

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 6, 1970, at the Hillsboro Church of Christ Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Henry Ward Beecher, one of the most noted preachers of the last century, in one of his sermons said: "Weeping has had more work in this world than laughing. Trouble has ruled more than joy. Even yet, large-built and high advanced in the causes of their living, and in the very midst of civilization, men ... are scarcely creatures of joy, but more of care and trouble and sorrow. Every household, every heart, in its turn, is pierced. Men go lonely, yearning, longing, unsatisfied. They are bereaved. They are filled with shocks and calamities. They are overturned. All their life is at times darkened. They are subverted ... The city makes suffering and the town makes suffering; and man himself heaps upon himself, by his own works, ten thousand sources of misery. And it is true that "the whole creation groans and travails in pain."

Beecher called his sermon "The God of Comfort" and took as his text II Corinthians 1:3-4, which reads, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comforts; who comforteth us in all our affliction, that we may be able to comfort them that are in any affliction, through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."

I need not tell you that life sometimes becomes very difficult. The going gets rough. There seem to be heartaches, disappointments, failures, troubles, sorrows and discouragements enough for everyone. And this is not just a phenomenon of our time. It has always been true. These difficult periods of life are reflected in some of the greatest sermons of the ages: Arthur John Gossip had a sermon which he called "But When Life Tumbles In, What Then?" Harry Emerson Fosdick preached on the theme "Handicapped Lives." John Sutherland Bonnell preached a noted sermon on "No Escape From Life." Charles H. Spurgeon had a famous sermon which he called "Songs In the Night."

That troubles come is not especially significant; that is inevitable. What is significance, is what we do about them. In facing our burdens it is extremely helpful to notice what some of the men and women of the Bible said and did in time of trouble.

Biblical Examples

No one faced greater troubles than Job, it would seem. Suddenly and without warning messengers came to announce that his seven sons and three daughters had been killed and that his 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, and 500 yoke of oxen and 500 she-asses had all been taken by robbers. At this point the scripture reads, "Then Job arose, and rent his robe, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped; and he said, 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 1:20-22). A little later Job said, "Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty. For he maketh sore, and bindeth up; he woundeth, and his hands make whole. He will deliver thee in six troubles; yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee." (Job 5:17-19). Then there came the great crescendo of faith, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." (Job 13:15).

David was another who faced certain difficult times. On one occasion when his much-loved baby son was critically ill, he put on rough clothing and fasted. The text reads, "And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who knoweth whether Jehovah will not be gracious to me, that the child may live; but now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him. back again, I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." (II Sam. 12:22-23)

In his 55th Psalm David wrote, "I am overcome by my trouble ... my heart is in anguish within me ... O that I had wings like a dove. I would fly away and be at rest; yea, I would wander afar." And then he came to this beautiful conclusion, "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you." (Ps. 55: 2, 4, 6, 7, 22).

At another time, and because of his own great sin, David wrote his prayer of penitence, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with a willing spirit. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart O God, thou wilt not despise." (Ps. 51:10-12, 17).

Strength and Courage

Yet another example of strength and courage in the face of trouble is found in the behavior of the young queen Esther. She was suddenly thrust into the crucially important role of savior of her people. Her uncle, Mordecai, felt that she alone was in a position to save her fellow-Jews from destruction. He urged her to go in before king Ahasueras and plead for the lives of her people. Continuing the story, the scripture reads, "Then Esther bade them return answer unto Mordecai, Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:15-16)

In the New Testament no character was more successful in triumphing over trouble than the apostle Paul. It is in II Corinthians 11:24-27, that he briefly recounts his many tribulations, "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of rivers, in perils from my countrymen, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in labor and travail, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness."

A few chapters earlier in the same letter to the Corinthians Paul had written, "We are pressed on every side, yet not straitened; perplexed, yet not unto despair; pursued, yet not forsaken; smitten down, yet not destroyed ... " (II Cor. 4:8-9). To Timothy, he gave the charge, "Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." (II Tim. 2:3). In his Roman letter, in the midst of a long sentence, there are the words, " ... rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing stedfastly in prayer ... " (Rom. 12:12).

All of this leads to his triumphant statement in the Philippian letter, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know also how to abound; in everything and in all things have I learned the secret both to be filled and to be hungry, both to abound and to be in want. I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me." (Phil. 4:11-12).

Three Tactics

Norvel Young, in the *20th Century Christian*, has written of three tactics to combat discouragement. They are "Expect it! Label it! and Use it! In developing these three points he says, "Expect it! Live, not in fear, but in the happy readiness which says, 'I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Rom. 8:38-39)

"Label it! Whether it comes in one cruel blow or in a series of small, irritating pricks, cultivate the capacity to smile and say, 'Despite the disguise, this looks like the old foe of discouragement to me.'

"Use it! Make it work for you in overcoming this tool of Satan. Go to the source of all strength ... the entire book of Ecclesiastes seems to be Solomon's vain reach for happiness. It is only in the last few verses of the book that he finds the key. 'This is the end of the matter; all hath been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.' (Eccl. 12:13)."

Somewhat related to these comments is this paragraph from William S. Banowsky, "Your ability to be happy has amazingly little relationship to external circumstances. You can make of them what you wish. Health does not confer happiness any more than wealth does. Pasteur was paralyzed; Milton was blind; Beethoven was deaf. (Helen Keller was deaf, dumb and blind); Robert Lewis Stevenson had a wretched state of health. Next time you are tempted to envy someone's happiness, ask yourself: How much of it is good fortune which has come from without; and how much of it is rather the result of combining a trust in God with a determined recognition of the importance of 'I.' 'Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid; for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song ... therefore with joy shall I draw water out of the wells of salvation.' (Is. 12:2-3). To this we add the words of Abraham Lincoln, 'Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be.'"

John Schindler tells the story, "I drove past a friend's farm one summer day and I thought to myself, 'Those oats ought to make Sam happy.' So I drove in and I said, 'Sam, that's a wonderful field of oats.' And Sam said, 'Yes, but the wind will blow it down before I get it cut.' He got it cut all right, he got it threshed, and he got a good price for it. Well, I saw him one day and I said, 'Sam, how did the oats turn out?' And he said, 'Oh, it was a good crop, and I guess the price was all right, but you know a crop like that sure takes a lot out of the soil.'" It is really very true that our attitudes toward life largely determine how we master our troubles and whether we shall be happy or not.

Troubles Can Be Blessings

It is not mere whistling in the dark when we say that troubles and difficulties can be blessings. They often are. For example, the inspired writer of the Hebrew letter said, "My son, regard not lightly the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art reproved of him; for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. It is for chastening that ye endure; God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father chasteneth not? ... Furthermore we had the fathers of our flesh to chasten us, and we gave them reverence; shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed good to them; but he for our profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness. All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous but grievous; but afterward it yieldeth peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness." (Heb. 12:5-7, 9-11).

Edmund Burke, one-time Prime Minister of England, wrote, "Adversity is a severe instructor, set over us by one who knows us better than we do ourselves, as he loves us better, too. He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper." To this we would add the words of Henry Ward Beecher, "Affliction comes to all not to make us sad, but sober; not to make us sorry, but wise, not to make us despondent, but by its darkness to refresh us, as the night refreshes the day; not to impoverish us, but to enrich us, as the plow enriches the field; to multiply our joy, as the seed, by planting, is multiplied a thousand-fold."

Far more meaningful are the words of inspiration, written by Paul to the Roman Christians, “And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose ... What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things? ... 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 these we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.” (Rom. 8:28, 31, 32, 35, 37).

The struggles and difficulties of life serve their purpose in helping us to become the kind of people God wants us to be. McCartney tells the story of a traveler in Africa many years ago who saw one of the large butterflies of the tropics struggling to free itself from the cocoon. He took pity on it, and with his knife cut the cords at which it was straining, and it came safely and easily out. But all the brilliant coloring was gone! The anguish of the struggle was necessary for that. The beautiful colors of the soul are won in the struggle with and the victory over adversity.

Conclusion

Inevitably, life will have its difficulties. The going gets rough. It is at this point that we face a critical decision. Many people give in to trouble, give up and quit. Others face their troubles and use them to reach greater heights. We have unlimited resources of strength in Christ. By ourselves we are weak but with Christ we are strong. The apostle Paul says just that, “Most gladly therefore would I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Wherefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.” (II Cor. 12:9-10).

It is in Christ that we find safety. Becoming a Christian, not only gives us hope for the world to come but also gives us strength to face the difficulties of life here and now. It is in Christ that we find our fulfillment. Without him we are weak; with him we are strong. For this reason, if you are not yet a Christian, you need to become one today. Believe in the Lord with all your heart, confess his holy name before men, repent of your past sins, and be buried with the Lord in baptism. Then, he has promised to add you to his family. He will surround you with his shield of protection and fill you with his strength.