

Frances Thompson and the Journey in Light from Darkness

By Jim Seghers

“It is not he who begins well that is commended, but he who ends well.” Spiritual proverb

The Bible uses *light* as symbol for everything good. In the Old Testament, for example, *light* symbolizes both God’s glory and his life-giving power (Ps 13:3; Prov 29:13). Darkness, in contrast, is the symbol of sadness, sorrow, death, and sin. *Light* is also a powerful image for God in the New Testament, which proclaimed “God as *light*” (1 Jn 1:5). In the prologue of his Gospel John declared of the divine Word who became man: “In him was life, and the life was the *light* of men. The *light* shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1:4-5). The *light* of God is far more powerful than the darkness of evil.

Light and darkness are also apt metaphors for the elemental struggle between good and evil that plays out in every person’s life. Jesus declared; “I am the *light* of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the *light* of life” (Jn 8:12). The Apostle John delineated the fundamental choice between *light* and darkness that each of us confronts on a daily basis:

“God is *light* and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the *light*, as he is in the *light*, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (Jn 5-7).

Only Christ can lead us out of the darkness of slavery to sin to the freedom of living as the Father’s son and daughters in the light. Jesus is the perfect model of right living. The power of his example and instruction is more excellent than all the advice of the saints and the collective wisdom of the world’s sages. Christianity does not consist primarily in doctrinal propositions to be accepted, although that is not something to be discarded, but a life to be lived in a divine relationship:

“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory [light] and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promise, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become *partakers in his divine nature*” (2 Pet 1:3-4).

What good does it do, for example, to explain and defend the doctrine of the Trinity, if I displease the Blessed Trinity by my behavior? Isn’t it far better to practice contrition than it is to define it? What is the value of memorizing the whole Bible if my actions do not reflect the love of God? “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccl 1:2) says the Preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes. The book of Ecclesiastes examines the emptiness of human life because death will inevitably come and deprive a person of everything he possesses. It opens with a question: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun” (Eccl 1:3)? It concludes that none of the following nor all of them

collectively: love, power, wealth, food, drink, sex, long life, many children, and even wisdom itself – can fully satisfy the craving of the human heart. The definitive answer to the meaning of life would await the advent of Jesus. Centuries later Augustine would write in his *Confession*: “Our hearts are made for you, O Lord, and in you only can it find rest.”

True happiness and success is found in seeking the kingdom of heaven while rejecting the illusionary values of this world. It is vanity to spend one’s life accumulating things that cannot fulfill and we must leave behind. It is vanity to seek honors and fame, which leads to pride and a feeling of emptiness. It is vanity to desire a long life, but not to care about a well-spent life. It is vanity to be overly concerned with this present existence while not preparing for the existence in eternity that awaits everyone. The poor, uneducated man who faithfully serves God is far more successful than the great achiever in the eyes of the world who neglects to serve God. Jesus, alone, leads us to abandon the vanity of this world and walk in his *light*. His life and teaching provides the only path we must follow to achieve true success, peace, and happiness in this life and in eternity.

Frances Thompson, who was born in 1859, was a man who learned this lesson through the tragedy of his own life. During his college years he showed little interest in his medical studies, but was drawn instead to become a writer. Unfortunately, he experimented with drugs and became an opium addict. Slavery to opium led him far away from God and into a life of extreme poverty and ill-health.

Thompson was rescued from near starvation by Wilfred and Alice Maynell. During one of his “cures” at the Norbitine Monastery of Storrington in 1889, Thompson wrote his famous poem *The Hound of Heaven*. This autobiographical poem reveals much about Thompson’s own journey to God. He is the fugitive and Jesus is the hound who never ceased to pursue him:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

What held him back from surrendering to the one who loved and sought him?
For, though I knew His love Who followed,
Yet was I sore adread
Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.

Nevertheless the ever persistent Jesus never gave up:

Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat -- and a voice beat
More instant than the Feet --
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

Rise, clasp My hand, and come !"
Halts by me that footfall :
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly ?
"Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest [drive away] love from thee, who dravest [drive away] me."

Frances Thompson died of tuberculosis at the age of 48 reconciled with God while he was cared for by the Sisters of St. John and St. Elizabeth.