

HOW TO LIVE IN AN AGE OF TENSION

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee." Isaiah 26:3.

The eight-year-old daughter of a university professor was playing on the floor of the living room. When her father entered the room, she looked up at him with a puzzled expression and asked, "Daddy, why was I born?" Her father's answer was not recorded. The child's question is one that all of us ought to ask ourselves: "Why was I born?" To this we may well add another which is related to the first one: "For what am I living?" These two questions will provide us with ample food for thought.

Few people ask such questions nowadays. It would be too bothersome to take the time to think through to adequate answers. Besides, these questions might involve us in some troublesome thoughts and some real soul-searching, which modern people sedulously avoid. It is little wonder that so many are not able to face life today. In fact, they cannot face themselves.

All too many people, young and old alike, lack a sense of purpose or mission in life. They have no spiritual resources with which to meet opposition and disappointment. Life has lost whatever meaning it may have had for them. What many people lack today, and this is especially true of youth, is "a faith to live by" and "a purpose to live for." Multitudes go through life plodding wearily along as though they were awaiting some catastrophe that will bring an end to all things. Joy has vanished from their lives. Hope has flickered and gone out. There is a spiritual vacuum at the center of their being. They are the very personification of the "empty house" against which Jesus has warned us -- an empty house waiting for seven demons to come and occupy it. If life is to have meaning, we must find a purpose for living beyond and greater than ourselves -- one that is more enduring than life itself.

Why should there be such widespread disenchantment and heart-emptiness in our time? Part of the explanation is found in the age in which we live. Our economy of abundance has definitely made life easier for us but in many instances has made character softer. People will continue to have heart-emptiness until they have a faith to live by and a purpose to live for.

Here in the United States we have developed a markedly neurotic life as a result of pressures. "The patron saint of the Irish is Saint Patrick, the patron saint of the British is Saint George, but the patron saint of the Americans is good old Saint Vitus." Americans are a very tense people, more so than any other people on earth. Americans live on taut nerves and it shows in their countenances. In Europe and elsewhere the faces of people are more peaceful. We are a nervous, high-strung generation of people. To an abnormal degree we are living with a sense of being under pressure all the time. And that produces tension and stress. And yet we regard ourselves as highly sophisticated. But sophistication implies being able to live in the world and know what you are doing. If you live in the world and get torn apart by the pressures, that doesn't indicate that you are very sophisticated. So one of the problems most constantly with us is that of how to live under pressure, or how to live in an age of tension. Instruction along this line is needed more sorely today than ever before. The United States has the highest death rate in the world from heart and blood vessel diseases. In 1900, cardiovascular diseases accounted for twenty per cent of all the deaths in the United States. Today, they account for fifty-four and one-half per cent, claiming nearly a million lives annually.

The most profound problems of our lives center in the fact that we live in two worlds -- the one material, physical, and visible; the other immaterial, intangible, and invisible. How tragic are the tensions between these two realms! Here in this immediate, factual world we see such brutality as will make our generation rememberable for its horrors centuries from now. And yet, at the same time, we inhabit a spiritual world also, one with intellectual insights, with ideals of beauty and loveliness, with faith and friend-

ships, and with aspirations that lay hold on God and goodness. What tension is involved in trying to live in both worlds! No wonder that many are bewildered and confused.

The people who are highly strung and nervously irritable find it difficult to relax. They are easily worked up into a fretful state. They say things they regret as soon as the words are spoken. They try to cross bridges before they come to them. This sort of tension eats like acid into the soul. It does what hard work never does, namely, weakens and debilitates. Some people are tense, edgy, and strained. They do not have any center of peace in the midst of life's storms.

How do people get that way? It is the rush and pace, the pressure and problems of life. It is the excessive demands made upon us by the numerous activities that eat into our lives, dissipating energy and vitality. It is the strident go-getting, the unabashed materialism, the fierce competition. On top of all this there is the general insecurity of the times: the scare headlines in the newspapers, the gloomy forebodings of radio commentators, the television screen which nowadays makes the international confusion vivid for us by bringing the principal actors in the drama right into our homes. The toll all this takes emotionally and mentally is heavy. To achieve inner serenity in the atomic age is not easy.

There is a widespread notion that much activity causes pressure; that people have nervous breakdowns because they are saddled with too many responsibilities, or because they work too hard. Actually there are not many breakdowns from sheer overwork. It isn't responsibility or work that breaks people down. Normally the average human being has more capacity for hard work and sustained effort than he ever uses.

What most often breaks people down is an impairment of the mental processes by negative thoughts and feelings, or by the weight of sin upon the soul. The consciousness of sin in the life can become such a burden that it will finally break a person down. Fear, resentment and hatred siphon off energies which a person should have for the conduct of the necessary affairs of life. They give rise to tensions that become continuous, preventing relaxation between peaks of activity. If we spend so much time making a living that we have no time for making a life, if we concentrate on the body and neglect the spirit, we are certain to suffer from tension.

Pressure can be reduced, or we can better accommodate ourselves to pressure, by the practice of creative silence. We Americans of the present day are not proficient in the practice of creative silence. But it is a very great art which we all should learn. Thomas Carlyle said, "Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves." E. Stanley Jones said, "The streams that turn the machinery of the world take their rise in silent places." Tagore, the great Indian mystic poet, said, "Every day wash your soul in silence." What a good thought that is! Wash your soul in silence. Every day yield yourself awhile to the silence of God. Have a quiet time daily communing with God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

So much for diagnosis; what about prescription? Daily the question is asked, How can peace be brought to our fretful and stormy lives? How can our discord be turned into harmony? How can our restlessness be subdued? How can our divided personalities be unified? We may never have stated our difficulty in just these words, but we are ready to admit that these are the questions to which our hearts crave answers. We are on a quest for personal peace.

The confusion which reigns in our world is distressing. There always has been more or less friction in human relations. Cain slew Abel and the earliest records of the race contain accounts of wars. Competition in one form or another is as old as mankind. So is the search for food, with its urgency and peril. So is the quest for a mate, with its inevitable rivalry. Petrarch, the Italian poet and scholar, listed five enemies of peace --

avarice, ambition, envy, anger and pride. These causes of unrest have been operative from the beginning, but we do not covet the distinction of living in the stormiest period of the world's history.

Sinister forces keep driving us into situations which nurture enmity. Nation views nation with mixed sentiments of fear, suspicion, and hatred. Economic ambitions and jealousies, nationalistic aspirations and racial antagonisms embroil the world. In industry there are controversies over such matters as hours and wages and fringe benefits. In business the situation is frequently so entangled that it is hard to draw the line between honesty and deception. In education the conviction is growing that we are imperiling our common life by trained hands and minds while we neglect to cultivate the only kind of character with which skill can be trusted.

In private life we see such glaring instances of inconsistency between profession and conduct that we wonder if honor, purity and Christianity are only meaningless words. In much of our modern literature all sorts of subjects are treated with cynical and shameless frankness and with such emphasis on the seamy side of life that young people, who are apt to believe all they read, are in danger of losing faith in God and respect for man.

Needless to say, this clutter of many things and interests is not restricted to the outer world. It is found also in the heart of man. Some of it is caused by a previous inner bewilderment; some of it is followed by a consequent personal disturbance. It is this turmoil which is hidden in the inward parts that supremely concerns us. For each one of us, this is an immediate and pressing problem.

No two people are distressed in precisely the same way. Each of us brings his own individuality and experience to every situation he encounters, and the impression he receives and the reaction he makes are determined largely by that fact. In one respect, however, we are alike. The heart of every one of us is the arena of a struggle. All of us have contradictory desires and emotions. We see things which clash. We covet some objects which are not good for us. Desire and judgment are at war. Ambition outruns ability. Our personalities are divided.

Christ and His disciples embarked in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. A storm arose suddenly. The little craft was lifted like a chip and carried to the top of the wave only to wallow into the trough. Water was coming aboard. The spume was driving against them and causing them to get wet. Clouds, driven by the high wind, scudded across the sky. It was dark and terrifying. Such a storm these seasoned seamen and fishermen had not known, and they thought that they were going to be drowned. As men usually do, they turned to Christ in their extremity. But what was He doing? Lying asleep, completely relaxed in the midst of the storm, unworried and unafraid. To Him the sea was the same as the dry land. He was rocked like a baby in the cradle of the deep -- completely relaxed.

The frightened men cried, "Master! Wake up! Don't You care that we perish?" Our Lord opened His eyes, stretched Himself, looked into the fear-marked faces of those whom He loved dearly, and said in substance: "What is the matter? Where is your faith? Why are you so afraid?" He rose to His feet, raised His hand, and His clear bell-like voice rang out over the raging sea, "Peace be still." He rebuked the wind and the waves and the Bible says, "There was a great calm."

The great obstacles to our having and enjoying the "peace of God which passeth all understanding" are to think evil thoughts, to have wrong desires, and to do evil deeds. These coagulate in the personality and ultimately block out peace. Peace is desirable, whether it be peace with God, peace of conscience, or peace with others. Peace is available. This peace is from God, given in grace, and maintained in mercy. But this peace is

conditioned. The mind must rely on God, the heart must trust in God, and the life must be surrendered to God. He offers peace to all who will receive it as a gift through our Lord Jesus Christ, but it cannot be obtained from any other.

One of the most beautiful verses known to man is Isaiah 26:3 which says: "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee." Much of your tension is due to the fact that your mind is not stayed on God. It is fixed and stayed on your problems. If you will just make a shift and keep your mind on God, He will keep you in perfect peace, and when you are in perfect peace your mind will correlate and produce better, it will be a far more effective instrument, and you will handle your problems with greater dispatch and efficiency. Get your mind off yourself and on God.

A farmer in South Africa had worked on a small farm for thirty years, and had not made very much from it. One day he plowed deeper, and discovered that under the shallow soil in which all his work had been done was a stratum of gold-bearing quartz. When the rock was exposed he found a reward that put all his former earnings in the shade. That is a parable of many lives. So many of us spend ourselves on the surface of life, and with all our getting we miss the things that matter most. Yet, under the surface, in a deeper fellowship with God, there is the richest treasure of all: strength, serenity, zest for life, and life filled with meaning and purpose.

There is no peace for the person who ignores God. But, for those who know Him, love Him, and serve Him faithfully there is "peace that passeth understanding" even in the midst of life's tensions, pressures, and trials. A child of God is not immune from cares, but his troubles are tempered by the Lord's perfect peace.