was the One who had brought them here, who had told them to launch out and cross over who had got them all caught like rats in a trap - there He was, sleeping, heedless and indifferent. It wasn't good enough. It wasn't right of Him to sleep. He had got them into this - let Him now get them out! Just then a bigger wave than ever struck the ship, and sent her staggering; and Peter, hauling like mad at the ropes, looked at John. 'For God's sake, man, don't stand shivering there! Wake Jesus! Get Him aroused. Our one and only hope - wake Jesus!'

Have we ever come to that, amid the tumult of the world today - we who believe in prayer? There was a day four hundred and fifty years ago when Savonarola, of the noble army of martyrs, was preaching in the great Cathedral of Florence. 'Sirs,' he cried, 'the light of faith is being extinguished, the soul of the Church is perishing. The ark of the Lord is going under. The billows of unbelief are going over her. The waves of trouble are swamping her ... Sirs,' he cried, 'what are we to do? What can we do?' And then - with a great shout that startled the Cathedral and heralded the Reformation - 'Wake Christ! Wake Christ!'

I ask again - Have we come to that? With power politics bedevilling the world, and international gangsterdom rife, with a fierce, unpredictable storm of cynicism and hatred battering the frail ship of our hopes and dreams and mocking our visions of the Kingdom of God - have we come to that? To see that Christ is indeed our only hope? That the one chance any of us has to get through this frighteningly complicated life is to bring Him into action at our side? Then act on it, call on Him now. Wake Christ! You will discover He has been awake and watchful all the time.

Thy foot He'll not let slide, nor will

He slumber that thee keeps.

Behold, He that keeps Israel,

He slumbers not, nor sleeps.

~ Hymn 139: CH3 (Psalm 121) ~

Here in the ship Jesus looked up into His terrified disciples' faces. 'Master, carest Thou not that we perish? Are we to drown, for all You care?' What a question! Shame on the lips that asked it.

But we do ask it still. It is not only those disciples' voices you hear; but

right down the ages, a great host of people, baffled by life, battered by its storm winds, overwhelmed by the mystery of evil and suffering, with one desperate challenge on their lips: 'Don't you care? God in heaven, is it nothing to You that we perish?'

'There is only one thing,' said a shattered soldier in hospital to the padre who was visiting him - and there was no mistaking the bitterness in his voice - 'there is only one thing I want to hear about now I'm not interested in anything else - *does God care?*'

There is such a host of people asking that tonight. Here is one of them. He has been a Christian and a Church member all his life. He has had a simple working theology of his own. But he is beginning to wonder if it is all myth and self-delusion. For isn't contemporary history a denial of his creed? All this successful devilry, this trumpeting atheism - how can God allow it? 'Does God care?'

Here is another man, his problems more personal. His life was once full of promise, and the future radiant; when suddenly, down came calamity, and the dream was destroyed, and the cup of heart's desire smashed to atoms at his feet. And he stands there among the ruins. 'Does God care?'

Or here is a woman with a psychological problem, nerves and depression. She can't see any reason for it, but it is there, spoiling everything for her - that intractable neurosis and maladjustment - making her life a misery, so that she wonders, 'How is it going to end?' 'If thou gaze long into an abyss,' said Nietzsche, 'the abyss will also gaze into thee'; and that is how she is feeling - out of the depths a cry, 'Does God care?'

Or here is someone else, whose problem is not the world of failure or depression, but sin - the grip and sting and tyranny of it, wrecking his resolves, vanquishing his vows, making chaos of his hopes. 'O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?' 'Does God care?'

Or here is someone for whom the real faith-destroyer is the biological fact of death. 'The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: surely the people is grass.' 'Our outward man perisheth,' declares St Paul. That is the inexorable truth - 'perisheth.' And 'carest Thou not that we perish?'

What a host of them there are, asking that!

Indeed which of us has not asked it at one time or another? In a world where the mystery of evil and the problem of suffering - after all that the saints and philosophers and theologians of two thousand years have done to elucidate them - are still wrapped in obscurity; in a world that is so desperately indiscriminate towards good and evil that it can hang up together on the same Calvary its Christ, its very best, and its thieves, its very worst, in appalling disregard of any difference; in a world where Herod and Nero triumph and the innocent die, and there are so many

things blind and meaningless, cruel and unjust - who has not at some time asked the question - 'Does God care?'

Bishop Neville Talbot has told of a high officer of the fleet, an agnostic, who was talking one day with a naval chaplain. 'Yes, padre,' said the admiral, 'it is all very well for you to talk about religion and the goodness of God - but look at the world! If one of my captains kept his ship in the condition in which the Almighty seems to keep the world, I'd sack that captain in a week!' That's the problem.

It is made almost startlingly acute by a picture in the Book of Job. To say that humanity must one day stand before the judgment-bar of God is indeed no more than we all know already; but Job, with a daring that takes our breath away, has reversed the picture, and actually dared to conceive God standing before the judgment-bar of humanity - man the judge, God the accused - and God summoned to answer at the bar of man's outraged soul!

So also Omar Khayyam in his great poem, brooding on the same mystery, has hazarded the opinion that if there are many things for which we poor mortals need to be forgiven by God, there are some things at least for which God needs to be forgiven by us:

*For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give - and take!*

'Master,' cried the disciples, laying rough hands on Jesus, 'Master, Thou hast brought us into this: and carest Thou not that we perish?'

But it is time we came to the Lord's answer. To that fierce demand Christ answered two things, two things as relevant tonight as they were then.

The first was this: 'Where is your faith?' Or - for this is what it meant - 'Is it not enough for you to know that *I am here beside you in the storm?*' It is told that once a Roman ship, a man-of-war, with Caesar aboard, encountered a terrible storm at sea. But not a man was afraid. 'Sail on,' cried the captain, 'the ship can't sink that carries Caesar!' That may have been bluff - but this was not. The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation means that the ship of humanity carries Christ.

It is one thing to say - as some are saying tonight with bitterness and self-pity - 'We are all in the same ghastly mess and predicament, all in the same boat, we poor human creatures in the world.' But it is quite another thing to say - 'We are in the same boat with Jesus!' And that is true. He has been through it, is going through it now. He knows all about the predicament - from the inside. If the ship sinks tonight, Christ sinks with it.

In fact, the doctrine of the Incarnation means something even more

profound. It means that we are in the same boat with God. 'In all their affliction, He was afflicted.'

There was a man who was imprisoned politically on an unjust, trumped-up charge, a man absolutely innocent. He was kept in prison for years; and when eventually he was released, his friends sympathised with him. But he said, 'I don't want your sympathy — it's no use: the only man who can help me is someone who has been in the hell that I have been in.'

What the Gospel proclaims is precisely that there is such a one, and His name is God the Father — God revealed in Christ the Son.

One of the most famous of the Greek legends tells of Prometheus chained to a rock in the Caucasus Mountains. When he cried out bitterly, the answer came: 'Expect no answer to thine anguish, unless one of the gods themselves be willing to go down for thee into unlighted Hades and through the gloomy depths of Tartarus!' The Gospel declares that this is exactly what has happened. 'He descended into hell.' God has been in it. That is the Cross.

This is a great part of the Christian light on the problem of suffering. It does not tell why it comes. It does not offer exemption from it. It does not meet our questioning with some neat theory that will solve the mystery. That is not Christ's contribution. No. His way is ever so much more wonderful than that. He says — 'When trouble comes, I will be there. I promise it.'

One of the most moving scenes in English Literature comes at the close of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. The carts were rumbling through the thronged streets of Paris to the guillotine. In one of them there were two prisoners: a brave man who had once lost his soul but had found it again, and was now giving his life for a friend; and beside him a girl in the first flower of youth. She had seen him in the prison, and had observed the gentleness and courage on his face. 'If I may ride with you,' she had asked, thinking of that last dread journey, 'will you let me hold your hand? I am not afraid, but I am little and weak, and it will give me more courage.' So when they rode together now her hand was in his; and even when they reached the place of execution there was no fear at all in her eyes. She looked at the quiet, composed face of the man beside her, and said — 'I think you were sent to me by heaven.'

What is the Christian answer to the mystery of suffering? Not an explanation, but a reinforcing presence: Christ to stand beside you through the darkness, Christ's companionship to make the dark experience sacramental — 'Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale, Yet will I fear none ill: For Thou art with me ...' (Psalm 23) — and I think, Jesus, yes, I know You must have been sent to me by heaven.

Do you remember that marvellous scene in the Book of Daniel?

'Look,' cried King Nebuchadnezzar, pointing to the furnace, 'look! We cast in three men there, and now — there are four! Who is that fourth? Where has He come from? A spirit? An angel? No — his form is like the Son of God!'

It was the truth: God in the furnace, God in the storm, God in the confusion of this bewildered world tonight. 'Carest Thou not that we perish?' There is Christ's first answer: Remember — you are in the same boat with God!

And then His other answer, His final answer? It was that ringing, reverberating cry above the storm: '*Peace, be still!*'

That was addressed primarily, I believe, to the turmoil of the waves: for I have no doubt that this was a mighty miracle of supernatural power. But it was addressed also to the inner turmoil of the disciples' hearts.

You may believe that in all the world's affliction God is afflicted: but you want more than that. You may know that 'In every pang that rends the heart/The Man of Sorrows had a part ...' — but you need more than that. You need a ringing voice above the storm: 'Peace, be still!' You can have it — in Jesus.

Those disciples should have known! They had seen Him cast out devils and heal the sick and resurrect the dead. They should have known. And the nations — the Christian nations at any rate — should know it today. There is a personal force in the world — His name is the Holy Spirit — who can conquer where all our fumbling, man-made policies fail.

And certainly you and I as Christians should know it. I can think of one place after another where I have experienced it — and so can you: the energetic rescuing action of the eternal Christ.

I am speaking tonight to someone who is depressed. I am speaking to someone else who feels at war with his or her surroundings in a world that doesn't care. I am speaking to someone else who is encountering some frightful doubt or temptation, straddling like a mad Apollyon right across the path to heaven. But tonight you are going to trust Jesus when He says — 'All power is given unto Me in heaven and on earth'; power to bridle the winds and shackle the seas and smash the grim spectre fear — and to make your life actually richer for having faced the storm — wind and the flood. It is to your turmoil He is speaking now: '*Peace, be still!*'

'What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?' Jesus, I adore Thee, my Lord and my God!