

"NEVERTHELESS GOD"

"Without were fightings, within were fears. Nevertheless God." -- II Corinthians 7:5-6

Have you ever considered how great an element of paradox there is in human life? The facts of life have a disconcerting way of confounding our careful theories, throwing out our calculations and contradicting our generalizations. Just when we think we have found a formula to fit the facts of life, something unpredictable and eccentric turns up, and makes our logic look absurd. Just when we think we have discovered or established a rule, we find a host of exceptions. That is enough to embarrass our precision, and to dynamite our dogmatism, and to play havoc with the axioms which we had thought quite comprehensive and secure.

No sooner have we fixed on one aspect of life, and nailed that down, and said, "This certainly is true," than there crops up some other aspect, apparently directly contradictory to the first, and we have to say, "But this also is true." Life is a thing so fair and lovely and sublime; but it is also true that there is an element in it unspeakably cruel and bitter.

Christ's yoke is easy and His burden light; yet it is the hardest thing in all the world to be a Christian. God foreknows the future, and sees the end from the beginning; yet the human will is free. We are to bear one another's burdens; yet every man shall bear his own burden. We are citizens of the world, members of an earthly society, with all the ties and responsibilities which that involves; yet our citizenship is in heaven.

Life is full of this kind of paradox, this inescapable tension between opposing aspects of our experience. You can't card-index life. You can't pigeon-hole truth. You can't hope to get the mystery of it tied up into a neat little formula with no loose ends anywhere. People are always attempting to do that. The human mind has a passion for systematization. It hates loose ends. It wants to have everything docketed and tabulated and tidy. It has an ingrained tendency to seek a snug, compact philosophy.

But it is a vain quest. Life is too big and complex for such treatment. There will always be awkward, intractable factors turning up, to take our confident theorizings by surprise; always an element of paradox to derange the symmetry of our logic. The truth is, life is so constructed that at its heart there is a great "Nevertheless!" We study the facts, and draw deductions, and arrive at conclusions, and feel that we have found and formulated the truth; but then life itself with a sudden thrust and challenge intervenes. "All that may be true," it seems to say to us, "your statement of the facts may be sound; nevertheless there is this!" -- and with that it sets down something that seems daringly, almost violently, to contradict our previous position -- "there is this to reckon with!" That is the element of paradox in life; and it is this, when you come to think of it, that gives our life on earth its danger and zest and glory.

In Hebrews 12:11, we read, "No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: NEVERTHELESS AFTERWARD it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness." This is what might be called "The Nevertheless of A Transformed Experience."

What are we to understand by "chastening"? It means the whole range and extent of life's stern discipline, all the hard and difficult things that test the faith by which we live. It means the darkness in which we stand when some of the familiar and comforting lights have gone out. It is what happens when plans fail, and dearest desires are frustrated; or when health gives way; or when homes are broken up, and good-byes are said; or when some unshared burden weighs upon the heart; or when the world goes mad, and chaos comes again; or when death parts two souls who loved as David loved Jonathan; it is all the darker side of life; and when this writer says that "no chastening for the present is joyous, but grievous," he is surely right. For these things hurt and mystify. They search the soul and leave deep scars behind. It is no use to say, "Cheer up! It doesn't matter." It is not faith, it is folly, to suggest that trial and suffering are illusions.

Chastening can be so grievous that some are turned by it to bitterness. They ask, "Why does God allow it? What have I done to be treated so?" And they fall victims to self-pity, and resentment, and a brooding, smouldering depression.

But here in this epistle is a man whom quite desperate trouble has utterly failed to embitter. He has found the secret of victory, and serenity, and strong unbroken self-mastery. Do you ask him what his secret is? Here is his answer, "Nevertheless!" "Life's discipline may hurt and grieve; nevertheless afterward" -- and with that, out of the very heart of his trouble he brings a prize more fresh and fair and lovely than the unhurt, untroubled life can ever show -- "nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit or righteousness," it wins as its harvest the strong peace of a quiet mind and the tranquillity of an upright soul.

You must have seen it happening -- here a man grappling with crushing, overwhelming misfortune, and bringing back from that battlefield of the soul a new sense of the real issues of life, a new poise and dignity of bearing, a new awareness of unseen, infinite resources; there a woman imprisoned in the long bondage of wearing illness, and developing out of that experience a tenderness, a loveliness of spirit, a communion with the unseen, which seem to turn that sickroom into a temple.

Nevertheless afterward! So trouble is transformed, and they who sow in tears reap in joy, reap the rich harvest of a deep, inviolable peace. However, this harvest is not universal, but only to those who are prepared to let God in upon their problem or their sorrow, setting their own trouble in the light of the cross where Christ bore all the troubles of the world. Only those who are willing to cooperate with the divine plan and will know the secret of the Lord.

In Luke 5:5 we read, "We have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing; **NEVERTHELESS AT THY WORD I will let down the net.**" This we shall describe as "The Nevertheless of an Unquestioning Devotion."

Consider what Christ was asking. He was asking something that on the face of it looked utterly unreasonable. "Let down your nets for a draught." But had they not been doing that very thing for hours without success? They had been scouring the sea through the long hours of a weary night. Anyone who understood anything about fishing would have known that if the hours of darkness had yielded nothing there was not the remotest chance of a catch now when the waters were shimmering in the morning sun. And those disciples were expert fishermen, and knew all the science of their craft. What could Jesus be meaning?

But hark to Peter! "Nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net!" It did not matter that the advice seemed totally unreasonable, it did not matter that all his fisherman lore was dead against it: it was the word of Jesus, and nothing else compared with that. "Nevertheless at thy word!" Can we look into the eyes of Christ, and say the same when His commands to us appear unreasonable, interfering even with our cherished ambitions and plans for our career? Why does Christ sometimes make things so dreadfully difficult for His servants? Why should a man have to keep aiming at the ideal of the Sermon on the Mount, when it has been proved to him repeatedly by defeats that he cannot hope to reach it? What is the good of getting back into the old boat, at the old place, with the old net, when you have toiled so long in vain? That is the natural language of the heart. But the man of faith is the man who can cancel all that out with one ringing, decisive "Nevertheless!"

Let us then listen to Paul in the words of our text, "Without were fightings, within were fears. Nevertheless God." This is the "Nevertheless of a Direct Divine Revelation."

Here was this lonely servant of Christ, confronting his grim and desperate situation, wrestling with life. "Without were fightings."

That means the assaults of paganism, the mailed fist of a totalitarian State battering at every thing the church held dear, the threat of destruction and ruthless extermination hurled at the dreams and hopes of the saints of God. "Within were fears." That meant the man's own consciousness of personal inadequacy, his aches of memory and gusts of shame, his sense of being the most appallingly earthy of earthen vessels, and the unworthiest of all the unworthy servants of the Lord. It seemed that his prospects were pitiful, his plight desperate and pathetic. By all the rules he ought to have been a nervous wreck; to have cried "I'm beaten," and given up the unequal struggle. He ought, humanly speaking, to have blown out the protesting light of his soul. He ought to have taken up his pen and written, "Without were fightings, within were fears, therefore, hope died within me, and the dark night of unbelieving fatalism claimed me for its own." But to this man in the darkest hour there had come one flash across the midnight; and here, in the light of that great vision, he springs to his feet, breathlessly flinging defiance at the menace of the facts, bluntly contradicting the logic of the natural with the thrust and invasion of the supernatural. "Without were fightings, within were fears. Nevertheless God! God comforted me." And so -- magnificently -- he sounds the trumpet-note of victory.

There were many things that conspired to cast Paul down. He had temporal trials of no ordinary magnitude and strength. His own people hated him, the heathen persecuted him; and worst of all, there were those in the churches whose conduct caused him sharp and constant pain. Then, too, he had a grievous disappointment. Titus did not turn up until long after he was expected, and in those perilous times, Paul was anxious about the young man's safety and about the news he had to bring. He was a good man and true, yet he was cast down.

No doubt "the care of all the churches" weighed heavily upon him. His health seems to have been far from good. He said "my flesh hath no rest." Insomnia seems to have visited him. One who can sleep can always forget his cares and sorrows for a while. But when one has to fight the battles of the day all over again during the night, then his case is a hard one indeed. Then, too, he was much alone. While he had many friends in Philippi, they were not of the type to whom he could unburden his heart.

The course of the apostle was one remarkably varied; sometimes prosperous, sometimes adverse. At the time when he wrote this epistle he looked back upon a period of trouble, contention and opposition, and upon experiences of suffering and disappointment. His nature was not one to pass through life unmoved; he was sensitive to all influences. And at Macedonia from which he was now writing, Paul had endured much which was fitted to depress his mind. Never was affliction more comprehensively summed up than in the language he here employs -- "Without were fightings, within were fears. Nevertheless God."

For Christ Paul was in peril of his life in Damascus; coldly suspected by his fellow-believers in Jerusalem; persecuted in Antioch; stoned in Lystra; assaulted in Iconium; beaten with many stripes in Philippi; attacked by a lewd and envious crowd in Thessalonica; pursued by callous enmity at Berea; despised in Athens; blasphemed in Corinth; exposed to the fierce wrath of the Ephesians; and bound with chains in Jerusalem.

The Lord of Paul's life knew the limit of the endurance of His servant. He knew that he was keenly sensitive. He saw him on the rack in his anxiety about Corinth. He understood his hungry longing for friendship. Paul's affectionate nature made him greatly dependent upon human friendships. Finally, Titus came and brought good news, so Paul's strain and tension were relaxed momentarily. Then, overflowing with an exuberant sense of relief and joy about Corinth, and of affection for his people, he spoke our text.

Men are frequently cast down by grievous circumstances; sickness, poverty, bereavement and approaching death. Also, by fears -- useless, groundless, foolish, sinful fears. Even the strong, fearless, enterprising Paul was cast down. We are accustomed to think of him as the soldier of the cross, and the hero of the spiritual war. And this is right. Nevertheless, we should not forget that he had a human heart, with human susceptibilities and cravings; that he knew what it was to be weary, disappointed and sorrowful, and what it was to be consoled, encouraged and elated.

Then, Paul informs us that God is a comforter. He is the Physician of the depressed. There are those who assume to be great and strong who would not stoop to render that sort of service; but what some are too proud to do, God delights to do. Note the means by which He comforts:

1. By things temporal as well as things eternal -- by a gleam of sunshine, a shower of rain, a sunny morning, the advent of spring, the blooming of a flower, the singing of the birds, the success of an enterprise, the services of a benefactor, the visit of a friend, a smile of approbation, a tear of sympathy, a word of encouragement, etc.
2. By the Bible -- The Psalms with their complainings, their rejoicings and triumphings; The Gospels with their exhibition of our loving Redeemer; and the Epistles with their doctrines and promises.
3. By the Lord's Day, with its holy calm, sacred assemblings and sweet rest.
4. By prayer, when desire is relieved by supplication and oppressive care is cast upon God.
5. By the church, with her ordinances of instruction, devotion and communion.
6. By the Holy Spirit, the comforter.
7. By Jesus Christ the Saviour.

There is but one hand that can lift up those who are cast down -- God can, will and does. God often comforts people through the visits of a friend. A genuine Christian often carries comfort into the house of a distressed friend.

Can you rise to that final, decisive "Nevertheless"? God knows that all of us are needing that divine revelation today. Without are fightings, principalities and powers setting themselves in battle array against the most sacred standards of our lives, doctrines of naked materialism and brute force laughing to scorn the spiritual values of the faith of Christ. And within are fears -- fears of our own deficiency of inward resource, fears of a break in our faith when the real test comes, fears of the unknown future and the dim and menacing way. Can we, recognizing the fightings and the fears, fling these two shining words right in the wretched lowering faces of them all -- "Nevertheless God"? Darkness may cover the earth, and gross darkness the people -- nevertheless God! The powers of evil may strike a pact together, as Herod and Pilate became friends on the day of the crucifixion -- nevertheless God. Faith may tremble at the assaults of devastating doubt, and heart and flesh may fail and faint -- nevertheless God! Can you triumphantly rise to that?

Can we, facing the fightings and the fears, around, within, rise up to it? Others have achieved it in days more terrifying than our own. Our own forefathers achieved it on the scaffold and at the stake. The Lord Jesus Christ achieved it in Gethsemane. "Let this cup pass: nevertheless Thy will, Father, not Mine, be done." Think of that, and know you are not alone when trouble comes. Reach out of darkness, and feel the pressure of more than human hand. Stand up in the might of Christ, and bid defiance to your fears. "Nevertheless God!" And the rest will be music, and a march to victory.