

LIFE'S GREATEST TEACHER

"And Laban said unto him, I pray thee, if I have found favour in thine eyes, tarry: for I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me for thy sake." Genesis 30:27.

Life has many great teachers. Love is a great teacher. Pain is a great teacher. Death is a great teacher. Sorrow is a great teacher. But what is the word which sums up the instruction of all other words? What is the word which is a university where all men matriculate, but where not all learn, and where not all receive a degree? What is the word which teaches you more than all the schools and colleges? What is the word that offers its wisdom, its riches and its honors to all men, and yet by many is rejected, scorned and despised? What is the word that proves that the way of the transgressor is hard, but that the path of the just is as a shining light? What is the word that shows the unhappiness of the life that is lived for self? What is the word that shows the worth of prayer, and proves the power of faith? That word is experience. "I have learned by experience."

Experience is life's greatest teacher because it draws upon all the inexhaustible stores of knowledge that are in good and evil, pain and pleasure, success and disappointment, joy and sorrow. Experience is life, and life, of course, is the greatest teacher.

The world is a school. Life is a teacher. Attendance is compulsory. Tuition is free. Education is gradual and progressive. The period of our remaining here is the schooltime of our earthly existence. We learn by experience.

This sentence, "I have learned by experience," is taken from a conversation of Laban with Jacob, his son-in-law, at the time Jacob had decided to take all his belongings and separate from Laban. Laban said unhesitatingly that he had learned by experience that the Lord had blessed him because of Jacob, and was trying to dissuade Jacob from his intention of leaving. Laban was not a godly man, but he was an astute and clever one. He knew how to keep his eyes open and to draw conclusions. He knew how to accept the lessons of experience.

God expects us to learn from whatever sources we can. God Himself is our greatest teacher and He tells us that if we lack wisdom we can ask of Him. We are also expected to learn from other people and from nature. Christ taught many spiritual lessons by using illustrations from nature.

It was a cynic who said, "Experience keeps a dear school, and fools will learn in no other." No, fools do not learn in any school. There is a proverb, "He that will learn from none but himself is sure to have a fool for a master." Most of the lessons of life come to us from experience, either our own experience or that of others. If we have any mind at all, we can certainly learn from this teacher.

It is a wholesome thing at the end of the year to think about life in terms of experience. The first and obvious thing is that our experiences are our own. Whatever roads we have travelled in experience, we have gone every foot of them ourselves.

There are some things we need never learn by experience. Among them is a knowledge of evil acquired by curiosity or by deliberate experiment. Such knowledge will make our battle with Satan all the harder and victory over evil all the more difficult. Sometimes people excuse themselves for indulgence in sin on the pretext that they want to see life, as though life were an opportunity for collecting experiences as a boy collects stamps or coins. Satan never perpetrated a greater falsehood than that sin is interesting and vivacious.

There are some things that we can only learn by experience. Yet not all knowledge is acquired thus. Do you remember Christ's answer to Pilate when the latter asked, "Art thou the king of the Jews?" Christ replied, "Sayest thou this of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?" That was our Lord's way of rebuking second-hand experience and self-produced spirituality. It

-6-

is the stern reproof of unreality in religion. There is a world of difference between artificial flowers and those that are real. The one is man-made and lacks perfume and true beauty of color and form. The other is produced by God and is distinctive in fragrance and loveliness.

There are many things that I have learned by experience. Among them are the following:

I. Salvation Is Wonderful.

God's salvation is perfect. His remedy for sin has met every part of my need. I cannot add to it. I cannot take away from it. I cannot improve upon it. It is perfect. It takes care of the past, the present and the future. Christ saves from the penalty of sin, the power of sin and eventually from the presence of sin. I thank God that I have received His great salvation. His salvation delivers from darkness to light, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, from selfishness to magnanimity, from defeat to triumph, from the lowest depths to the highest heights.

II. Christ Is Precious.

"Unto you therefore who believe he is precious" (I Peter 2:7). Christ is precious subjectively. In His own person He unites God and man. In Him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. He is the only Saviour of men; the only hope of sinful souls. Christ is also precious objectively: as the revealer of God, as the redeemer from sin and as the reconciler to God. However, Christ is precious to believers only. The better one comes to know Him, the more precious He becomes, He becomes more precious to me as the years go by. I can and should prove that He is precious to me by trusting everything to Him, sincerely loving Him and faithfully serving Him.

III. The Years Pass Rapidly.

A child is hardly conscious that time moves at all. But as we grow older we are startled to find how rapidly time is passing. It begins to fly like a rushing river torrent. "We spend our years as a tale that is told." "Life is swifter than a weaver's shuttle." "What thou doest, do quickly."

IV. Limitations Are A Reality.

Every man learns this lesson if he is capable of learning anything. A young man starts out to make a name for himself, but experience soon teaches him that he is not going to set the world on fire and that his coming into the world will not make a tremendous difference in it one way or the other. It may not be a good thing to lose the ideals of youth and some of the fires of ambition, but that is what takes place in life anyway. The world will not remember us very long after we are gone and those who shout today will forget tomorrow. A fellow-minister and one of my former parishioners was engaged in evangelistic work, and held numerous revivals and tent meetings. He (Moses L. Chambers) told me that he had the notion that the conversion of the world depended on him and his work. After a breakdown in his health and he had to quit preaching, he stated that his retirement from the evangelistic field had not had any more effect on the world than his sticking his finger in the waters of Cumberland River and pulling it out would have on that stream. The fact that we shall soon be forgotten after we are gone should make us very humble. Experience should teach all of us to be humble.

V. Things Do Not Satisfy.

By experience I have learned the inadequacy of material things to bring abiding satisfaction in life. Emerson said, "Things are in the saddle and riding mankind." We are living in a materialistic age and all of us need to watch lest we worship things. All of us want to be happy, but too many people seek happiness in the abundance of things

which they possess. Real happiness comes from a frame of mind and the bent of the soul.

The only real and abiding joy comes from a consciousness of doing the will of God and thereby helping other people. One does not have to accumulate a fortune to be happy. Christ said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

VI. God's Way Is Best.

His way is always best. Things happen to you in life. Then you wonder why they happen. What is the purpose of these events? One of the greatest answers to this question was given by Joseph. His bitter experience of being sold into Egyptian slavery by his own brothers, being falsely accused of a wicked deed, and being cast into prison and left to languish there for years was of a nature to make Joseph sour, cynical and bitter. After the burial of their father, the brothers became frightened at the thought of their sin against Joseph and possible revenge at his hands. They sent a messenger to him to plead for pardon. They feared that he might try to get even with them for their sin against him, which fear was entirely unwarranted. Joseph assured them that while they meant what they did against him for evil, God meant it for good. He saw in their deed not the meanness of men but the providence of God. Whatever happens in your life as a Christian, hold fast to these words, "God meant it for good." In all of the events of life God purposes that you shall be a blessing.

VII. God's Grace Is Sufficient.

With the passage of time we have increasing proofs of God's love, wisdom and power. He does love us. All His acts are prompted by love. He is infinitely wise. He knows and cares and guides. We do not know the way but we do know our Guide, and we can always trust Him. He has infinite power. There is nothing too hard for Him to do. He upholds and supports us, putting underneath "the everlasting arms."

Our Lord Jesus Christ said, "My grace is sufficient for thee." He promised sufficient grace to every believer in Him. That sufficiency is not a bare adequacy, just covering the extent of the need, with no overlapping margin; it is large beyond expectation, desire or necessity. The supply has exact correspondence with the need; never too much, never too little, but perfect adequacy; never too soon, never too late, but timed to the tick of the clock and to the beat of the heart. Grace for tomorrow's needs will not come today. He gives grace to His people in their necessities, but not until they occur.

We must not expect that grace will be given for the doing of the needless. Grace is only promised for real need. Somebody once asked D. L. Moody: "Have you grace enough to be burned at the stake?" He replied, "No." The questioner pressed him further: "Do you not wish you had?" "No," replied Moody again, "for I do not need it. What I need just now is grace to live in Milwaukee three days and hold a mission."

Underneath the child of God are the everlasting arms of an all-sufficient grace which never fails. Grace is imparted at every step of the way; grace for the big things and grace for the little things. "My grace is sufficient for thee." Oh, what a wondrous promise this is! The more one meditates on it the more glorious it becomes.

His grace is sufficient to save, to secure and to sustain. It is sufficient to sustain us in the midst of our temptations, our mistakes, our trials, our troubles and our sorrows.

"He giveth more grace as the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength as the labours increase.
To added affliction He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials His multiplied peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is
half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.
His love has no limit, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men;
And out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth and giveth, and giveth again."