

## "WHEN FACED WITH DISAPPOINTMENT"

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 Paul, the great Apostle, had his heart set on going to Spain. In his dream of Christian outreach and conquest, he had plans for reaching the outermost rim of the world of his day. But he never got to Spain; instead, he landed in a prison cell in Rome.

His experience has something to say to us. For somewhere along the line all of us have to learn how to handle disappointment - the disappointment that comes from a disrupted plan, a deferred hope, an unrealized dream. Anyone unprepared for a joust with disappointment is not conditioned for life. The late J. Wallace Hamilton of Florida once said that many a man's life is a diary in which he means to write one story, but is forced to write another. Many there are who have to settle for something less than what they want in life, and for some this is a major problem - to take that broken plan, that unrealized dream, that disappointment and to make something out of it. "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain" said Paul. But Paul never took that trip; instead he journeyed to Rome, and there he sits in prison, scribbling on a bit of parchment. Disappointment. How is one to deal with disappointment.

TRACTION OUT OF TROUBLE Suppose we begin our search for some answers on the lowest possible level, at that point where the truth is fairly obvious, at the point where so many have learned, to some extent, how to make disappointment and frustration fruitful by getting traction out of their trouble.

It is true that life does make progress in a resisting medium. We see this in operation in different areas. For instance, a bird needs the resistance of the air to fly. The fish need the resistance of the water in order to get traction for their fins, and even the simple business of standing on our feet could not be accomplished without resisting forces pushing against that action. Without struggle, without sacrifice, without pain there would be little progress and little traction for our feet.

There's a story that comes to mind about an old grandfather clock which had stood in the corner of a home 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".

There's an element of truth in this as it relates to the larger matter of living. Many of us looking back would have to acknowledge to a degree that whatever we have achieved in terms of person growth, in terms of self-fulfillment, in terms of character has been achieved through struggle and 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. There are times when the weights of life help to keep us going!

It seems that when God molds a man, He puts weights on him, gives him burdens with which to live, crosses to carry, hardships to endure, tribulations over which to triumph. We can't explain it; there's an element of mystery in it. It reminds me of something my son once asked me when he was four or five years of age. He wanted to know why vitamins are always in spinach and never in ice cream where they should be.

I think it's true that a great many of life's sweetest songs have come out of our saddest thoughts. Right away, we think of the haunting beauty of the Negro spirituals born out of the anguish and heartache of other days. Arnold Toynbee, I think it was, who traced this thought 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

Suppose we 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's full of accidental frustrations. 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. Sometimes we call them "bad breaks" - these things that happen through no fault of our own. There are those who go through life broken up 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 unforeseen emergency or responsibility that make a prior claim on their lives. Life is strange, filled with bad breaks, with the unexpected and so often our dreams do not turn out exactly as we had dreamed they would.

And yet - it is amazing how fruitful those bad breaks can be with the help of a little resilience, resourcefulness and courage. 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 him all about photography. The publishers made a mistake. They sent him the wrong book; they sent him "The Mammal on Magic, Mindreading, and Ventriloquism". The section on ventriloquism fascinated the young boy, and he began the practice of throwing his voice. He went on to create a wooden dummy to whom, at one time, more people listened on a Sunday than to all the preachers on this continent. Now whether the blunder that created Charlie McCarthy can be classified as providential will depend somewhat on your point of view, but it does serve to illustrate the element of accident upon which life so often turns.

And so we need to be reminded from time to time that accidents and failures are not all final. Someone has said: "Resourceful men never make mistakes; their failures are always portals of new discoveries". It's well to remember and carry with us. doors leading to

Biography points up this truth to us again and again - of how failures have been turned into fortunes, how troubles have been changed into triumphs. We think of John Wesley and how as a young man out of Oxford he came to Georgia as a missionary planning to convert the Indians. He failed. They almost converted

him. He returned to England a defeated, discouraged man. But out of that failure was born the fervor that changed the life of a nation and gave birth to 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". Where does accident end and providence begin? Who knows.

And so if you happen to miss the "Spain" of your life and get a prison experience instead - however, disappointing to you it may seem - remember that it does not mean the end of everything. It may be the beginning of something. Yes - remember that many of the immortal words of hope and faith that poured forth from Paul's lips were written in a prison cell. Out of the disappointments of his own life there 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. We know this. Some we have to live with our entire lives. To live with a broken body, a broken heart, a broken home, a continuing problem - what then. Then it is that we must go deeper than magazine success stories, deeper than surface philosophies, into the profound and underlying meaning of the cross.

Tolstoy it was, who writing in his book, "My Confessions" described four ways in which people face tragedy and disappointment. First, there are those who are so frightened that they 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 to it. And four, there are those who irrationally accept it, yet stand up to it bravely and take it when it comes.

As you pause to consider these four ways, you become aware that all four leave out the one creative and redemptive element which runs through all of the New Testament and which the cross of Jesus is the supreme example. 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 of it a force to lift men to the very feet of God.

The creative Christian approach would be not to ask how can I bear this thing, but rather how can I use it. How can I make it pay dividends, to put richness into life that wasn't there before. 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 tragedy into something positive and helpful to others.

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 blessed and find happiness. If you get a bad one, you will become a philosopher."

There's a hunting lodge in the highlands of Scotland that has become something of a famous show place. I remember visiting this lodge back in 1954 when I was student in Scotland. There's an interesting story about it. One day many years ago a guest was opening a bottle of soda and carelessly splashed the contents of the bottle over a newly decorated wall. The other guests hoped it would dry and disappear, but it didn't. It left a long, unsightly splotch, stretching from almost the floor to the ceiling. The guests departed with the feeling that the scolding of their host was justified.

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 Edwin Landseer, the artist famous for his paintings of animals. By this thoughtful and considerate action, he brought ~~good out of evil~~, beauty out of a *blunder* ugliness. Ever since then, every artists passing through this town has stopped to study the Landseer pictures and on the walls of the lodge many have added drawings of their own until it now stands no longer a lodge for careless guests, but an abiding place of beauty for those who love beauty.

Thank God for this creative, redemptive element which rests at the heart of life - that can take our blunders, failures, tragedies and disappointments and weave them into patterns of beauty and usefulness.

LET US PRAY      Help us, O God, to deal with our disappointments creatively.  
Help us, first, to see in them opportunities for the strengthening of character and opportunities for growth. Help us to remember that resourceful persons often use their failures for new discoveries. And always keep us mindful of the deep mystery of the cross, and of how Thou used it to lift men to thy feet. In the spirit of Christ, we pray.