

## "THE MIDDLE YEARS OF LIFE"

### INTRODUCTION

I'm sure that you've had the experience of being so busy some morning of the week that you were totally oblivious to the passage of time. Suddenly when you look up from what you've been doing and see the hands of the clock pointing to the noon hour, you say to yourself "Where's the morning gone...I didn't think it was anywhere near the noon hour".

So in the day-time of our life, time passes, and we do not always hear the striking in the forenoon, until all of a sudden, it dawns upon us that it is closer to noon than we had realized. Chronologically, I suppose, the noon time of life can be anywhere from the thirties into the sixties. But the knowledge that it is getting along toward noon comes in more subtle ways than encounters with birthdays. It comes at that moment, perhaps, when your children say, "Tell us what it was like, daddy, back in the old days when you were young...." Or it may come when you go back to a 15th or a 25th college reunion, and you talk about the changes on the face of the campus, while you think about the changes on the faces of your contemporaries. It comes when you talk about the speed with which the summer went, or when you complain about the small print in the newspapers. In so many subtle ways, the noon signal sounds and you know that you are in the mid-span of middle age.

We have been so accustomed to dwelling upon the problems of fore-noon and youth that we have seldom focussed upon the problems of noon and middle-age. Noon-time has its own trials and temptations. Jesus was describing many a middle-age person when he said: "This man began to build, but was not able to finish". Dante was just coming into middle age at 35 when he wrote The Divine Comedy, and early in that book he said:

"Midway in the journey of my life I found myself in a dark wood where the right was lost".

At noontime we have difficulty in keeping some ways and some worth which we gathered in the forenoon of life. Last week, some of the emphasis was on the forenoon of life; next week we shall think about the afternoon of life. Today, our emphasis is on the noontime of life.

### SENSE OF SIGNIFICANCE

To begin with, noon-time often brings a problem in keeping our sense of significance. Some years back, when Harvard University celebrated its tercentenary, a group of freshmen carried a banner reading, HARVARD HAS BEEN WAITING 300 YEARS FOR US. There is something about that breezy self-confidence that strikes a responsive note in the memories of our youth. Here we were - critics of the status quo - and architects of a new order that would bring new life to the company or the community that was fortunate enough to claim us. Surely the world had been waiting just for us.

But with the passage of time, we began to realize that we did not have quite the impact that we had imagined, and that we did not have a monopoly on all skill and wisdom. A young lawyer in his 30's put it this way:

"It is in the thirties that a man learns to accept these limitations without losing respect for himself and faith in his future", and he added, "I know how that I shall not make a fortune at the bar, but I am still thrilled by the practice of law".

I would say that he had solved one of the fundamental problems of noon-time - "to accept his limitations without losing respect for himself". For noon-time is a period when the limitations of our lives loom increasingly large. Not only limitations of ability and potentiality, but other limitations as well.

There come those first hints of limitations of health and strength. We don't seem to have quite the resilience and the reserves of energy that we once had. We discover that our children can pretty well match us and occasionally out do us in contests involving physical strength and skill. There are limitations of strength and energy.

Then there is another limitation that is involved when we realize that our children are no longer so dependent upon us. Of course, we say that this is what we have worked for and wanted - that our children should lead independent lives - but a mother often feels a certain loss of significance when a child goes to kindergarten and that can be accentuated for parents when their children grow up and go away to school or off to work.

And perhaps the most difficult limitation is the growing realization that no one is really indispensable in his work - that there is always someone in the bull-pen warming up to take our place if we falter - and that just possibly he might do as well or even better than we do the job. This, you remember accounted for the tragedy of Saul in his middle age. He could not accept the fact that a farm boy by the name of David was leading a sovereign by the name of Saul in the popularity polls; he just couldn't take it when the crowds sang, "Saul has slain his thousands, but David his ten-thousands", and because he was no longer top man on the totem pole, Saul went all to pieces. We find it difficult to accept the prospect of second place. And yet this is a limitation that all of us have to come to terms with.

Noon is a time when we should distinguish between a sense of indispensability and a sense of significance. People can be significant in the lives of their children and their friends - without feeling indispensable. People can play significant roles in their work and in their community - without seeing themselves as indispensable. That young lawyer had won a most important noon-day struggle when he "learned to accept his limitations without losing respect for himself".

KEEPING OUR IDEALS: In the second place, noon-time often brings a problem in keeping our ideals. This is true with regard both to our personal ideals and to our social idealism. When the monks in the Middle Ages were asked: "What is the most dangerous hour in the day for the religious man" they answered, "It is the hour after the noon-day meal, when all spiritual things lose meaning".

The hour around noon-day - and how true it is! How many people start out with a clear set of rules for their personal lives, and they come through the tempests of youth with banners flying - and then in the success and complacency of middle-age, they relax their rules about fidelity or integrity or honesty - and proceed to make fools of themselves.

The Old Testament is as modern as it is old in revealing the pitfalls of having arrived at the noon day of one's life. If Saul floundered because he lost a right sense of significance, then David later floundered because he lost a right sense of ideals. The monks of the middle ages were so right - noon-time can be a dangerous hour - for then the pre-occupation with the material struggle - the self-assurance that comes with achievement - the false security that comes from respectability - can all lead to a moral sclerosis that impedes the flow of ideals when decisions are being made.

And it is equally true with our social idealism. Dorothy Parker in her lines "The Veteran" has penned the biography of many a life:

"When I was young and bold and strong,  
Oh - right was right and wrong was wrong,

My plume on high, my flag unfurled,  
I rode away to fight the world.

'Come out, you dogs, and fight' said I  
And wept there was but once to die.

But I am old and good and bad  
Are woven in a crazy plaid.

I sit and say, 'The world is so;  
And he is wise who lets it go,  
A battle lost, a battle won -  
The difference is small, my son.

Inertia rides and riddles me;  
The which is called, Philosophy."

All of us know the temptation of which she writes. In our youth we have such clear convictions, and we have a certain courage to match those convictions. But then what subtle temptations we encounter to pull away from our idealism. We get a good job - and there is our future. We fall in love, get married, have a family - and there is our responsibility to them. We get a house - and there is our investment. We get in a groove - and the questions we had been asking don't seem so pressing.

Someone was telling about a successful captain of industry who had come up the hard way - through the ranks. And on the way up, he would ride a bus to work with his fellow-workers and eat in the same cafeteria, share their lives and sense their needs. But when he arrived at the top, his mode of living changed completely. A private limousine delivered him to his office building; he took a private elevator to his office; ate lunch in a private dining room. He lost touch with the workers and so lost a former sensitivity to the needs of his real partners in the business.

I think there's something of a parable here for most of us. We live a fairly privileged and protected life. We don't know what it means to live under communist oppression; we don't know what it means to live under the specter of famine. We don't know what it means to be a part of a minority group in the ghetto of a city; we don't know what it means to be caught in poverty in Appalachia. Most of us don't know what it means to be an alcoholic, or drug-addict, or unwed mother, or a prisoner or an ex-prisoner. And not knowing, we drift toward not really caring, and in the words of the poem: "We sit and say, 'The world is so - and he is wise who lets it go - a battle lost, a battle won - the difference is small, my son".

But there are enough examples on the horizon of history to remind us that noon-time need not be a naptime for social awareness - men like John Wesley and William Wilberforce - who in their eighties were as sensitive to suffering and concerned to correct injustice as in their twenties. And most of all, there is that haunting word of Jesus that one final measure of our discipleship will be our involvement in the world of human need.

".....hungry and you gave me food.....thirsty and  
you gave me drink.....a stranger and you welcomed  
me.....naked and you clothed me.....sick and you  
visited me.....in prison and you came to me...."

Thank God for lives that find that kind of Christlike idealism in the forenoon of life and keep it long past noon!

KEEPING OUR FAITH

Then there's another part of the problem of noon-day. Not only do we have trouble keeping our sense of significance, and trouble in holding to our ideals, but we also encounter difficulty in keeping our faith. We talk about the struggles of young people in finding a faith - and this is true enough. But then we commonly suppose that once found - faith is forever, and this is not necessarily true. Faith can be wrecked and faith can wither in the heat of noon-day.

Sometimes a person's faith is shattered when it comes up against some hard circumstance. More often, I think it is that a person becomes pre-occupied and his faith shrinks through disuse and malnutrition. A man wrote about putting his faith in his bureau drawer and when some time later he went to get it, it wasn't there. Of course not. Faith is not safe in storage, any more than muscles are preserved through immobility. There are too many noon-time spiritual tragedies that can be summed up in Jesus' word: "This man began to build, but was not able to finish...."

Of course, the other side of the coin is that some of the greatest spiritual victories are those that are won in the noontime and the afternoon of life. I am impressed when Jesus describes a youthful faith inspired by the flowers of Galilee - but my soul really comes to attention when on Calvary's cross, he works his way steadily through despair and defeat to a final commitment. I am interested in what Paul had to say when first he was converted on the Damascus Road, but I am more interested in what he said and did in the heat of the battle in the months and miles that followed. I would be interested in reading Bonhoeffer's early spiritual diary, but I am much more concerned with what he wrote in prison as the shadows of Hitler's oppression closed in on him. I am enlightened by Ralph Sockman's early sermons, but I am helped more by some expressions of his faith in the later years of his life that brought some personal tragedy to the Sockman family. There should be an added stature to the faith that has grown through the sun and the storms of noon-day.

I remember that shortly after my 20th birthday (soon after I had decided to go into the ministry) I preached one Sunday morning in a little church in Northbush, New York (some forty to fifty miles north and east of Albany, up in the foothills of the Adirondacks). After that sermon to a congregation of 20 people, an older man - wise in years and wisdom - came up to me and said, "I'd like to hear you preach in about 25 years". I thought that was a strange comment to make. But as the years have passed, I think I have come to understand more and more what he meant. He was right; a person should grow - not only in the manner of his preaching - but also in the meaning of his faith. And this goes for all of us who call ourselves Christian - at noon-time, we can by the grace and guidance of God, knowing something about a faith that works - in overcoming resentment, in building a home, in meeting difficulty, in providing direction, in finding forgiveness, in confronting death. "Wherefore we faint no; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day".

"These are the middle years and this is noon....

And this is the hill that I have climbed too soon:

Yet never once on the steady upward way

Have I beheld what I behold today:

Here from this golden summit I can see

Beauty enough to take the breath from me.

Forward and backward, distances so vast,

The future's far horizon, and the past blurred in a mist so blue  
I cannot know which would have been the better way to go.

I look North and South and East and West -

Then take the west road down - It looks the best."

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LET US PRAY

O God, as we face the middle years of life, with their joys and satisfactions, with their disappointments and regress, and lack of fulfillment, help us to look for the things that are so great that they demand all that we have and are. Grant that we may cease to think of the things that we can keep, and begin to think more constantly of the things that we can give. Help us to give ourselves to something great, that we may lose ourselves and so find ourselves, for it is only in losing our lives that we can ever hope to find them. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen