

LUMINOUS LIVES

"Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain."
Philippians 2:14-16.

In some of the churches which were under Paul's oversight murmuring and strife were almost intolerable, but in the church at Philippi they were merely incipient. In his letters to the other churches Paul wrote for the purpose of correction, but in his letter to the Philippians he wrote for the purpose of prevention. Few exhortations are more incisive or demanding than the simple command: "Do all things without murmurings and disputings." He was practicing what he preached. He was a prisoner in Rome for preaching the gospel of Christ, but he neither murmured against God nor against men. He had learned how to be content and to "rejoice in the Lord" under all circumstances. Even though he was in prison he wrote this epistle of joy.

The word which Paul used for murmuring, "goggusmon," is an unusual and expressive word. It means "to mutter." It was used of "the cooing of a dove." In it we catch the suggested strain of monotony, for it continues to go on and on. If permitted to persist, sooner or later murmuring and grumbling break out in disputing. The sin of murmuring is displeasing to God. For that reason, the murmuring spirit is to be shunned by the Christian.

People murmur against God and against others. That murmuring is a common sin the history of God's chosen people abundantly shows. They murmured again and again. Oh, what murmurers they were! Soon after they were delivered from the bondage of Egypt, God led them into a place called Marah. Without waiting to see what God intended to do, they at once murmured. They met their very first hardship with murmuring. (Exodus 15:23-27). God knew all of the time what He was going to do for them, but because His plan was not made known to them immediately they complained, murmured and grumbled. God led them there to test them, for the Bible tells us, "And there he proved them." Because they wanted everything to be sweet and easy, when that was not the case they murmured.

The murmuring spirit is not easily cured. The chosen people soon murmured again. When they were led into the wilderness the Bible said, "And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured." This time it was because there was no bread to eat. What short memories they had! They had forgotten so soon the faithfulness and mercy of God. There was no excuse for their murmuring. God had met their need before, and He could meet it again. He had led them into the wilderness, and He was certainly capable of caring for them while they were there. The fact is, there is never any real justification for the murmuring of God's children.

No sooner had God led the chosen people into their next experience than we read, "And the people murmured" (Exodus 17:3). They had not yet learned their lesson. The spirit of murmuring is a stubborn one and it clings. These people murmured every time they met with a difficult experience.

Murmuring is very common in human history. Great is the company of disgruntled and disappointed ones who complain about or criticize nearly everything that is done for God. If asked to do anything, they consider it either too menial or too much; it does not give them enough prominence or it puts too heavy a load upon them. Something is wrong somewhere, and they must coo their complaint in wearisome monotony. There is no more fertile field for frustration of God's work than this spirit. Nothing is more unlike Christ. Certainly God is not having His way in the heart of a chronic complainer.

God loves a cheerful worker, but the devil dances with impish delight over the strife and schisms which murmurers cause. Avoiding murmurings and disputings is the mark of a truly spiritual Christian. When people do things without murmuring and disputing their lives are radiant. Christ is always grieved by murmuring, complaining and disputing. When people pout, they do not shine.

Are you shining or whining? Are you a shiner or a whiner? It takes more power to give light than to make sound. It takes a lot more grace to manifest Christ than to murmur about things. It takes a lot more Christlikeness to shine than it does to whine. Not only are Christians to be beneficent influences, shining "as lights in the world," but they are to be positive and effective witnesses. When we "shine as lights" we are passively Christian. When we "hold forth the word of life" we are actively Christian. In one case we are character witnesses. In the other case we are articulate witnesses. We are to be both lights and voices. We are to shine and to speak. We are to be felt and to be heard.

As the moon and the stars appear in the night, so the Christians come out to give light in the darkness. A church is a lighthouse in a dark place. The darker the place the more its light is needed. A lighthouse is certainly fascinating. There it stands--a sentinel against storm and darkness--sending out its beam of light into the darkness, warning of danger and guiding to the safety of a clear channel and a friendly port. Out of the writings of Wayland Hoyt comes the story of a visit to a lighthouse at Calais in France. Someone said to the keeper of the light, "What if one of your lights should go out at night?" "Never!" cried the keeper. "Yonder ships sail to all parts of the world. If tonight one of my lights were out, within a short time I should hear from America, or India, saying that on such a night the lights at the Calais lighthouse gave no warning, and some vessel had been wrecked. Ah, sir, sometimes I feel, when I look upon my lights, as if the eyes of the whole world were fixed upon me."

The feeling of responsibility which that lighthouse keeper had about his lights is exactly the feeling which followers of Jesus Christ are to have about their lives. On the Eddystone lighthouse in England is this inscription: "To give light and to save life." This mission held up by those words for the lighthouse is exactly the mission which is held by the New Testament for Christians. A child of God is to shine as a light, and by shining hold forth the Word of Life.

Verse sixteen has a direct application to the inner life finding outward expression in Christian conduct. The Word of Life has been received into their hearts and through holy living is to have a salutary effect on others. Children of God are to consider themselves as on display before a hostile world. In our text there seems to be an allusion to torchbearers, who in the night went before others to show them the way. It is as if he had said, "You are bound to shine upon the darkness around you, and this you can do, for you are furnished with a lamp or torch, even the word of life, which you ought to hold up to view, that those who are in darkness might be attracted by its light and be induced to walk in it." As a hand holds up a torch or as a beacon flings forth its beam, so the Christian is to let his light of testimony and witness, in word and life, shine before men.

The analogy which Paul uses here is a very good one. A light cannot burn except it be connected with the source of power. A lamp cannot burn unless it be filled with oil. A Christian must always be in contact with the light-giving source. The foolish virgins in the parable said, "Our lamps are going out." The oil supply was gone. A Christian can only keep his light burning, his testimony bright and his influence powerful as he steadily receives from Christ the oil of grace and strength. A Christian who does not consistently and earnestly pray cannot shine; he has no oil. A Christian who does not study the Word of God and assimilate it cannot shine; he has no oil. A Christian who has no interest in the church, who does not give himself in the service of his church, cannot shine; he has no oil.

The Christian who shines for the Lord will not limit his light-giving to one particular area of life. He will recognize that the gospel of Christ is complete, not only affecting the totality of his own personality but the total of the world in which he moves. In his business, the Christian will shine. So many church members today are gloomy with complaint, harsh with criticism and bitter with animosity. So many church members enjoy an argument or a fight more than they do a spiritual meeting.

We should cheerfully and earnestly seek to shine for the Lord and to serve Him in the midst of our churches, permeating the entire atmosphere with a spirit of compassion and love and devotion to Christ.

There are multitudes of people who have never had a genuine Christian experience. They have wandered through life, some of them identified with a church and its work, but they have never experienced any intimate, heart-warming contact with the living Christ. There are also many who have had such an experience and have stored it away and never shared it with anyone else. The Christian, whose light shines, will be constantly and consistently sharing what he has discovered about Christ with others all about him. Remember Paul's words, "Among whom ye shine as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life."

What of our lights? We claim to be Christians, followers of that same Christ who saved, blessed and used Paul. Yet there are far too many times when our light is dim indeed. At times people have real difficulty in discerning the spirit of Christ in us. Sometimes it is hard for them to see Him in us at all.

Remember the lighthouse keeper at Calais. He said, "Ah, sir, sometimes I feel, when I look upon my lights, as if the eyes of the whole world were fixed upon me. Go out! Burn dim! I cannot let them do that! I would rather die first!" We need to come to the place in our Christian faith where we would rather die than let the light of our testimony burn dim. We may never have to die for our faith, but, by the grace of God, we can live for it.

There has never been and never can be but one gospel, one life-giving Word to hold forth. All the modifications man has devised has not altered the original or changed its power one particle. "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever," the only Saviour, the great Lover of humanity, the perfect Substitute for the sinner, the risen Lord, and the Coming King. Who would not be willing to hold forth the Word of Life for Him?