

## "DEALING WITH OUR DISAPPOINTMENTS"

TEXT: "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be sped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little" Romans 15: 24

### INTRODUCTION

The great Apostle, Paul, wanted to go to Spain. He had his heart set on that. In his dream of Christian conquest, he had laid his plans for reaching the outermost rim of the world of his time, to preach there the good news of Jesus Christ. But he never got there; instead, he landed in a prison cell in Rome.

His experience has something to say to ours: somewhere along the line we will all have to deal with disappointment - with disrupted plans, deferred hopes and unrealized dreams. Anyone unprepared for a joust with disappointment is not conditioned for life. Many a man's life is a diary in which he means to write one story but is forced to write another. Few have a chance to live on the basis of their first choice. Many have to settle for something less than what they want, and for many this is a major problem of life - to take a broken plan, un realized dream, a disappointment, a frustration and make something out of it. "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain" said Paul. He never took that journey; instead he journeyed to Rome and there he sits in prison, scribbling on a bit of parchment. Disappointment. How is the Christian to deal with his disappointments?

### GETTING TRACTION OUT OF TROUBLE

Suppose we begin on the lowest level, where the truth is so obvious that we cannot possibly mistake it - at the point where everyone has learned, to some extent, how to make disappointment and frustration fruitful by getting traction out of trouble. To be sure, no one but a fool would pretend to understand the mystery of pain, and no one but a liar would pretend to enjoy it, but certainly this is clear: that without pain there would be no progress, and without frustration no traction for our feet.

Life makes progress in a resisting medium. We see this in operation in different areas. A bird needs the resistance of the air to fly; the fish needs the resistance of the water to get traction for his fins, and even the simple business of standing on our feet could not accomplished without resisting forces pushing against that action.

There was an old grandfather clock which had stood in the corner for three generations, faithfully ticking off the minutes, hours and days. Its momentum came from a heavy weight, suspended by a double chain. "Too bad" thought the owner "that such an old clock should have to carry such a great load". And so he released the weight and carefully removed it, and with that the ticking stopped. "Why did you do that?" asked the clock. "I wanted to lighten your burden" was the answer of the owner. "Please" said the clock, "put my weight back. The weight is what keeps me going".

And how true this is in this larger matter of living. Life's troubles are so disagreeable and the weight of them so heavy that we never give them credit for their help. But I am sure that most of us, looking back, would have to admit that whatever we have achieved

in terms of character, in terms of personal growth or self-fulfillment has been achieved through conflict. It has come to us through powers hidden within us, so deep that we didn't know we had them, called out into action by the challenge of opposition, resistance, frustration and disappointment. The weights of life keep us going.

It seems that when God molds a man, He puts weights on him, gives him burdens to live with, crosses to carry, hardships to endure, tribulations over which to triumph. All of this is a profound mystery to be sure. We can't explain why it is. It reminds me of something my four year old son asked me earlier this week - he wanted to know why vitamins are always put in spinach and never in ice cream where they should be. I'm afraid my reply skirted his question - "David...nevermind....just eat your spinach". Don't ask me why, but for some strange reason our sweetest songs come out of our saddest thoughts: the Negro spirituals are the sad songs of a sad race, and they are the loveliest music in America. Arnold Toynbee traced this through history in his monumental study. In a chapter entitled, "The Stimulus of Blows" he shows how hardy civilizations had come to birth in response to a challenge. "The greater the challenge, the greater the stimulus". Without weights, even civilizations cannot keep going. A little boy was leading his sister up a mountain path. "Why" she complained, "It's not a path at all. It's rocky and bumpy". "Sure" he said, "The bumps are what you climb on....."

#### BEAUTY OUT OF BLUNDER

Consider now a second area where frustration can be made fruitful, somewhat by accident: that area in which we find the capacity to get beauty out of blunder. Life is full of accidental frustrations. You know this. It's as though blind fate were in control of things, spinning the wheel of fortune and calling out our names on the off numbers. We call them "bad breaks" - these things that happen through no fault of our own. Many go through life broken by the bad breaks. They invest a fortune and the bottom falls out; they take up a life task and their health fails; they want marriage and find the door closed by some family responsibility which they cannot disregard. Life is strange, filled with risks and but few dreams turn out as we had planned them.

Yet, it's amazing how fruitful the bad breaks can be with the help of a little resilience and resourcefulness. Where accidents end and providence begins is an open question. A boy in Illinois was deeply interested in photography. He answered an ad in a magazine and sent in his 25¢ for a book that told all about photography. The publishers made a mistake. They went instead of the book he ordered, "A Manual on Magic, Mindreading and Ventriloquism". The section on ventriloquism fascinated the young lad, and he began practicing the art of throwing his voice. You have heard of him. He created a wooden dummy to whom, at one time, more people listened on a Sunday night than to all the preachers on the continent. Whether the blunder that made Charlie McCarthy can be classified as providential will depend somewhat on your point of view, but it does illustrate the element of accident upon which life so often turns.

We need to be mindful of the fact that accidents and failures are not all final. I'm sure that many of you have had some sort of calamity in your life, or what seemed to be a calamity, that later turned into something fruitful. Someone has said: "Resourceful men

never make mistakes; their failures are always the portals of new discoveries."

One has only to turn to biography to see the truth of this, to see how doors that appeared to be shut suddenly swung open to new adventures leading to success, to see how failures have been turned into fortunes, troubles into triumphs. Edison, for instance, started out selling newspapers on a Western railroad and was fired from his job because he spilled acid on the baggage car and set it afire. That accident turned him to telegraphy and scientific research. Abraham Lincoln tried to reach the heights as a lawyer, and failed. At 46 he considered himself a great failure and almost by coincidence turned in the direction that led him straight to the White House. And what about John Wesley. He wanted to be a missionary, came to Georgia to convert the Indians, and failed miserably. They almost converted him. He returned to England a defeated man, but out of that failure was born the fervor that changed the life of a nation, and out of that failure came the Methodist Church. Dr. A. J. Cronin began as a doctor, broke in health and in bitter frustration turned reluctantly to writing. Whistler, the artist, wanted to be a soldier, but failed in his chemical examination at West Point. He often chuckled over that saying, "If silicon had been a gas, I would have been a major general". Just where does accident end and providence begin? Who knows?

And so if you miss Spain and get a prison, however disappointing to you it may seem at the time, remember this that it does not mean the end of everything. It may be the beginning of something. Lives can be rebuilt. Even a spell of sickness can be a door; it may be a providential moment when God makes you lonely enough to hear the quiet voice, or puts you on your back so that you have to look up.

Take your New Testament. Fourteen letters of Paul make up the bulk of it. Most of it written in jail. Some of the very best of it might not be here at all if Paul had gone on to Spain. Shall we not say then that God was in that disappointment, giving Paul a prison cell from which to pour out words of immortal hope and faith. Out of the frustration of his own life came some of the greatest contributions of his life.

#### THE MEANING OF THE CROSS

Now, lest it seem to some that we have been dealing altogether too lightly with this tragic element of life, let us move into the deeper shadows, to where there hangs a cross. To be sure, not all failures and accidents and disappointments turn into good fortune. Some of them we have to live with endlessly. Not all prisons have windows of light, some of them are dark, dreary places, their great walls shutting in the spirit. What then: to live on with a broken body, a broken heart, a broken home, when the frustration settles down into a continuing problem - what then? Then we must go deeper than magazines success stories, deeper than surface philosophies, into the profound and underlying meaning of the Cross.

Tolstoy, in his book "My Confessions" describes four ways in which people face tragedy and disappointment. First, there are those who are frightened by the dire turn of events and simply go out and get drunk. Second there are those who give way to complete despair

and remove themselves from the problem by suicide. Third, there are those who resent it and stoically steel themselves against it and harden their hearts against it. And fourth, there are those who irrationally accept it, yet stand up to it bravely and take life as it comes. Let me ask you this (reflecting momentarily upon this last method): is this the best that we can do with the tragic elements of life? Just grin and bear them. Stand up and take them? And courageously endure them? Granted - there is something admirable and wonderful in facing life bravely, but this fourth method leaves out, it seems to me, the one creative, redemptive element which runs through all of the New Testament and which the cross of Jesus Christ is the supreme example and greatest illustration. Jesus did not merely endure the cross; he used it. He didn't merely bear the blows life hurled at him; he took them and turned them into weapons to use against evil. The disappointment of the cross he made the salvation of the world. He made out of it a force to lift men to the very feet of God.

The answer of our faith is that adversity should be made to pay dividends, to put richness into life that wasn't there before. Our faith tells us that we should get something out of everything, even in defeat. We ought to get something out of sickness, and not just go through it. We ought to get something out of criticism, and not just take it. We ought to make every disappointment, every broken hope, every severed relationship, pay a profit. Socrates once advised a young man: "By all means get married. If you get a good wife, you will be happy. If you get a bad one, you will become a philosopher." If you have missed your Spain and have gained a prison, the creative Christian approach would be not to ask how can I bear this thing, but rather how can I use it. And while you may never get out of it, you can, if you wish try to get something out of it to make life better for someone else and so turn seeming frustration into achievement.

High in the north of Scotland, there is a hunting lodge which has become a famous show place. One day, many years ago, a guest opened a bottle of soda and splashed its contents over the newly decorated wall. The other guests hoped it would dry and disappear, but it didn't. It left along, unsightly splotch, stretching almost from the floor to the ceiling. The guests went away feeling that the scolding of their host was justified.

But one man remained behind. He studied the blotch on the wall. Then he went to work on it with crayons and charcoal, and finally, oil paints. With quick, bold strokes he turned the brown stains into brown Highland rocks, with a cataract pouring over them. Where the stain was deepest he painted a glorious highland stag leaping into the torrent, pursued by hunters in the background. His name: Sir Edw'n Landseer, the artist famous for his paintings of animals. By this thoughtful and considerate action he brought good out of evil and beauty out of ugliness. Ever since then, every artist passing through the town has stopped to study the Landseer pictures and on the walls of the lodge many have added drawings of their own until now it stands no longer a lodge for careless guests, but an abiding place of beauty for those who love beauty.

Thank God for our great gospel of redemption that can take our blunders, our failures, even our deliberate sins and weave them into patterns of beauty and make our frustrations fruitful.