

"LIVING BEYOND THE REACH OF TROUBLE"

TEXT: "....I will fear no evil: for thou art with me"

(Psalm 23:4)

INTRODUCTION

A story is told of how a fire one day broke out in Thomas Edison's laboratory, burned it down completely and destroyed many valuable and unfinished experiments. Later, walking through the water-drenched wreckage, he found a little package of papers tied tightly together with a string. The package was water-soaked and fire-scarred, but some freak of chance had left it intact. Mr. Edison opened it, and at the center of the package was a photograph - a picture of himself, scorched around the edges but still undamaged. He looked at it for a moment, then picked up a piece of charcoal from the floor and wrote across the face of the picture: "It didn't touch me".

I heard this story a number of years ago. But since then, every time I read or hear read the Twenty-Third Psalm, and come to the words, "I will fear no evil", I think of that story. For in my judgment, that is what the writer of this psalm had in mind. He believed that he was beyond the reach of trouble. He had an inner assurance that the scarring evils of life could never touch him. And when you get over the initial shock of that, into the deep truth underlying it, you have hold of a great secret of life which nothing, not even the shadow of death, can diminish. "Beyond the reach of trouble" - can one live in such a fashion?

DEVELOPMENT OF IDEA

Now I think before we go any farther, we must slow down, back up and give answer to what is already a well-framed question in our minds.

On the surface, of course, this is something of a foolish faith, not at all in keeping with the facts of life. No one ever gets beyond the reach of trouble - no one. There is no wall high enough to shut out trouble. There is no life, however pure, immune to it. There is no trick, however clever, by which we can evade it - not by escapism, not by fantasy, not by denial of its reality, not by drugs or alcohol or pills. Not even by miraculous intervention can we get beyond the reach of trouble. Trouble is universal. Trouble is impartial.

The lack of belief in this observation is often heard expressed in the prayers of people. "Why...why should this have happened to me?" Or "What have I done to deserve this?" And it is heard even in some thankful prayers people use to express their gratitude for some deliverance, and seem to think that by some merit in themselves they were spared the evils that came to others.

After the San Francisco earthquake, which was followed by fire, had reduced the city to shambles, a newspaper reporter noticed a liquor distillery standing intact in the devastation, and he wrote:

"If, as they say, God spanked this town
For being over-frisky,
Why did He burn the churches down
And spare Old Hopalong's whisky?"

No - this type of theology has difficulty standing up....thinking that God protects the righteous from trouble and visits his disaster on evil men. This notion, I think, can be ruled out of the 23rd psalm. That isn't what he meant. He didn't say, "I will meet no evil". He said, "I will fear no evil". In other

words, evil may come - will come, but I will not fear it for Thou art with me". In this high sense, he was living beyond the reach of trouble.

SOME TROUBLES MANAGEABLE

In the first place now, it is true, is it not, that some of our troubles are quite manageable. Some of the troubles, some of the difficulties which befall us have power to harm us only, or mainly, through our fear of them. They are not in themselves formidable. They are made so through our fears. And we get beyond their power to hurt us when we get beyond our fear. I think we know this.

Lloyds of London - the most famous insurance company in the world - has made millions of dollars out of this fear, betting with people that the disaster they anticipate will never harm them, or for that matter, even happen - all the bridges we cross before we reach them, the shadows we cast, the ghosts we conjure up. A famous Frenchwoman said, "I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm afraid of them". It's a malady that afflicts all of us at some time or another and in some form or another. We're afraid of so many things which in themselves have no power to hurt us except through the torment of fears they inspire.

Now one should never underestimate the real dangers of life, nor join the chorus of those who despise fear as wholly evil. Fear is a useful, indispensable element of preservation - a divinely planted emotion for our protection. And without it, it is doubtful if the human race could ever have survived. But it's an emotion of extremely high voltage, and easily overshoots its mark.

Somehow has said that a good psychiatrist can't exaggerate. But most of us can manage to exaggerate our fears without benefit of psychiatrist; and we invariably do, until often the fear of the evil is worse than the evil itself. The dread of illness can be more damaging than the illness. The fear of failure can be more fatal than the failure. † Go through the list of phobias which have been multiplied in this age of anxiety and see how many of them are what Archibald MacLeish called "faceless fears". That is, they have no substance, no shape, no bodily image that you can face or fight. They're shadows. Fear of the dark - fear of open places - fear of closed places - fear of criticism - fear of the future - fear of old age - fear of death. They are something like seventy-two listed phobias, most of them shadows, ghosts.

omit

Obviously then, one of the great needs of life is to keep our fears manageable. And one of the great contributions that religious faith makes to wholesome life is right here. Nothing takes the fear out of life so much as an awareness deep within of God's nearness and His loving concern. When life is undergirded by a consciousness of God's presence and concern, we are released from the fear of many shadows and get beyond the reach of many seeming evils.

Good

SOME TROUBLES CAN BE ASSETS

Now let's go a bit further and take a second step and remember that some of the evils that befall us turn out to be assets - and we get beyond the reach of their power to hurt us when we confront them, not with resentment but with resourcefulness and learn to use our troubles to add new dimensions to our lives. Much as we hate trouble, complain about it and try to avoid it if we can, what we are most thankful for as we look back over life are precisely those things which, at the time, seemed hostile, hard to take, but which by their very challenge saved us!

Wandell Wilkie once said: "What a man needs to get ahead is a powerful enemy". And Edmund Burke offered this claim: "Our antagonist is our helper". "He that wrestles with us strengthens our muscles and sharpens our skill".

Apparently human nature must have something to push against and something with which to wrestle. This, I think, is one of the hopeful things about a handicap. We all have them in some form. Handicaps are the hard things we wrestle with and push against.

Dr. Marie Ray, a psychiatrist of some note, after making a wide study of the relation between handicaps and achievements, and going down the list of notable men and women, came up with this conclusion, that most of the shining lights of history were made so by their struggles with either some ~~difficulty and~~ disability or some responsibility that seemed too great for their powers. And then she put down this definite rule as the result of her research:

"No one succeeds without a handicap. No one succeeds in spite of a handicap. When anyone succeeds, it is because of a handicap".

Now certainly that's strong medicine for an age that is trying hard to escape hardship. But if it is the truth, then we have to come to terms with the fact of it. Without minimizing in the least the tragic element of life, we have to grant that at least some of our trouble is not enemy, but ally - explainable and manageable. And we can get beyond the reach of its power to hurt us when we make use of it to help us. Certainly we shall fear no evil in any trouble that we can turn into triumph. That phrase is not mine; I borrowed it from the New Testament. It was Paul who said it, looking back over all the trials and troubles he had gone through, the frustrations, the persecutions, the tribulations:

"We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down but not destroyed".

He was saying what Mr. Edison said, with some added overtones: "It didn't touch me". "We have learned to triumph" said Paul, "even in our troubles".

TROUBLES OF A DEEPER NATURE

But we must go on to consider another kind of trouble - deeper down - troubles...difficulties which seem part of the total mystery of life indefinitely beyond our understanding, coming sometimes in forms so crushing we can't make any sense of it. Some troubles we can kick away with our feet; some we can wrestle with and develop our strengths and sharpen our skills. But some troubles are utterly beyond our explanation and understanding. There seems no way around them or ~~over~~ through them - only through them. And only from the great depths of resources from within can we get beyond the reach of their power to destroy the spirit. And yet how often we see it done. We think of the people who have lived with pain - "the walking wounded" - someone has called them, to whom no saving miracle has come except the miracle of bravery within.

I suppose we will never know how much we owe to people who demonstrate this, some of them close and dear to us, who get beyond the reach of the trouble that can hurt them by some marvellous quality of the spirit which in them seems stronger than anything that can happen to them. There are others among the "walking wounded" who have to live with the evil of the world's ill will. They are caught in the cross-currents of human passions, racial hates, classwars. And as they walk the bitter road, they do not become bitter nor let the bitterness get into them.

Roland Hayes, that very humble and gifted Negro tenor once said:

(+)

A doctor who was frequently consulted by people whose ills were mainly the results of their anxieties made a catalog of the worries of his patients. He found that forty per-cent of them worried over things which never happened.

- 30% of the worries were over past matters which we now ^{re} beyond their control.
- 12% were anxious over their health, although their only illness was in their imagination.
- 10% worried over their families and friends and neighbors, although in most cases these people were endowed with enough common sense to look after themselves.
- 8% of the worries had real causes which needed attention.

Certainly, if the doctor's analysis was correct, nine-tenths of our worries are entirely useless and unworthy of the concern of intelligent people.

"My voice teacher told me that as an artist, and as a black artist, I would suffer terribly and needlessly if I allowed the barbs to penetrate my soul. But that if my heart was right and and my spirit divinely disciplined, then nobody in the world would be able to hurt me. I know now that this is true. I try every moment to live in such awareness of the presence of God that no bitterness can creep into my heart. In this way I've learned to be happy even in the discovery that nobody in the world can hurt me except myself".

That's high ground for the human spirit - beyond the reach of trouble. "I will fear no evil for thou art with me".

We think of Christ and his great example in all of this. More than any other, He taught us and showed us what David meant in this great psalm. "I will fear no evil..." Not that He didn't face it. He did - in the very worst that it could do. He was called a traitor, a blasphemer, an enemy of God. He was disowned, despised, rejected - a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And it touched Him, touched Him deeply - but it did not destroy Him. Never once was he pushed into an unrighteous mood. He took the evil of men, made it a lever to lift them. He took their blows and turned them into blessings, until the very cross on which He was crucified became the living symbol of man's salvation.

This, I think, is the Christian answer to the piled-up evil of the world. Not an explanation, but rather an overcoming, and a redemption. "I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me".

LET US PRAY Our lives are not always easy, O God, and we ask for strength to meet the difficult things that the days may bring to us. Open our eyes to the shining things that lie ahead of us. Help us to put the past behind us, and pour all our energies into the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes always steadfastly on him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Amen