

FAITH TO FACE THE FUTURE

A sermon preached by Batsell Barrett Baxter on Sunday, August 23, 1953, at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee.

This has been a week of major news events: the change of leadership in Iran removing the prominent Mossadegh, the abdication of the Sultan of Morocco, the settlement of the major strike in France, the elections in Germany, and the continued release of prisoners in Korea. Yet, I believe that it can be said without serious contradiction that the biggest story of the week was the one that broke in connection with the Hydrogen Bomb. Its implications for the future are such that it undoubtedly towers above any of these other events. Comments were made during the week that as many as twenty or forty million Americans could be killed in a single night now that a major, unfavorable, foreign power has the Hydrogen Bomb.

We inevitably feel some uncertainty for the future. As parents, we look into the future and have some misgivings. When we bring children into this uncertain world knowing not "what shall be on the morrow," we are, of course, filled with some feelings of apprehension and fear. Our world needs a faith for the future.

Perhaps we can brush aside these major dangers of an international nature. We know that they are beyond our grasp, for we can't possibly think of twenty or forty million people dying in a single night. It never has happened before. We have no way in which to comprehend it, so since it's something beyond our control and something too big for our minds to grasp most of us simply shut it out of our thinking. We just hope and pray that it will never happen.

There are other crises, however, which come into our lives which are more personal. They have a greater tendency to disrupt the normal tenor of our way than do these huge international fears that are too big for us to comprehend. I am more and more impressed with the number and the inevitability of these personal crises which come into the individual life. Some weeks ago Brother Emol Fails taught a class in the course of which he referred to the days when he formerly sold life insurance. Sometimes people would ask, "Now if I die - what?" He said, "I didn't say, but I always thought, it's not if you die, it is only when you die." So I would say to you, it is not if sorrow comes, but when it comes. It is inevitable that in every one of our lives some rain must fall. It is inevitable that somewhere down the road there are going to be some major crises which are too much for us to handle alone. And when they come, our only hope is for a faith that is deep enough that it will enable us to survive and face the future. Let me name to you just a few of these crises that may come your way or mine.

The Storms Of Life

First, I think of the crisis that comes when loved ones are taken away. Only a few days ago I went into a home where an only child had died. I found the father walking from room to room in something of a daze. I shall not soon forget going into one of the private rooms of that home and kneeling down by the side of the bed with that distraught father and listening to his half-spoken prayer. Then, he said, "Get my Bible and read the fourteenth chapter of John." In his hour of despair he wanted to hear again those words: "Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." (John 14:1-3). In his hour of deep anxiety he reached out for his faith in the promises of God.

It hasn't been very many months since I stood one day by the side of a casket and listened as a mother and an afflicted child said good-bye to a husband. It was all the more real to me because he was just my age. I don't want to see again an experience like that, though I know it is inevitable that we must. When loved ones are taken away, unless there is a faith, unless that faith is strong, there isn't any real way to face the future. In the long ago when Job heard the news that his seven sons and three daughters had all died in a single day, he had the faith to say: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: Jehovah gave, and Jehovah hath taken away; blessed be the name of Jehovah." (Job 1:21). It is that deep faith that you and I must have if we are to face the crises of the future.

Again, when some crippling illness, or death comes, there is going to be a need for faith. Those who have never gone through this particular kind of crisis cannot possibly know the anguish that comes when the doctor says, "The test's show that it is malignant," which is his way of saying, "You have cancer." That word has a kind of blasting influence. So often with the knowledge and skill of medical science, it may not be fatal nowadays, but always when we first hear it there comes the most dismal picture of lingering months of illness, of great pain, and then death. When a man hears the words, "You have cancer," it takes a great deal of faith to face the future. Or when the doctor says, "I've looked at the pictures and you have tuberculosis." There comes a terribly black moment, followed by a kind of dazed realization that there will be months and maybe years in bed. Again it takes faith to face a situation like that.

Or when death begins to draw near, it takes a great deal of faith to think about the end of one's own life. I like to think of a passage or two in the Bible when I think of these crises. Over in the second letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians is that wonderful paragraph in which he says, "Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen: for the things that are seen are temporal; but the things that are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens." (II Cor. 4:16-5:1). In connection with that passage, an earlier one from the same apostle says, "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this corruptible shall have put on immortality, then shall come to pass that saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. Oh death, where is thy victory? Oh death, where is thy sting?" (I Cor. 15:51-55). When you and I have a faith that is deep enough and solid enough to undergird our lives even death or crippling illness doesn't shake us.

Again, crises come sometimes when homes break up. Have you ever lived through an experience like that with someone near and dear to you. Have you felt the heartache and the pain? It helps to know that even if a home does break up, being saved is more important than having a home. Even though one may need to live the remainder of his life alone it isn't final tragedy. The only thing that ultimately counts is our relationship to God, and there isn't anything on this earth, the activities of parents, or husbands, or wives, or children, that can effect our eternal salvation, unless we let it.

Along with these, there comes another crisis when a job vanishes and savings are gone. How many men committed suicide a score of years ago when the crash came? I guess we'll never know, but the number was great. When a man who's trusted in this world and its goods suddenly finds himself broke, he is unable to face the future and chooses death instead. But that's no answer to the problem. It is only when we adjust our thinking to the eternal principles of God that we have the faith to stand loss of whatever kind it may be.

Sometimes the crisis is in terms of deep sin that overtakes us. I still remember that day when I stood in the Federal Court before Judge Davies with a man who had worked for the Post Office and had stolen money. In time, as inevitably it happens, he was caught and then his whole life caved in. His reputation was gone; his family was disgraced. His job, his retirement, all of that was swept away, and he stood there a broken and disgraced man. Sin had blasted his life.

I think of David in the long ago, whose sin was of such a major nature, yet when the crisis came he repented from the bottom of his heart and God forgave him. Faith in God, you see, can save a man even in the depths of despair which comes with gross sin. Think of the time that Peter denied his Lord and was forgiven. Later he was used as one of God's most useful tools. Or think of the apostle Paul whose sin was the persecution of Christians. Later he became the foremost salesman of the Gospel to the Gentile world. There isn't any crisis that comes that can't be met if we have faith.

Don't think that they will come only to someone else. You and I have some control over it. We may not slip into gross sin, and ours may not be some crippling illness, but somewhere down the road of life tragedy must come, and when it does, oh, how we need that faith.

One of the happiest pictures I know is the picture that unfolds here each Lord's Day morning and each Wednesday evening, as we send our little ones off into the various classrooms to study the Bible. From two years old on to young manhood and young womanhood they go. Under the skillful guidance of some teacher--a line here, a line there, a precept here, a precept there--they are learning the faith that after a while will sustain them. I think it's especially beautiful on Wednesday evening when the children with bright countenances and glowing eyes come back from their classes, after having learned a little more of the Word of God. If you haven't seen them, come and watch as they come from those experiences of learning. As we plant deeply in their hearts that faith, we are simply helping them to insulate their lives against the sorrows that must inevitably come. As I see one of these little girls come by I don't know whether hers will be a blasted life because she will eventually marry some man who is unworthy of her, or whether it will come because of something else, but I know that somewhere down the road she is going to have to lean on God, and that without Him and without faith, she can't possibly make it alone.

Some time ago I listened as a preacher told of an experience with another man. He told about a man who had become ill and yet when he went to the doctor there was nothing that they could find wrong with him physically. Finally the doctor suggested that the man who was ill talk to a preacher. When the preacher talked with him he said, "Will you take the prescription that I give you?" The man said, "Yes, I'll take it. I have taken my doctor's prescription, so I'll do whatever you tell me to do." The prescription was: "Read five times every day the twenty-third Psalm. Read it when you get out of bed in the morning, read it before you eat each meal, read it immediately before you go to sleep at night." You know those lines so familiar to us all,

Jehovah is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul: He guideth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou hast anointed my head with oil; My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and lovingkindness shall follow me all the days of my life; And I shall dwell in the house of Jehovah forever. (Psalm 23)

A few weeks later the man made his report. Completely cured. You see he had needed spiritual help. Let us try that twenty-third Psalm, too. Say it when you get up, say it before you eat your meals, say it again in the evening. As you say it over and over and over again you can't think of your crisis, the fear and the anxiety. It somehow pushes it out. This is only one of those great passages of spiritual strength. There isn't a one of us who won't need to learn and read hundreds of times, these great truths of God. For it is only when we believe in God and lean on Him that we can stand against the crises that come.

There's a passage in Paul's letter to the Romans which says, "We know that to them that love God, all things work together for good." Let me read a little further in that same chapter, the eighth chapter of Romans,

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... Nay, in all things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:28, 31, 35, 37-39).

One of my favorite hymns is that ancient one:

A mighty Fortress Is Our God

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great,
And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right one on our side
The man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth is His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

And tho' this world, with evil filled,
Should threaten to undo us;
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.

It has been nearly four hundred years since Martin Luther penned these lines, but they are still true. They were true in his age and they are true now. The only possible hope for the future is a faith in God and in Christ that overcomes the world.

CONCLUSION

The physical world is made up of hills and valleys and our lives from the beginning to the end have their ups and downs. Do you remember that precious little boy that came into your home some years ago? Remember how many times he fell down and skinned a knee, or bumped a cheek, and how often he cried? With a child the ups and downs come so quickly, but a few minutes later, even after the worst period of crying, how happy he was. Perhaps not quite so rapidly, but in the same way when we get older there are ups and downs, and the only answer when we feel that we are crushed and there is no way out is in leaning back on the everlasting arms of God. "He careth for you," and is ready to help you. I hope there is someone here who is ready to say, "Lord, I want to be thy child, I want to give my life to thee. Lead me where I should go and help me when I am in need." When you accept Him and obey His commandments He promises to help you both here and in the world to come.