

"UNWILLINGLY"

INTRODUCTION

John Wesley's account of his life-changing experience at a mid-week prayer service on Aldersgate Street in London in the month of May in the year 1738 is one of the classics in the history of spiritual growth. Recently, as I was reflecting upon the written account of that experience as it was recorded by Mr. Wesley himself, one word stepped out to impress itself upon me as it had never done before. The word I refer to is the word "unwillingly". Listen to Mr. Wesley's words:

"In the evening I went very 'unwillingly' to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed..."

What a strange prelude to such a powerful experience. Here was a man on his way to the most important event in his life, and yet as he later confessed, "I went... very unwillingly...."

DEVELOPMENT

Perhaps the word stentles us all the more because we are living in a time when the disciplines - both internal and external - have been so largely reduced. The emphasis in our time seems to be on permissiveness and self-expression. From little Johnny in nursery school to Janie away in college, and indeed, to their parents and their grandparents in retirement, the climate of these years seems to encourage people to rebel at restraints, to ignore the disciplines of life, to insist upon their right to have what they want when they want it. This word, "unwillingly" is not exactly at home in our time and in our experience.

In recent years, we have witnessed a great deal of ~~campus~~ turmoil, urban unrest, political self-interest, suburban comfort. For so many, the emphasis is on enjoyment and expression, certainly not on duty and discipline. You may remember that a number of summers ago, our nation was shocked by the senseless murder of eight nurses in Chicago. When the murderer was apprehended, he revealed a tattoo on his left arm, with the words, "Born to raise hell". There are times when as we look out over our land, one wonders if we are not approaching that demonic kingdom of chaos and selfishness. Confronted with this prospect, an increasing number of voices are calling for the recovery of discipline.

Now if anyone is thinking that I am about to make a plea for a return to a kind of painful Puritanism or a joyless Victorianism, let me quickly correct the impression. It's not at all difficult to understand how we have arrived at our present state of irresponsible freedom when we contemplate a former state of almost impossible restraints. If the status of students on the campuses of our land has given one cause for concern from time to time in recent years, listen to these rules for students at Mt. Holyoke a century ago:

1. No young lady shall become a member of this school who cannot kindle a fire, wash potatoes, or repeat the multiplication tables.
2. No cosmetics, perfumeries or fancy soap shall be allowed.
3. Every member of this school shall walk at least a mile a day, unless an earthquake or some other calamity prevents it.

4. No student may have any male acquaintance unless they are retired missionaries or agents of some benevolent society.
5. No student shall tarry before the mirror more than three consecutive minutes.
6. No student shall devote more than one hour each week to miscellaneous reading. The Atlantic Monthly, Shakespeare, Scott's novels, Robinson Crusoe, and immoral works are strictly forbidden. The Boston Recorder, Missionary Herald, and Washington's Farewell Address are recommended for light reading.

And those, I suppose, are what we call "the good old days". So let no one misinterpret the words this morning as a nostalgic yearning for the wholesale imposition of all of yesterday's restraints. Across the years, there have gathered some strange assortments of rules and regulations, even in the name of religion, and some restraints have abundantly deserved the fate they have suffered at the hands of rebels. Said Dr. Fosdick a generation or two ago:

"No man is worth his salt who does not sometimes rise in rebellion, smash through some nonsensical repression and claim his freedom".

But - having said that, I come back to celebrate with you this morning the word "unwillingly" as a word that is desperately needed for our time. All hail to the freedom which modern man holds in his hands, but freedom without responsibility, self-expression without self-discipline, success without struggle - these can readily make a tragic mess of a person, a city, a school, a university, a nation.

I feel that if there is going to be any real substance to a person's life, he had better be prepared to walk some rough stretches which are uninviting and unappealing, and into which he steps with a certain unwillingness. Again quoting Dr. Fosdick (and this is one of my favorites):

"No horse gets anywhere till he is harnessed. No steam or gas ever drives anything until it is confined. No Niagara is ever turned into light and power until it is tunneled. And no life ever grows great until it is focused, dedicated, and disciplined"

Suppose we look at this from two different angles in our remaining moments.

CHOOSE UNWILLING AVENUES

For one thing, there are some unwilling avenues which a person had better choose for himself.

There is a passage of scripture in John's Gospel that speaks of Jesus' decision to return from the section around Jerusalem to his native Galilee, and in this section of scripture, we come across this sentence: "He had to pass through Samaria". Now Samaria represented no traveler's paradise for the Jews. The Jews hated the Samaritans with a deep seated prejudice and treated them like the scum of the earth. Nor was the fault all on the side of the Jews. The Samaritans responded to Jewish hatred by setting traps for wandering Jews. It was no safe trip through Samaria. It is not quite accurate to say that Jesus had to pass through Samaria on his way from Judaea to Galilee. There was another, more comfortable route which would take a traveler through all Jewish territory. Yet Jesus chose to go through Samaria, both to deal with his people's prejudices and with the

the sins of the Samaritans. It was one of the uninviting, rugged stretches in his life, but in response to some deep inner compulsion, "He had to pass through Samaria".

There are many different ways in which a person needs to go through some Samaria in his own life. Any youth who is in earnest about his participation in sports travels the route through Samaria in terms of his training and his discipline. The name of Jim Ryun who holds a number of records in the running of the mile has been in the news again recently. I remember reading an article a number of years ago about Ryun in which it was mentioned that he works out twice a day, seven days a week, twelve months of the year. The article went on to observe:

"Work outs are much more strenuous than they once were. Paavo Nurmi, the celebrated 'Flying Finn' of the 1920's, considered it a good day's work when he put in three or four miles. Today, Ryun runs 70 to 100 miles a week".

One can translate that from sports to studies to a career in the arts - to any field of achievement. If a person is going to begin to fulfill the possibility of his life, there will be those times, without any hint of glamour or any sound of applause or suggestion of please, when he deliberately goes this demanding way of discipline and self-denial.

And as John Wesley discovered, the same principle holds with regard to spiritual growth and fulfillment. We sing "Spirit of God....descend upon my heart", but this seldom happens in a vacuum. There are some disciplines that must be followed - study, prayer, worship, service - if one is to arrive at any sort of a spiritual summit. And moreover, all along the Christian journey, a person must be ready to travel some unwilling routes, if he is to arrive anywhere in his Christian action and influence. Genuine Christianity costs as well as comforts. Belief in the work of the church is not enough. And there had better be some moments in any Christian's life when - albeit unwillingly - he gets out of his comfortable chair, whether to take an unpopular stand, or to share his brother's burden, to assume some Christian responsibility in response to the light and love he has found in Jesus Christ.

"He had to pass through Samaria". If a person is ever going to be anything more than a moral or spiritual pygmy, let him have the courage to choose some routes which loom as unwilling avenues.

THRUST INTO UNWILLING AVENUES

Now look at this truth from another angle, and reflect, too, that there are some unwilling avenues into which a person is simply thrust and he has no choice in the matter. For instance, a person is transferred to a new territory from a situation in which he felt so much at home; a person is confronted with some inevitable adjustment in his life, from induction into the army to an enforced retirement; or a person comes into a stretch of sickness or his life is touched by sorrow. How many times in life - when we have made plans to reside for a time on easy street, we find that our address is suddenly changed to an unfamiliar and unwilling new avenue.

I remember a few years ago a lovely family moved to this vicinity from another part of the country. From the first, the wife met the move with resistance and resentment. She didn't care at all for the city. She went back home as often

as she could. All the while she kept up an insistent pressure upon her husband and his company, until in the end, all other consideration to the contrary, she prevailed and they moved back to where they had come from.

The more I see of life, the more I am convinced that one of the greatest gifts and graces of life is the grace of acceptance - the acceptance of a person's residence, the acceptance of some limitation, the acceptance of an (authority) interruption, the acceptance of a separation. This was part of the victory of the Apostle Paul when he could say, "I have learned in whatever state I am to be content". It certainly was not that whatever state he was in was enjoyable. No one would relish the rocks and the ridicule which came into his life. But he was given to understand that God was in it, with him, and beneath the outer turmoil, there was a peace which the world could neither give nor take away.

Little does anyone know all of the streets marked "unwilling" where persons of this parish have been forced to take residence. But rare is the life which does not encounter circumstances that at first seem bleak and hopeless. Then it is that the Christian faith quietly affirms that no situation is hopeless. We make this affirmation in the light of the cross, for if ever there was a man who found himself on the street of dark discouragement and despair, it was the man from Nazareth. And the Christian faith rests its case on the declaration that God was there, and in the persistent light of the cross, no road on which you and I travel need ever be considered a dead-end street of defeat. There is some possibility of growth and goodness in it, if we will accept the street where we live as the place where God can work for good with those who love him.

Let me bring this to a close by sharing with you the words of the Confederate soldier, penned a century ago. They could well have been written by the Apostle Paul, in his journey from reluctance to fulfillment:

"I asked God for strength, that I might achieve - I was
made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked that I might do greater things - I was given
infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy - I was
given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life - I
was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for - but everything I had hoped
for -
Despite myself, my prayers were answered. I am - among all
men - most richly blessed."

Wesley was speaking a word for our common humanity when he wrote, "I went very unwillingly". But he also traced the map of Christian experience when he recorded that at the end of his reluctant journey, he was in a sense singing the "Hallelujah Chorus". So it was with His master before him, and so to some degree, it can be with those who come after him...indeed, people like ourselves!

PRAYER Open the eyes of our understanding, O God, as we try to interpret thy word to us. Keep our minds clear, our imaginations alive, and our hearts pure and humble, that we may turn to the great Book in which we find thy word, knowing that in it thou wilt speak to us and our need. Amen.

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But what a strange prelude to such a mighty experience. Here was a man on his way to the most important event in his life, and yet as he later confessed, "I went very unwillingly...."

DEVELOPMENT

Perhaps the word startles us the more because we live in a time when the disciplines - both internal and external, have been so largely reduced. The emphasis more and more seems to be on permissiveness and self-expression. From Johnny in nursery school to Janie in college, and indeed to their parents and their grandparents in retirement, the climate of our time seems to encourage people to rebel at restraints, to insist upon their right to have what they want when they want it. The word "unwillingly" is not exactly at home in our era or our experience.

The climate has changed so in recent years. At the beginning of another week, one looks out over a land marked by campus turmoil, urban unrest, political self-interest, suburban comfort. The emphasis is on expression and enjoyment, not on duty and discipline. Two years ago this past summer, the nation, you may recall, was shocked by the senseless murder of eight nurses in Chicago. When the murderer was apprehended, he revealed a tattoo on his left arm, with the words, "Born to raise hell". When we look out over our land, we wonder if we are not approaching that demonic kingdom of chaos and selfishness. Confronted with this prospect, an increasing number of voices are calling for the recovery of discipline.

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There are so many different ways in which a person needs to go through some Samaria in his own life. Any youth who is in earnest about his participation in sports travels the route through Samaria in his training and discipline. I remember reading an article some time ago about Jim Ryun - the modern speed merchant who has broken so many of the records in the running of the mile. It pointed out that Ryun worked out twice a day, seven days a week, twelve months of the year. And the article said:

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PRAYER Open the eyes of our understanding, O God, as we try to interpret thy word to us. Keep our minds clear, our imaginations alive, and our hearts pure and humble, that we may turn to the great Book in which we find thy Word, knowing that in it thou wilt speak to us and to our condition. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen