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The Dew of Heaven

The earth's atmosphere is a mixture of gases which includes water vapour. We cannot see it but we can surely feel it, like when the air is dry or when it is excessively humid. Water vapour enters the atmosphere because of evaporation of water, particularly from the ocean surface. On the other hand, if the vapour in the atmosphere condenses, water falls out of it. The most common manifestation of the condensation process is rain or snow, but it can also result in the formation of dew.

The atmosphere's capacity to hold water vapour decreases with temperature. When the temperature falls below a threshold, called the dew point, the moisture has to condense back to water. Early in the morning, or even at late night, objects near the ground lose heat. The nearby air also gets cooled and when its temperature falls below the dew point, moisture condenses on the surface of these cold objects in the form of water droplets that we call dew. A calm, clear and humid atmosphere is favourable for the formation of dew. The surfaces on which dew forms are those which are colder than their surroundings, such as plant leaves, grass blades, flowers, metal railings, car tops and window panes. As the sun begins to rise, the dew droplets begin to evaporate and disappear fast.

The processes of dew formation and rain are essentially similar, in that rain involves condensation of vapour on what are called cloud condensation nuclei. But rain falls from a height, while dew does not fall, it just forms on a cold surface. We need rain to quench our thirst and grow our crops, but at times it can be harsh and destructive. Dew

is always fresh, soft and mild, pleasing to the eye, delicate, gentle and so fragile.

No wonder then that in the Old Testament, dew has been looked upon as a reminder of heaven's tender mercies. The first reference to dew in the Bible comes in the story of Isaac, Jacob and Esau. Isaac, who has grown old and cannot see clearly, blesses his son Jacob, thinking that he is Esau: *May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness, an abundance of grain and new wine.*¹ Later, when Isaac realizes his mistake, he says to Esau: *Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above.*²

When the Israelites received their first manna from heaven, it was preceded by dew. As we read in Exodus: *That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor.*³ The hungry people had gone to sleep grumbling against the Lord and blaming Moses for their plight. What a surprise it must have been for them to get up and see their surroundings covered with a carpet of lovely fresh dew. From the physical point of view, dew was perhaps necessary to moisten the dry desert soil so that when people picked up the manna it would be free of dry soil particles adhering to it. *When the dew settled on the camp at night, the manna also came down.*⁴ But surely the dew was a sign of reassurance from God to his complaining and angry people, that whatever happened, wherever they went, he would never leave them alone nor forsake them.

¹ Genesis 27:28

² Genesis 27:39

³ Exodus 16:13-14

⁴ Numbers 11:9

Much later, when the Israelites were about to enter the promised land, Moses began his farewell message to them in these words: *Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants.*⁵ As Moses blessed the tribes of Israel, he said about Joseph: *May the Lord bless his land with the precious dew from heaven above and with the deep waters that lie below.*⁶ In his final blessing to Israel, he said: *So Israel will live in safety alone, Jacob's spring is secure in a land of grain and new wine, where the heavens drop dew.*⁷

In any land, water is what sustains all living beings and makes the soil produce food. But where water is scarce, dew can indeed be a precious source of water, and Moses traces that source to heaven. This has a confirmation later in the story of Job, when God himself speaks through the whirlwind and confronts Job with some gruelling questions and he asks Job: *Who fathers the drops of dew?*⁸

There is an interesting episode in the Bible involving dew. This was at the time the Israelites had done evil in the eyes of the Lord, and he had punished them by handing them over to the power of Midian. The Israelites were made to suffer so much by the oppressive and ruthless Midianites, that they cried out to the Lord for help. The Lord heard them and chose a simple man named Gideon to launch an attack on the Midianites and crush them. Gideon was having his doubts about his own strengths and he asked for a reassurance. He said to God: *“Look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said”.* And that is what

⁵ Deuteronomy 32:2

⁶ Deuteronomy 33:13

⁷ Deuteronomy 33:28

⁸ Job 38:28

*happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew - a bowlful of water. Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew". That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.*⁹ It is significant that God did what Gideon wanted him to do, not once but twice, letting the dew form either on the fleece or on the ground selectively. To me it appears that this was God's way of showing that he can bestow his mercy selectively and that we should not take it for granted. As he had said to Moses: *I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.*¹⁰

Dew is a sign of plenty, as Job says when he recounts his better days. He had then thought: *My roots will reach to the water, and the dew will lie all night on my branches.*¹¹ When the Lord blesses the city of Jerusalem, he talks about dew: *The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew.*¹² The prophet Micah makes this prophecy about the ruler to come from Bethlehem: *The remnant of Jacob will be in the midst of many peoples like dew from the Lord, like showers on the grass.*¹³ The prophet Hosea echoes a similar promise: *I will be like the dew to Israel.*¹⁴

When blessings are withheld, it is like the absence of dew. This is how the Lord blames the people: *Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth*

⁹ Judges 6:37-40

¹⁰ Exodus 33:19

¹¹ Job 29:19

¹² Zechariah 8:12

¹³ Micah 5:7

¹⁴ Hosea 14:5

*its crops.*¹⁵ Again, this is how David laments upon Saul's death: *O mountains of Gilboa, may you have neither dew nor rain, nor fields that yield offerings of grain. For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, no longer rubbed with oil.*¹⁶ Elijah had said: *As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.*¹⁷

Rains are at times accompanied by thunder and lightning, but dew comes silently and gently in the night. The Book of Proverbs says: *A king's rage is like the roar of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass.*¹⁸ And dew has a freshness: *Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn you will receive the dew of your youth.*¹⁹

Dewdrops form at night and in the early hours of the morning, but they cannot stand the sun's heat. As the sun rises and spreads its heat, the dewdrops evaporate and they are no longer to be seen. The Bible recognizes this fact and uses it purposefully: *What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.*²⁰ The simile is applied again to idolaters: *Therefore they will be like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears, like chaff swirling from a threshing floor, like smoke escaping through a window.*²¹

There is, however, one particularly difficult reference to dew

¹⁵ Haggai 1:10

¹⁶ 2 Samuel 1:21

¹⁷ 1 Kings 17:1

¹⁸ Proverbs 19:12

¹⁹ Psalm 110:3

²⁰ Hosea 6:4

²¹ Hosea 13:3

in the book of Daniel²². Daniel interprets the dream of king Nebuchadnezzar and true to his interpretation: *He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.*²³ This dew here which is so plentiful that it can drench a person is obviously of another kind.

The opening chapters of the Bible²⁴ gives an account of how God created the heavens and the earth in the first six days and then rested from all His work on the seventh day. What God did next was to plant a garden in the east in Eden, where he put the first man, Adam, whom he had created. The garden had all kinds of trees, pleasing to the eye and good for food. God Himself used to take a walk in the garden in the cool of the day.²⁵ What joy it must have been for Adam to be walking in the presence of God, keeping step with him, perhaps holding his hand, and talking to him! Can we have this joy today? Yes, says this beautiful song, written and composed by C. Arthur Miles in 1912:

*I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses,
And the voice I hear falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.*

*And he walks with me, and he talks with me,
And he tells me I am his own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.*

²² Daniel Chapters 4-5

²³ Daniel 5:21

²⁴ Genesis 1-2

²⁵ Genesis 3:8

We have to come to the garden early, really early. Before the joggers arrive and begin their rounds, before the yoga enthusiasts roll out their carpets and take positions, before the elderly occupy their favourite benches, before families pick their picnic spots. Really early and alone. While the dew is still on the roses! It is only then that we can walk with him, and talk with him, and be assured that he has not forsaken us, that we still belong to him. And his voice will come clear above the chirping and singing of the birds:

*He speaks, and the sound of his voice,
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
And the melody that he gave to me,
Within my heart is ringing.*

Have you ever cared to see the dew on the roses? No? Then go to the garden, early and alone. Do not think about the dew point temperature or the process of condensation. Just breathe in the fragrance, capture the beauty of the dewdrop, while it is still fresh on the rose, and feel blessed.

