

WHEN LIFE TUMBLES IN

"If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?" Jeremiah 12:5.

Many people allow circumstances to affect greatly their religious interest. If all goes well, they praise God; if things go wrong, they blame Him. It is generally little things that upset them. Someone in the church failed to invite them to a social function, so they stop attending the church services. Financial losses, misfortune or illness overtake them, and they say, "I am through!"

Here is a man who, stunned by God's ordering of things, has been musing upon the bewilderments of life. Suddenly he bursts into God's presence with a babble of protest, implying that God has been unfair in His dealings with him. Then, just as suddenly, he checks himself. For after all he realizes that he does not have anything to complain about that others have not experienced also. His rubs and frets and ills are just like the ones which others have had. If things of this sort make him peevish and cross towards God, what may be expected to happen when one of the great crashing dispensations bursts in his life?

Things of this nature are inevitable. For years and years you and I may go our sunny ways and live happily, while the rumors of these terrors are blown to us very faintly as from a world so distant that they seem to have nothing to do with us, and then they happen to us. "Never morning wore to evening but some heart did break" -- hearts just as sensitive as yours and mine. But when yours breaks, what then? You certainly do not want to be searching for something to bring you through when the test comes.

Suppose that, to you as to Job, suddenly out of the blue there leap dreadful tidings of disaster. Would you have the ability to pull yourself together and to face it as he did? He said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord."

God is adequate for any and every emergency. He enabled Job to say, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." He enabled David to say, "I will fear no evil." God enabled Ezekiel to exclaim, "At even my wife died, and I did in the morning as I was commanded." Paul said, "All things work together for good to them that love God." Christianity does not merely afford us an escape from the common ills of life, its disappointments and struggles, but it enables us to bear these things when they come.

Jeremiah, God's prophet and preacher of righteousness, was divinely called to the prophetic office early in his youth and continued in that work for over fifty years. He was troubled and discouraged because of the afflictions which had come upon Jerusalem. He sought an explanation for the fact that in a world governed by a righteous God the righteous had to suffer so much. Jeremiah also wanted to know why the wicked prospered. "Why do the wicked prosper?" That is one of the oldest questions. Job asked it; David asked it; Jeremiah asked it; many of God's children have asked it. Addressing himself to God, Jeremiah said, "Righteous art thou, O Lord, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?" (Jeremiah 12:1).

God has a way of answering questions by asking other questions. That was the way He answered Job, when Job was troubled about the prosperity of the wicked and his own afflictions. At the end of Job's long series of questions and eloquent appeals, God answered him with a series of questions, the purpose of which was to humble His servant and cause him to see that if he knew so little about the ways of God in the physical universe, it was not strange that there were providences of God in his life and in God's government of the world which he could not understand.

In like manner God answered Jeremiah's question about the prosperity of the wicked by asking him a question, "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?" (Jeremiah 12:5). At first glance that does not appear to answer Jeremiah's question. The prophet had not asked God to tell him what he, Jeremiah, would do under certain given circumstances, but he wanted to know what God was going to do, and why He permitted men to do what they had done and were doing. Yet there was profound meaning and satisfaction in the answer that God gave.

God's answer to Jeremiah's questions was in the form of a double metaphor. The first is borrowed from the field of battle -- "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses?" If a man has not been able to battle successfully with the infantry, what will he do when he has to fight against the cavalry? The other metaphor is borrowed from a journey. If the traveler has been wearied by the ordinary incidents of his journey, the heat and the fatigue of it, then what will he do when he comes to the Jordan River, when it overflows its banks?

Jeremiah did the right thing in taking his trouble to God and talking it over with Him. He not only talked to God but he let God talk back to him. Jeremiah told God that the outside opposition was too much for him. God's answer was equivalent to this: "If in the easier tasks, the outside opposition, you are ready to quit, what will you do in the severer tests, the inside opposition? You've got to deal with treachery and hypocrisy and opposition on the inside yet. Your brethren and the king and your fellow preachers and princes are yet to try you as God's messenger."

God made it clear to Jeremiah that when he brought the Word of God and insisted upon it his brethren would set him aside and reject him as a God-called prophet; that they would cry out against him and arouse the multitude against him, by declaring that he was a dangerous fellow and a wild fanatic; that they would praise Jeremiah to his face, but they would curse him and carry on a propaganda of poison against him behind his back; and that his fellow preachers would threaten him and urge the multitude to kill him. In other words, God informed Jeremiah that his previous experiences were very calm in comparison with the storm which was yet to come.

Gentle, sensitive, sympathetic, shrinking Jeremiah, lovable and loving, wearied with the world's wickedness, continued to do the work of Him who sent him. He did not hesitate to proclaim God's Word to the people. He endured their opposition, sought their welfare, prayed for their forgiveness and continued to preach against their sins. When the judgment of God fell upon Israel and the nation went into exile Jeremiah went with them. He shared with them the penalty of their disobedience. No wonder that the people of Christ's day saw a likeness between Christ and Jeremiah (Matthew 16:13-14). The fact that some thought Christ was Jeremiah come

back to earth was a great tribute to the prophet. How much like Christ are we?

If you do not have an adequate faith in God, what will you do when the race of life is hard? What will you do when the strain is greater than the measure of your strength? What will sustain you when Jordan overflows, when the great crises of life come? Life has both major and minor trials. These minor trials in a way prepare us for the greater trials to come. If in the time of the smaller trials you have been troubled and shaken, then how will you do in the swelling of Jordan, when the great trial comes? This question was addressed to Jeremiah, and through him to us, not to alarm us or discourage us, but to prepare us and strengthen us for what is to come.

Since the first river went out of Eden to water the earth, there has never been such a river as the Jordan. Born in the snows of Mount Hermon, it flows southward and enters the Sea of Galilee, 682 feet below sea level. Issuing forth from the Sea of Galilee, it follows a winding course and empties into the Dead Sea, 1,292 feet below sea level. Although it is only about 200 miles long, it is the most historic of all rivers. I shall never forget the pleasant summer days when I stood on the banks of the Jordan. There was nothing about the stream to suggest a great and a famous river except the historic memories. Among these memories was the crossing of the Jordan by Joshua and the people of Israel. Then there was the memory of the day when Naaman, the leper, dipped himself seven times in the Jordan and was cured of his leprosy. The day when John the Baptist baptized Christ in the Jordan River, and then saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Him came to mind also. The crossing of the Jordan by the children of Israel on their way out of Egypt to the land of Canaan made it the symbol of the immortal soul of man crossing the river of death at the end of life into the kingdom of heaven.

At certain seasons of the year the Jordan River was a very narrow and shallow stream. But at other times when the snow on the mountains melted it was swollen into a much larger river.

Even so, life is often very calm and peaceful. Then, all of a sudden life tumbles in and when it does some things are exceedingly important. What should we do when life tumbles in?

I. Remember it as it was before.

Dr. Albert Beaven wrote of the overwhelming sorrow which overtook Mrs. Beaven and himself in the loss of their little seven-year-old daughter. They were stunned, dumb with sorrow. Then it dawned upon them that they were letting the two weeks of her illness and death make them forget the seven years of happiness and fellowship. With this thought they began to relive the years which God had given them together.

Memory is given us to retrace the steps of lost fellowship, to sip again from the cups that have been drained, to relive the joy of the light which shone in eyes we loved, and to feel again the touch of the vanished hand and to hear the voice that is still. In every life there are such areas if we will unlock the gates which often our sorrow insists upon securing.

II. Begin rebuilding.

For some reason God wanted a new and a better structure for your life. Life is full of rebuilt plans. Life tumbled in for Saul of Tarsus and he became Paul the Apostle. Paul's life later tumbled in. He wrote, "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (II Corinthians 12:7--10). Never would Paul have known the grace and power of his Lord Jesus Christ as he did had his life not tumbled in.

III. Help others out of their tumbled-in structures.

God enables us to gain help in order that we may give help. There was a man whose little daughter was murdered by a fiend. Instead of distrusting and despising everybody, this man began to devote his life to the assistance of under-privileged children. Every child in his community began to love him. He journeyed to the grave of his daughter and dedicated himself anew to the task of building childhood.

IV. Believe that it is for our good.

When life tumbles in, we turn to Paul's writing. What must have been behind that passage in Romans eight, where he wrote with such confidence: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." We may not understand nor see the reason why but we know it is for our good. Things do work together for good even though we may not perceive the good or it may not be immediate.

To reconcile life's tragedies we must say:

"O for a faith that will not shrink,
Though pressed by every foe;
That will not tremble on the brink
Of an earthly woe.

A faith that shines more bright and clear,
When tempests rage without;
That when in danger knows no fear,
In darkness feels no doubt."

To those who trust in Christ the voice of sweet assurance says, "When thou passeth through the waters I will be with thee and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee." Only by faith in Christ can you look upon the roaring, swelling tide of Jordan undaunted and unafraid.