Prophets and Glad Tidings

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Even when they preach repentance and thunder words of warning, the prophets bring nothing but good news. In every age joy is the keynote of their message: "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion: for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the Lord" (Zechariah 2:10). Like the angels, the prophets bring glad tidings of great joy, the assurance that our Redeemer lives and that he has come to earth and taken upon himself the task of atoning for our inadequacy. In the boundless jubilation that comes like a vast sigh of relief with that assurance, all other cares and worries shrivel to insignificance. As we all know, the word gospel comes from the classic evangelium, "the joyful news," "the glad tidings." In his darkest hour the Lord told the Apostles, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Then he left them to tread the winepress alone, to do the work that no one else could do. We are commanded to be joyful because he has borne our sorrows. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief so that we need not be. Our own sins and limitations are the things that make us sad. He had no sins and limitations; he was not sad for his sake, but wholly for ours. Only one could suffer for others who did not deserve to suffer for himself. If we remain gloomy after what he did for us, it is because we do not accept what he did for us. If we suffer, we deserve to suffer because there is no need for it if we only believe in him.

But shouldn't we pay the price of our own sins? Isn't it only right and proper that we do so, and does it not weaken our character to be given something we do not deserve? In answer to this we might imagine the human race to be in the position of a mountain climber on a precarious ledge. The man has been climbing mountains all his life; he has never yet (or else he wouldn't be alive) found himself in a position from which his will and his wit have not been able to extricate him. But now at last he is in such a position. Whose fault is it? Strictly speaking the climber is wholly responsible for getting himself in a "jam," for he took the risk. Yet it is only by taking

such risks — some of which seemed greater even than this one — that he has become the able climber that he is; his very virtues have led him into a death trap. It was inevitable that his courage and enterprise should someday lead him to overreach himself and turn to his destruction. This is the heroic situation so familiar from the Classics and the Sagas — the very essence of our human tragedy: because the hero does not sit at home and vegetate, because he has godlike aspirations, he is doomed to death. His very virtues encompass his destruction, for he has one fatal weakness he is human.

In the first lecture we showed that the Greeks, much wiser and more thoughtful than we are, saw with terrifying clarity and conviction after they had examined the question from all sides with their peculiarly searching intensity, that man is simply not up to the task of assuring himself a good life on earth, let alone in eternity. And so after all our planning and toil we find ourselves clinging exhausted to the face of the cliff, forced to admit at last in one terrible flash of insight and despair that our strength is hopelessly inadequate to getting us home again, even if we had not wasted our powers in anger and debauchery.

Then at this moment a helping hand is reached down to us. Now the question is, should we refuse the hand for fear of weakening our character? Will we still, in spite of what we know, insist that we can go it alone — that our own intelligence will be enough to save us? Should we protest that the appearance of the hand at such a time and place is illogical and highly improbable, or debate whether the owner of the hand has strength enough to give us aid? Take the advice of the Greeks, who knew far more about the problems and ambitions of men than we ever will: man can never save himself. Grasp the helping hand while you have a chance, and ask questions afterward. In the novel The White Tower, the Nazi mountain climber falls to his death because he is too proud and independent to grab the helping hand of another climber — he is the superman who doesn't need anybody's help; he has been taught since childhood that his own iron will can overcome all things. The moral is plain: "Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer. Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered" (1 Nephi 10:6; 2 Nephi 2:7).

One thing we must recognize, and that is that the fact of man's fallen state is real, whether or not one can think offhand of a good logical explanation for it. The schoolmen can argue the universe itself out of existence — after all, the multiplicity and disorder of the stars is a good argument against their existence, and it is simply absurd to suppose that anything at all can

really exist and have life except the one God. We, however, accept existence as one of the facts of life; we begin with the universe as a given quantity — it is not our business to ask whether there could or should be such a thing: there it is. Anselm, giving a strictly feudal interpretation of the atonement, says we cannot pay for our sins since, being an affront to majesty, they exceed in enormity anything we can atone for. An awareness of the preexistence, on the other hand, puts the thing in another light. We become parties to the whole plan of salvation from the first. Our elder brother Jesus Christ has proposed that he should help us to rise above ourselves, and this does not weaken our characters since our part of the bargain requires that we take no credit for the achievement, standing upon new heights not as haughty conquerors but with broken hearts and contrite spirits. We claim no unearned glory for ourselves, but we are the richer for the part we have been allowed to play in our own salvation.

But aside from the life-and-death issue, are not toil and suffering in general good for us? Did not God condemn Adam to drudgery and Eve to much sorrow? Is not man born to trouble as the sparks fly upward? True enough, sorrow is the lot of man. No one escapes it, and so the question is not whether man shall suffer or not in this world, but only how much he shall suffer. And how much should that be? — as little as possible, is the assurance of the prophets. The ancient saints were often reminded that if they must suffer their sufferings would be brief, not protracted a moment longer than necessary. The sorrows of the Apostles are compared to the sorrows of Eve — inescapable but brief: 'Ye shall be sorrowful," Christ told them at his leavetaking, "but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born unto the world" (John 16:20-21). No man knows a thousand years of pain. As soon as one realizes his position fully, he is ready to be saved from it. As soon as our climber grasps the seriousness of his situation in one clear-sighted instant and repents of his rashness and folly, then he is ready to receive the proferred hand — his pride gives way to humility, and he joyfully accepts salvation. No need to have him clinging to the rock indefinitely: he has learned his lesson! God does not play cat and mouse with us; our sufferings are not drawn out; they are but for a little moment, says the scripture, to those who are ready to accept deliverance.

Since we have used the figure of the cliff, we should, in view of Toynbee's famous allegory, be careful not to fall into a superficial historical interpretation of salvation. Few will deny today, it is true, that the human race is standing on a very narrow ledge with a precarious fingerhold above and

a yawning gulf below. But we are not talking about historical salvation at all. Men take themselves and their historical doings altogether too seriously. Those who turn from the daily paper and the news broadcasts to con the scriptures for signs of the times, revise their charts of prophetic world events, and plot the course of God in history are wasting their time. This is a shabby little show down here — read a last month's newspaper if you don't think so. As a matter of fact, the human race is at this moment as near to an earthly paradise as it can ever expect to be — unless you honestly think that more televisions and cars and play-school education are going to endow man with the wisdom and forbearance of the angels. After every conceivable improvement and correction in our world has been made, we are still at a loss to imagine any institutional setup or scientific attainment that can make men permanently happy. Even though we were drunk with per manent prosperity, we would learn with the poet Housman, that

> ... men at whiles are sober
> And think by fits and starts
> And if they think, they fasten
> Their hands upon their hearts.

If the race were to gain all its earthly desires, it could only exclaim with the bitterness of a Roman emperor, utterly satiated with all he could think to ask for: Omnia fui et nihil expedit — "I have been everything, and nothing is worth anything!"

If the things of this world are all an empty show, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," what is important? The atonement of Jesus Christ — that is the one supreme reality of our life upon this earth! Men have forgotten about it, I grant you; it sounds strange and unfamiliar in our ears, this joyful news of the redemption — a technical jargon, the quaint survival of a solemn terminology from another day of simpler and more gullible souls, the laboring of a forced and unnatural situation, and so forth — if that is what the atonement has become to this generation, so much the worse for us. Atonement indeed! Of course it has no compelling application in modern life — we have fixed that. The vast and variegated stage setting of the modern world, like that of the ancient, with its impressive props and ingenious effects, is carefully designed to conceal the truth that men haven't the courage to face.

What are we afraid of? What do men fear most? Believe it or not, it is joy. Against joy, society erects its most massive bulwarks. The gospel is a message of terrifying joy. What is the culmination of all joy? To stand in the

presence of God and behold his face — we don't need to argue that point. Yet what is the most frightening prospect that mortal man can imagine? Certainly, to stand in the presence of God and behold his face! The presence of Jesus was an unbearable torment to wicked men and devils alike; rather than look upon the face of the Lord, the wicked shall beg the rocks and the mountains to cover them; the Apostles who cheerfully faced death at the hands of devilish men were "sore afraid" at the approach of God the Father on the mountain; and when Moses descended from another mountain, the people fell down in deadly fear at the presence of one who had been talking face to face with God, though Moses himself at an earlier time had "hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God" (Exodus 3:6). It is not hell that men fear most, but heaven. Plainly the joy for which man was created is no light and trivial thing. It has more substance to it than all the rest of our existence. We live here, as many a philosopher has noted, in a shadow world of half-lights and unrealities. Everything in our society conspires to dampen and control joy. Our sordid little pleasures are carefully channeled and commercialized; our pitiful escapes to alcohol and drugs are a plain admission that we will not allow ourselves to have joy in our right senses. Only little children can face up to it — they have no hidden guilt to admonish cautious behavior or make joy appear unseemly. The kingdom of heaven is one of joy, and it is literally true that unless we are as little children we cannot possibly inherit it.

Why do we insist on taking ourselves so seriously? Because we are frightened to death of being found out. Men have turned their backs on the atonement of Jesus Christ to make for themselves a world of humbug. To lend dignity and authority to the pretentious fraud, they have invented the solemn business and drudgery of everyday life. To avoid answering questions, we pretend to be very busy — my, how busy! In every conservatory of music there is the student who practices scales and exercises with dedicated zeal for eight or ten hours a day or works away for months and years with terrifying persistence at a single piece. This is the devoted grind who impresses others by his matchless industry. But don't be fooled: This drudge is not working at all — he is running away from work! His ferocious application to dull routine is but a dodge to avoid the novel and frightening effort of using his head. And never, never, for all his years of toil, does he become a real musician. In the manner of this poor dupe, the whole majestic world goes about its ostentatious enterprises, the important busy-work of everyday life which includes, alas, nearly all its religious activities as well. And all this expenditure of effort inevitably culminates in the supreme effort of all — the effort of war. William James got the cart before the horse in his famous essay

on the "Moral Substitutes for War": It is war that is the super-substitute, showing the fantastic extremes to which men are willing to go to escape their true calling.

In such a busy and dedicated world the prophets appear as loafers and tramps, as maladjusted vagrants with no visible means of support. One of the commonest, if not the commonest, charges against Joseph Smith was that he was lazy and easygoing, yet he accomplished far more than any ten men of his generation. He was called by his critics a merry prophet — always cheerful and sweet-tempered, he never took himself too seriously and sometimes, for all his unfailing courtesy, offended visiting dignitaries by his lack of solemnity. In ancient times the saints impressed outsiders the same way, were often charged with unnecessary levity, and even accused of being drunk with new wine. We all know how the learned doctors shook their heads at Jesus' informal manner — but if he did not take seriously the things which were important to them, they on their part despised the things of the kingdom which were all-important to him.

Sorrow is a negative thing, a matter of defects and failures, shortcomings and frustrations, waste, triviality, and inability; to live with it requires only resignation. The Russian novel shows us the almost unlimited capacity of the human race for suffering, and anyone can make his own statistical researches to prove that humanity in a thousand ways declares its almost unanimous preference for drab and depressing routines. If the world is a dark and dreary place, it is because we prefer it that way, for there is nothing in the world that can keep a man from joy if joy is what he wants. Direct access to our Father in heaven through prayer is always open. But right there we draw back; as soon as we gain a distant glimpse of it, we are not so sure whether we want this joy. It is altogether too much for us to bear. We must learn by degrees to live with it. It is not strange that we are afraid of so great and overpowering a thing — that we are overawed by the feeling that all this is too good for us. The fact is that it *is* too good for us — much too good, and the message of the prophets and the Church to us here is that we must awake and prepare ourselves as good and faithful servants to enter into the joy of the Lord. We are not ready yet. It was the glory of the Lord shining round about them that made the shepherds sore afraid, so that the angel had to reassure them that he was bringing only joyful news, good tidings of great joy, for he had been sent to announce, as all the prophets have, the coming to earth of the Redeemer. That has been the joyful message of all the prophets. That we may come to support not the burden of great suffering, but the much greater impact of limitless joy is the purpose of our training here. "In the world ye shall have tribulation," says the Lord to his prophets,

"but be of good cheer: I have overcome the world." Let no one imagine that there is no conflict between the World and the Prophets — throughout the centuries each has been an affliction to the other. What the World teaches us, if we would believe its wisest men (how often the Latin poets have said it!), is to live gracefully in the wan shadow of ever-present sorrow. To the Prophets such teaching is posturing pretense and lame surrender, for they know better; theirs is the far harder task of persuading men to accept, and to live with, boundless and everlasting joy.