

The Ministry of Sorrow

by J.R. Miller

The Ministry of Sorrow is a sermon that explores the purpose and comfort of sorrow in our lives, and how it can bring us closer to God and prepare us for eternal life.

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1

Topics: "Suffering", "God's Comfort"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the 'Ministry of Sorrow' as an essential part of Christian life, illustrating how sorrow serves as a divine educator, leading believers to deeper faith and understanding. He draws parallels between earthly trials and the heavenly glory that awaits, suggesting that through suffering, Christians can develop tenderness, patience, and a closer relationship with God. Miller uses metaphors such as the dim lamps of comfort that shine brightest in darkness and the bird learning to sing in the shadows to convey that affliction can reveal the beauty of God's love and purpose. He reassures that God's presence and comfort are always near, even in our darkest moments, and encourages believers to trust in His eternal love. Ultimately, Miller concludes that the trials we face are not without purpose, as they prepare us for the splendor of eternal life.

Transcript

A book that treats even fragmentarily of Christian culture, would be incomplete without a chapter on the ministry of sorrow, for this is an experience through which sooner or later every life must pass. It is part of the earthly education for the heavenly glory. Our Lord himself passed this way before us--and was made perfect through suffering. And sorrow is also ordained for us, his followers, that through much tribulation we must enter the kingdom of heaven.

They are only the very young--who know nothing as yet, of the liturgy of grief. To them the language of sorrow is an unknown tongue, and the consolations of the Scriptures seem written in pale or invisible ink. But it will not long be so. The years will bring griefs to them, and under their hot flames--the comforts of religion will glow upon the inspired page as no other words do!

The railway-attendants passed through our train at midday and lighted the lamps. The passengers could not understand why it was done. How pale the lights seemed, in the blaze of noon! But soon we plunged into a long tunnel, into pitchy darkness. How brightly then the beams shone down upon us! and how grateful we all were for the lamps! So the lamps of comfort which God hangs about our hearts in our sunny youth, and which seem to us so dim and so without a purpose while there is no break in our joy--will burst

into heavenly brightness--when the darkness thickens about us. What shall we then do if none of these lamps of consolation are ready lighted in our hearts?

The ministries of sorrow for the Christian, are manifold. Blighting the joys of earth on which he had set his heart--sorrow turns his eye toward the things that are unseen and eternal. There are many who never saw Christ--until the light of some tender beauty faded before them; and, looking up in the darkness, they beheld that blessed face of Jesus beaming down upon them in divine gentleness and love.

Many of the sweetest joys of Christian hearts--are songs which have been learned in the bitterness of trial.

A story is told of "a little bird that will never learn to sing the song his master will have him sing--while his cage is full of light. He listens and learns a snatch of this, a trill of that, a polyglot of all the songs in the grove--but never a separate and entire melody of his own. But the master covers his cage and makes it dark all about him, and then he listens and listens to the one song he is to sing, and tries and tries, and tries again--until at last his heart is full of it. And then, when he has caught the melody, the cage is uncovered, and he sings it sweetly ever after in the light."

It is often with our hearts--as with the bird. The Master has a song to teach us--but we learn only a strain of it, a note here and there, while we catch up snatches of earth's music, the world's songs, and sing them with it. Then Jesus comes and makes it dark about us--until we learn the sweet song he would teach us. And, having once learned it in the deep shadows, we continue to sing it afterward, even in the brightest day of earthly joy. Many of the loveliest songs of peace and trust and hope, which God's children sing in this world--they have been taught in the hushed and darkened chambers of sorrow.

In like manner, many of the rarest beauties of character, are touches given by the divine Spirit in the hours of affliction. Many a Christian enters a sore trial--cold, worldly, unspiritual, with all the better and more tender qualities of his nature locked up in his heart--like the beauty and fragrance in the bare and jagged tree in January. But he comes out of the sore trial with gentle spirit--mellowed, enriched and sweetened, and with all the fragrant graces pouring their perfume around him.

The photographer carries his picture back into a darkened room--that he may bring out its features. The light would mar his delicate work.

Just so, God brings out in many a soul, its loveliest beauties--in times of affliction, while the curtain is drawn and the light of day is shut out. The darkness does not tell of God's anger--it is only the shadow of the wing of divine love, folded close over us for a little while--until the Master adds some new touch of loveliness, to the picture he is bringing out in our souls.

Afflictions, when sanctified--

soften the hardships of life,

tame the wildness of nature,

temper worldly ambitions,

burn out the dross of selfishness,

humble pride,

quell fierce passions,
reveal the evil in our hearts,
manifest our weaknesses, faults, blemishes and perils,
teach patience and submission,
disciple unruly spirits,
deepen and enrich our graces.

"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey Your Word." Psalm 119:67

"It was good for me to be afflicted so that I could learn Your statutes." Psalm 119:71

"No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the fruit of peace and righteousness to those who have been trained by it." Hebrews 12:11

Afflictions, when sanctified--plough the hard soil and cut long and deep furrows in the heart. The heavenly Sower follows, and fruits of righteousness spring up.

It has been said that "the last, best fruit which comes to late perfection, even in the kindest soul--is tenderness toward the hard, forbearance toward the unforbearing, warmth of heart toward the cold, and philanthropy toward the misanthropic." But there is no influence under which these late fruits ripen so quickly--as under the power of sorrow. It makes us gentle toward all. It softens every harsh feeling and fills the heart with tender sympathy, kindly charity and benevolent dispositions. Many a home is saved from wreck--by a sorrow that comes and draws estranged hearts close together again. Many a cold, icy nature is made warm and tender--by the grief that crushes it.

Then sorrow cuts the chains which bind us to this earthly life--and sends us out to sea on voyages of new discovery. It opens windows in our poor prison-life here, through which we get glimpses of the better things of immortality and glory.

Especially is this true of the loss of friends by death. We live absorbed in the earthly life about us, thinking of no other, our eyes fixed on the dusty soil at our feet--and not seeing the radiant heavens that glow and shine above our heads. Then suddenly one whom we love is plucked away from our side, and for the first time we begin to look up and to obtain glimpses of the invisible and eternal things of the life above and beyond us. Thus viewed from any side, affliction appears as a messenger of God sent to minister to us in the best of ways!

God is the Comforter. He has opened the springs of comfort in almost every page of his Word. At the head of almost every chapter, an angel seems to stand crying, "Comfort, comfort my people! says your God."

There is no darkness that gathers about any of God's children--into which he does not send some beams of brightness.

One dark and dreary winter day I sat in my study thinking what I should say to my people the coming Sunday. The sky had been heavily overcast all the morning. But suddenly there was a little rift in the clouds, and a few sunbeams fell on my window. As the brightness flowed in--I raised my eyes, and there,

on the wall, was a bit of as glorious a rainbow as ever I saw. There was some peculiar formation in the glass of the window-pane, which acted as a perfect prism, disentangling and unsnarling the white beam and spreading its brilliant threads in rich display upon the plastered wall of the room.

Just so, there is no life of Christian disciple, however dark and full of cares and grief, into which God does not at some hour of each day pour a little at least of the splendor of heaven. The trouble is that we shut our eyes to the comfort--and will not look upon it. We see all the clouds and sit in the darkness, beholding not the sunbeams and the bits of rainbow that our Father sends into our lives to brighten and illumine them.

There is a picture of a woman seated on the low rocks, looking out upon a wild sea, down into which the treasures of her heart have gone. Her face is stony with hopeless, despairing grief. Almost touching the black robe of the mourner, hovering over her shoulder, is the shadowy form of an angel softly touching the strings of a harp. But she is unaware of the angel's nearness, nor does she hear a note of the celestial music. She bows in speechless unconsciousness, with breaking heart and unsoothed sorrow, while the heavenly consolation is so close.

Likewise, many of God's children sit in darkness, crushed by their sorrows, yearning for comfort and for an assurance of the divine love and sympathy, hearing no soft music, no whisper of consolation; while close beside them the Master himself stands unperceived, and heaven's sweetest songs float unheard in the very air they breathe. It is a simpler faith which we need--to take the consolation which our Father sends when our hearts are breaking.

There is no comfort like the fact of God's infinite, unchanging and eternal love for us. If we can but get this truth into our individual consciousness, it will sustain us in every trial. All the universe is under his personal sway, and he is our tenderest and dearest Friend, carrying each one of us close in his heart. "The Lord who created you says: Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are Mine! When you go through deep waters and great trouble--I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty--you will not drown! When you walk through the fire of oppression--you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior!" Isaiah 43:1-3

Providence is not merely the outworking of a mechanical system, or the beneficent operation of wise and good laws. It is rather--the thoughtful, sleepless, loving care of our Father! We put God too far off. There are laws of Nature--but he is the Lawmaker, and these laws are but the methods of his kindness. They do not make any gulf between him and his children.

In every well-ordered household, there are regulations, rules, habits, laws--but these do not make the home-providence any less due to the love and kindness of the parents. No more do Nature's established and uniform laws, cut us off from the personal care of God. He comes near to us perpetually in these methods of his providence. His own fingers touch the tints in the flower. With his own hand, he feeds the birds, and in all second causes it is still his hand that works. The beautiful things we see, are the pictures our Father has hung up in our chamber to give us pleasure. The good things we receive, are the ever-fresh tokens of his thoughtful love for us.

And the same is true of the evil and painful things. Our Father has sent them! They seem to mean harm. But he loves us with a deep, tender and eternal love. We cannot see how these things are consistent with love's plan--but we know that they must be; and in this faith we may rest--not understanding--but yet

undoubting, unquestioning and unfearing.

"If we could push ajar the gates of life,

And stand within and all God's workings see,

We could interpret all this doubt and strife,

And for each mystery--could find a key."

But this, we cannot do. Hereafter we shall know. Yet even now, knowing what we do of God's wise and eternal love for us--we can believe and trust and be at peace. This is the truest comfort. It is the clasp of the tree's roots, upon the immutable rock. It is the soul's clinging to God in the storm.

A tourist writes of stopping at Giesbach to look at the wonders of its waterfalls. The party had to pass over one of the falls on a slender bridge through the drenching water, with the wild torrents dashing beneath. It was a trying experience. But once through, a glorious picture burst upon them. There were rainbows above, beneath and circling on all sides.

Just so, the spray of sorrow falls now, and we may have to walk through floods and pitiless torrents, and all may seem a strange, inexplicable mystery. But there will come a time, when we shall have passed through these showers of grief, and when we shall stand amid the splendor of rainbows on the shores of glory! Then we will understand, and see love in every pang and tear!

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