

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

and personal as in the other points. Now there was a medicine called "Phrygian powder," used by ancient physicians to cure weakness of the eyes. Further, there flourished at Laodicea one of the most famous medical schools of antiquity, which "began that strange system of heterogeneous mixtures, some of which have only recently been expelled from our own pharmacopœia." Finally, the name "Phrygian" was liable to be used in the sense of "Laodicean," because that city was nearest and most familiar to the Greek world; thus, for example, Herodes Atticus spoke of the famous orator, Polemon of Laodicea, as "the Phrygian."<sup>1</sup>

Must we not, then, conclude that the message to Laodicea continued: "and [I counsel thee to buy of me, not the vain Phrygian powder that is prescribed and concocted by the famous physicians of thy school of medicine, but] eyesalve to anoint thine eyes, that thou mayst see."

W. M. RAMSAY.

### "THE BURDEN OF DUMAH."

ISAIAH XXI. 11, 12.

THE days of the prophets were, in spiritual things, the brave days of old. No nation but the Hebrew ever had a succession of such men. Other nations had their poets and philosophers and heroes; the Jews alone had their prophets. They were more than the philosopher and the poet, and different from the hero who battled with circumstances and grappled with destiny. They were much more than men who merely foretold the future. They struck with strokes of cleavage sheer down through the confusion and unrest of their age, and they laid bare the essential

<sup>1</sup> *Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia*, part i., pp. 52, 41.

order and divine plan of things. They appealed to men to fulfil the divine purpose expressed therein, and they demanded that the nation should stand to its duty as if face to face with God. They were interpreters of God's way and will—*first*; they were seers, men who saw into the future—*afterwards*. Their insight gave them their foresight.

Isaiah is in this chapter shown to us as a typical prophet. A grievous vision has been given him. The King of Assyria had sent out a foe to invade the country. Night—deep, dark midnight—was over the land; and Isaiah stood on Mount Zion while all around the darkness circled. To him, standing on his solitary rock, all the confused and uneasy thoughts of the people seemed to be gathered; just as, in a tempestuous night at sea, birds of far and wandered wing flutter to and beat against the lonely lantern of the lighthouse. To him there, the silence of the night had voices and the darkness gave signs. From the wilderness of the sea, from the valley of vision, from Arabia and from Tyre, voices of complaint seemed to come to him; and from Dumah—the land of silence, the region of rock and fastness in which Edom had his hiding-place—came this call, unlikely and unexpected, doubling itself through the darkness, "Watchman, what of the night?"

This is a question which all the ages take up and put. It has almost lost the note and tone of the finite, so universal has it become. It has been hallowed by the long use which the centuries have made of it. It sounds to us like the deep solemn voice of humanity's loneliest heart. It is the call of those who are waiting, waiting for some better thing, more than they that watch for the morning. We have all heard it; and we have all, in perplexity and darkness, asked it ourselves, "What of the night?"

The Church of God is always asking this question, raising it from among the groans and travail pains of the new

creation; and the sons of God ask it, groaning within themselves, as they wait for their adoption. There is agony in the words; they are a sort of cry. The anxiety is as to when the light shall prevail over the long darkness and be for ever divided from it, and when, after the turmoil and confusion of this formative period which we call Time, there shall be new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. Because the church so distinctly knows of some better thing, and that "when the morning appeareth," she counts the watches, and says, "What of the night?"

The same cry, more vague and not so hopeful, comes from the human heart at times without anything of the religious sentiment in it. The soul of man is here, amidst mysteries and shadows, ever on the outlook for something clear and limitless like itself. Finding it nowhere, it still beats about, ever renewing the search. Circumstances and events always, sooner or later, chill and perplex and depress our higher thought and feeling—just like night. Our dreams are sometimes the best things in our life. Men may ensconce themselves in any security or comfort they please, or may devote themselves to some noble life task, or may seek their rest in a philosophy or a philanthropy, or in a Church which seems to them to know and love the truth; but ere long they will be heard calling aloud in disappointment and uncertainty like those who have lost their moorings and are adrift in the darkness. And when men can do no more and have to die, their last word to the grim old sentinel, as the great darkness fills their eyes, is, "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?"

As this question is put in every age, so to every age there is given some man of prophetic spirit who seeks to answer it. We may call him prophet, preacher, sage, or poet; but he takes up speech, and maintains a deep, solemn dialogue

with his age. He talks with the human soul when other voices are silent. People go to him by night, when others are asleep and when lighter cares are left, and they ask him the things that men speak about when they are dying. The prophet's larger thought is awake and astir, environing the lesser interests of life as the sea the land; and his voice is not loud, as when waves beat the shore, but it yearns as when the sea draws its great breath and heaves, holding the mystery of the stars in its deep reflection. And there are always some in every age to whom the word of a prophet is precious; some who feel that he holds the outposts and knows the secrets and has the keys, and whom his voice inspires even when his words are hard to understand. It gives security and strength, in all uncertainty and change, to know that some one of large, far eye is on the alert and outlook, like a watchman on the frontier or a warder on the walls. It is a comfort to have some one to call to in the dark. The prophet's office is for all time. There is a grand succession in his ministry in the house of human life. Both the Church and the world depend in crisis on the man of insight; the man who sees into the life of things; the polar, primary man, whom hearts in emergency instinctively discover, and to whom they call, "*Watchman*, what of the night?"

The reply of the prophet to this voice of the midnight is one for all the ages. He epitomises history, and foretells the future when he answers, "The morning cometh and also the night." For there is a rhythm everywhere here on earth. Things vary and alternate. We have day and night, summer and winter; we sleep and we wake, we have youth and age, we live and we die. Tides ebb and flow; moons wax and wane; the flowers have yearly their resurrection and their death. "The morning cometh and also the night."

Nations rise and fall. Greece cultivates the garden, and

Rome breaks down all her hedges ; Rome builds walls, and the Goth scales them ; patriots purchase liberty, and by-and-by the people throw their liberty away. And thus, in human history, the continual variation and alternation go on. "The morning cometh and also the night."

The Church goes down into Egypt, and she is ransomed ; again, she is bound with fetters and borne to Babylon. She has palmy days, and then days of adversity. She knows revival, and soon reaction and depression follow. Her Reformation grows to rationalism, her noblest Puritanism to prudishness and politics. The church of the parish falls cold and dead, and the chapels become the centres of spiritual light and life ; anon the chapel is made the club-house of petty interests in the village, and life and work revive in the church. The dawn of civilization seems to break on heathen Africa when the pioneer missionary touches its shore, and ere long civilization casts darker shadows there than those of heathendom's midnight. So true it is that "The morning cometh and also the night !"

And so it is in individual life. There comes reaction after energy ; we feel relaxed and unstrung after the effort of our highest purpose ; and depression treads quickly after exaltation. We sing on the heights, and then cry out of dark depths ; we leap on the hills, and then are broken in the place of dragons. We set out in the morning on pleasant paths, and we are lost and entangled in gloomy thickets before the noon. So it is all too true ; sadly, sorely true ! It has been, and still is, as Isaiah said of old, "The morning cometh and also the night."

This answer of the prophet might seem, to him who called out of Seir, as cheerless as it was equivocal. The reply does not seem serious ; it was baffling and blinding, as if the prophet took a handful of the darkness and flung it back into the eyes of the half-awakened sleeper.

But there was wonderful method and meaning in his giving Seir such an answer. Seir was a place of security apart. Its inhabitants had only a remote, we may call it a curious or speculative, interest in the struggle of the land with Sargon and Sennacherib. That place of security had become a place of silence and sleep, or at most a withdrawn region of dreamy indifference; and Seir was only turning in his dream and speaking drowsily when he said, "What of the night?" So Isaiah is impatient and abrupt with him. He replies not only, "The morning cometh and also the night," but he adds, "If ye will enquire, enquire ye." As if to say, "If that be all you have to ask, that is all I have to answer." It was a craven question; it was the voice of a sluggard; for Seir was a deserter and a coward while he thus *enquired*. Certainly not a soldier, he was hardly a man worth an answer. If he had the spirit of manhood and heroism, he would arise and stand forward and *act*. It was no time to sit apart and speculate. It was a time of crisis. The night was pregnant with great issues. The Church was in the throes of a great struggle. It was a poor business to be calling from a safe distance, "What of the night? What of the night?" So Isaiah hits this sleeper in the side, as the angel smote the sleeping Peter. He says, "Awake, thou that sleepest! Shake off thy dreamy sloth! Leave thy easy bed! Come out into the black night that hurtles with storm and war! Come down from up there, and take your side and your place with us here! Be a man, be a hero in the great contest! Turn ye! Come!"

This is the burden of Dumah. It is short, incisive, and peremptory. Isaiah takes but a momentary aim, but it is straight and unerring; then with a sudden, swift flash, he lets go in the dark and strikes at indolence and indifference. He is in a noble passion, and he hits hard; he deals his long blow home, and has hit to the quick.

Selfish Seir has got his word once and for all, and it is the Word of God to all time against indolence and sloth.

There is a quaint, old-world ring about all this; yet things are not now so unlike what they were in Isaiah's time as to make this example and his word of no importance or moment to us. The great contest in which Israel and Assyria ranked long ago, and which Isaiah and Sargon led, is not yet fought out. Of it from age to age the words are true—

"Its rear lay wrapped in night; but breaking dawn  
Roused the long front and called the battle on."

Might now, as then, rises up against right; the Lie lays at the Truth, and the Truth must lay at the Lie, and the sons of men resist the sons of God. And plenty of people may be heard calling out of snug studies and from refined seclusion, "What of the night? When is the long fray to cease? When is the Church going to put down all the evil, to house the poor, to convert the heathen, to put in order the confusion, and finish the work she has in hand? When is the new day to dawn on the old, unruly night?"

To the old question there is only the old answer, "The morning cometh and also the night," unless we add also the sharper and more personal word, "If ye will enquire, enquire!" But this is not a matter of mere enquiry; it is a thing of bone and muscle, of sweat and blood. "Come you over and help us! Stand forth and take your place in our ranks! Return! Come!" Perhaps this sharper word is sometimes needed and justified. For the men of only speculative concern in the world's great problems are often unreasonable; they who have laid aside practical work for criticism are frequently unkind; and often the fruitless workers are they who have spun the finest theories. The great problems of life will not admit of theoretical solution, but only of practical; they will not

solve at a distance, or on paper; they will yield only when men come very near them, throw themselves upon and close with them in lean, bare grips. They demand the energy of a man's whole nature, the effort of the will, and the agony of the heart, as much as, even more than, the power of the brain. The saviours of the world go about amidst its evil doing good; they lay their own hands on the sick; they themselves anoint the eyes of the blind; they lose their own life.

What light, then, does this old-world Hebrew word throw upon the world around us to-day, and upon present-day duty? Not very much on the *world*, but very bright and clear light on *duty*. Now, as then, in all that is momentous and of chief concern to the world, the signs are perplexing. They baffle the most earnest when they try to interpret them. Some say the world's full day is dawning, and some that the darkest night is not yet past. The day is known unto the Lord; and, when He is making all things new, the evening and the morning are one day. But to us "The light is not clear nor dark; not day nor night." None of us can say much more of things than Isaiah said of old, "The morning cometh and also the night." Our age has the great old problems to grapple with. No leal-hearted Hebrew had a distincter or more personal duty because an army was in the land than we, because evil and misery and wrong are in our Christian country, and ignorance and superstition and cruelty in the world. We do not want men to burden the prophets with the cry, "What of the night?" or to swing round and slow the advancing chariot by hanging on listlessly behind. The man we need is he who is as faithful in the lingering night as in the breaking day; who has never a thought of despair or fear, and who "never doubted clouds would break." Even though the signs of our times were more uncertain than they are, and the tokens of life more

troubled, we must not lose either faith or hope. No man who believes in Christ can have an element of pessimism in his heart, or dare say of any past, "The former times were better than these." *On the whole* the world must be going right; and God, whose thousand years are as one day, is reconciling all things unto Himself, and making them new and better in Christ. It has not yet been proved that evil can ever succeed; we deny the victory to any evil One; we claim the victory for Christ, and we fight in hope. The progress is steady in spite of all the seeming reversals and defection. The Church in the world is as faithful and brave as ever she was; and, certainly, the world around has a larger life and a wider love than ever before.

Still, though all things are destined to good and will come to a perfect end, every age and every Church has its own difficulty and danger. "Do you ask me," said Savonarola, "what will be the end of the conflict? I answer 'Victory'; but if you ask me in particular, I answer 'Death.'" The glory of life on the earth is its struggle, its rising up and rousing itself, its standing forward and battling with the confusion and darkness. It is only thus that a life here can be made divine, and be equipped for eternity; out of weakness being made strong, just as it waxes valiant in this great fight.

"Glory of virtue, to fight, to struggle, to right the wrong—  
 Nay, but she aimed not at glory, no lover of glory she :  
 Give her the glory of going on and still to be."

Long as our round earth turns and moves, long as this life is the arena and scene where the evil meets the good, so long shall it be true "The morning cometh and also the night." And it will be only when that which is perfect is come and the day known unto the Lord is fulfilled, that these words will pass into those of later prophecy: "There shall be no night there." ARMSTRONG BLACK.