

Don't Let Your Lamp Go Out

One wonders these days if there will be another blackout of civilization. With all of the war preparation that are now in progress it is possible that soon the glittering lights of our cities and villages will be extinguished. Certainly in the spiritual sense the blackout of civilization has already begun.

A ~~xxxx~~ preacher in Columbus received the following response in the form of a letter from someone who had heard him proclaiming the principles of the Christian faith:

I listened carefully to every word you said. Then I said to myself, "That's something practical. That I can understand. If I were to do that, it would certainly change my family, my business and my personal life. I could not only come to love all the best things, but I could literally fall in love with life". I was enthusiastic, and I made some real beginnings. But now it's Thursday, and I know I'm not going to do anything about it at all. I also know why, and that's why I'm writing to you. It's because I don't want to badly enough. I know I can do almost anything I want to, and I start out on noble ventures and commendable projects, ~~xxxx~~time after time. Then, when the novelty wears off and I begin to face the steady, tough pull, I find myself saying, "What's the use? So what? Why should I study night after night? Why should I go to work every day, stay on this diet to keep my weight down, get up and go to church on a cold morning, or read my Bible tonight when I'm so tired? You said last week, "Love your neighbor as yourself". Well, I think I just about do that, but the trouble is, I have myself. When the whole world's in such a mess that you lose all heart for everything, what do you do then? Why don't you talk about that sometime?"
(copy of letter given me by Dr. Floyd Faust, Broad St. Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio)

I have an idea that there are many people in the congregation of any preacher who would like to write him a letter similar to this. These questions are honest and sharply put, and I think that they deserve some careful answers.

What interests me most about this person is that after feeling all fired up about ~~thxxx~~ what the preacher had said on Sunday when Thursday came the fires had died down. How many here could testify that on Sunday they do honestly feel the flush of the Holy Spirit; their hearts are lifted; their wills inspired to new ventures; and yet who would have to confess with the passing of a few days, "But now it's Thursday". Religion, like a meteor, flares up on Sunday, lighting the sky, but by Thursday it has spent its force, and crashes ~~like a dud~~.

This fact of spiritual ~~xxxx~~ blackouts is illustrated by one of the familiar parables of Jesus. In his story of the wise and foolish virgins he helps us to see our-

selves. Ten maidens went forth to greet the bridegroom. Each of them took a lamp, but five of them took an extra supply of oil in case they would need it. The other five took no more oil than was already in their lamps. When they arrived at the place where they were to meet the bridegroom they learned that he would be delayed in coming. So they lay down to wait, while their lamps continued to burn. When they were finally aroused by the sign of his coming the five who had brought no extra oil found that their lamps were exhausted. But ~~in~~ spite of the delay, the other five maidens brightened their lamps with the reserve oil which they had been wise enough to carry. It was they, then, who went forward ~~with~~ the bridegroom to celebrate the marriage, and the door was shut upon the five maidens whose lamps would no longer burn. With great haste they sped toward the shopkeepers to secure additional oil, but when they returned with their lamps burning again it was too late, for the door was shut tightly against them. They missed the celebration because they had failed to prepare against the delay.

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Jesus told this parable to illustrate the fact that we need at all times to be prepared for eventualities. Since no man knows exactly what the future holds in store for him, he should be prepared spiritually to meet all situations. Christians have always looked forward to the coming reign of Christ on earth, but they have never known for certain when it would begin. But they should be prepared to endure until it comes.

One great New Testament scholar, A. B. Bruce, has pointed out that "the folly of the foolish virgins consisted not in bringing no oil, but in not bringing enough". (p. 501) They did not have the oil when they needed it most. So their lamps ~~were~~^{went} out at the precise moment of greatest need.

You have heard certain persons described ~~by~~ in this way: "He hasn't enough religion to last him overnight". Despite its facetiousness that aptly described many of us. It may be literally true that though we do have some religion we don't have enough to last us overnight. No one knows what any given night will bring, what requirements it will make of us. And the crisis of any night might find ~~that~~ the oil in our lamps of faith exhausted because of greater requirements that are thrust upon us.

Jesus is trying to say in this parable that the emergencies of life test our

character and faith. A crisis or an emergency reveals what we truly are. We are most severely tried in extremities.

It must be confessed, I believe, that not many of us are prepared for the present crises in our souls. We have dabbled in religion and we have daubed our lives with a few spiritual ~~touches~~ ^{splashes}; we have burned some oil in the lamps of faith, but now when we are called upon to endure in a time of extreme emergency and crisis it is revealed that there is not enough oil in our lamps. Some of us may be getting along still rather well, and we are not as yet struck down by the darkness. But time and the deepening of the crisis will reveal that we too have not prepared against this day.

Last summer as I was preparing to disembark from the Queen Mary I had a sickening experience which is recalled by this parable. I had known for a long time that before I could get off of the ship I had to present evidence that I had been inoculated against small pox. No one could get off without showing his papers. Early that last morning I got very near the head of a long line on the ship waiting to get my final papers so that I could get the whole matter finished in time to ~~get up~~ ^{be} on deck and watch the magnificent view of New York City as the ship steamed into the harbor. For eight weeks I had eagerly anticipated that thrill. I got in the line all right and I was in plenty of time, but to my great despair I was informed that my inoculation certificate was not properly signed. My heart sank. If only I had had it checked the day before, as I could have done so easily, when there was all the time in the world! But now before I could get off of that ship I had to go and be inoculated all over again. And so while the Queen Mary was passing through the harbor I was racing ~~all over the bottom of the ship~~ ^{around below} looking for a doctor to give me another shot. And when I finally was through with the sorry business and ran feverishly up on deck to catch a view of what I had wanted so much to see, the ship was just tying up at the dock, and I had missed the whole thing! You see, I hadn't carried enough oil in the lamp of my ~~lucky~~ brains! I didn't have it at the precise moment I needed and wanted it the most.

The poet Tennyson has caught the truth of Jesus' parable:

Late, late, so late! and dark the night and chill!
Late, late, so late! but we can enter still.
"Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now!"

No light had we; for that we do repent,

And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.

"Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now."

No light! so late! and dark and chill the night-

Oh let us in, that we may find the light.

"Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now"

Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?

O let us in, tho' late, to kiss his feet!

"No, no, too late! ye cannot enter now"

(from "Guinevere" from "The Idylls of the King")

He who tried to prepare people for the long night watches of the soul said himself, "I must work the torks of him who sent me while it is yet day, for the night cometh when no man can work."

III-

In these times that seem to breathe with doom we ought not to let our lamps of faith go out. I think that God is saying to us today, "Don't let your lamps go out. Keep them trimmed and filled with the oil of faith. Keep them burning in the darkness". Let me suggest three lamps that we dare not let go out.

-A-

For the sake of our nation and our world we dare not let the lamp of democracy go out. In times of national and international danger we are inclined to curb the liberties that we cherish most while we forfeit our faith in democratic processes. We dare not do this. Perhaps we would be in no danger of doing so if we had prepared our democratic institutions more adequately for this day.

Let us not in these days forget that our democratic faith is based upon the importance of individual persons. Let us not carelessly neglect the freedoms that properly belong to such persons: the freedom of thought and expression, the freedom of choice, the freedom of religion. Neither let us forget to exercise our rights in accordance with our individual responsibilities. Let us not forget our concern for persons and their welfare - a principle which distinguishes us from fascists and communists.

I was impressed most deeply this week by one thing that the President of the United States said in his address to Congress. Reminding us that we stand in mortal danger in this present world, he called upon Congressman and all Americans, nonetheless, to debate the issues ~~with~~ in the spirit of free and open discussion, in the spirit of unity, ~~but~~ not of uniformity. That is a ~~lamp~~ lamp we should hold up for all of the world to see, for

it is a signal and beacon light of our democratic faith. We must guard this lamp because there are those who seek to extinguish it - those who believe more in uniformity than they do unity. Let us be true Americans, but let us not brand as subversive all who disagree with our ideas. Let us not sink to the level of McCarthyism.

~~Thaxthaxthaxthax~~ In the street in front of our house there have been excavations ^{where} ~~and~~ men have been trying to locate sewer trouble. A huge hole in the middle of the street has been guarded by warning lamps. If someone were to hit that hole in the darkness real disaster would follow. The other night those lamps went out - all but one, and someone did come near to meeting disaster. Had it not been for that one tiny flicker in the darkness of the night, a tragedy could have occurred. That is the way we ought to regard our democracy in the world today. Let us keep the lamps of our justice and freedom burning so that in a world of darkness all the world can see. Let us not continue to persecute our minority groups; let us not discriminate against any citizen. Let the world see our lamp of faith in democracy.

-B-

Another lamp that we must keep brightly burning in a world of despair is the Church of Jesus Christ. There can be no doubt that the churches of England suffered badly from the last war. The light in them has died low. And one wonders about the Churches in America, if their lamps of faith are well supplied for the days ahead.

I wish, as the pastor of this church, that I could make this an intimate word to all who have ever been caught up in the fellowship of this church. The light of this church is desperately needed now. If we allow it to perish we have struck a mortal blow. I wish that more people would regard their participation in this worship as a sacred responsibility. Instead of folding their hands at home in despair, I wish that they would come here and fold them with us together in prayer. One thing we can all do now is to witness here for our faith so that our young people and these college students, caught ~~up~~ up in the despair and tragedy of this world, may see the evidence of a host of believers. I tell you that our young people do deeply need you here. They need to see your faith, that it does not flicker and fail when the going gets hard and the pathway dark. They need to see you here so that there may be kept alive in them those hopes and dreams of

a better world - a world that will belong to the spirit of Christ. In these past weeks I have spent much time with these youth; I know their despair, their fears, their sense of hopelessness and helplessness. They need you here to surround them with a fellowship of worshipping faith. Please, don't let the lamp of this church go out.

A preacher recently told his congregation that "subversive activity against the government is not as harmful as subversive inactivity against the church". (Robert Greene Lee, in Christ. Cent. April 19, 1950, p. 494) When you consider the precious Word of Life that we hold in our trust for all of the world, it is downright subversive activity against God and His universal purpose for us to ignore Him in worship and slight the fellowship with indifference which He is seeking to build. Your inactivity against the church is subversive when you consider its direct influence upon the growing lives of boys and girls and college students who see in your life and example the evidence that you don't care.

The world is dark, but we need our church. Last summer when we stood in the infamous concentration camp at Dachau we wanted most of all to be taken to the place where the great German Pastor, Martin Neimöller, had built a little chapel and led his fellow prisoners in worship for eight years. We were sorry that we were forbidden to see that because somehow we felt that it would communicate to us an undying hope in a world of darkness. If all churches would determine that no matter what may happen around them in the world they will keep their altar fires burning, God's will may yet be heard.

In a chapel at Stanton Harold, near the heart of England, there is an inscription which tells of a man who sought in the days of Cromwellian turmoil, to do something lasting:

IN THE YEAR 1653
WHEN ALL THINGS SACRED WERE
THROUGHOUT THE NATION
EITHER DEMOLISHED OR PROFANED
SIR ROBERT SHIRLEY BARONET
FOUNDED THIS CHURCH:
WHOSE SINGULAR PRAISE IT IS
TO HAVE DONE THE BEST THINGS
IN THE WORST TIMES
AND
HOPED THEM IN THE MOST CALAMITOUS
(found in THE COMMON VENTURE OF LIFE, Trueblood, p. 102)

This much I know for certain: in these times which are surely the worst, it is the church of Jesus Christ that keeps ~~my lamp~~ my lamp of hope burning. And I dare not let it go out.

-C-

Finally, I think I ought to say to you, "Don't let the lamp of your personal integrity and worth go out." Guard the sacred precincts of your character, your soul. Don't become so immersed in the dread and doom of this world that you sell out your own soul.

This, however, is precisely what many are doing. Looking at the darkness of the times, they shake their heads, shrug their shoulders, and murmur: "What's the use?" tDown come the pillars of personal integrity and life falls into ruin.

Can you afford to do that just because the world seems to be moving on a tide of despair? Let us vow here that we will maintain our standards of morality and human worth. Let us determine that we will not allow ourselves to go to pieces morally and spiritually. Let us hold our ideals high, though admittedly it is now harder. Let us continue to be dependable - yea, more dependable in our work and various responsibilities. Let us not try to get by because we are in a mood of despair. Let us give our best - *in* the worst times - to the jobs we have to do. Let us not cheat and chisel because everyone else is doing it. Let us, above all else, be true to ourselves, and thus true to God. Let us never forget that we are children of God.

If we can each maintain our personal integrity and Christian character we will ~~xxxxx~~ raise lamps of hope in a world of darkness. Let us keep them burning.

One evening last summer in London I took a long walk through the district of our hotel. It was a zone of many flats and tenements, and several hospitals. I stood quietly for a long time on a streetcorner watching a fascinating sight. It was the traditional lamplighter lighting the evening lamps. He rode on a bicycle and carried a tall pole in his hand which enabled him to reach up and pull on the switch of the gas lamps along the street. For a long time I stood and watched him making his way down the street, crisscrossing from one lamp to another, until he disappeared in the distance. And I thought to myself that this is what Christians ought to be doing with their lives in a world of darkness. They should be lamp lighters and lamp tenders. Their lights should never go out.

Remember that magnificent ~~phxxxx~~ sentence in reference to Christ: "The light is still shining in the darkness, and the darkness can never put it out". Do you believe that? Well, don't take it for granted. Don't be too sure, for that light could go out if you let it. For God depends upon the continual burning of your lamp.