

Great Southern Preaching

Vital Christianity as Interpreted by the Sermons of Some of the Leading Contemporary Exponents of the Gospel Message in the Southern States

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With an Invocation by
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THE GLORY IN THE GRAY

Harris E. Kirk

"It shall come to pass in that day, that the light shall not be clear nor dark . . . but it shall be one day which shall be known to the Lord . . . but it shall come to pass, that at evening time it shall be light." Zechariah xiv. 6.

In a piece of very ancient writing which is known to us as the Book of Zechariah, one comes upon the strange, cryptic passage quoted above. This passage is part of that mysterious part of biblical truth known as apocalyptic, of which we have the finest example in the Book of Revelation. When this mood is upon him, the old Hebrew seer endeavors to describe things that are really beyond description. If you approach him without spiritual imagination—if you require words of definite meaning—you will never understand him. I am not going to tell you what he means, for I do not know. He seems to be saying, "There it is, what I have seen and felt; take my words and make out of them what you can."

Vague as they appear, however, they have had meaning for religious faith in all ages, and have naturally played a part in the devotional literature of the Christian church. I turn to them to satisfy a feeling that overtakes us at the close of the year, when after a period of unreflective activity we find ourselves

at the crossroads, doubtful about the next step. Such a mood brings one to a standstill. We try to get our bearings, and as we look about our world are surprised to find that it is neither clear nor dark. At such times great thoughts are born, unsuspected capacities are quickened into wakefulness in the dormitory of the soul, and the companionship of God is felt to be a necessity. When the self-sufficient mood, encouraged by ceaseless activity, gives place to one of humility, developed by the sudden realization of the confused pathway before us, God has a way of speaking home to the heart and, curiously enough, often in ways as indefinite as the mysterious words I have quoted above. Let me, then, open my mind to you at this season on the mysterious theme: "The Glory in the Gray."

At the outset I am going to claim this to be a conception peculiarly Christian. No matter what a man's philosophy may be, he cannot avoid a sense of confusion in things. The mood is not limited to religious minds; in some form it is present in all philosophies worthy of the name. There is in the processes of life a sense of emergency, of catastrophe, of sudden alteration in outlook that disturbs the most serene optimism. To be sure there are observant minds able to discern somewhere on Time's horizon a gradual emergence of the gray; but it is only the Christian who is able to see the *glory* in the gray. It is true he cannot describe it so as to appeal to an unimaginative mind; he is obliged to speak as one incapable of describing his vision. Still the Christian knows what he means. You may call this faith if you like, and I will not deny it; but permit me this word—it is the faith that overcomes the world.

What quickens my thought just here is the union of faith and experience expressed in Zechariah's prediction of a day known only to the Lord. It is a confession of faith in the divine direction of human life. For God to know a day is for Him to control it; He is the master of time and duration; it is He who has created the tradition of nights and days, who follows the processional of years to their purposeful end. But the prophet sagely tempers his faith in Providence by a sober recognition of the contingencies of life; and the wisdom of this course is a fact which becomes evident to any kind of mature thinking. Life comes to us in a series of surprising and unanticipated emergencies; and together with a definite faith in the divine wisdom which controls the highways of life we must take account of contingencies over which we have no control. The conclusion to which this leads us is that, while one must firmly believe in divine direction, he must be ready to accept life in respect to its qualitative experiences as wholly uncertain; which is merely another way of saying that while we can always be sure of God, we can never be sure of life.

Consider for a moment the notion of contingency in life. Let us put to ourselves one or two questions. What is it that interests us most; what calls out our finest thought, creates our firmest purposes? Do the experiences necessary to the growth of character and personal force come from what we consider certainties or uncertainties? Why, for instance, do we speak of "dead" certainties? Is it not, as one of my friends is fond of putting it, because a dead certainty is dead, and has little power of arousing our interest at all? We do not allow our minds to dwell much on death, because that is certain; but life, the most uncertain

of all adventures, is of surpassing interest to every living soul.

By carrying this contrast a little further we are able to distinguish between two kinds of interest which exist in the world—one belonging to the domain of things, the other to the realm of souls. Emerson has thus expressed it:

There are two laws discrete,
Not reconciled—
Law for man, and law for thing,
The last builds town and fleet
But it runs wild,
And doth the man unking.

Is not the starting point of all philosophies this: Shall one conceive the world in terms of things or souls? So far, the Oriental mind has based its thinking upon souls, staking life upon the reality of the imponderables; while the Occidental mind, stimulated by superabundant energies, is trying to build a durable philosophy upon the unceasing flux of material things. In the fever and fret of our present life, we are making appeals to the outer court of things. It is only when a thoughtful mood overtakes us, as now, that we draw apart and think of the inner court of things. At such times we feel the force of life's contradictions, the perpetual conflict between "law for man and law for thing."

Such reflection, however disenchanting, has the advantage of making us realize where our living interests lie. Any interest that belongs to the world of things is limited. Eventually, science securely harnesses it, reduces it to order, and makes it a dead certainty. That is why Bergson said that intellect is

less inspiring than instinct, because intellect is compelled to slay the thing it loves in order to understand it. What he meant was that the systematic arrangements required to obtain order in material affairs develop certainties in which all interest dies. Just now we are surrounded by all sorts of physical marvels—the airplane, the radio, and the like. Yet already we have ceased to wonder at these things. But when we consider the realm of souls, when we appeal to the inner court of things, what a difference is there! A domain of wonder, fear, and surprise breaks in upon the mind. One feels, on the plainest pathway, the menace and inspiration of uncertainty. As we sense the mystery around us, our interest in the adventure of life grows and grows—

. . . that one way

March life, love, stars, God's dreams, and night and day.

And when, through some sudden dislocation of plan, some swift emergence of disaster, some overpowering confusion of mind, you become doubtful of your way, you have only to look about and see that you have lighted upon a day that is neither clear nor dark. Man is by nature a nest builder. He has a passionate desire to seize some splendid moment and fix it forever in an imperishable form; to dig himself in and consolidate his holdings in a firm habitation over which nature's flux can have no sway; but try as he may, God will dig him out and even in old age send him on his travels. Man's wish is for finality. Against this attitude of mind God puts movement, contingency, uncertainty. There is no escape from upsettings and reverses. And so, gray is the normal color of the path of maturity; yet the eye of faith can always discern, even in the dimmest hour, the glory glinting through the gray.

The Kingdom of God is founded upon nothing tangible, for He "hath founded it upon the seas and established it upon the floods." Man's confidence amid this ceaseless flux lies in his realization of the pressure of the Everlasting Arms, which hold him the more securely because of the changeableness of this present world. It was faith in this elemental fact that led the prophet to speak of the light that comes at evening time. As we have already asserted, for God to know a day is to control it, to bring it to a hopeful end. The man of faith knows, however much he may endure of reverse and disappointment, that he is moving toward an increasing light; that somewhere on the rapidly revolving scroll of nights and days is the day known only unto the Lord, "that at evening time it shall be light." This is the faith that helps man to make a good end. In this world we shall have trouble; but Christ commands the way and the end of it is peace. There is more beyond the present, a vision beyond the work; and however dark the way, however heavy the toil, we know that

. . . there shall dawn a day
If not on the homely earth,
Then yonder, worlds away,
Where the strange and new have birth,
And power comes full in play.

In face of such a hope, what shall be our outlook upon the New Year but one of eagerness for a larger experience of life? If we dare greatly to adventure ourselves upon the undisclosed will of God, it shall be that when things are darkest, when life is most uncertain, we shall discover overhead the Eternal God, and underneath, the Everlasting Arms. If like Brown-

ing's Childe Roland we approach the Dark Tower, crossing dreary and ghostly plains, if need be, in search of our heart's desire; if like him, while fully sensing the dread mystery of existence, we dare put the slug-horn to our lips and blow our challenge to life, we shall, ere we close our pilgrimage, see the glory in the gray; and like a rain-washed highway rejoicing in the splendor of the morning sun, our path shall become as a shining light that leadeth unto a perfect day!