

DESIRES THAT DEADEN

"And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul" Psalm 106:15.

In order to understand this verse, we need to look into its historical circumstances. It refers to an incident in the wilderness life of the people of Israel. When God delivered them by the miracle at the Red Sea, and their enemies were destroyed as they pursued after them, the children of Israel at first were very grateful and sang the praises of God. But, they soon forgot God's wonderful work in their behalf in delivering them from Egypt. On their wilderness journey they had been saved from starvation by the manna which fell from heaven for them. For some time they had had nothing to eat except this food which was called manna. It appears that they had grown tired of this monotonous diet. Perhaps they were something like the young member of a household in which rabbit formed the staple article of food, who expressed thanks at the table in these words:

"For rabbit young, for rabbit old,
For rabbit hot, for rabbit cold;
For rabbit tender, for rabbit tough;
We thank Thee, Lord, we've had enough."

These Israelites had had enough of the manna. They wanted a better diet, or, as we would say, a higher standard of living. Giving expression to their feelings, they broke out into a very complaining mood and asked, "Why doesn't God give us flesh to eat?" Through their hearts there surged the desire for the old fleshpots of Egypt. While there they had had a varied diet--cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic, but in the wilderness it was manna every day, and they wanted a change. They wanted flesh to eat.

When they laid their complaint and request before God, He seemed to say, "Yes, indeed, they shall have flesh to eat; they shall, in fact, have it until they are tired of it." Tremendous quantities of quail descended on their camp. Greedily, the Israelites fell to eating this meat. They glutted themselves with it. They ate so ravenously that they got terribly ill. A plague or epidemic broke out among them. The Word says, "The Lord smote them with a great plague." Many of them died. After a long course of vegetarian food a plunge into a greedy consumption of flesh would naturally create a reaction and the body would suffer. However, when people eat gluttonously they should not charge God with the discomforts arising therefrom.

The place where the victims of the plague were buried was called the "Graves of Lust." The Psalmist's inspired comment on that bit of Hebrew history is this, "He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul." Moffatt translates this verse as follows: "He let them have what they desired, then--made them loathe it."

Not getting what we desire in life is a common cause for complaint. We often think that life is difficult and unfair because we do not get what we want. What we have here in this text is something quite different. It was a case of getting what they wanted and requested, and then wishing they did not have it. The children of Israel always wanted something which they did not have. We say that they were a queer lot, but we are often just as silly. We are always wanting something that we do not have. We are so prone to think what somebody else has is much better than what we have. We often get what we want and then we decide that we do not want it.

I. Some Illustrations.

How true the Bible is to life! It is not simply the record of good, pure and holy activities on the part of people. Even in some of its best characters weaknesses come to light. Their dominate desires are not always good.

Abraham and Lot were faced with the problem of finding adequate pastures for their flocks and herds, whereupon the elder very generously gave his nephew his choice of

locality. Lifting his eyes, Lot noted the fertility of the plains toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and a great longing for them filled his heart. Lot found plentiful pasturage for his flocks and herds, but he later discovered what a terrible blunder he had made when he wended his steps thitherwards. Sodom must have become almost a living hell to his sensitive soul.

Take the demand of Israel for a king. It was never God's choice for his covenant people to have a political monarch like the nations that surrounded them. Yet, they were insistent. A king they must have, and a king they got. When Saul ascended the throne it appeared that big things were in store for Israel. Well, they turned out to be big all right--big and terrible. The career of their first ruler ended in black disaster, both for himself and the nation with suicide for the former and military defeat for the latter. Desire turned out to be deadly.

Recall, too, the story of Ahab and his ill-fated plan for taking possession of Naboth's vineyard. For reasons which to him were good and sufficient Naboth would not sell his property to the king. Inspired by that feminine fiend, Jezebel, Ahab hatched a scheme in which false charges were lodged against Naboth, on the strength of which the innocent man was stoned to death. With the owner out of the way Ahab took possession of the coveted property. Yet, scarcely had he taken over when the stern prophet Elijah appeared upon the scene. When Elijah prophesied Ahab's early and violent death, the brutal king exclaimed, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" Elijah calmly replied: "I have found thee." Ahab got what he wanted, but it proved to be a deadly thing to him.

Judas Iscariot got what he wanted too. He plotted and schemed. He connived and conspired. He sneaked and slithered in the shadows. He was permitted to get his price--thirty pieces of silver. But he enjoyed his loot for a shorter time than it had taken him to gain it. When he saw the way things were going--Christ Jesus condemned, no miracle performed to save Him from His captors, a horrible crucifixion meted out to Him--Judas found his thirty pieces of silver were hotter than blazing faggots. He threw the blood money on the pavement and fled in dismay. He got what he wanted, but he did not like what he got.

Our desires often prove injurious to us. A child may cry for a green apple and keep on doing so until the mother, just to satisfy him and to teach him a lesson, lets him have it. After he eats it and has a severe case of stomach ache, he learns that he did not want what he got.

It is not good for us to get all we want. We see that clearly in the case of children. No wise parent gives a child all that he asks for. Adults often get what they desire, but after receiving it wish they had not done so.

II. Some Insights.

1. God has so arranged it that people frequently get pretty much what they really set their hearts on. I would remind you of what Emerson once wrote: "Young man, be careful what you want, for you will surely get it." Our wants get inside us and color our lives. If we want something at any cost, we often get it. Among the many mysterious facts that hang around our human existence this is one that God has ordained: in the long run desires are determinative--we get what we really go after. But when we receive what we seek we may find that it has not brought us what we really want and that in the process we have starved our souls. God's only way of teaching us may be to let us take or have what we insist on having and pay for it in the starvation of our souls.
2. All desires, good or bad, exact of us a price. In general it may be said that for the fulfilment of good and worthy desires you must pay beforehand, whereas for the desires that are evil and unworthy you pay afterward. As Savonarola said: "Would you rise in the world? You must work while

others amuse themselves. Are you desirous of a reputation for courage? You must risk your life. Would you be strong morally and physically? You must resist temptation. All this is paying in advance. Observe the other side of the picture: the bad things are paid for afterwards."

Here are two young men. One sets his heart on helping people by being a physician. Another sets his heart on helping himself by being a rounder. His \$100 a week job is good enough for him so long as he can make the night spots and pick up some thrills. The first man toils early and late. He must deny himself all luxuries and many good times. He pores over his medical books. All the while the flame of desire to be a first-rate doctor burns with rising intensity. He is paying beforehand. Look at the other fellow. The idea of denying himself, saying, "No" to himself, makes no appeal to him. But keep watching him. Stay with him until his easy-going habits begin to take their toll. Stay with him until drink has debauch him, or gambling has sapped his character. Stay with him until the whole combination of consequences has knocked his morale into a cocked hat, and from his fed-up, cynical soul there comes some such cry as that of George Arnold:

"I have had my will,
Tasted every pleasure,
I have drunk my fill
Of the purple measure.

"Life has lost its zest,
Sorrow is my guest,
O, the lees are bitter, bitter!
Give me rest.

"Love once filled the bowl,
Running o'er with blisses,
Made my very soul
Drunk with crimson kisses.

"But I drank it dry,
Love has passed me by.
O, the lees are bitter, bitter!
Let me die!"

Don't let anyone tell you--not even Satan--that if you take Christ's way, it means self-sacrifice, whereas taking the world's way means self-satisfaction. Sinful desires exact a price just as righteousness does. The difference is that in fulfilling righteous desires you pay ahead of time, but in realizing selfish desires you pay afterward. Whichever way you take it, you come right back to the Bible's enduring word: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting

III. Some Issues.

1. We should be suspicious of uncensored desires.
Each of us is a bundle of desires. Some of them are primarily physical, such as hunger and sex. Some are primarily intellectual, such as curiosity and ambition. Some are primarily social, such as friendship and play. Some are primarily spiritual, such as peace of mind and a good conscience.

Early in life we face the indispensable necessity of sitting in judgment on our desires, and saying to some, "You may pass in," and to others, "You must stay out." In this business of evaluating our desires we discover that some of them are not so much to be denied as they are to be disciplined and held in a subordinate place, while others are to be preferred and given priority. The desire for food might incline me to enter a man's orchard and help myself to fruit that did not belong to me. In that case a legitimate desire must be held in check while the desire for social approval and, above that, for the favor of God leads me to refrain from eating stolen fruit.

It was here that Israel failed long ago. There was no sin in the physical craving for some meat in their diet. The sin lay in their letting that craving run off with them, so that they thought more of a rich meal than they did of God and His goodness, thought more of satisfying their stomachs with flesh than they did of strengthening their souls with a touch of hardship. If you want to be an infant emotionally throughout your life, just give way to your uncensored, unregulated desires.

2. We should surrender our desires to the lordship of Christ. The key to healthy, happy and helpful living is a faith and a loyalty that will take your varied desires and somehow organize and unify them. The highest of all unifying forces is Jesus Christ. Surrender your desires to Him. Make Him the chief object and ambition of your soul. He will put an end to some of your desires, but He will do it by putting better ones in their place. He will redirect others and give them a lesser place than you have been granting them. He will beautify and hallow all of them which He permits to remain.

The crucial question is, Will you make the surrender of your desires to the lordship of Christ? Without Christ man is mastered by his desires; with Christ man has the mastery over his desires, and that is the mastery of the Master. Without Christ, desires have the man; and constantly they deaden him. With Christ, the man has desires; and perpetually they vitalize him.

Ever remember that what we have out of Christ we eventually loathe, and what we have in Christ we love. Christ was Lord of Paul's desires, Master of his emotions, and King of his ambitions. He so lived that when prison walls surrounded him, and the executioner's axe awaited him, he exclaimed: "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."