

## OVERWHELMED

"But the word of God grew and multiplied" (Acts 12:24).

Mr. Webster says the word overwhelm means to cover completely, as by a great wave, or to deluge overpoweringly. Most people today have a feeling of being overwhelmed, and perhaps you are among that number. We are living in a world which every year gets more complex, more massive, and more unmanageable. Hegel, the philosopher, thought that there was not a human problem that could not be penetrated and encompassed by human thought, and solved by human beings. That was one hundred fifty years ago, but much has happened since he said that. Not many people today would agree with him. Most of us have had that kind of optimism shaken out of us. It is part of the emotional experience of almost everyone today to feel bewildered by the overwhelming complexities of modern life. One man in New York said, "I feel like a peanut in Yankee Stadium." Perhaps there are times when you feel like that man, as you consider the problems of our age.

We are overwhelmed by a swift change, for one thing. Normal change is exhilarating and healthy; too much or too rapid change is overwhelming, as when things happen so fast we can't even grasp the facts as they rush by. Something like an earthquake has shaken the world, shaken down old things we thought were solid, and swept away old landmarks we thought were permanent. We stand bewildered today in a world of frightening change.

We are overwhelmed, too, by the expansion of knowledge, a deluge of new facts breaking through before we have a chance to assimilate them, know what they mean, or where they are taking us. We are in the midst of a knowledge explosion in every field of human enterprise. Things are happening in research laboratories that are fantastic beyond belief. And with the output of their data, research periodicals are bulging our libraries beyond their capacity to compile the new facts. One reason we have computers is that we have developed ways of living too complicated for the brain box to keep up with them. This piling up of facts, more facts, new facts, has put an enormous burden on education, new pressures on our children, and on our teachers, and has confronted the average mind with a sense of bewilderment and confusion. How do we find our way through the maze of facts, this forest of new ideas, most of it as yet undigested knowledge?

We are overwhelmed also by the magnitude of our problems. We seem up against a new kind of massiveness, everything super size, gaint size. Someone has called our age the "age of enormity;" everything is big and getting bigger. And so life confronts us with new questions which no one seems big enough to handle. Everything seems overextended, beyond the power of mortal man to solve or even control. Many national problems are completely out of hand. International affairs, major problems in foreign policy, obviously have been unmanageably complicated for a long time. We make a little progress in one area and find ourselves by that very decision confronted with mounting difficulties in another. Old animosities going back through centuries break up through the crust and break down the peacemaking machinery, and are seemingly almost out-of-hand. Some of these old quarrels seem to be without solution: Arab and Jew, Moslem and Hindu, Communist and Christian. The very size of the problems is staggering -- and all the big decisions will be made by faulty, finite, mortal men.

All of us are involved in the big decisions, affected by their consequences, but we are not linked up with the means of meeting any of them. Anthropologist Margaret Mead said, "We've grown so accustomed to this, so oppressed by the sense that the world's gotten so big and unmanageable that we've accepted the role of nothingness,

the helpless feeling that there's nothing we can do that will matter very much." Overwhelmed is the word which describes it. Individuals are like peanuts in Yankee Stadium.

What do we do when we feel overwhelmed? How do we deal with these dark moods of disheartenment about our human insignificance? Keep in mind that what we are dealing with now is not the solution of the problems, but the mood that is created by them. We must deal with this in a Christian way and try to find a Christian answer.

The first answer is a theological one. It may jolt you at first to be reminded of it, but you have to come to it, and you had better begin with it. Accept the fact of your insufficiency. Up to a point the mood is quite justified and healthy. Man is in many ways a helpless creature against the forces of the world's turbulent life. He is not God. One theologian said, "The world has come of age. Modern man is mature. He has learned to cope with all the important problems without reference to God." But that statement is not true.

The Bible consistently proclaims the insufficiency of man, the immaturity of man in the totality of life. The first realistic thing you have to do is to accept your limitations as a creature. Remember, you are not God. Resign at once the office of General Manager of the universe. You don't have to carry the whole world on your back. Turn some of it over to stronger hands, and remember the fact that you can't manage it doesn't mean that it is unmanageable. Fortunately the affairs of this world are stronger hands than ours.

Trust in God's greatness, in His wisdom, in His power to manage the universe He has made. He has guarded it by some built-in limitations in its very structure, beyond which the follies and evils of men cannot go. Nothing takes the anxiety out of life so much as a consciousness of God's greatness, His nearness, and His concern about even the small details of life. This is first. Accept the fact of your insufficiency. Lighten the load on yourself, and turn some of it over to stronger hands.

A second way to deal with the mood of helplessness in the presence of big unmanageable things is to make use of a simple device which is psychologically sound, and spiritually essential. When you get in a low mood, when you find yourself overwhelmed by a sense of failure or futility, when the world and its problems get too big, and you feel like a peanut in Yankee Stadium, then take on some small thing, something you can manage, and get it finished. There is a wonderful therapy in that, to get something finished -- however small and inconsequential -- to get it done. People who work in the area of the mind, in the manipulation of words and ideas, have a curious way of finding relief and rest in physical work. When that chore is finished it gives one a flattering sense of getting something useful done. So much of his work is opened, unresolved, half of the time he doesn't know whether he has finished anything or not.

Have you ever wondered why these Westerns on TV seem to survive all the changes? Year after year, no matter what else is displaced on television, the Westerns go right on. Why? It is not really because the vast majority are morons who like violence; although many like them for that reason. It is because the Westerns speak to this deeper mood within the masses, this longing for something simple. A college professor said, "The reason we like Westerns is that it's a relief for people living in a complicated world to look for a change at a more simple world." Everything is pretty

clear in a Western -- black and white --- and something gets settled there. Right and wrong are not as fuzzy and ambiguous as in real life. You can distinguish right away between the "good guys" and the "bad guys," and you don't have to wait forever for the issue to be resolved. It doesn't drag on as it does in Korea, China, and Vietnam. Evil gets punished. The bad guys get shot within the half hour, between commercials. It is all so simple. The appeal of the Western is to our unconscious desire to escape from unbearable complexity to a world of satisfying simplicity.

Some think that is also the appeal of sports. There's certainly nothing ambiguous about a baseball game. There is a beginning and an ending, there are rules, and there are umpires to make them stick. When the umpire calls "Out," the player is out. And there is something very definite about a home run when the bases are full. Somebody wins a baseball game; it just doesn't drag on like the cold war which no one knows whether we are winning or losing. So once a year in October the World Series comes. And for a few days it takes the minds of the people of the nation off the uncertainties of a complicated world -- and lets them look at something simplified for a change.

There is not really any mystery about this. All of us have learned it to some degree, how to turn from the unmanageable to something we can manage. A housewife said, "When things get too much for me, I go out into the garden and work with my flowers." Something in the garden restores her confidence in herself. She may not be able to manage the children, or a program for the Woman's Missionary Union, or for the Woman's Club, but she can grow flowers, and she turns for a period of time from the big things she can't do to the small things she can do well, and thus restores a certain confidence in her own worthwhileness.

Finally, try a new attitude. Fortunately you can do something about your moods. Move as quickly as you can from the despairing views of life to positive views. You can do it on the same facts.

"Two men looked out of prison bars.  
The one saw mud -- the other, stars."

Those two men had the same facts, but two different attitudes. You can do something about your moods, if you want to do so. It may not be in your power to control the conditions of life, but you have a responsibility for your attitude toward them. Try a new attitude.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones was speaking about the world and made this remark: "The early Christians didn't say, 'Look what the world is coming to.' They didn't emphasize the question. They pointed to the answer. They kept saying, 'Look what has come to the world.'"

People so often use a two-word phrase, "Yes, but ..." How different that is from the statement in the New Testament, "But the word of God grew and multiplied." That isn't our approach, as a rule. It is the nature of our mood to concentrate on the negative, magnify the problem, even to discount the good we see and qualify it with "Yes, but ..." We say, "It is a beautiful day." And someone answers, "Yes, but no rain." Or when people talk behind your back or mine they likely say, "Nice person, yes, but ..."

The writer of Acts was talking about the persecution of the early Christians when the very existence of the churches seemed precarious. King Herod had gone on a rampage to stamp out the churches by destroying their leaders. Peter and John had been

imprisoned. James, the brother of John, had been killed, and the churches were hounded and their members were scattered everywhere. "But the word of the Lord grew and multiplied." Well, that is a tonic for the timid, and it is consistent with the entire New Testament. Paul said, "We are handicapped on every side, but we are never frustrated. We are puzzled, but never in despair. We are persecuted, but never have to stand it alone. We may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out" (II Corinthians 4). You see, out of the same facts you can get despair or hope. Then why not choose hope? Try a new attitude. As Christians, we have an obligation to reeducate our moods, to strengthen people by our faith, and not to depress them with our doubts.

In the midst of World War II, when everyone was fearful and overwhelmed with anxiety, Prime Minister Winston Churchill said, "When I look back on the perils which have been already overcome, upon the great mountain waves through which the ship has driven, when I remember all that has gone right, I am encouraged to feel we need not be afraid that the tempest will overcome. Let it roar, let it rage, we shall come through." Thus he displayed the traits of which the Bible is literally full, a stout heart, an unfaltering hope, and courage to stand in the storm. To those with fearful hearts our Lord says, "Be strong. Be not afraid. I have overcome the world." How much we need to saturate our minds with this positive, contagious, redeeming note in the Bible!