

## "THROUGH THE WATERS"

"But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee." Isaiah 43:1-2.

One of the unique trips for tourists was organized by a Tourist Agency for people who like something different. It is a 317 mile ride down the wild Colorado River in an inflated rubber raft. The pilot is Miss Georgie White and she knows this stretch of the river better perhaps than any other living person. A reporter, who took this trip, tells us that when you start the trip you think you are in the rapids. "But these are just ripples," Miss White tells you. You come to understand what she means when, after three days, you come to something which has to be seen to be believed. The smooth water of the river drops abruptly from view as if it has been chopped off with a giant cleaver. Beyond lies a cauldron of froth, which ascends skyward like flames from a fire. You slide through an enormous gaping hole, down a forty-five degree angle. The shock of collision stops the raft completely and the occupants are inundated by blankets of water. At last, the raft shoots up and you are over the top.

This is a vivid parable of human experience. Many of us who are something more than tourists through life discover that even in the routine of life there are troubled waters and you pass through them. The stream of life, at time, swirls with its churning current and troubled waters and there are ripples here and there. But when you pass through them, you come to something different and the spray dashes high and walls of water threaten to blanket you. Currents pull and tug as you pass through strange and difficult days.

Any of us who know what is going on around us know that we are swept almost to the brink again and again by the swirling waters of life. There are ripples here and there, but there is deeper trouble ahead for many. Life is frequently one huge swirl of angry waters, tugging at our feet to snatch us away. Yet above it all is the sound of the voice of God speaking the same message that He spoke to Israel long ago. "Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee."

These wonderful words were spoken to the nation of Israel, rather than to an individual, but that which was true in the case of the nation was true of the individuals within the nation. At the time when these words were penned Israel was exiled in captivity to Babylon. The majority of the Jews found themselves to be slaves on an alien soil, surrounded by people who spoke a foreign language, and naturally they were perplexed by the strange customs of their captors. To be a captive in the hands of an enemy is a humiliating experience, and the torture of the mind and spirit is often worse than that of the body. The one thought which obsesses the mind of captives more than any other is that of release and the opportunity to go home.

God had done so many things for the people of Israel. He had led them, fed them, defended them and given them many evidences and experiences of His presence, power and good pleasure. The Israelites were a chosen people, but they were human. They had their weaknesses. They forgot, they made their mistakes and they got into difficulties and trouble just as the rest of mankind. But, when they turned to God in repentance and faith, He did great things for them. He never failed them when they were in the floods and the fires of affliction.

This figure of the waters as a synonym for trouble, affliction and sorrow was a favorite with the writers in the Old Testament, and was employed in some of the noblest passages. It is doubtful if any metaphor is more frequent in the Bible than that by which sudden calamities are represented by a deluge of waters. "Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me" (Psalm 42:7). "Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me" (Psalm 69:1-2). We are called upon to pass through the waters of temptation, the waters of affliction in circumstances, person and family, and the river of death. The waters of affliction are numerous. They are often deep. Every stream is not a brook; there are rivers as well as rivulets; and all afflictions are not light. As the waters in a stream are often muddy, so the designs of Providence are sometimes obscure. In some instances afflictions descend upon the child of God with all the rapidity of the torrent, and before the afflicted are aware of it they are in the midst of great distresses. Some children of God on their way to heaven are called upon to pass through more rivers of trouble than others. Some have to cross rivers which others are able to avoid.

The terms used in our text refer to the larger rather than the lesser troubles through which we pass, even though the vexations and annoyances to which we are subjected daily are experiences in which we need to summon our higher principles if we would act rightly and live acceptably to God. But it is the more serious calamities and the greater sorrows which most imperatively demand all the resources at our command. We pass through the waters or we walk through the fire, so to speak, when heavy losses reduce our possessions and make us face lack of means or dependence on the charity of others, when grievous disappointment overtakes us and extinguishes the bright hopes by which our pathways had been lighted and our hearts had been animated and sustained, when sickness assails us and our strength fails and we are forced to lie on beds of helplessness and pain, when the failure of those from whom we looked for great things sends a pang through our souls, and when bereavement throws its dark shadow on our homeward way.

In the beginning of verse two trouble is described as passing through the waters. This represents the influence of trial in which the soul is sometimes so overwhelmed that it resembles a man sinking in the waves. Trouble in its more severe form is described as walking through the fire. Water and fire are two of our best servants as long as we have them under control. Water cleanses, nourishes and quenches the thirst. Fire warms, cheers and makes one comfortable. But when they gain the mastery over us they overturn, consume and destroy both property and life. They become striking illustrations and fruitful sources of trial and distress. What a comfort this verse is to God's children who are passing through the furnace of affliction! It may be that your life has been filled with losses and crosses, and you may have wondered about the meaning of it all. You may have been inclined to think that everything has been against you, but in reality it has been for you, although you have not realized it.

You are not the only person who has been called upon to pass through the waters. Many others have passed through troubled waters in previous generations. Many others are passing through the waters of trouble and affliction today. Still many others in the generations ahead will have to pass through the waters also. You are not alone in this respect. It may not be much comfort to you that many people pass through similar painful experiences to the ones which are yours. Yet, sometimes it is the very person who has known the deepest possible trouble that brings the deepest possible help in the time of need. Troubled waters are a constituent part of life. Job said, "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble" (14:1) and "Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (5:7). There are calamities which thwart our purposes and spoil our plans and blight our dreams. At times you can feel that you are in the grip of some current sweeping you closer and closer to the brink of the falls.

Sooner or later we shall pass through troubled waters. Why should we plead exemption? Why should we expect something different when this is a part of the total of human experience? Even Christ Jesus was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." He was troubled in spirit and wept over Jerusalem. God says, "When thou passest through the waters," not "If you should pass through the waters", or "Shoulds you ever pass through the waters", but "When you pass through the waters." Why should I be astonished when this comes to me? Others pass through the waters. Why should we be amazed to find ourselves included in the human race?

It is so encouraging to know that when you pass through the waters God will be there too. If you are even vaguely familiar with His dealing with Israel, you will recall that God was repeatedly with His people when they were in the wild rapids of the river of life. He was the Creator of this nation and He worked diligently with her people. He took them out of Egypt. He took them through the Red Sea. He took them through the wilderness wanderings and through their disobedience and into the Land of Promise. He tried His best to get them to be a people of whom He would not be ashamed to be called their God.

When the waters are at their worst, voices will likely whisper to you, as Job's so-called comforters spoke to him, saying, "There is no one here! You are now utterly alone! There is no loving Father! You can only be brave and realistic and just tough it out to the end!" Don't listen to such voices. Perhaps another voice will whisper, "God is here, but He is just looking on; He is good and kind and well-meaning, but He is helpless. Things have gotten away from Him in this world of ours. He is just a neutral in a time of great struggle. He is like a spectator." Disregard that whisper because such a God as that is not enough for you and me.

Christ proved once and for all that there is a God Who loves and Who cares, and He is at work in the world. Christ's pain was real. His cross was real. His death was real. His resurrection was gloriously real. In the Person of Christ is evidence that God is with us, and that He loves and acts in our behalf.

We naturally look for sympathy in the days of trouble. Sometimes friends who are with us in sunshine forsake us in the storms. But God will never forsake us. He has said, "I will be with thee." That brief promise is enough. The One Who made that promise has all power. He has promised us His protection as well as His presence. Concerning the waters He says, "They shall not overflow thee." That promise may also be translated, "They shall not sweep thee away." He was referring to what we call a flash-flood. A storm may bring inches of rain in a very short time. The result is that a small stream can suddenly become a raging torrent, and houses and their occupants can be swept away. A flash-flood can turn a dry canyon into a death-trap many feet deep with a roaring, tumbling cataract, and all because of a sudden rain storm.

When you pass through the waters, if you will listen, you will hear God say, "You won't always be here!" Others are passing through the waters, but God is with those who are His children. You will find it necessary to pass through the waters, but God will be with you if you are His child. But the glorious thing about it is that you will not have to be passing through the waters forever. He will not leave you there. He will take you through the waters. How full of promise that word is even now! "When you pass through" deliverance comes and you journey on beyond the waters. "Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee." Through the years God's children have been singing:

"When through the deep waters I call thee to go,  
The river of sorrow will not overflow,  
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress."