

THE CHANGING FACE OF GOD

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The voice of the LORD breaketh the cedars; yea, the LORD breaketh the cedars of Lebanon (Ps. 29:5).

A bruised reed shall he not break (Isa. 42:3).

The twenty-ninth psalm is one of the most descriptive poems of David. He described a tempest felling the cedar trees of Lebanon and spoke of thunder that reverberated through the hills. Bishop Perown says in the Pulpit Commentary: "We seem to hear the roll of the ocean, listen to the pealing thunder, to weigh the flash of the lightning, the crashing of trees in the forest, and the heave of the mountains as they were lifted from their foundations by an earthquake. But while it is to the description of all this grandeur and majesty that some commentators chiefly call attention, neither nature's grandeur nor majesty is the main topic of this psalm . . . in the eyes of the psalmist all the forces of nature were under one scepter, wielded by one hand, and that hand was moved by the heart of our redeeming God."

The cedars of Lebanon were among the greatest assets of the country during the reign of David and Solomon. They supplied timber for the temple, and it was valued above many other commodities. Dr. W. M. Thompson says: "I counted 443 trees, great and small. Some are struck down by lightning; broken by enormous loads of snow, or torn to fragments by tempest. Even the sacrilegious axe is sometimes raised against them."¹

When tempests roared through the mountains, many of these monarchs of the forest were damaged or destroyed. It is possible that at some time or another David witnessed such devastation. The trees which were so tall and stately seemed to brush the stars. When the giants fell, it seemed God's voice had terminated their existence. It was not a cause for amazement when the nation believed thunder to be the voice of the Almighty. James Lee said: "The cedars of Lebanon have always been famous, for they supplied wood for the temple."

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One who has visited the forest writes: "As we stand beneath the great arms of these old patriarchs of a hundred generations, there comes a solemn hush upon the soul as if by enchantment. The girth of the largest tree is more than 41 feet, and the highest may be 100 feet. Some of these are said to be 3,500 years old, but they are not all erect. As we consider these trees, some facts invite attention."

The Majestic Power of God... Great
The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaketh the cedars; yea, the LORD breaketh the cedars of Lebanon (Ps. 29:45).

From time immemorial men considered thunder to be the voice of the Almighty expressing His anger. Modern science has other ways of describing atmospheric disturbances, but even Job said: "God thundereth marvellously with his voice; great things doeth he, which we cannot comprehend" (see Job 37:1-5). Historical events also appeared to endorse that opinion. When the ark of the covenant was returned to Israel by

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the Philistines, a great assembly of Hebrews gathered at Mizpeh where Samuel interceded for the nation. News of that gathering disturbed the lords of the Philistines who came with a great army to attack the Jews. The Philistines were dis-

mayed and scattered by a terrible thunderstorm which some writers called "God's heavy artillery" (see 1 Sam. 7:10). It became evident that when the Lord spoke from heaven, men were helpless and terrified.

Throughout history, arrogant men imposed their will upon others, and humanity suffered extreme atrocities. The Caesars, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, and others defied God and sought to take His place. They were foolish men who were destroyed by their ego. It may become possible for other rulers to emulate their example, but the Bible says: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel from everlasting, and to everlasting" (see Ps. 41:13). Belshazzar, the king of Babylon, was informed by Daniel that his breath was in the hand of God, and that his existence depended upon the mercy of the Lord (see Dan. 5:22-23).

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I was at Myrtle Beach in South Carolina just after the terrific storm called Hugo roared in from the Atlantic Ocean. What I witnessed was astonishing. Although many trees were felled by the storm, many were literally twisted as if gigantic hands had endeavored to turn them into corkscrews. Men with their inventions are capable of doing many things but when compared with the forces liberated by God, they are feeble. David had similar thoughts when he wrote: "He breaketh the cedars of Lebanon." When he saw the trees swaying, he compared them with the graceful movements of deer. He wrote: "He maketh them also to skip like a calf" (Ps. 29:6).

The Merciful Pity of God... Gracious

A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench (Isa. 42:3; Matt. 12:20).

It was significant that when the dispute arose regarding the legality of healing on the Sabbath day, the Lord withdrew into the wilderness and quoted words spoken centuries earlier by the prophet Isaiah. He used two word pictures which revealed His attitude toward distressed people and spoke of a bruised reed and a smoking flax.

"The pens with which scribes wrote were reeds sharpened at one end. This was dipped into the writing fluid, and messages written on parchment or tablets of clay. It was to be expected that continual use would soften the fibrous point, and when the pen became saturated it would bend and be unfit for further service. The scribe would then crush the softened reed with his fingers and throw it into a container—a waste paper basket! 'Smoking flax [a dimly-burning wick] shall he not quench.' The lamps used in the time of our Lord were made of clay. They resembled a large dessert spoon with a handle at one end and a hole for the wick at the other. The wick, a piece of string, lay flat on the surface of the very small amount of oil within the lamp. Sometimes when the oil supplies were exhausted, the wick slowly burned until only a pinpoint of light remained. Then an offensive odor would be emitted, and an impatient writer instantly extinguished the

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light by squeezing the wick between his thumb and finger. The prophet said the coming One would be possessed with extreme patience. He would not discard men because they were broken and unreliable, and would not extinguish a light because it had grown dim. The Messiah would replenish the oil, and restore backslidden souls to their former usefulness. The coming King would deliver men, not destroy them."2

It is important to remember the same God who broke the cedars of Lebanon looked with infinite pity on a broken reed. The same Lord who felled the trees and made them skip like deer restored people who had become tired and despondent. This was among the greatest of all revelations. God was thought to be austere, but those who knew Him best understood He was filled with compassion. The Lord who brought the universe into existence could charm young children as He held them in His arms. Christians love to sing: "A mighty fortress is our God," but young people sing: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Would it be correct to describe these extremes as the changing face of God?

The Manifested Pleasure of God... Great
The LORD sitteth upon the flood; yea, the LORD sitteth King
for ever. The LORD will give strength unto his people (Ps.
29:10-11).

David had already spoken of God's power. Trees were felled, the earth shook, and all nature responded to Jehovah's authority. The psalmist emphasized that God remained undisturbed upon His throne. His ability was unchallenged. He is "from everlasting to everlasting," and no man can change that fact. David proceeded to supply a more intimate glimpse of his Lord. He who broke the cedars of Lebanon and shook mountains was interested in assisting people. He was not a mystical deity living in space but a Father seeking for opportunities to help His children. The psalmist said: "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3). A dedicated shepherd loves, listens, and leads his flock. He understands every movement and need of his sheep. He knows when danger threatens and hurries to

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protect his animals. As David risked his life to defend his flock against the lion and the bear, so the Lord cared for His sheep and was willing to lay down His life on their behalf. The shepherd went ahead of the flock to lead them into green pastures and still waters. At first it appears to be inconceivable that the Almighty who broke the cedars could be kind to suffering people. David was constantly reminded of the protecting power of God who had helped him throughout his life. Nevertheless, it appeared incomprehensible that the Creator of heaven and earth should be anxious to share His life with sinners. The psalmist expressed the same amazement when he said: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" (Ps. 8:4).

The story has often been told of the child who stood outside the gate of Buckingham Palace. A prince asked what caused his tears, and the boy explained that he wanted to see the queen, but the guard had refused to let him go through the gate. Somewhat amused, the prince took the small boy into Her Majesty's presence and explained the situation. Queen Victoria was a very gracious lady and ordered the child to be bathed and given a new suit before he returned to his home.

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How could the queen who ruled over a vast empire become the benefactor of a dirty little boy from the street? She had been inspired by the Prince of Peace at whose feet she worshiped.

The Mighty Purpose of God... Glorious

The LORD will bless his people with peace (Ps. 29:11).

Throughout the long history of the Hebrew nation peace was always elusive. Surrounded by aggressive neighbors, the children of Israel were in constant danger and, apart from the reigns of David and Solomon, were threatened by invasion. The inexcusable persecution perpetrated by Nazi Germany cannot be erased from memory. Yet even in the most distressing periods of their history, the victims believed God would eventually bring them to the time when the lion and the lamb would live peacefully together. That faith has never

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wavered, and even today there are rabbis who believe their Messiah will make that possible.

It was significant that Jesus said: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword" (see Matt. 10:34). It became evident to the disciples that Jesus sought a kingdom within human hearts and not a geographical conquest to expel Romans from the Promised Land. Nevertheless, the Lord also promised to return as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. His people would indeed be "blessed with peace." This has always been the purpose of the Almighty. John described a city descending from heaven to become the center of righteousness. "And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 22:5).

The leaders of the early church accepted this fact, and went out to help Christ prepare sinners to become citizens of that amazing city. Without the Gospel, the new Jerusalem would never be inhabited. Millions of Christians believe the establishing of Christ's kingdom will soon take place; the hope of the church is about to become a reality. Selfish governments will no longer covet their neighbor's territory, and armies will no longer dominate weaker nations. Universal peace will continue forever.

God is working His purpose out

As year succeeds to year,
God is working His purpose out,
And the time is drawing near.

Nearer and nearer draws the time,
The time that shall surely be;
When the earth shall be filled
With the Glory of God
As the waters cover the sea.

1. W. M. Thompson, *The Land and the Book* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1910).
2. Ivor Powell, *Matthew's Majestic Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1986).

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