

MASTERING DISAPPOINTMENTS

Acts 16:6-12

In this chapter, as in many others, there is a clear example of the conflict between the will of man and the will of God. What Paul wanted to do was not what God wanted him to do. This conflict may be traced in the life of every man. Success comes only when man has been willing to surrender his way to the leadership of the Spirit of God.

I. Forbidden By The Spirit.

1. When Paul and Silas were about to launch out into new territory they found their way suddenly cut off. The details of the obstruction are not given. There may have been some physical blockade, or it may have consisted in a definite impression from God that resulted in a complete change in desire and plan.
2. The sensitive Christian spirit knows that God knows what is best. Paul did not know what lay beyond the boundaries of Asia, but the Spirit of God knew and Paul showed his wisdom as well as his Christian spirit when he yielded his wishes to the will of God.
3. This is the first and finest mark of Christian discipleship. "Not my will, but Thine, be done." Where this is thoroughly observed, there will be no doubts about the outcome of the venture; but let a man beware when he is determined on his own course irrespective of the will of God.
4. Why would the Holy Spirit forbid them?
As a rule it does not pay to ask the reason for God's leadership, but we do not tread on dangerous ground when we ask this question here. The desire was to go to Bithynia, but that was to stay near the home base; the Spirit drove them on beyond the former itinerary, on toward new fields, on to where the name of Jesus had never been preached.

II. Unrealized Dreams.

We are going to consider a factual personal problem which is practically universal. It is the fact that very few persons have a chance to live their lives on the basis of their first choice. All of us have to live upon the basis of our second and third choices. To the one who reads biography this comes to be so much a matter of course that he takes it for granted.

1. Moses cherished the fond anticipation of entering Canaan, but his hopes were crashed on the very borderland.
2. David dreamed of a temple for God. He planned it, and he gathered material for it, but one day God intervened, and David was not allowed to build it.
3. Many times Paul had planned a course which he was not permitted to follow. If we are going to trace these broken plans in the life of Paul, we must begin with his conversion. He was going to Damascus to imprison Christians, but he left there as the most devout Christian of them all. At the time of our text he had planned "to go into Bithynia; but the Spirit suffered them not." His life was made up of the fragments of broken intentions--so much so that near the end of his life he wrote, "I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." He recognized the fact that he belonged to the Lord and was subject to His orders.

4. Life is a dual thing for all men.

A pastor has two churches--one is the church he dreams about in his heart, the other is the church that actually exists. Every singer has two songs--one is the song he dreams about and wishes he could sing, the other is the song he is able to sing. Every artist has two pictures--one is the dream picture, and the other, the real picture. All good men dream of a life which they are not able to attain.

5. Unrealized dreams are the places where men are tested.

The real test of life does not come when men are able to achieve what they have desired, but when they are denied their ambitions and must end short of the victory. What would be your reaction to disappointment? Here is the crucible in which life is tested.

III. Unquestioned Providences.

1. When Paul was converted he said, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" That was the "white flag" of his soul. He surrendered to the Lord that day. His life was no longer his own. It was turned over completely to the Lord for guidance.

2. In such a life disappointments become His appointments.

Such a man does not ask why. Without question Paul immediately followed the leading of the Spirit of God. He could not understand it. He could not explain the new course. He did not ask for an explanation. He yielded readily to the will of God.

3. Failures in one direction may be permitted in order that we may be driven in another direction. God always leads in the way that is best for us.

4. This incident marked a turning point in history.

Western civilization had its origin here, and the gospel for the Western world began its journey from this point. But Paul had not planned to go to Europe, that was a second choice. He had started from Galatia to Proconsular Asia. He was forbidden to go there by the Holy Spirit, who said, "No, you can't go there this time." When he got up to the province of Mysia, he tells us that he planned to go to Bithynia. And no wonder! Bithynia was one of the richest provinces of Asia Minor, and to have carried Christianity there would have been a triumph indeed. Even though Paul wanted very much to go there, the way was blocked. His plan was broken.

At first, it must have seemed lamentable to Paul. And yet, Paul rendered his most significant service with the left-overs of a broken plan. Wanting Bithynia and getting Troas is a familiar experience. But to take Troas, the second best, the broken plan, the left-over of a disappointed expectation, and make of it the greatest opportunity one ever had is a much less familiar experience. Yet, as one reads the story of human life, we see that powerful living has always involved such a victory as Paul won in Troas over his own soul and his situation. Paul had the conviction that if God had led him to Troas that there must be something in Troas worth doing.

IV. Unhesitating Obedience.

There was no dillydallying with Paul. He immediately recognized the leadership of God's Spirit and followed without hesitation. His was the spirit of surrender, of obedience and of victory.

Our trouble is that when we land in Troas we often begin to pity ourselves. It would have been easy for Paul to have felt sorry for himself, when he landed in Troas, but he didn't. Instead, he at once began thinking about other people. He wondered if

there was not someone who might be better off because he had landed in Troas.

When we say "Troas" each one of us thinks of some situation in which we had not planned to be. Let us see in it an opportunity for service. George McDonald said, "Nothing makes a man strong like a cry for help." You walk down the street utterly fatigued and suddenly there is a cry. There has been an accident in which a child was hurt, and you will never think of how tired you are until it is all over. Nothing makes one so strong as a call for help.

V. Divine Revelations.

1. When God closes one door He opens another.

We may not always see the new door which God opens because our eyes are closed by prejudice.

2. God does not always tell us why He leads us into different fields than the ones to which we desired to go. It is enough to know that His judgments and actions are right and best.

When we think of William Carey, we recall that he had Polynesia on his heart and longed to take the gospel there, but God chose India for him.

When Adoniram Judson was a young man he gave himself to missionary service and his ambition centered on India. That was his Bithynia. When at last he reached India they would not admit him. The East India Company would not allow him to stay and the governor told him to take the first ship back to America. For a year he labored to open the doors of India, but they were bolted. So he turned to Burma. That was his Troas, unknown, untouched Burma. Can one suppose that through all of that disappointment Judson could see the leading of God? Of course not, because he was human. But he did so handle the affair in Burma that the doors began to open until today no informed person can think of Burma without thinking of Judson. When the consequence began to appear and Judson looked upon his life in retrospect he could see that it had been planned of God.

When we think of Phillips Brooks, we think of spiritual ministry, a great personality pouring his soul out with abundant power upon the people. Of all the letters that he received, it is said that he cherished most this one from a small tailor shop near Copley Square in Boston: "Dear Mr. Brooks: I am a tailor in a little shop near your church. Whenever I have the opportunity I always go to hear you preach. Each time I hear you preach I seem to forget all about you, for you make me think of God." Nevertheless, remember that Phillips Brooks did not plan to be a preacher. He planned to be a teacher. That was his Bithynia. As soon as he graduated from college he plunged into his chosen profession of teaching and he failed. He failed completely. Listen to what he wrote about his pupils as he was failing: "They are the most disagreeable set of creatures without exception that I have ever met." After he had failed and had been dropped from his position, he wrote, "I don't know what will become of me and I don't care much"; "I shall not study a profession." There is a sense in which Brooks never recovered from the disappointment. At the flower of his career he came down once from the office of President Eliot of Harvard white as a sheet and fairly trembling because he had declined what he knew to be his last opportunity to become a teacher. He wanted Bithynia and he got Troas but through Troas he found the door into a service that if he had lived a hundred lives he might never have found again.

3. God does not foretell what awaits us.

We wonder what effect it would have had on Paul if he had known what awaited him. We also wonder how we would be affected if we knew what awaited us. It is good for us that God keeps our futures hidden from us.

VI. Divine Blessings.

1. God never deserts us when He leads us into strange paths. If His leadership calls us to bear burdens, it will also supply the needed blessings.
2. When God moves us in a given direction, He also directs others to that same course. If He sends Phillip from Samaria toward Egypt, He also sends the Eunuch from Jerusalem toward Egypt, and their paths cross.
3. He may permit Paul to be cast into prison, but He will pull down the prison walls. He does not desert His servants. He may allow the jailer to beat Paul with stripes, but He will later make that jailer wash the stripes and bind them up.
4. Duty faithfully done guarantees a reward. It may not pay in terms of money, nor in physical goods, nor in terms of praise or approval; but it will be profitable in terms of peace of mind, of clear conscience, and of divine blessings. Paul's path through Macedonia was marked by a trail of broken plans, but he also left a number of new churches with great men and noble women doing battle for God.