

"AFTER MANY DAYS"

"Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days."
Ecclesiastes 11:1.

There seems to be considerable warrant for thinking that this verse has a meaning that was founded on a certain action of the Nile River which flowed through lands mentioned in the Bible. Until recent years Egypt depended for its fertility upon the annual rising of the Nile River. Every spring the river overflowed its banks, and just as far as the overflow reached, assisted in many places by canals and water wheels, vegetation grew and crops were cultivated. But where that water line stopped, there the sands of the desert began, stretching, as it appeared when viewed from the top of one of the pyramids, for miles and miles east and west of that long ribbon of green which was the Nile Valley. In the days when the writer of Ecclesiastes lived and wrought, so much depended on the overflow of the river. The rush of the water over the fields converted what would have otherwise been a barren desert into fertile soil.

Today the flood waters of the Nile are controlled to a large extent by the great dams which have been built far back into the mountains of central Africa. But it is not difficult to imagine what that annual overflow of the Nile meant to the inhabitants of Egypt during the days in which the Old Testament was being written. Spring time was flood time in Egypt. Flood time was also sowing time. The peasants and farmers of Egypt took advantage of the annual overflow to cast their seed on the receding waters when they were in the process of returning to the confines of the banks. They took their grain seed, got into a flat-bottomed boat, paddled up to the upper end of their fields and worked their way down to the other end, scattering the seed broadcast upon the waters. Theirs was indeed the work of faith in the laws of nature. To some it might have seemed as if they were actually throwing away good seed, but the risk had to be taken. They knew that there could not be any harvest without the sowing.

When the waters completely subsided, they left the saturated grains strewn over the cozy soft mud. In that fertile mud the seed germinated and the plants grew under the hot Egyptian sun. After many days the Egyptian farmers harvested their crops. Aware of that procedure, the writer of our text recorded the words, "Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days."

With this picture in mind, we now come to consider our text from a spiritual point of view. It reminds us that it never is easy to take the long view when we think of our lives and work. We may be content with "small profits", but we demand "quick returns." But the events of life do not work out that way. We are compelled to wait for the harvest --- first the blade, and then the ear, and then the full corn in the ear. We should be both venturesome and persevering in the service which we render in behalf of God's cause, and equally patient and uncomplaining in our waiting for the harvest. It is ours to plant and to cultivate, but it is God Who giveth the increase. We must live and work in faith, knowing that results will follow, even "after many days."

It is doubtful if any type of Christian service calls for more faith and perseverance than scattering the seed of the Word of God through preaching and teaching.

I. The Immediate Investment.

It may be the care, training and education of our children, or patient work in a Sunday School class, or the faithful sowing of a pastor.

Whatever it is, we have to make the immediate investment of our time and thought, our speech and action. We dare not delay doing now, because we shall not pass this way again.

II. The Deferred Dividend.

We are not permitted always to achieve an immediate result or to reap a speedy harvest. We are compelled to take the long view, and be content to wait. Anybody who preaches or teaches the Word of God has his hours and days of discouragement when he wonders whether to keep on is really worth while. Here is a teacher in a Sunday School. She is full of enthusiasm for her work. She longs to tell her pupils "What A Friend We Have In Jesus." Yet, Sunday after Sunday in her class of restless youngsters, it seems to her that she is doing nothing but casting bread upon the waters. Then she begins to think herself a failure. She is tempted to resign her position as almost every worker is now and again. But one of the laws of the great school of life, which also holds true in a Sunday School, is "Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days." That careless and unresponsive girl some day will be praising her teacher. That boy who disturbs the entire class some day will write his teacher and tell her what he owes to her. The most unpromising soil sometimes yields the richest results.

Some years ago it was a bitter wintry Sunday in England. The roads were clogged with snow. In a certain little church only a very few were present for worship. So few, in fact, that it was almost decided to dispense with the service. But at length a man, who had practically no training in preaching the Word and very little experience, entered the pulpit. He chose as his text that morning Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else."

At one point in his remarks he fastened his attention upon a little boy who was sitting all alone under the balcony. "Young man," he said, "you look very miserable this morning, and you will never find happiness until you give your heart to Jesus. Look unto Him and be saved." In the providence of God, it was just the right time and place for that invitation, for that boy was that morning deeply burdened with a sense of sin, and then and there received Christ as his Saviour. Thus began the Christian experience and the Christian career of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Little did that humble preacher dream all that was in the balance that morning as he stood in his pulpit. He only cast his bread upon the waters --- and he found it after many days.

A few years ago more than a thousand American churches celebrated the centenary of the birth of one of the greatest evangelists our country has ever known. In his lifetime he was a power for Christ in England and Scotland, as well as in the United States. In 1854, however, he was not a world-famous evangelist, but only an eighteen-year-old clerk in Holton's shoe store in Boston. At that time he was a member of a Sunday School class taught by a Mr. Edward Kimball, but was not a professing Christian. One day while walking down the street, Mr. Kimball felt an impulse to go into the shoe store and to speak to this young man about accepting Christ. Then the excuses began to push their way into his mind --- "It was not a good time, it was not the right place, besides I do not know how to do personal work anyway" ---- the same excuses which possibly have restrained us time and again from witnessing for our Master. But at last, with a prayer in his heart, Mr. Kimball summoned his courage and entered the store. He found the young man

in the back wrapping up a pair of shoes. "I went up to him at once," said Mr. Kimball, "and putting my hand on his shoulder, I made what I afterward felt was a very weak plea for Christ. I simply told him of the love Christ had for him and the love He wanted in return." It seemed that the young man was ready for the gospel message and light, for there in the back of that store in Boston, he received Christ as his Saviour. Thus began the Christian experience which led to the great evangelistic ministry of Dwight L. Moody. But did Mr. Kimball know all that was in the balance when he walked into that shoe store in Boston? He only cast his bread upon the waters, and he found it after many days.

George Mueller prayed for the salvation of two men for sixty years before either of them was saved. Two years after Mueller passed away the second man received Christ as his Saviour. Years after a message has been delivered by a preacher, someone writes to say that his sermon was the turning point in his career.

III. The Blessed Assurance.

"Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days." That is clear and definite. The ultimate outcome is assured. Our labor can never be in vain in the Lord. We may be disappointed, but we need not be discouraged. Every Christian worker may continue the work of faith and the labor of love, knowing that in due season he shall reap if he faints not.

The farmer cast his seed upon the waters and he found it again multiplied many times after many days. There is no getting without giving. That is a law of life. You can never keep love by hoarding it, any more than the farmer can keep his granary full by hoarding his seed. The more love you give, the more love you will have in your heart. The person who gives love not only increases his own power of loving, but he gets more love showered upon him.

There are two inland seas in Palestine -- the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. They lie in the same Jordan valley and are only some sixty miles apart. But between them there is an almost measureless difference. The Sea of Galilee is beautiful and abounding in life. In the time when our Lord walked on its shores there were at least nine cities, each of which had more than 15,000 inhabitants. There were splendid gardens along its shores, fleets of sailboats on its waters and multitudes of fish in its depths. Teeming life was the mark of that sea. On the contrary, the Dead Sea was silent and desolate. No people were along its shores. No skiff sailed its waters. No fish swam in them. It was the last word in desolation and forsakenness.

What accounts for the difference between these two seas lying in the same valley? The Sea of Galilee has an outlet. The Jordan flows into and out of it, so that the waters are kept sweet and clear. The Dead Sea receives the Jordan River, but gives nothing out, so its imprisoned waters become bitter and its shores are desolate. This is a parable of individuals, churches and nations. Life is kept sweet and rich and full only as we give out. If we receive without giving, we become mere seas of death. This is the challenge of the harvest ---- are we giving unselfishly or living selfishly?

In at least two respects bread cast upon the waters always comes back. First, in what it does for the one who sows the seed. Robert Louis

Stevenson, when he was a little boy, one day helped a poor old woman with a heavy basket across the street. Whether this act of his was lost upon the woman, we do not know, but we do know that it was not lost upon Stevenson, for he later testified that that one deed of kindness affected all that he ever wrote. Edwin Markham had this same thought in mind when he penned these lines:

"I built a chimney for a comrade old,
I did the service not for hope of hire ---
And then I traveled on in winter's cold
Yet all the way I glowed before the fire."

Moreover, in considering whether or not bread cast upon the waters is ever lost, let us remember that on earth we do not see the final harvest. Who can say what surprises are in store for God's faithful laborers on the other side? Christ brought this out very clearly. When those on the King's right hand are reminded of their past deeds of kindness, they exclaim in startled surprise, "Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? The point is, here are kind deeds long since forgotten by those who rendered them --- but not one forgotten by the King. In His Book of Eternal Remembrance not one has been omitted. When that Great Book is opened, we shall see that Lord Shaftesbury was right when he declared, "During a long life, I have proved that not one kind word ever spoken, not one kind deed ever done, but sooner or later returns to bless the giver."

"I spoke a word,
And no one heard;
I wrote a word,
And no one cared
Or seemed to heed;
But after half a score of years
It blossomed in a fragrant deed.
Preachers and teachers all are we,
Sowers of seed unconsciously;
Our hearers are beyond our ken,
Yet all we give may come again,
With usury of joy or pain.
We never know
To what one little word may grow.
See to it, then, that all your seeds
Be such as bring forth noble deeds."

-- John Oxenham.