

The Dayspring from on High ...

(Der Aufgang aus der Höhe ...)

A sermon by Friedrich Schleiermacher, delivered on 25th December 1824.

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From the transcript of an unknown person.

Glory be to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill towards men.

Text: Luke 1: 78-79

Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the Dayspring from on High hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

My devout friends, that is a proclamation about our Redeemer, which even before his birth resounds out of the times of the old covenant across to us in our time, as promised by his father to the one who was the forerunner of our Lord, but speaking to him of the Lord himself, before the infant was born, in order to prepare the way for him, and fittingly, to guide our festive reflections today.

For having listened to the Bible verses together, we will unfold for ourselves so many special causes for our festive joy today, which we so desire to consider now, here in each other's company.

The Lord, whose birth we celebrate, has sought us as the Dayspring from on High through the mercy of God; the Lord, whose birth we celebrate, is revealed to all who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. At last, the Lord, whose birth we celebrate, sets our feet on the path of peace.

I.

First then, the Dayspring from on High has sought us through the mercy of God.

The Dayspring from on High, my devout friends - what a lovely expression that is to set apart from the others! - concerns the relation of our Lord to all who believe in him. It indicates first of all his heavenly origin; but then, at the same time, it also indicates that he has become the object of longing and hope. For all along, my beloved friends, in the feeling of their incomplete and helpless condition, men have seen Heaven on high, and have beheld the morning.

Indeed, they have in part also beheld Evening there. That is to say, they have directed their gaze to the past with a feeling which is sometimes more, sometimes less definite, that their present condition ought to be more innocent.¹ But because it is seen as a corruption, [the feeling is that] something better must have gone before it.

¹ The German is 'Urpünglich', more accurately translated as 'original', in the sense of original perfection or innocence.

They have directed the eyes of their spirit towards that innocence as towards a sun which has set, and have sought as well as they could to make for themselves images of a past which they no longer possessed.

But that, my good friends, was not a place whence salvation could come, but merely a place where human beings must evermore have gone mad in the darkness and in the shadow of death, seeking life and light in the past, where there was nothing to find.

It was hope, then – it was the joyful, if equally obscure faith in God, that still would have been a help and a peace – which prevented man from beholding morning and seeing into the future.

But not hope in the world. For so general was corruption and the feeling of corruption, that men were pervaded by it, so that earthly things could not help them. Therefore, even if they included in their thoughts those things which are best and noblest and most excellent, even so, those things have still the same frailty, still the same incapacity, still the same defilement by sin. It was only upon the Dayspring from on High that they could rightly found their hopes and desires. And this [Dayspring] had to come from above, thereafter to arrive on earth, shining and illuminating all around, and giving them true help. Thus says even Zechariah, in anticipation of the one who was to prepare the way for the Son, who through the mercy of God has sought us – so near, so present was the future to him – the Dayspring from on high.

But visits and visitations – that, my good friends, that we know from scripture as a sign of a closer relationship, in which, in certain circumstances, God places himself alongside men. The scriptures of the Old Covenant are full of visitations of divine wrath. But the voice that cries out to us from these same scriptures can also be joyous, as when it says: “The Lord has visited his people!” For wherever divine wrath and divine judgement are not expressly specified, then according to the modern understanding, one cannot understand “the visitations of the Lord” otherwise than as referring to divine grace and mercy.

Accordingly, my good friends, God has never before visited the human race without revealing to us the Dayspring from on High. For it is through the Dayspring that everything that the human soul has ever acquired for itself in hope now exists: whatever it possesses and whatever it is even now becoming for all time. This is what we find right now, through the Dayspring from on High visiting us from God, so that we might be one with him, as he was one with us, and so that in and through the only-begotten Son, we might all be children of God, such as those from whom his grace and faithfulness, his truth and love, could never again depart.

And if we think about it, given that the Lord has once more departed from this earthly arena, this same arena has actually been given yet another Divine visitation – not a visible appearance on earth this time, but an invisible power which the Lord has planted in human souls, that is, the visitation through his Spirit, as it was poured out upon all flesh at the absolute beginning² of creation. But that, my good friends, is not the same kind of visitation: rather, it is the setting of the Divine in the human soul, even for the sake of which the Lord has come. Hence God would not have been able to visit us, were not the only-begotten Son of the Father already the rightful and only Dayspring from on High, even before he appeared. For what the Spirit of God is and does in his believers, all that belongs to the Dayspring from on High. As the Lord himself says, 'From his own he will take, in order to give and to transfigure.'

For when we think how the Dayspring from on high has visited us, and give God the glory thereof, how else could we attribute it except as Zechariah did, to the tender mercy of God? Indeed, my

2 The German is 'Unbeginn', suggesting a 'non-beginning', a beginning which is before time.

good friends, we do not find in God attributes, virtues, and excellencies which are in anyway singular, partial and separate. Rather, they are found as all one and the same. In the human sphere there is nothing more good and splendid than to distinguish justice and mercy from one another; but in God, my good friends, these are both one and the same. Therefore we can say – yes, and say it just as well! – that it is through the justice of our God that the Dayspring from on High has visited us. Then, my good friends, as the Lord said at the absolute beginning of things, looking upon everything that he had made, that *everything was good*, so we can rightfully say that he had not at that time foreseen the darkness and the shadow of death, into which men would sink. For if he had said that *everything was good* despite this darkness, would he not also and at the same time have thought about the salvation, which he intended to prepare for them precisely through the visitation of the Dayspring from on High? Therefore, while both sin and salvation have been enclosed by his eternal decree, yet he could absolutely not do otherwise than give the latter *after* the former had occurred.

Therefore, it is in this way and no other that he has shown his truth and justice: that through the Dayspring from on High he has visited the sinful human race, which was indeed created according to his likeness, an image that was meant to be identical to him, and which has been formed for a blessedness which he could not bestow in advance.

However, my good friends, even as we know and are conscious of our own beings as inherently *ourselves*, at the same time we know and feel that we are not capable of attaining through our own power the goal for which men were destined all along, when they gazed upon the morning and the heavens. Nevertheless, we cannot lose the consciousness, that that should be our goal; and given that we were meant to attain it, we could not be brought to it in any other way than *by* this consciousness. Furthermore, given that we are also not capable of attaining what is ours, then this and only this is what we should demand of God, given that he has fashioned the human soul in this way as an image, identical to him. Yet because we know that we would have no right to demand it except that we *could* have attained it through the original use of the power that is inherent in us, therefore we can only attribute it to the mercy of God, that the Dayspring from on High has visited us. And so it is thus expressed in human terms and in human ways, in the words of these men of the Old Covenant as received in the Scripture, even as it is in our time meritoriously attributed to the mercy of God.

However, for us, my good friends, there is yet a higher explanation, when we consider how it is one of the treasures of wisdom, (which we likewise owe only to the Dayspring from on High), that we know that God is love. In mercy, empowered by which the Dayspring from on High has visited us, the divine love is actually reflected in our feelings and in our intuition as the essence of the Almighty and Eternal one. And in that mercy there is no *reason* for the Dayspring from on High to visit us: the reason is his love, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; the reason is his love, that we, who could not endure to see the countenance of the Lord, now see the glory of God in the glory of the only-begotten Son of the Father. And so the Dayspring from on High has visited us, so that our eyes are now opened and cleansed, that we might see the Father in the Son, and so return in him to the living communion of the Spirit!

II

So what else do we require, my good friends, first of all to explain to us in detail the following words of our text, that the Dayspring from on High has visited us, so that he appears to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death?

For, my good friends, one thing in particular must rightly be noted, that from the perspective of our own time, we cannot know with how clear or obscure a consciousness the father of John was

thinking as he spoke these words. For he was surely thinking first of all about his own people, as elected by God from ancient times, as those concerning whom the divine promises had been given. Though these promises were possessed, it so happened, that just as imminent fulfilment seemed to be approaching, it was immediately withdrawn again. Nevertheless, through the possession of these promises, they had been differentiated from and elevated above all other races of men. Most properly, therefore, he thought about his own people, for they were those very ones who, robbed of their ancient glory, had fallen from a position of blood and strength, and now were looking more like people sitting in darkness and the shadow of death. But for us, my good friends, this differentiation has passed away, for in the salvation, which has come into being in men through the visit of the Dayspring From On High, is such a blessedness and an abundance, that the differentiation between those who enjoy the promises, and those who are still far from them, is simply the greatest thing – no, we have to say, the *single* thing – that men possess, against which all other things fade away and are counted as nothing.

But I say to you all, it is true that it was the whole human race that sat in darkness and the shadow of death. We really feel what that means, don't we, my good friends? The light is the pure, the joyful and blessed means by which we understand everything; and only in the light, only as long as it is day, are we capable of living and doing good. But darkness and the shadow of death – that is what is bad. When the shadow falls upon us, that is exactly when we are robbed of the use of our strength. It is the opposite of all life, all blessedness and all virtue. And the human condition is truly and rightfully described in this way and no other, whenever we think about it apart from the manifestation of the Dayspring from on High, regardless whether before or after. Thus the Lord himself states and affirms it, when he says: "I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness." [John 12:46] Does he not say there quite distinctly, that all who do not believe in him are in darkness? But they who believe in him, my good friends, they are the ones who know him and rejoice in his being the Dayspring from on High! They are the same ones who hear the words that he received from the Father and has spoken, the words which are Spirit and Life! They are the same ones in whom the will of God, which he revealed to us, has been taken into their hearts. But these same ones also know that they are only capable of doing the will of the Father and of holding fast in their soul to the Word of Life that he has spoken, when they come to the one who calls the weary and heavy-laden to himself. They are only capable when they as the branches remain on the vine, in which are divine powers in abundance. These powers are Light and Life. The Light, said John at the beginning of his Gospel, shines ever in the darkness; in the darkness was shining that same light that seeks from within to penetrate the obscurity, and thereby to turn the eyes of men to the Dayspring from on High. But the Light could not penetrate the darkness, and the darkness could not receive it. That is why there is no other description for the human condition than darkness and the shadow of death. But the Lord has come and has appeared, a Light to all who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. Oh, how he sheds his light! as purely and tenderly he remakes the earthly life, redeeming us from the darkness, in which we find our eyes obscured and our strength crippled.

That simply never lets us forget, that without him we would still sit in darkness and the shadow of death; and that the power, which God has set in the human soul, could not be released and made free except through the help of the Dayspring from on High. That simply does not let us forget to give to God and to the tender mercy of God the whole glory that is his due for having found us, and for visiting us as the Dayspring from on High.

But now, my good friends, now that the Light has appeared, so now ought the darkness and the shadow of death everywhere be gone, and the life of man be ever tenderer, brighter, and more blissful. Now ought the Dayspring from on High shine ever wider, and his light be cast over the whole earth and over all the regions of the human race.

III

At last, it is revealed to us, so that he guides our feet into the way of peace. This gift of peace, my good friends, which the Lord himself especially commends to us, positioning it as the entire content of what he can give to men. “Not as the world giveth, give I unto you, but my peace,” as he says, “my peace I give unto you, my peace I leave with you.”³ So he himself confirmed these words, that he might set our feet firmly on the way of peace.

But, my good friends, how will this peace be represented to us here? As a way we have to travel. That is, [it is presented to us] as a Good which can be achieved only in praxis and in the right use of our power; nor yet as a Good which is possessed, but as something that comes from outside, after which man must always wrestle and strive, and through wrestling and striving achieve it for himself. That is what is meant by, “He guides our feet into the way of peace.” It is as if the Lord himself actually said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, who set their feet willingly on the way of peace and are pleased to walk nowhere else than upon this way. “Blessed are they, for they shall be called the children of God”⁴: so we know, my good friends, that the sonship of God, seen freely from one angle, is not something that we can acquire and procure for ourselves while we are wandering this way and that. No – it is only through him, the only-begotten Son, that we are called, and that we *are*, the children of God. That is the power which he has given to all who believe in him: this sonship of God resides in faith in him, and it is a gift which, through faith in him, and through him, has called us into life and made faith dependent upon the preaching of the Evangelists.

But it is the Spirit of God who within us cries out, “Dear Father”. It is the Spirit of God in whom we have sonship, and whom we have received as the Spirit of Sonship. And it is precisely this Spirit, who is the divine power, which permeates and enlivens all who believe in the Lord. Therefore, all the working of the divine Spirit in our soul is actually nothing other than our conduct and the guiding of our feet upon the way of peace. So we travel in the world through the power of the Spirit as children of God. As such, the peace of the Lord is most certainly in us. We are such in him and through him, insofar as we are one in the Spirit – and where the unity of the Spirit is, there is peace. We are such, because God lived in him, and through him has reconciled the world to himself. And we are such, because as we are one with him, we are also one with the Father, and the Father comes to make a dwelling place in our hearts. For wherever the dwelling place of God with the Son is in our hearts; wherever there is oneness with the Father through the Son, there is the peace of God. But this peace of God is higher than all reason, and can neither be grasped nor produced. Rather, it is the gift of the Spirit alone, the Spirit which the Son has sent, the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of sonship.

Well then, my good friends, therefore let us rejoice in the heavenly mercies, that have been with us throughout, through which the Dayspring from on High has visited us. To him be the glory, who has thus visited the human race. But as it is he who has set our feet on the path of peace, oh so may he then also uphold all who travel his way, and for whom he has therefore become real truth and life, because he has shown them the way and given them the power to travel that very same way. So, my good friends, may there also be peace on earth, and may the divine peace that the Lord has brought reign everywhere. So may those who recognise the Dayspring from on High tread upon a way of eternal and joyful goodwill instead of a way of darkness and the shadow of death. So may they tread, those who have received the light which shines in the darkness, and who have become his own, and as such have the power, through faith in him, to be the children of God. Amen.

3 This verse is a slightly free rendering by the preacher of John 14:27.

4 Matthew 5:9