

“STARS ABOVE THE FREIGHT TRAIN”

Text: Isaiah 40:26

SERMON - Rev. Arthur W. Rich

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I'm speaking this morning on the subject "Stars Above the Freight Trains." My sermon subject was suggested to my heart when I was reading a novel by Ernest Poole. Ernest Poole wrote a novel entitled "The Harbor". And in that novel he tells the story about a little boy who during the daytime would slip away from his house in Brooklyn, and he would play with some street urchins along the railroad tracks. One day the boy had the horrible experience of seeing a freight train run over the body of one of his little playmates. As he saw those wheels grinding a little playmate to death, it almost sent him into hysterics. He ran on home and was almost beside himself for a long time. It seemed that every time he heard a freight train go by it would cause him to cry out in terror. His mother did not understand what the reason was for all this shock. She took him to the country, thinking that a little rest from the city might do him some good. Even in the country at nighttime one could hear the freight train going through the valley nearby. As soon as the freight train would go by, the little boy would awaken from sleep with a terror and cry out as if a fresh wound had been implanted in his heart. The mother didn't understand but she was wise, and whenever she would hear her little boy cry out in the night, she would take him over to a window, pull back the curtain, and then show him the stars above. Then she would tell him about the stars until the freight trains had passed by.

My friends, there are many freight trains in life that have a frightening effect upon us if we think about them. But isn't it wonderful to know that you and I have a Christ who can take us to the window of life, pull back the curtains, and then tell us about the stars that are above the freight trains? Well, I like that little subject, "Stars Above the Freight Trains," but I thought I ought to have at least one verse of scripture to use as a text, and I found it in the 40th Chapter of Isaiah, in that 26th verse. And what a wonderful challenge it is. "Lift up your eyes and behold who hath created these things." Now what is he talking about? He's talking about the stars. Just look up and behold who hath created these things that bringeth out their host by number. And as you look at the stars remember He calleth them all by name. By the greatness of His might for that He is strong in power not one faileth. This morning I'd like to suggest three freight trains in life that have a terrifying effect upon you and me. But I can tell you that there is a wonderful assurance we have that above those freight trains there are the stars of an Almighty God and they give us comfort.

I. First of all above the FREIGHT TRAIN OF SIN, I want you to see the STARS OF FORGIVENESS.

I do not know of anything with a more terrifying effect than this thing called sin. Like freight trains sin goes rumbling along through life. I heard a man say not long ago, "When I think how terrible sin is, I cringe in fear." And all of us would cringe in fear if it were not for the fact that above the freight trains there are the stars of forgiveness. In the 7th Chapter of Luke there is the greatest drama of forgiveness that's ever been recorded. Beginning with that 36th verse is a story of a drama of forgiveness told in unforgettable terms.

There are three actors in this drama. There is the Son of God with His power to forgive sin. There is a poor woman of the streets, an outcast, who has already experienced the forgiveness of her Lord. And then there is a proud, self-centered, respectable Pharisee who has never seen the stars of forgiveness because he doesn't even know that he has any sin in his life. Here they are, the three characters. Jesus notices this outcast woman of the streets who comes in. She gets down in front of Him and the tears roll down her cheeks and splash on the feet of the Son of God. She washes His feet literally with her tears. Then she dries His feet with the hairs on her head. She leans over tenderly and kisses his feet, and then she takes out some precious ointment and anoints the feet of Jesus. All the time she's doing this there are snide remarks as the Pharisees say one to another, "What kind of a prophet is this? If he were really a prophet, he'd know what kind of a woman is hanging around his feet. What kind of a prophet is he?" And then Jesus answers all of them as He talks to Simon the Pharisee. He puts it in a very simple little story about two people who owe a bill.

Now Williams, when he translates it, uses American money. He says that one man owed \$100 and the other person owed \$10. And they owed their money to the same person. There came a time when neither one could pay, and so the man to whom they were indebted forgave both of them, both the \$100 debtor and the \$10 debtor. And the Son of God turned to Simon and says, "Let me ask you a question, sir. Which one loved the man the most?" And Simon had sense enough to answer, "Why I suppose the one who had the most forgiven." And Jesus said, "You've told the truth for once in your life. That's exactly right." And then he went on to apply the story to that drama of forgiveness. He said, "When I came into this place, Simon, you didn't have any water to wash my feet. You didn't have anything to show that kind of consideration. But this woman washed my feet with the tears from her grateful eyes. You didn't have any kiss for me, but this woman hasn't stopped kissing my feet. You didn't have anything to put on my head. She took all she had and anointed my feet. Now, Simon, I hope you've learned the lesson. The one

who loves the most is the one who has had the most forgiveness, and Simon, you don't know forgiveness. You've never seen the stars of forgiveness because you haven't seen you sin."

Let me suggest this morning' that there are several things that Jesus is letting those stars of forgiveness say out of this story in the 7th Chapter of Luke. He's saying, first of all that forgiveness is not dependent upon our merits. You see two people owed: One owed \$100 and the other owed \$10. But neither one could pay according to the 7th verse neither one could pay; but when they were forgiven, it was because both of them were unable to pay. And the Son of God is trying to let the stars of forgiveness twinkle out this message: Your forgiveness is not on the basis of your merit for none of you are able to pay.

The second thing the stars of forgiveness are trying to say is that forgiveness is in spite of our sinfulness. Oh, I can hear those whispers. "What kind of a prophet is He? Look at that woman. A sinner. She's not respectable enough to come into the First Baptist Church, for example, of some big city. She's an outcast. Why doesn't he recognize it?" Well, the strange thing about it is that He knew who she was, and He knew that she was a lost sinner who had been forgiven. My friends, the thing I love about the grace and the gospel of God is that the sinfulness does not keep back the forgiveness. And no matter how low you or I may be, no matter how far down you have sunk in sin, I remind you that there is forgiveness. You see God treats us better than men sometimes treat each other. When we look at sinners we have contempt. When the Son of God looked at them, He looked with compassion. When the Son of God speaks, it is with pity. We poke fun. And when the Son of God sees a woman, He does not say, "Get away"; He says, "Come here." And the forgiveness was in spite of her extreme sinfulness.

Then I think that wonderful star of forgiveness is trying to tell me that forgiveness of necessity must be first thing that God gives us. It is the first manifestation of the love of God as far as the Gospel is concerned. You see both of them had to be forgiven of their debts before there could be established a real relationship. Every once in a while, I hear people crying out in their need for God to help them. Now, to tell you the truth, the first thing God needs to give you and me is forgiveness. He can't give you fellowship, He can't give you peace of mind, He can't give you a loving relationship, and He can't give you any of this until first of all you have seen the star of forgiveness above the freight trains of sin. Isn't it wonderful that He pays for it? Never forget who put those stars of forgiveness in the sky of grace. God's love put them there.

I remember reading a story of a benevolent old doctor. Many of his patients were very poor, and he knew they were poor. At the close of each day's practice he would come back and dictate to his secretary all the charges for all the visits made during that day. She would record them in the book. Then at certain times the dear man of God would get out his book of accounts and he would read over the accounts to see who owed him. When he came to someone he knew was unable to pay, he would always write over that bill in red ink these words, "Forgiven, unable to pay". Then came the day when that good doctor died, and went home to be with his Lord. His widow, seeking to settle the estate to get all the accounts settled, found the book, and she wanted everyone in the book who still owed anything to pay it. And when she went to court, the judge had the book in front of him and he called the widow in and he said, "My dear friend, you know your husband's signature and your husband's writing. " He said, "I found in certain bills "forgiven, unable to pay." Now I want to ask you a question. Is that your husband's writing?" "Oh, yes," said she, "I can tell my husband's writing. He wrote that in certain places." The judge looked at her and said, "Dear lady, there isn't a court in the land that will give you a verdict against the people that your husband forgave their bills because he knew that they were unable to pay".

When I look up at the stars of forgiveness, I see written all across my rotten past and your past these words, "Forgiven, unable to pay." And I hope you will see those stars of forgiveness.

Of course, I will have to remind you that forgiveness according to the story demands an expression of love in return. Oh how very touching yet very tender, the words of Jesus when he said to Simon, the Pharisee, "You didn't give me any water to wash my feet, but she had used the tears from her grateful heart, from her full eyes to wash my feet. Simon, when I walked in, I hoped you might walk up and give me a kiss but you didn't give me a kiss, but look at her, she has been kissing my feet since she got here. Simon, I hoped so much you might anoint me but not once did you do this to me but look what she has done. She brought that precious ointment to anoint my feet." Then he went on to say it over again, that when you really are forgiven, out from your life there flows a stream of gratitude. The man who has seen stars of forgiveness can't help but be grateful.

II. Now let me suggest a second freight train not only the freight train of sin but also the FREIGHT TRAIN OF SUFFERING.

And above the freight train of suffering, I want you to see the stars of divine purpose. How long has the freight train of suffering been rumbling through this old world? How long has the sounds of the wheels of the freight train been going through the valley of life? I will tell you how long. Ever since man and woman were dismissed from the Garden of Eden. Ever since God told them that because of disobedience there would be in this world, as part of life, suffering and pain even in childbirth.

Let's never forget that there is always facing us the realization of the thing called suffering. And I hear those wheels going round and round. Not a day goes by in my visitation but what I can hear the freight trains of suffering go by. The only thing is I can look above the freight train and I can see the stars. The stars of divine purpose!

Two men looked at suffering. There were hundreds of years apart in time. They say something altogether different. Job looked at suffering and it was a challenge to his faith and he cried and said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." Another man hundreds of years later, a man by the name of Oscar Wilde, looked at suffering and it led him only to an atheistic conclusion. For said Oscar Wilde, "There is enough suffering in one London lane to let me know that either there is no God or that He doesn't love us." Now there is a long, long distance between the faith of Job and the atheism of Oscar Wilde.

I say to you this morning that you need to look above the freight trains of suffering and see the stars of divine purpose. What are they saying? I look up at those stars and I hear Romans 8:28 all over again. "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God to them who are called according to His purpose." The star shines above the freight train of suffering. I think those stars would try to say something else. I think they would say that suffering reveals the grace and the power of God. You know some of us need suffering sometimes to help us realize the grace and the power of God. The trouble is that some people cry out for a while in their suffering only for temporary help, and then they think-they can get along. Like the man who is up on a roof and he begins to slide down the roof, and he is so afraid of the fall and so for the first time in his life he cries out, "Oh, God save me." Then he makes another prayer, "That's all right God, I don't need you now, I am caught on a nail." There are a lot of people like- that who think only in an emergency. When something else comes along they think they don't need God. But let me remind you that sometimes suffering may bring us to the realization of the grace and the glory and the grandeur of God.

An earthquake isn't a pleasant thing, but it brought the Philippian jailer to the place where he found Christ as His Savior. Certainly blindness isn't a good thing but it is the thing that brought a poor blind man to the one who could heal him and then he could cry out and say, "Once I was blind, but now I see." To lose a loved one is not an easy thing, but it brought Mary and Martha to a greater realization of the power of God in Jesus Christ. So that suffering may show the power and the glory and the grace of God. It may be the thing that will prune our lives. Jesus made it very clear that often times there must be a pruning knife in order that we might bear more fruit I wonder if I'm not speaking to someone this morning who perhaps was not as fruitful a Christian until a knife came along to cut upon the tree of your life. And when that pruning process was carried out you found that you were more fruitful for Christ. Sometimes It may be that suffering may be to remind us over and over again that we need to share with others. We suffer that we may share. I've had people say, "Preacher, I didn't know how to sympathize with somebody until I lost a loved one myself. I didn't know how to share with someone until I went into the crucible of suffering myself." Horace Bushnell said, "I learned more theology in the death of my son than I learned all the years until suffering came along." Let's never forget that we learn how to share." Dear old Dr. Talmadge, the preacher of another generation, used to say, "Where did David get the ink to write his songs of comfort? Where did Paul get the ink to write his letters of comfort in the New Testament? Where did John the Beloved get his ink to write that last great book of the Bible with its mystery and with its promise, the glories promised in the future?" And Talmadge used to say with that great eloquence of his, "All of them got it in their tears." I have an idea, friends, that when you and I look above the freight trains of suffering we can see the stars of divine purpose.

III. And last of all the FREIGHT TRAIN OF DEATH.

That has been a terrific sound in human ears--the wheels of death, the freight trains of death passing by. Many times people heard only the freight trains but one day the Son of God came along. And then He said to you and me, "Come to the window and let me pull back the curtain. Let me show you the stars of immortality." And as you and I look up we hear the stars saying, "Because I live, ye shall live also."

John the r3e10ved was on that lonely isle of Patmos. Like the rest of the disciples I have an idea that he was filled with fear. Even the disciples didn't have great faith at the time of the death of Christ. Many of them had "their misgivings. Here on the island of Patmos poor old John is getting kind of downhearted. He's going to die in a little while, a lonely death. Suddenly he feels someone take him by the hand and it's the Son of God, the living Christ who says to him, "John, I've got to throw back the curtain so I've got to let you see what's above the freight trains of death." Then it was that John looked up and he saw the stars. The stars were twinkling and they said, "I am He that liveth and was dead, and behold I am alive for evermore." No wonder John sat down and wrote in that same wonderful book, "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. There shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away"

May I say in conclusion, my friends, the only one who can help you see the stars above is the Son of God 0 The only one Who can show you the stars of forgiveness above the freight train of sin is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who taketh away the of the world". The only one who can show you the stars above the freight trains of suffering is Jesus Christ. If there be no Christian faith then our life is all a fanatical mockery. But when you can say, "I know whom I have believed," then it is you begin to understand the purpose. And, my friends, I would hate to be facing the freight trains sounds of death if I were not a Christian. Do you know the real reason why many people hate to die is because they've never seen the stars above the freight trains, And the one thing that they're thinking about is that they cannot escape, laugh it off though they may, try to explain it away though they may. There is yet one haunting thought4' "It is appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgment", Hebrew 9:27. And everyman facing death has a feeling that there is a settling place out yonder and that there is a place where God really settles the score. That's why people hate to die, because they are afraid of that judgment. .

And may I remind you that you have the stars that tell every Christian "He that hath the Son hath everlasting life." You don't have to worry about your sins. Like the woman's husband, there is no one who can get a verdict against you when the Son of God has marked your bill paid because you were unable to pay. And I say to you this morning: If you let Him, He will take you to the window. He'll pull back the curtains, and He'll say "Child of mine, don't let the freight trains of life frighten you. Just look up and see the stars above."