

THE MINISTRY OF SILENCE

"Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth." Psalm 46:10.

There are certain voices that we never hear except when everything is silent. They reach us out of the stillness. A river flows beneath the streets of the ancient city of Shechem. During the hours of the day one cannot hear the rolling waters on account of the noise of the narrow streets and the bazaars. But when the night falls, and the clamor dies away and the dews of kindly sleep rest on the city, you can hear the music of the buried stream quite audibly. There are many voices like those hidden waters. You never can hear them except when things are still.

The root meaning of that word "be still" is "to slacken," slacken your pace, slow up, don't be in such a hurry. In the midst of the turmoil and tumult of life there is a place of peace, a quiet anchorage where we may outride the storm; the discovery of abiding possessions in a world of dissolving securities.

Life is an ever-increasing complexity. People have never been busier than they are today. If the proportion of achievement were equal to that of energetic activity, what a world this would be! It is a truism that we are living in an age of speed. Never before has life been such an endless rush as it is today. For most of us life is infinitely more of a rush than was the case twenty or thirty years ago. When our forefathers were traveling, if they missed a stagecoach, they sat down complacently and patiently waited a week for another. Now we are impatient if we miss one of the sections in a revolving door.

In these days of push and rush it is almost impossible to get any appreciation of the calm, unruffled and retired space of existence. When one begins to speak of stillness, some are afraid. As one lady said, "Everything was so still I was frightened." She could almost hear her own heart beat and she was afraid.

If all our speed really produced results, if it made for more successful, happy and useful living, then it would be justified. But, alas, too often our speed is just hurry and bustle, and the real values of life are left lingering by the roadside.

Archibald Rutledge, the nature writer, tells how his father "went slowly down the way of life; not because he was indolent, but because he did not want to miss the wonder by its wayside. 'Every time you hurry to get to a place,' he used to tell me, 'you run the chance of missing more than you gain. The wild things in nature rarely hurry unless they are in danger. How can life be rich for us if we dash through it? Speed will take you somewhere, but when you say you have arrived, that's about all you can say. Speed often takes us away from the very things that would do our souls the most good.'"

"Be still and know that I am God." There are some forms of knowledge which require stillness. Self-knowledge and God-knowledge can never be had until we have learned to be still. God's Word says, "Commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still." Such verses are out of harmony with our American mood. In a country where a commercial spirit is rampant and where we are apt to think that the hustler is the ideal type, a stern necessity clamors for the recognition of this Bible truth, "be still and know that I am God."

The quest of the human soul for God is implanted by Him. It is not in man to turn to God. Instead, God always takes the initiative. Our longings are His invitations and pleadings.

A prerequisite to knowing God is stillness. A mind that is like a crowded thoroughfare, with calls and concerns jostling over it, does not perceive the footsteps of God. Such a one was Esau, who is called that "profane person," because there was no quiet, sacred place in his mind--every thought, desire and passion had unchallenged admission to his

being. On the other hand, it was when "Jacob was left alone," his life's busy concerns and apprehensions hushed, that God met him, and he became a prince with God.

There are some things that inevitably result from quietness: poise, depth of character and stability of purpose. And there are some things that inevitably result from feverish hurry: anxiety, shallowness of character and instability. "Men ought always to pray and not to faint," the Scriptures admonish, inferring that when men pray they are strong and equipped to meet the varied experiences of life; but when men forget to pray and are driven by rush and hurry, they faint, they lack that steadying grace which holds one in the time of storm. It is the hustle and hurry of our modern life which causes shallow thought, unstable purpose and wasted energy. So many would be better and wiser, stronger and happier, if they would devote more time to silence and meditation.

Stillness before God is the way to effective living. Abraham was alone with God, listening for the message which was for him alone. Where did God train Moses for his great work but in the silences of the wilderness? He was in the silence of the desert when arrested by the vision of the burning bush which was not consumed by the fire. Before the moving events of Mount Carmel, Elijah was prepared with strength from outside himself in the stillness of Cherith, where the only sound was the gurgling of the brook over the hot stones. Isaiah was alone with God, meditating on the woes of his country when his lips were anointed for his being the spokesman for God.

Christ Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the desert alone with his thoughts and God before He assumed the duties of His public ministry. The Apostle Paul, that greatest of all Christian missionaries, following his sudden conversion, went off into the deserts of Arabia, there to think through his Christian position. John Bunyan gave to the world his immortal Pilgrim's Progress out of the solitude of his Bedford jail. How often God has had to draw men and women aside from the fog and confusion of life into quiet places before they could see life in its true proportions!

The earthquake forces itself on one's attention. The tornado compels recognition; its voice is fearful and we are afraid. But you cannot hear the still, small voice of God in the soul unless you are still and listen. This is, perhaps, the reason why the men of the Bible seem to live in another world and under another order of things. They were still and quiet and communed with God. Today the average visitor to Jerusalem will ask, "How high is that hill?" But, the Hebrew singer of old, looking upon the same hill, exclaimed, "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so is the Lord round about His people." Such remarks indicate two habits of mind, but oh, the difference! That old Hebrew poet felt that he lived in a world that God made and gave to him. He saw the divine signature everywhere. "The strength of the hills is His also."

If any people ever needed to be called back to the fact that there is a kind of knowledge which can never be had except in stillness, it is those who are living today. Never before has life been such an endless rush as it is today. The very speed at which it is possible to travel has been multiplied within the lifetime of most of us. We are rushing past life in a desire to live. In the jostle and rumble of modern life the voice of God cannot be heard. The kind of knowledge we need most is that which can be obtained only in the quiet of life.

Today there is no silence, no privacy, and men seldom hear the voice of God speaking in the depths of their own spirits as did Elijah in his cave. If only we were still sometimes! If only, like Isaac, we occasionally went afield to meditate! But meditation is largely a lost art. The average person shuns solitude. It is, What shall we do next? Where shall we go? What shall we do? Where shall we kill the time? What a revelation it would be if we could be introduced to ourselves! Some of us are actually strangers to ourselves. Behold the sad spectacle of so many people everlastingly trying to run away from themselves! Much of the fussy activity of life is explained by the fact that to be alone is unendurable by not a few. When one is alone with himself, a new self begins to struggle to the front

and calls for recognition. You remember that word of the apostle, "We must all be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ." The first element in that manifestation will doubtless be our introduction to ourselves.

Let us remember that all depths are silent, depths of space as well as those of thought. The over-arching heavens are silent, speechless to all but the most meditative souls. Extreme emotions of all kinds are silent. When rage cannot speak, look out. When joy is deepest, it has no speech or language. When grief is heartbreaking, it is dumb. When fellowship is complete, it needs no words. Spirit feels the kinship of spirit and is satisfied.

Among the numerous and grievous sins of life the one of being too busy has a prominent place. It is a sin which provokes and permits many others. It allows the good things of life to crowd out the best. It permits the nonessential to take the place of the essential. It permits the minor concerns to push aside the great issues. In these hectic days we need to be alone with God and our own souls. If we are too busy for the "quiet time" we are far busier than we ought to be or God wants us to be. How often God has had to draw men and women aside from the fog and confusion of life into quiet places before they could see life in its true proportions!

"Be still, and know that I am God." That I, the Creator, hold the world in the palm of My hand, that the world is sustained by the strength of My power. Know that God is still in control, that great spiritual laws rule and prevail which cannot be broken. Nations and men only break themselves against these laws. Let us take heart in the fact that God will accomplish His purpose and His plans in His own way and time.

If man has no time for God or for prayer or for spiritual goals then he is to be pitied. He is missing the very genius of life. He is like an eagle in a cage, like a lion pacing back and forth behind iron bars. The eagle was not created to spend its days in a cage. The lion was not created to be confined; he was created for the deep forests. Even so, man has been created, not for a life of feverish rush and hurry, but for communion and fellowship with his Heavenly Father. "Be still, and know that I am God."