

OVERSHADOWING CLOUDS

"While he thus spake, there came a cloud, and overshadowed them: and they feared as they entered into the cloud. And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him." Luke 9:34-35.

Clouds have a conspicuous place in the Scriptures. Across the sky of human history they have drifted since that day when, on the one that poured the deluge upon the earth, God hung out the bow of a gracious promise. With a pillar of cloud God guided Israel from bondage to freedom--from Goshen to Canaan. It was in a cloud that God came down to talk with Moses on the summit of Sinai. It was in a cloud that Elijah was taken up into heaven, and Christ passed through a cloud from Olivet to the right hand of the Father. Out of the clouds God waters the parched fields, and in them He weaves the bow of an everlasting promise. When our present dispensation has run its course, Christ will return in a cloud to receive His people unto Himself.

Let us think of the clouds that from time to time overshadow the lives of God's people, that we may learn, if we can, the message that they bring. Clouds never come empty-handed, and if we do not receive their blessing the fault is our own. On the mount of transfiguration the disciples were terrified but in after years that mountain experience became a great inspiration. In all ages the messengers of sorrow have perplexed the people of God. Both saints and sinners have marveled when the children of God have been subjected to adversity. David tells us that he almost lost his faith when he saw the saints in their sorrow while the ungodly had an abundance of material prosperity. This is no new experience. Abraham and Joseph, Moses and Elijah, and all the prophets had their seasons of sorrow and suffering. So dense was the cloud that settled over Calvary that Christ exclaimed, "my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Reason has no answer to give to this question. Only faith can kiss the hand that holds the rod, and declare in the midst of the tempest, "All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." Because there is always so much suffering and sorrow in the world, a sermon for the comforting of the saints is never out of place.

You will recall at once the setting of our text. Christ desired to withdraw from the crowd and sought the quiet and peace of the mountain. He did not go there alone, but took with Him his three most intimate disciples--Peter, James and John. All three were strong, hardy men, accustomed to taking risks, used to battling with the elements. There on the mountainside they entered the cloud. A cloud is a thin vaporish matter floating between heaven and earth. Clouds are of various shapes, sizes and hues, and have a multitude of uses. Both by their presence and their absence, they influence our feelings and modify our health. Some days they make all of the difference to us between gaiety and gloom. The sudden appearance on a fine day of a huge black cloud darkening the sky and overhanging the earth frequently awakens a general apprehension. Birds fly about wildly, insects retire, beasts become noisy and restless, and human beings serious and pensive. Like the clouds that overhang and surround us, so the sorrows of life come and go with variable pace, and alternate our days with changeful light and shade. Few are the altogether cloudless days of the year, and few the days of our lives that are void of anxieties and troubles.

I. Overshadowing Clouds.

"There came a cloud, and overshadowed them." Of the exact time of that event, we are not told. It was probably at night because it was the custom of our Lord to retire in the evening to some secluded place for prayer and meditation, and we know that He was praying when the transfiguration took place. Moreover, the disciples who were with Him were asleep at the beginning of the great scene. Then, too, the cloud that terrified them was bright and shining. There would not be anything startling in a bright cloud at midday, but at midnight it would indeed be startling.

1. Clouds overshadowed the very choicest of the apostolic band. Peter, James and John were of the inner group who stood nearest to the Master, and yet it was to them that this terrifying experience came. Whatever else it may mean, our passing through a cloud is no evidence of the divine displeasure.

It is as true today as it was in the time of Isaiah that God chooses His people in the furnace of affliction, and to us there is no greater mystery in this world than that of the sufferings and sorrows of the saints. We still wonder that Potiphar's wife should revel in luxury while Joseph languished for years in an Egyptian dungeon. Why should Pharaoh live on the fat of the land while the loved of the Lord toiled under the crack of the whip of a taskmaster? David was chased like a partridge on the mountain, while Saul, the rejected of Jehovah, continued to live in a palace. The infamous Jezebel had an ivory palace in which to live, and was fed on the dainties of the land, by the hands of royal servants, while Elijah the faithful slept under a juniper tree, and had his food served to him by unclean birds. While Herod was fattening on the spoils of Canaan, the Son of God was nailed to a Roman cross and given wormwood and gall to drink when He thirsted.

2. Clouds overshadowed the choicest of the disciples while they were actively engaged in the Master's service. One of the first questions to leap to our lips when we see the cloud coming is, "What evil have I done that led God to send this sorrow to me?" We have come to associate all pain and disappointment with divine displeasure. What we need to realize is that God is never angry with His people, and that love guides every providence that touches our lives. Most of us can believe that God laid our sin on Jesus Christ and put it away in that great sacrifice at Calvary; but how many of us really believe Him when He says that all things work together for our good? If we really believed that, then we would welcome our clouds even as we welcome the sunshine of prosperity. It is said that when first they shut John Bunyan up in Bedford jail he used to stand before his barred window, looking out on the crowds that were passing and to whom he desired to preach, and in the bitterness of his soul pray that God would open the prison door and let him out to proclaim the gospel to the multitude. Doubtless, John Bunyan is now glad that God did not answer his prayer in the way that he wanted it, but that He shut him up to the writing of his immortal allegory. The things that we can do are those God wants us to do, and it is for a larger fruitage in that field that He is preparing us now.

3. Clouds are passing things.

It is the blue sky with its sun and its stars that abides, while the black clouds come and go. Too many of us are like Simon Peter and want to make booths and abide under the cloud. Some cling to their grief as the ivy clings to the wall. They remember every affliction, while they forget a thousand blessings. They keep anniversaries of all their afflictions. Call on them today, and with mournful tones they will tell you that so many years ago mother died. Go a little later and they will inform you that so many years ago a dear child went to heaven. They always remember the date when they went to the hospital, but they have forgotten the morning they were dismissed. Instead of asking, "What evil have I done that God sends me this package wrapped in black?" let us receive it from His hand and ask what new mercy there is in this gift from our Father.

Clouds are necessary in the physical world; also, in human experience. It would not be well for us to pass our days in the unrelieved glare of shadowless light. We should become very hard and unsympathetic. It was said of a certain lady: "Yes, she has become much softer since her trouble." We understand the expression: "He has mellowed with the years." How much are clouds worth? More than you and I know. We shall only know their full worth when we stand in the "land of pure delight." Clouds are the watercarriers of the earth; also, God's great life-refreshers.

II. Overwhelming Consternation.

"And they feared as they entered into the cloud." It is to their credit, however, that, even though they were afraid, they did not hesitate, hold back or refuse to enter it, but they went forward. To be afraid and yet to go forward is the highest form of courage. Evidently they were afraid of the unknown.

What are some of the things of which we are afraid when the clouds overshadow us?

1. That God has forsaken us.

Satan is always ready to whisper this into the troubled heart. He will dig up some old sins and flaunt them before us and then tell us that God has grown weary of our sinfulness and cast us out of His presence. How terrible he can make this appear every tried soul knows. What we need to know is that God is never nearer to His people than when they are passing through some sore trial, and He never loves us more tenderly than when our hearts are almost broken with sorrow. Very little is said in the Bible about God's presence with His people in times of prosperity. Of course He is there, but then we have no doubt about it. But when the storm comes, then He puts His arm about us and assures us that we need not fear any evil.

2. That no good can possibly come to us through our affliction.

One of the remarkable things about God's treatment of His children is that He does not always state what pay we shall receive for our service, but He does promise an adequate remuneration, one which will satisfy us when it is received. If we treat affliction and sorrow as friends, they will bring us a friend's compensation, but if we treat them as an enemy we shall receive only the recompense of an enemy. Thrice blessed are those who can see the hand of God behind the shadow that darkens their pathway.

III. Overcoming Comment.

"There came a voice out of the cloud saying, this is my beloved Son, hear ye him."

While they were overshadowed by the cloud, and hushed in fear, the disciples heard the voice of God addressing them and testifying to the deity of Christ. It was the very testimony which they needed. While under the cloud, they discovered the new and larger meaning of Christ's mission. He talked with Moses and Elijah, and the subject of their conversation was the death He was about to undergo at Jerusalem. It is when Christ delivers us from some great and crushing sorrow and brings us out into a large place that we discover that He is more than a great teacher—He is a divine deliverer. While they were under the cloud, they discovered Christ's place in the unfolding of the divine plan.

As we come to the table of the Lord, let us ever remember that it was first prepared amid the blackness of denial and betrayal, desertion and death. Let us bring all our sorrows and mingle them with those of the Man of Sorrows, and as we eat the bread and drink the cup, let us not forget the fruitage that the world has gathered from that great scene of suffering.