

The Soul's Desertion

"My beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone." Solomon's Song 5:6

The happiest condition of a Christian out of heaven is to live in the conscious enjoyment of the presence of the Lord Jesus. When the love of Christ is shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit, the believer need not envy an angel his harp of gold. It matters not what may be his outward trial; the Holy Spirit is able to make the heart live above all surrounding circumstances, so that we can have summer in the midst of winter, and pluck our ripest fruits when there are neither leaves nor fruits upon the tree.

But the Christian is unhappy, unhappy to the utmost degree, whenever he loses the sense of the presence of his Lord. Then the pillars of his house are made to tremble; his fresh springs are dried up; the sun is hid from his eyes; and the sky is so dark overhead that he walks, rather wanders, about a world which cannot render to his soul any substantial comfort. Were he a worldling he could live upon the world, but having been taught by grace to aspire after something nobler and better, the loss of that is exceedingly grievous to his spirit.

I question whether the most of Christians do not sometimes lose the enjoyment of the Lord's company. I question yet further, whether there are not very many professors who live contentedly under that loss; nor can I account for this, except on the supposition that they can have known but little of that presence their best estate. Otherwise, they must be in a most sickly and slumbering condition of soul, gradually becoming worse and worse; or else they never could bear to have things as they are with them.

It seems to me that a real believer in a sound state of health no sooner loses the presence of his Lord than he begins to cry for him. Where has Christ gone? Why have I lost sight of him? The sounds of his footsteps still linger in the ear. The believer awakens and starts, and asks himself, "How is this? Where has my Beloved gone? What is it that has chased him from me? I cannot live if he leave me; therefore, let me speedily seek him, and never rest until once more I am restored to full communion with him." Let me, then, talk a little with such believers as have lost for awhile the comfortable presence of their Lord.

The first question shall be-- WHY WAS THE BELOVED GONE?

According to the text, he was gone. Read the preceding verses, or perhaps you have them upon your memories. The spouse had been asleep. This was the beginning of the mischief. "I sleep, but my heart wakes." If we begin to fall asleep, we must not wonder if we miss the quickening and comforting influences of our Lord's presence. Jesus Christ did not put us in his Church that we might sleep away our time on earth. Do not fancy that such an active spirit as that which burned and blazed in our Savior's flesh can be content to hold communion with lazy sluggards who toss upon their beds and say, "Yet a little more sleep and a little more folding of the arms to slumber."

It is the active Christian who keeps pace with Christ. Christ is a quick walker; if you crawl along the path of duty, he will soon leave you behind, until you begin to enquire, "Where is he gone" and quicken your pace to overtake him. Are there any here who have missed Christ's presence, and who may trace it to the fact that they have been drowsy in prayer of late, heavy in all the exercises of study and duty, and, in fact, sleepy altogether? Have they been without care for the conversion of others, having scarcely any concern even about their own children; perhaps indifferent to the welfare of Christ's Church, feeding little upon the Word, and resorting but little to the assemblies of the saints? Marvel not if the Beloved withdraw himself when his spouse does nothing but nod and sleep, instead of keeping company with him in active service!

After the spouse had fallen asleep, her Beloved came and knocked at the door, saying, "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled; for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night." Yet she refused to open the door to him. Surely this is another sin which drives Christ away- when admonished for falling into a drowsy state, not to regard it. Depend upon it there is extreme peril to a soul that does not accept the warning. Awful as it is to sin when unwarned, it is still more horrible to persevere in sin in the teeth of rebuke, and after gentle, loving exhortations. What! did conscience prick me, and will I not be scrupulous? After having seen my fault and smarted for it, do I still persist in it? Have I been lukewarm and indifferent? Does the Holy Spirit visit me, remonstrate with me, and make me feel that I am gradually backsliding, and little by little declining? Have I vowed and resolved that I would seek spiritual recovery, and am I still as dull, careless, and unconcerned as ever?

This argues ill for my soul! The Beloved will not put up with our rebuffs of him forever. Out of love to us, he will hide his face; if we grieve him, he will go; if we walk frowardly towards him, he will soon walk frowardly towards us. These are God-provoking sins; it is a defying of his Spirit when

you thus spurn his gentle admonitions.

Note, further, that the spouse, when her Beloved knocked at the door, made idle excuses that she had put off her cloak, and put off her sandals, and could not put them on. She was taking her rest upon her couch, and could not bring herself to come to the door to let him in. Ah! how often self-indulgence lies at the bottom of the sin that drives Christ away! A believer cannot let his lower nature get the uppermost, and yet find that he is walking agreeably to the Lord's mind. Your spiritual nature ought to keep your mental nature under control, and your mental nature ought to keep your bodily or animal nature entirely in check.

A man who, is a thinker and a philosopher will scorn to let the mere passions govern him, but a true Christian, having a yet higher spirit within him than the mere mind, having that new living seed within himself which comes from God, and leads him to God, should not and must not allow his baser nature to reign supreme. If we indulge the flesh, depend upon it- Christ will not be with us. He does not come to dwell with swine, but with men; and not with men of the earth earthy, except in order to renew them and make them like himself, who is the second man, the Lord from heaven; in order to make them heavenly.

If your daily walk is to be with Christ, your daily walk must be in heaven. If you would enjoy the sunlight, you must not bow your face down to the earth. If you seek to be enriched in the things of God, you must not be for ever groping among the dark pits and bogs, and morasses of earth. Oh! soul, are you indulging yourself and taking things easy? Carnal security is one of your worst enemies. Do I hear any man say, "It is enough, my soul; you have much spiritual goods laid up for many years; take your ease"? Do you think that there is no need for you to watch? You have become so experienced that there is no occasion for you to be much in prayer, for a word with you is as an hour with some; that there is no cause for you to be continually striving against your besetting sin, you have gotten such complete mastery over these infirmities. Oh! when we talk so we betray the darkness in which we are living, the self-deception we are fostering; the corruption we are degenerating into, and the desertion we are provoking. Such backsliding as this will soon make Jesus hide his face from us.

Beloved, the simple reason of Christ's conscious absence from our souls is, in most cases, sin. I say in most cases, for sometimes Christ may hide himself in absolute sovereignty, but I am always jealous lest we should charge God foolishly. You are so apt to put too many saddles on that stalking horse. There are such multitudes of professors who would even excuse their sins upon the plea of a divine sovereignty which exposed them

to temptation, that I scarcely like to mention it.

I believe that God does not afflict willingly or arbitrarily the children of men. Neither does Christ hide his face from his people for nothing; but your sins have separated between you and your God. He chastises us, not as silly parents may do, out of mere spleen or caprice, or to please themselves, as the Apostle seemed to think some fathers did in his day; for he says, " They verily chastened us after their own pleasure." But when God chastens us, it is for our profit. Our good is his aim, and his end in using the rod of correction. He makes us suffer for the sin which seemed sweet. He nauseates our palate with the bitter fruits of disobedience, that we may afterwards relish the peaceable fruits of righteousness.

Now, beloved, in each individual case the hiding of the Lord's face may be occasioned by a different sin. It is very probable that my Lord thinks that to be a high sin in me which he would take little notice of in you. It is equally possible that he may think that to be peculiarly offensive in you which he would not visit in my case with stripes. For according to our constitution, our office, our experience, our light, and our several circumstances, our transgressions may be estimated.

You are not provoked, perhaps, by a good deal of noise from one of your children, but half that noise from another of your children would vex you exceedingly. Because the one happens to be of a quick, impetuous temperament, you set it down to natural disposition; but the other being of gentler habit and quieter mood, you upbraid him for his excitement, as if it were of evil propensity, and intended to aggravate and annoy. So you may have a confidential servant in your family, from whom you may reasonably expect more care, thoughtfulness, and circumspection than you look for in any of the other servants. The more trust you repose, the more scrupulousness you require. Let us, then, each one according to his position, seek grace to walk uprightly, carefully, tenderly.

It has been well said that what an ordinary subject might 'do or say', one of the Cabinet Council must not even 'think'. The favorite of kings has a dangerous path to walk, and though it is a blessed privilege to be the favorite of heaven, it involves a very solemn responsibility. "You only have I known of all the inhabitants of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for your iniquities."

You can see defilement on a white slab which you would not have noticed on the common soil; so there are sins which spoil the character of saints that would hardly be observed in ordinary society. The presence of Christ can only be preserved with incessant watchfulness and inviolate fidelity. The sacred Dove is soon disturbed. The Beloved is soon waked up and made to

stir. Hence it should be our cry, "I charge you by the roes and by the hinds of the field, that you stir not up, nor awake my love, until he please."

Having thus considered the cause why the Beloved is gone, let us enquire--
WHAT ENSUES UPON THE WITHDRAWAL OF HIS PRESENCE?
Great mistakes have been made upon this subject. Some have supposed that believers suddenly cease to be followers of Christ, go back into the world, apostatize, and perish. But the Lord does not desert his people after this fashion. He has not cast away his people whom he did foreknow, and he never will. Has he put his hand to the work of their salvation, he will not turn away from them. When he turns away it is always with a gracious motive; hence the consequences, though often very sad, are not fatal. The withdrawal of his conscious presence is not intended to slay us, though it brings us very low, and would leave us a prey to destruction were it not that he stays his hand in time, and gives grace to keep the soul alive under his desertion.

As soon as ever Christ is gone, there is a suspension of those influences that once made the Christian happy and strong. The Holy Spirit no longer comforts the soul. The Word does not enliven or invigorate. The sweetest sermons fail to cheer the heart. Even the promises of God's Holy Book are like lanterns without candles- they bring no light. When Christ hides his face from a disciple, his spirits flag, and he feels a general depression. He cannot pray as it was his desire to do; he cannot preach as he once did. The holy duties to which he tenaciously clings become rather a burden than a pleasure. Instead of those delightful walks he had alone, when his soul went up to God in quiet meditation, he finds his thoughts all dissipated, scattered here and there. Nor can he by any means concentrate them; far less can he make them soar and mount towards Christ.

He goes to his Bible -- not so often as he did, nor yet so solemnly as he did -- but the book does not speak to him. God answers him neither by Urim nor by Thummin, nor by open voice. And now he does not seem to have the illuminations of God's Spirit. He does not dive into the meaning of the Word as once he did.

Providence, again, seems dark. The secret of the Lord does not appear to be with him as it formerly was. He has no enjoyment. The soul follows after God after a fashion; but, alas! he has to cry, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" Thus divine influences are, for a while suspended.

Then it follows that he loses much of his assurance. He used to know he was a Christian. Now he begins to sing, " 'TIS a point I long to know." So he

has to furbish up his old evidences, and eat some of the stale bread, that he used to care little for when he used to live upon a daily portion from the King, even a portion from the King's table. He sits down in the ashes, and is glad to sit there.

Sometimes he mourns because he cannot mourn, and frets because he cannot fret. While he sees his sin he is afraid he has not a true, feeling of it. Though he still looks to the cross of Christ and to the precious blood of atonement, he does not seem to have the power of looking that he once had, nor to derive that comfort from casting himself upon the finished work which aforetime he did when Jesus Christ was manifestly with him.

But perhaps it will aid you in realizing the dark features of this desertion if I use a little simile-- You see full often a house that is left by its former tenant, and is shut up. Jesus Christ never altogether leaves a heart of which he has once taken possession. There is one room in a believer's soul which the Holy Spirit never abandons. Where he comes, he comes to abide, and to abide forever. Still, that room is so secret that while he resides there the whole house may look as if it was deserted. Compare that empty house with a cheerful home. What a contrast between its previous and present condition! Why, 'the joy has gone from it'. The blinds are drawn down -- or, perhaps, the windows stare at you in their desolation. The house looks unfurnished. It is no longer any ornament to the street. Its decorations have vanished since its inhabitants have fled. The house is there, with all its capacities; the home, with all its vivacities, is lacking. The life and the loveliness have gone from it.

And so, a child of God soon loses all his joy and comfort when the tenant of his soul is withdrawn. No sparkling of the eye, no singing of the great hallelujahs; no sounding of the cymbals, even the high-sounding cymbals. He will be glad enough to get a note out of the sackbut now. He cannot get up to those glorious songs which once made his spirit keep tune with the angels because the joys of heaven had come down to earth.

Then the house, being empty, is sure to 'get into a state of filth'. There is nobody to clean the dust; all sorts of spiders and foul things get into the corners and crannies, and the longer the house is shut up the more these creatures multiply. Down in the cellar there is a little vegetation -- long yellow stalks and roots trying to live -- left there by some old inhabitant. But there is nothing fair, nor beautiful; all is uncomfortable. So it gets to be in our hearts. All sorts of evils spring up. Evils we little suspected, which would have been kept in check by the presence of Christ, begin to multiply and increase upon us, and the little good that is in us seems be an unhealthy sprout, bringing forth nothing unto perfection.

Then a house with nobody in it 'decays'. How the metal rusts! How the paint gets stained! How the wood begins to rot! How the whole thing has a damp kind of smell! It is all going to ruin. Why, ten years of habitation would not do so much mischief as these twelve months of shutting up.

When Jesus Christ is gone, 'everything is amiss' -- love nearly expires, hope scarcely glimmers, faith is well-near paralyzed, no grace is in lively exercise. Without the life of God in the soul, there is a total collapse, and a chill strikes right through the spirit.

Has the house been long empty? The boys outside are pretty sure to mark it for their sport, and to break the windows. In fact, it stands 'exposed to all sorts of outward damage'. So, too, with malice and mischief, the devil will come upon a man when he knows that he has lost the light of God's countenance. What a horrible old coward he is! When the child of God is rejoicing in the company of Christ, he has not often to encounter Satan. The accuser of the brethren well knows how to time his tactics and his temptations. But when he sees that the Lord he departed, then Satan takes courage, and attacks the child of God to his serious damage and hurt.

I heard the other day of a good country ploughman who told a story of victory over temptation in his own simple style. He was a man who feared God above his neighbors, and seemed to live above the world in spiritual things. A minister asked him if he did not get tempted and worried sometimes by Satan. "Yes," he said; "I have known much about being tempted by Satan in my time. Why, sir, ten years ago I was threshing in this barn here, and the devil came upon me with a strong temptation. It plagued and worried me so, that I could not get rid of it; until at length I put down my flail, and got away into a corner, just beyond the wheat there, and I wrestled with God against him until I gained such a victory that I came back to my place rejoicing. Many a time since that," said the old man, "he has lurked about my path; but I never stop to parley with him. I repeat the promise by which I found a way of escape that day in this barn, and I feel myself made strong by the remembrance of that victory, " Ay, and just so when we can remember some of those occasions when we seemed to overcome temptation by private communion with God, then we get strong, but

"Let the Lord be once withdrawn,
And we attempt the work alone,
When new temptations spring and rise,
We find how great our weakness is."

Like Samson, when his hair was lost, we think we shall defeat Satan as at other times, but we--

"make our limbs with vain surprise,
Make feeble fight, and shut our eyes."

When houses have been long left without tenants and look deserted, they get up a rumor that they are 'haunted'. And sure I am that when a heart has been left by Christ, and there have been no comfortable enjoyments of his presence, our souls do get haunted with strange, mysterious doubts and fears, vexations and forebodings which you cannot grapple with; horrors that do not take any shape; troubles that ought not to be distressing; alarms that are made up of shadows; dangers that have not any real existence. Oh! that Christ were there! As phantoms would all vanish in the sunlight, so would all these dreary doubts and dismal dilemmas be chased away if Christ returned.

Oh! that our poor empty house could once more have its gates flung wide open, and that the King could come to dwell in his own palace, and make it all bright and lustrous with his presence! Master, see how sick we are without you! Come, blessed Physician! Jesus, see what wretched beings we are if you withdraw! Come, our Beloved; come to us! Let the sad effects of your departure quicken your footsteps, and bring you over the mountains of division to the longing spirits of your fainting children.

Passing on, let us enquire-- **WHAT COMFORT IS THERE FOR A SOUL WHEN THE BELOVED HAS WITHDRAWN HIMSELF AND IS GONE!** Let me reply, there is no comfort at all that will be of any service to you unless you get him back. Ah! but if a wife loves her husband, and he is gone, we may quote the old song: --

"There is no luck about the house,
When the good man is away."

The dear man, the joy of her heart, being gone, she could not make anything go well. And so, where the loving heart has lost its Beloved, it's best Beloved, there seems to be no joy anywhere. Nothing can make up to a regenerate soul for the loss of the society of her Lord.

And yet some considerations may help to stay us while we are seeking for it. Though he is gone, he is our Beloved still. Though we cannot see him, yet we love him; and if we cannot enjoy him, we thirst after him, and that is some consolation, though it be a poor consolation, to think it has not quite lost all its life, for it has got life enough to hurt, and life enough to be in pain, and life enough to feel itself in exile until Christ's return.

Methinks, too, there is some comfort in this, that though he is gone, he is gone out of love. Was it in a tiff of anger? yet it was rather a rebuke of our sins than a rejection of our people. Christ withdraws because he needs to

bring us to our senses, and to draw us more closely to himself. He knows that if we were to have enjoyments, and yet walk in sin, this would be highly dangerous; therefore, these enjoyments must be withheld until the heart is broken, and the soul abhors itself in dust and ashes. It is some comfort also, that though he is gone, he is not gone out of earshot. Jesus Christ can still hear the cry of his people. No, he is not gone beyond the reach of his eyesight. He is looking upon his poor deserted one to see what the effect of his hiding himself is.

And there is this to be said, that he is not so far gone but what at any moment he can return, and his return can at once make our souls like the chariots of Amminadab. He can rise upon our darkness, and that in the next instant if so it pressed him. He is gone, but he is not altogether gone. He has not taken his love from us, nor shall his loving-kindness utterly fail. Still on his hands he bears the marks of his passion for our salvation. Still on his breast-plate glitter the jewels that bear our names. He cannot forget us, though he hides himself. He may be asleep, but it is in the same boat with us, and near the helm. He may appear to have utterly deserted us, but "can a woman forget her sucking child that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb", Yes, they may forget, but Christ shall never forget his saints.

But now, lastly-- WHAT IS OUR DUTY IN SUCH A PLIGHT?

If he is gone, what then? I answer -- our duty is to repent of that which has driven him away. We must institute a search at once. Bunyan describes the citizens of Mansoul as searching for the cause why Emmanuel had withdrawn himself, and they took Master Carnal-Security, and burned his house, and hanged him on a gallows on the site where the house stood, for it was through feasting with him that the Prince was angered, and his subjects lost his presence.

Search yourselves if you are not as happy as you were; if you are not living as near heaven-gate as you were, search yourselves. And having so done, and found out the evil, ask grace to be purged of it. Oh! you will fall into that evil again if you trust to your own strength, but in reliance upon the Holy Spirit's power you can overcome it; you can put your foot upon the neck of this evil, and so destroy it that it shall not molest you again.

And then, beloved, let me earnestly entreat you -- and I am speaking more to myself, perhaps, than I am to any of you -- to stir up your whole soul to recover lost ground. Be ashamed that there is any lost ground to recover. Oh! it is easier to lose Christ than it is to find him after we have lost him. It is easier to go straight on in the strength of grace than it is to have to go back

to find your roll which you have lost under the settle in the harbor of ease, and then, after going back, to have to go over the same ground again.

When you have got the wings of an eagle, what blessed work it is to soar, and to pass over long tracks of country! But when the eagle-wing is gone, and you have to limp painfully along, like David, with broken bones, it is hard work. But, beloved, if you have slipped at all, ask grace to recover now. For my own part, I feel I have so little grace that I have none to lose. As to falling back -- oh! what should we be if we fell at all back, for we are back enough now! We are nowhere at all in comparison with the saints of God in the olden times. We are but beginners and babes, but where, where, where shall we be if we are to go farther back still? No, no, sovereign grace, prevent so dreadful a catastrophe! Press forward.

And, brethren, will it not be a great thing and a right thing for us to endeavor to set apart much time for special prayer that we may have lost grace restored? Should we not set ourselves to this one thing, that we must get back by the simplicity of faith to the cross-foot, and by the earnestness of love unto the bosom of the Master once more, and that we will not be satisfied with preaching, and praying, and going to places of worship, or with ordinances, or with anything, until we get Christ back again? Oh! my soul, I charge you be content with nothing until you get your Lord again. Say, with the good housewife I spoke of just now, whose husband was from home, "Yes, this room shall be decorated, and every part of the house shall be cleansed, but, ah! the joy of my heart will be to see him return, and until he come the house cannot be cheerful and joyous." It is so with our souls. We must have the King back, and back soon. But when he does come back, we must hold him fast, and not let him go. Charge your souls to be more careful in the future, lest you again provoke him to jealousy.

Alas! for those who never knew my Lord! Oh! may they seek him early, and find him speedily! If it is sad to lose his presence for awhile, what must it be to live and die without Christ? Oh! that is a black word for anyone to have written on his brow-- "Without Christ." If you are in that condition, dear hearer, may divine grace bring you to Christ, and Christ to you, that you may enjoy the fellowship of his love! Amen.

No. 3552. Published on Feb. 22nd, 1917. Delivered by C. H. Spurgeon, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington.