

MASTERING LIFE'S DISAPPOINTMENTS

"After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not. And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas. *Acts 16:7-8*

Disappointment is the common lot of man. Prince and peasant, prophet and people, wise and unwise, rich and poor, young and old -- all experience disappointment. The person does not live who, at some time or other, has not been disappointed. So, when disappointment comes to you, you can say that no strange thing has happened to you but such as is common to all mankind.

The number of disappointments are incalculable. Think of the millions on record all along the stream of time; think of the many millions more that are never placed on record. The variety of disappointments which men suffer is very great. Men are disappointed in carrying out schemes of ambition, in securing preferment, in amassing and holding wealth; yes, even in carrying out plans of good, benevolence and charity. They repose trust in institutions, in friends, in the future; but alas! they are doomed to disappointment.

The bitterness and melancholy results of these disappointments are worthy of note. Many a bright and happy life has been forever clouded and depressed by early disappointment. Many a life has been shortened, and many another tragically ended, because of some overpowering disappointment.

The sources of disappointments are many. They arise from man's shortsightedness, mistakes, failure, and weakness. We are constantly taken by surprise at things springing up that we never dreamed of and made no provision for.

So, let us consider a factual personal problem which is practically universal in its application. 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 one who reads biography this comes to be so much a matter of course that he takes it for granted. One of the most impressive exhibitions of this inescapable human problem of handling life's second-bests is in the case of Paul who wanted to go to Bithynia but arrived in Troas. No wonder he wanted to go to Bithynia for it was one of the richest provinces of Asia Minor, and to have carried Christianity there would have been a triumph indeed. Moreover, Paul wanted to go there very much and tried very hard, for he was never a half-way man. But, he could not go; the way was blocked, his plan was broken, and he landed in Troas.

At first it must have seemed lamentable to Paul. I can picture him standing on the shores of the Aegean, and saying, "I wanted to go to Bithynia and here I am in Troas." But lo! through Troas a way opened to the preeminent service of his entire career. He rendered the most significant service with the leftovers of a broken plan. Wanting Bithynia and getting Troas, how familiar an experience that is! But to take Troas, the disappointment, the second-best, the broken plan, the left-over of a disappointed expectation, and make of it the greatest opportunity we ever had, how much less familiar that is! Yet, as one reads the story of human life, one sees that powerful living has always involved such a victory as Paul won in Troas over his own soul and his situation.

With the coming of disappointment, some of us get discouraged and begin to worry. Worry prevents us from living happily and victoriously. Worry is always enfeebling. It injures digestion, disturbs intestinal action, upsets the nervous system, causes the glands to function irregularly, ruffles the temper, prevents sound sleep, distracts the mind, saddens the heart, hinders the discharge of daily duties, impedes the largest service, kills the aspiration and ability to be and to do in life, prohibits success, destroys energy, whitens the hair, shatters health, causes happiness to flee, and sends multitudes to untimely graves. Worry has killed many persons, but it never made a single one great or strong. It is always deadly to vigor and usefulness. It divides our attention, subtracts from our strength, adds to our burdens, and multiplies our difficulties.

It is absolutely useless because it never does the slightest good. It never helps any one to teach a better lesson, write a better editorial, pen a nobler poem, sing a sweeter song, live a better life, sell more merchandise, plow a straighter furrow, or achieve more heroic exploits. It never dries a single tear, nor lifts a single burden, nor solves a single problem.

Jesus gives the cure for worry as faith in God -- faith in His love, His mercy, and His goodness. Simple trust in Him is the only effectual cure for it. He procures our peace, appeases our heart-hunger, satiates our soul-thirst, bears our burdens, banishes our fears, dispells our disappointments, and changes our sighs into songs.

Is there any one in this group who has not wanted one thing and gotten another? We watch our young people grow up, as we did, with their ambitions and plans for Bithynia and we wonder what they will do when they face the inescapable experience. When they are shut out from their first choice and get the second or third one, will they know how to handle that? Will they have the spirit and attitude and technique to make of it their finest chance? Since this problem is inescapable, we may well ask what it was in Paul that enabled him to turn defeat into victory.

1. His Genuine Christianity.

Whatever else was shaken when Paul got to Troas, his conviction still was there that God had a plan for his life, a pattern for his character, an ideal for his soul, and that if God had led him to Troas there must be something there worth discovering, that God's purposes included Troas just as much as Bithynia, and that God never leads any person into any place where all the doors are shut. Paul's religion entered in.

It is just in such situations as this that one can tell how much real Christianity a person has. When you see one who wants Bithynia and gets Troas, and then remains certain that there is a purpose for his life, and takes a positive attitude toward the second-best as if to say, "If God has led me here there is something worth while here to do," you know that person's religion is practically operative. Paul's religion meant to him a positive faith about life and a positive attitude toward life, effective that watching his career is again and again like watching the Battle of Marengo -- in the morning an obvious defeat, in the afternoon a resounding victory.

2. His Care for Other People.

The trouble with many of us is that when we get disappointed we begin to pity ourselves. We often engage in wild imaginings about what we would have done if things had just turned out as we had planned and expected. Paul could have done that.

He could have said, "If my plans had not been broken; if I had not given up everything for Jesus Christ, I could have been one of the greatest rabbis of Jerusalem." How easy it would have been for him to have felt sorry for himself in his disappointment.

Instead, he at once began thinking about other people. He wondered if there was not some one who might be better off because he had landed in Troas. He had not been there one night before he saw a man from Macedonia and heard him saying, "Come over into Macedonia and help us." It was Paul's unselfishness, his generosity, his magnanimity that opened the doors for him in Troas.

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; a child is hurt; and you will never think of being tired until it is all over. Nothing makes one so strong as a call for help. A mother is completely fatigued. She has been telling her friends for weeks that she can't carry on, and then her child falls ill and needs her. Week after week, by day and by night, she stands by and never thinks of being tired. Nothing makes one strong like a call for help.

We can think of others, who like Paul, handled their disappointments.

Whistler, the artist, started out to be a soldier and failed at West Point because he could not pass in chemistry. He used to say, "If silicon had been a gas I should have been a major-general." Instead, he failed in soldiering, half-heartedly tried engineering, and then tried painting -- with such remarkable results as one sees in the portraits of his own mother, Miss Alexander, and Carlyle.

When Adoniram Judson was a young man, his chief ambition was to become a missionary to India. When he reached India they would not let him in. The doors remained shut for one year. So he turned to Burma -- unknown, untouched Burma. Can one suppose that through all that humiliation and disappointment Judson could always see the leadership of God? Of course not, but He so handled the affairs in Burma that no well-instructed person today can think of Burma without thinking of Judson, nor think of Judson without thinking of Burma.

Livingstone volunteered for service in China, and was terribly disappointed when he was sent to Africa. There he learned that his plan had not been the plan that God had for his life. So, he made the best of his disappointment by handling well the situation in Africa.

When we think of Phillips Brooks, we think of a 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." But, remember that Phillips Brooks did not plan to be a preacher. He planned to be a teacher. That was his first choice. As soon as he graduated from college he plunged into his chosen profession of teaching and he failed completely. Listen to what he wrote about his pupils when he was failing: "They are the most disagreeable set of creatures without exception that I have ever met."

After he had failed and had lost his position he wrote: "I don't know what will become of me and I don't care much. I will not study a profession." There is a sense in which he never recovered from his disappointment. At the height of his career he came down one day 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 he would never have found again had he lived one hundred years.

This, then, is the conclusion of the matter: that because Paul had these two elements in his life -- a genuine Christian experience and a real concern for the welfare of others -- when disappointment came to him his imagination was filled not with defeat but with victory. Often, when we are disappointed, we think we are defeated. We think defeat, we imagine defeat, we say defeat, and we are defeated. But as soon as Paul landed in Troas, he saw an open door, a beckoning man, a new chance, and a successful issue. He took his disappointment, mastered it, and changed it into an opportunity for service. Therefore, do not let disappointments dishearten you, or sour you, or cause you to turn back in the journey of life, but always make the best of them.