

Skylines and Plains

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SKYLINES AND PLAINS

By President Carl Gregg Doney

Isaiah 45:8—"Let the skies pour down righteousness; let the earth open, and let them bring forth salvation."

This graphic figure of the ancient seer presents nothing that is cryptic or unintelligible. It is an appeal for righteousness to reach mankind and for mankind to receive it. It is the recognition of a relation between heaven and earth, between God and man. Men have always believed there were stars above and that there was an earth upon which they poured their light. These are the foreground and the background of life. There is a background to human life and there is a foreground. The foreground is the earth of daily work. The background is the skies of motive and of ideals.

The earth beneath our feet is the stage of human action where the details of the daily task, the plans and thoughts are being worked into tangible realities. Above the earth are skies, the home of vast truths, of the principles we live by, of deep consecrations and of the mighty impulses that energize the daily tasks. In the skies are great reservoirs of power and guidance, source of the rivers that give beauty and fertility to the plains.

There is little likelihood that a man will forget the earth. It constantly claims his interest. It offers rewards that have value in his home and in the market place; it withholds them from the laggard and stings him for his neglect. Here and there is a man lost in reverie and abstractions, who contemplates his visions of truth so intently that his eye sees none of the stir and sweep that fills the plain before him. But these persons are not many; the multitudes are busy with the earth on which they stand, their look is downward where their hands are moving and where other men are hurrying to and fro. These are the persons who are in danger of forgetting the other sphere of life.

Contemplating these two spheres, one can see that life cannot be entirely separated from either. Likewise one can see that the values of a life will depend on how the two hemispheres function together; the skies must pour down righteousness and the earth must open to receive it if together they are to bring forth salvation. Expressed in another way this that we have been saying is about motives and methods, character and conduct. The two always go together in human life—method must have motive, action must have character. We always look for the character behind the deed, the motive behind the method. The deed and the method we perceive imme-

diately, but we know that they take color and value from the quality of the man who expresses them. You study the voice and manner of the man who greets you, seeking to penetrate to the man behind the man. You become sensitive to impressions, always seeing beyond a man's deeds to the qualifying background of his character.

Why does this relation interest us? If a man's actions are pleasing, why should we have any further care? When a man sells goods across the counter, why should it mean anything to us whether he is a saint or a villain? Does it matter at all if the physician who treats us is lecherous and dishonest? It matters just because no action is a final thing, it never is judged in its own right, but stands irrevocably tied up with motive and character. This is why the very memory of the World War sickens and disgusts. So long as we thought that the motive squared with the deed, there was no sparing of sacrifice and courage; but when the actual motives were brought to light, we realized the sham and weakness of the whole affair.

Here then is everlasting testimony to the integrity of human nature. It seeks and demands wholeness, reality, sincerity. The sky and the earth are one and when torn apart there is unreality, the offense of the unnatural, the futility of the fractional.

But here also is everlasting evidence of the weakness and recalcitrance of human nature. This that you easily ask of others, you find hard to achieve for yourself. You recognize the two worlds, but to join them properly in yourself is difficult.

Not the most common failure, but still too numerous, is the man who does little more than gaze into the heavens. He beholds the greatness of righteousness poured in splendor from the skies. He sees the beauty and wonder of truth and allows it so to capture his soul that he rests in glowing admiration of its goodness. He also perceives the blight of ignorance, the curse of poverty, the cruelty of sin; he discovers plenty pulling rich robes back from the touch of wretchedness, learning that dupes and defrauds the trustful, inequalities that surge like desperate whirlpools and over against them he beholds the healings of justice and sympathy and brotherhood. Even as he thinks on these things, needy men stand knocking at his door. He does not hear them; he is wrapt in the glow of enthusiasm, he believes that because he has dreamed he has acted, because he has been stirred the thing has been done.

All of us know this man, the man of high ambitions whose generous enthusiasms fall from his hands like trickling sand. It will not do to dismiss or condemn him as a hypocrite and pretender. He possesses reality, he has truth, but he is ineffective because he has no method or plan. All the life he has is lived in the realm of vision

and idea; his hands do not strike out to break up the hard crust of the earth on which he stands. Yet there he is with great and genuine convictions that are unused—a fraction of the man he ought to be.

Close beside him is a man of another sort. He is busy with the earth. He does not bother with ideals, enthusiasms or motives; action is what interests him, nothing counts except the thing that is done. He studies methods by which the earth can be made to yield the greater harvest with never a glance toward the skies for primary and everlasting motives.

Such men are a numerous company in these days. There are benefactors who give to keep the poor quiet, who support the church that crime may be lessened, who endow colleges because learning safeguards democracy. Suggest to them the idealism of helpfulness, the religiousness of doing good and these motives find them unresponsive. There are learned teachers who faithfully pursue the technic of instruction yet who never suffuse their teaching with a recognition that learning is a duty, a privilege, and a high responsibility to God and society. There are business men who are honest, whose methods are intelligent and reputable but who would be puzzled by the thought that their highest service is in relation to the redemption of society. There are preachers whose desire for a practical religion finds them absorbed in ways and means, in methods and organizations that have lost the dynamic of motives poured out from the skies.

Many reasons are offered to explain this matter of fact form of life. Advocates point to the dreamer who never does anything, to the woes and needs of the world which cry out for the practical man to take things as he finds them and to do his best to heal the day by day afflictions of the race. They tell us to forget about motives and inspirations and to get busy with actualities.

No one will say that there is not truth in the position of the practical man, but it is only a half truth and such truth may be as dangerous as complete error. When a man seeks to live on bread alone, his inspirations become low level calculations and his guidances lose vitality. There is a pole-wide difference between actions derived from exalted character and those prompted by policy. When men are motivated by their own natures business becomes mechanical, government becomes cunning, learning becomes a trade, religion a thing of ritual, life itself a formality.

That this is an unsatisfying and dangerous condition has been verified by every period of decay and is tragically demonstrated by the recent years and the present time. Since the turn of the century the earth has more and more ceased to open to the outpouring of righteousness from the skies. Out of its own seeming abundance the earth itself

has provided the motive for human endeavor. Primary motives have been crowded from life by secondary motives and men have studied methods for doing things rather than inspirations for doing the better things.

I suppose that in no single generation have the American people so much departed from the great realities and tried so feverishly to be happy with things of secondary value. Such things always decay when unsupported by spiritual loyalties. Decadence is a word that is now applied to a score of things that are intended to interpret and ennoble life and to make it lovely. We speak of decadent literature with its pruriency and babblings about nothing; of decadent music with its syncopation, crooning, and tom-tom blare; of decadent art with its insane creations sprung from delirious minds; of decadent politics with its spineless servility and chicanery; of decadent churches with their grotesque conformity to the spirit of the times; of decadent theatres with their trumpery and silly sensuality. Shoddiness and depraved taste appear to have settled like a nasty fog upon the work and aspirations of this generation. Not all is bad, not so much is bad as may seem to be, but all that is bad carries the heavy mark of the earth, little touched by the righteousness from the skies.

Matthew Arnold affirmed that conduct is three-fourths of life. This is not true; the very center and margins of life are in the motives that give impulse and quality to conduct. Motives come first, conduct is a result. Motives that have their home in the skies lead to high objectives and high methods. Motives that spring from the earth give their lower qualities to men's purposes and ways. The governing idea must be greater than the end we seek. Low inspirations are the cause of the tragedy and futility of the present day. We battle against our sufferings and long for the heaven above to come down to earth, forgetting that we cannot have heaven on earth without heaven, forgetting that we cannot bring in the Kingdom of God and leave God out.

Never have we so penetratingly known the world's problems or seen so many evils that need to be cured and never have we gone about the healing in a more wooden or stupid manner. Life blossoms from within and not by tying flowers to swaying branches. The unpossessed regions of social redemption appeal to an awakened generation with a terrifying meaning and we employ the transient aspect of matter and force as means for saving humanity. The ratchet of God always clicks down on the machinery that tries to run without Him and no amount of intellectual cleverness that is heedless of God can long keep that machinery in motion.

The closing months of 1862 and the early months of 1863 were black with despair for the Union government.

Abraham Lincoln counseled with men, and the 30th of April was solemnly set apart as a time when the nation should counsel with God, should fast and pray and look to the skies for inspiration and courage. On the 30th of May, 1918, when the world was white with bleeding, Woodrow Wilson joined his people in fervent petition that the earth might open to the righteousness of God that poured from the skies. Lincoln's people, giving their hearts to a heaven-enkindled passion, thenceforth moved by a new alliance, saved the government. Wilson's people, empowered by motives rooted in the spirit of God, swept into the triumphant days that closed the World War. When religion and patriotism are not joined, men are broken by their contesting claims, but when patriotism and religion are united in a common cause, a people is inspired with the flaming power of God. When any human enterprise is not empowered from above it falters and fails.

These present times that bitterly pierce all hearts in this broad land have been met by a President of good will and fine courage. He tells us that poverty must be banished, that children shall have the inalienable rights of childhood, that men shall not exploit their fellow men, that justice must be done, that strength must be shared with weakness, that every one is entitled to a happy life. These objectives are as good as goodness itself, they are a modernized translation of the second great commandment that a man must love his neighbor as he loves himself.

But methods will not operate without motives, codes will not function without conscience; there is a first great commandment, that man must love God with all his heart, mind, and strength, and the second commandment utterly fails without the first. There can be no durable progress until the God of the hills is sought to rebuild the society of the plains. The skies pour down righteousness while the earth floods itself with liquor; the skies pour down righteousness while government tries to operate mechanisms with secondary causes; the skies pour down righteousness while men run to and fro, crying, "Lo here!" and "Lo there!"

Many of the people of America are bewildered, especially the Christian people. They wish to be loyal, but they find poor inspiration to be loyal by their being profanely "cracked down upon" or their being advised by a national leader to seek their comforts in "wine, women, and song." They are missing the things that men live by and are saddened. They know that only as men have spiritualized motives can their actions be a means for the permanent recovery of reality. They know that the constants and constructives of society always have their sources in the spirit. They know that true statesmanship is to discern the way God is going and then to clear the

way for His advance. There are substitutes for God, but there is no equivalent.

President Taft said that the trouble with America is that too many people do not care what happens so long as it does not happen to them. Something is needed that will cause them to care; and that something is a spiritual motive that will guide emotion, kindle imagination, restrain lust, govern cupidity, control selfishness, and ennoble character. That motive comes from the skies: great ideals, fountains of inspiration, realities of the unseen that "give grandeur to the beatings of the heart." There is no road to the highest except along the highway of the high.

A program of reform is more popular at first than one of regeneration, though the centuries have always declared that a man or a nation is saved, not by forms, but by spirit. "The sum of the whole matter is this," said President Wilson, "that our civilization cannot survive materially unless it be redeemed spiritually." Man has obstructed God's idea of humanity by deciding that the best values are of the earth and not of the spirit. Man has enthroned himself, forgetting that no self is a whole self which is only itself, that a complete self is to take its share of the total wholeness of which it is a part. The road which must be taken if we would recover the permanent realities of life is not guide-posted by human devices, but is along the way that Christ revealed and followed. His life and love entering into men become redemptive for the individual and a redemptive conscience for the race. In this Christ-engendered racial conscience is the vast reservoir of human rights and the power to make them realities of society. The sense of weakness and sin puts all of us on an equality of need, but it is the conception of the fatherhood of God that provides a hope that makes men struggle out of their loss toward their enfranchisement as sons of God.

These are not rhetorical phrases. The awful sense of need is experienced by everyone. That sense will crystallize for each of us either into despair or into hope. But God in Christ bids us hope and not despair. Hope however has no meaning if it be based only on an exhortation. The Christian's hope like homing pigeons may poise uncertain for a moment, but ultimately it moves for its verification toward the Man who confirmed it every foot of the way from Bethlehem to Calvary. There on the cross the hope became an ideal, an ideal that thereafter was to hold the hope to its own vast meaning.

Great ideals come down from the hope-lit skies where shines the cross—ideals like love and liberty, justice and righteousness, sacrifice and truth. Great ideals become the enthronement of mighty motives with empires of their own. You cannot dethrone a great ideal when once it has

found a rooting place in human hearts. And if that ideal rule in the realm of hope and religion and daily toil, being spoken in the litanies of hymn and prayer, written on the upturned faces of men who walk the streets, seen in the eyes that are wearied by long waiting, that ideal becomes vital with power and will beat its way upward to the lordship of life and the saving of the world.

Two thousand years ago Christ broke into the march of mankind with His cross, which means that he set Himself into that march with His stainless goodness and turned it into other highways. It means that He now is walking besides each marching man offering a spirit to every changing hour and a light for every pathless road. Some do not see Him, do not know Him as He walks beside us, but He Himself has told us that He always can be found where love and duty are fulfilled in service. And if the reality of God has been obscured by the fogs of religious formalism, or the miracles of science, or the systems of philosophy, or the enchantments of materialism, you will discover that the way of Christ leads to the Heavenly Father.

Here are the answers and the satisfactions of the marching generations. Christ answers to their hope and satisfies their need with the supremest response the world has ever known. He is the living continuity of all He ever was. All humanitarian forces, plans, and projects—the church, the social organizations, the government—must finally depend on Him for the true and sustaining motives for their redemptive programs.

Therefore

“Trumpeter, sound for the splendor of God—
Trumpeter, rally us, rally us, rally us,
On to the city of God.”

My friends of the graduating class, my friends everywhere, if I could sum up the judgments of all my experiences, of all that I have known and felt, of all that I have read and learned, it would be that life's strength and safety and satisfactions for you individually and for society collectively will be realized to the extent that you place Christ at the center of your life to gird it with His power and to guide it with His truth. I speak this with unalloyed conviction, with an assurance as certain as an axiom. You know that I do not undervalue the power of intellect or the splendor of physical soundness, but in the end the lamp is unlit and the loin ungirt if they be not kindled and empowered by Him who is infinite light and power. If you will be great in yourself and in your service, you will labor to join the earth with its tragic needs to the skylines with their infinite inspirations and perfect purposes.