

"THE BANANA PEEL IN YOUR PATH"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

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INTRODUCTION

I always try to boil a sermon down to one sentence, but I'm not always successful. Today it is this: you cannot arrange your life perfectly, but you can always derive the highest meaning out of whatever happens. Let me repeat it. You cannot arrange your life perfectly...because there will always be a banana peel somewhere in your path. But even so, with God's help, you can always draw the highest meaning out of any experience.

I'm building this thought on our Lord's teaching in the 9th chapter of John's Gospel. It's a rather harsh chapter, but it speaks in a counselling manner to our modern predicament. Jesus healed a man born blind. The people asked, "Lord, who sinned? Did he or did his parents?" They were trying to "box" Jesus in because of His miracle and their question reflected the conventional wisdom of their day.

It's not perfectly clear in the formal translation, but Jesus answered, "Neither. This was done so that the glory of God could be manifested". This phrase does not mean that God permitted the blindness so He could show His glory, but rather, it means that out of the banana peel of that particular tragedy God could work His special grace and help that man. This is the theme I want to work around a bit with you this morning.

DEVELOPMENT

Let me tell you about a cartoon that caught my eye some time back in one of our papers in response to a bank robbery. It showed two bank robbers with kerchiefs over their mouths coming out of a bank, with pointed pistols in hand, heading for their getaway car. But in the meantime the neighborhood boys had stripped the wheels of their car and put it up on milk crates, thus cutting off their escape. The boys got the tires. The cartoon is a good illustration of the sort of thing I'm talking about. Here were these bank robbers executing a well thought-out, carefully planned crime and getting away with it. Heading for their getaway car, they did not see the banana peel factor in their path...what the local kids had done while they were inside the bank. This is life - there's always a surprise factor in every plan. We need to remember that.

Here's another story that points up the same idea. A surgeon here in the city many years ago by the name of Dr. Gordon Buck was preparing to operate. His young assistant, Dr. Weir, was to administer the anesthetic, which he did. The surgeon asked, "Is he ready?" The assistant, Dr. Weir, replied, "Ye sir, he's ready".

Whereupon Dr. Buck made the initial incision and the patient grimaced in pain and let out a scream. Dr. Buck quickly said to the assistant, "Doctor, don't you know how to administer ether? Give the patient some more". Dr. Weir did so and again the patient grimaced in pain and yelled. Finally, in anger, Dr. Buck said, "Don't you know how to administer an anesthetic? You're supposed to test". The young, somewhere humiliated intern said, "Yes sir. I have tested. I have pushed his eye and it doesn't have any reflex so I judged he was ready and under." "Oh, I beg your pardon" said Dr. Buck. "I forgot to tell you that the patient has a glass eye".

I introduce this grim but of humor to make graphic the point that no one can perfectly see all his steps or all the chapters in his life. There are surprises that are good; there are tragedies that are bad. No one can see what's ahead. Life is not closed up in a tightly locked system. There are surprise openings.

There are flukes and wild deuces, unexpected surprises. There are pitfalls and windfalls, blessings and curses, rainfalls and droughts, tidal waves and tornados. And it is in this setting that we have to life and walk in a path where many times there are banana peels that one can slip on and fall to the ground.

WHAT DOES GOD HAVE TO DO WITH THIS?

But you ask: what does God have to do with all of this. It was this

situation that Dr. Tournier treated in his helpful volume when he spoke about his wife. One day when she was in the garden of their home in Switzerland, she turned back to look at him and their home and stumbled and broke her leg. With his deep humanity and warmth, Dr. Tournier said, "God did not cause that, but God helped her see a higher meaning in it."

And then in reflecting on it, he commented that his wife had been hampered and harrassed...tried and pushing beyond her strength. This accident happened out of the pressure and inner stress of her own life, which is familiar to all of us. God did not cause it, but in her own responsibility for her life this banana peel experience of tripping brought her a new perspective. God was able to give her rest, a healing and a renewal of spirit.

Who was it who said, "The fault is not in falling down, it is in lying there". I like that. Remember the story of Joseph in Egypt. He was sold by his brothers into slavery. He went down to Egypt and one thing after another went wrong. Finally he had the tremendous climax of rising to become Prime Minister of Egypt and confronting his brothers. He said to them, "You meant it for evil, but God used it for good!" What faith. We can all use a dose of faith like that.

BUT HOW CAN WE GET TO THAT DEGREE OF FAITH?

How can we get to that degree of faith? Who among us hasn't had

frustrations and disappointments, obstacles and terminations - banana peels in our paths. We usually try to explain it away or rationalize it. And that's easy to do when we're sitting here, but it's much harder to do when your broken leg is propped up on a stiff frame or when you're dealing with any one of the other banana peels of life.

What do people do? Well some do the sort of thing that is described in this story of the blind man. They try to say of an accident, "It was God's will." I find that answer inadequate and I can't buy it. Other people may go to the other extreme and say, "The problem isn't real...it doesn't exist...it's only in my mind...in my interpretation". Those are the two extremes....rigid determinism and subjective unreality. And there's a third interpretation. This is what some people mean when they say, "Life is nothingness - absurdity, nihilism. It has no meaning, no score, no sense to it". And that becomes, for me, somewhat tragic.

ALSO STILL ANOTHER VIEW

There's still another view and that's the one that says that evil has a certain therapeutic effect...that we grow through pain and suffering. Perhaps we do and perhaps it has, but how harsh to say to someone, "well...in the long run, good will come out of this experience...your pain, suffering, whatever". This is often true, but do you think that any one of these views really helps. I wonder...

I think basically that what has to happen is that you and I have to make a spiritual and personal adjustment to the fact of banana peels, those blots of ink on our writing, the unfortunate things in our lives and realize that these were not caused by God.

They were not determined. They are a part of our freedom, the pluralism, the "technology" of life. They are part of the whole circle of life and they afford us a platform for God to bless us if we will receive the banana peel spills as a fresh way to see Him - to know Him and to experience His love.

And hear this carefully. I think we are on solid ground in reading that Jesus replied, "Neither...it just happened." God did not cause the man's blindness. But, in that "given" happening, God showed His glory.

AN ILLUSTRATION

An experience that parallels this story of Jesus healing the man born blind happened to Len Franklin, a young college man who was mountain climbing out in Colorado. He and three companions were scaling a perpendicular facing when his rope was cut on a jagged rock. He fell the equivalent of seven stories and in the swirling blackness of pain was taken to a nearby hospital. Finally, he discovered himself to be totally paralyzed. Now, that was the banana peel - the unforeseen tragedy in his life. He cried out to God, "Help me move".

He would sweat with effort in his brain to move his feet, but his toes didn't move. He went through the turbulence of anger and resentment. You and I know well the questions that must have seethed in his heart. What did I do wrong? God, why did you do this to me? Finally, there came a day when he made his surrender and his peace with God and said, "Lord, you are going to have to help me."

The next day he tried again to move his toes. He was surprised to see the sheet move, and he exclaimed, "Can it be true? Lord, help me". He moved his toes again. Today, this young man is able to navigate on crutches and operates an agency with his father. He has recovered as much as he can physically but he has maintained his wonderful spirit of confidence despite the banana peel.

"What did he do wrong?" Probably nothing. Do you think that God cut the rope? Absolutely not. Anyone who scales rocks with a rope runs the risk of the banana peel effect. Anyone who lives at all runs the risk of the banana peel in his path. I believe that in any set of dangerous or tragic circumstances God can always show you a higher view of the situation and pull you up and out spiritually. He may not give you a perfect body again. He didn't for this Colorado boy, but He gave him a new life-spirit.

GOD DEALS WITH US IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Look at the scriptures. Did Jesus go around healing everyone instantly? No. On one occasion, as Jesus marched to Jerusalem toward His own death, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, who sat by the side of the road, cried out repeatedly, "Master, heal me" and it's reported that Jesus restored his sight immediately.

But in another case, when an unfortunate boy was brought to Him, Our Lord merely anointed his eyes with mud and said, "Make your own way down to the pool at the other end of town and wash...then you will see." There was still another case where Jesus healed a blind man. Jesus asked Him, "Can you see?" The man blinked in the hot sun and said, "Yes, I see men like poplar trees wavering and walking." Jesus touched him again and made his sight perfect.

Paul was blinded on the road to Damascus and had a complete turnaround of heart. Now, in these instances of healing, one was instant. The second was gradual or processional. In still another, healing was contingent on cooperative

action. In still another, it was a comprehensive experience. What I am trying to bring out is that God deals with us in different ways. Sometimes God intrudes in life. Sometimes He interrupts. Sometimes He waits to act or divert us to another road. He always tries to renew life!

CONCLUSION And so let me get to the conclusion of all this and send you out into the warmth of a Summer day. There may be a banana peel now and then in our path that causes us to slip and lose our balance, but remember this. There is the dramatic factor of hope in the creativity of God to work through the tragic experiences of life. This is the key. I believe it.

We can expect surprises and upsets, but God has given us the skill, through Jesus Christ, to blend those events into the artistry of the total mosaic of life. As Christians, we know that God will not leave us alone nor forsake us. Even when we slip and fall, He will help us to rise again and walk.

I close with some lines of blank verse called "God's Footprints". They're based on that delightful parable "One Night I Had a Dream" .

"One night in deepest sleep, I dreamed,
Upon the beach I walked,
The Lord was by my side each step,
As quietly we talked.

Then on the sky my life appeared,
Each chapter was serene.
Two sets of footprints in the sand
I saw in every scene.

And then I noticed in some parts
Of discontent and strife
Just a single pair of footprints
In the worst times of my life.

"Lord, you said you'd walk by me
In good times and in bad,
Why then weren't you with me
When you knew my life was sad?"

"My dearest child" God whispered,
When you suffered then, I knew.
The single pair of footprints
Were those times I carried you".

PRAYER Open the eyes of our understanding, Lord, as we try to interpret Your word. Keep our minds clear, our imaginations alive, our hearts pure and humble, that we may turn to the Book in which we find Your word, knowing that in it You will speak to us and to our questions and concerns. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen".