

OUR REPLY TO LIFE

John 12:27

"Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour." John 12:27.

Jesus had come to the very threshold of Calvary. The question came to Him, was this the only way? Was there no other road to His victory over evil in the hearts of men? The visit of the Greeks which John reports may have raised some of these questions. John tells us in this chapter of the visit of certain Greeks to Jerusalem who came to Philip and said, "Sir, we would see Jesus." It does not seem that their request was merely to behold Jesus with their bodily eyes. They, doubtless, desired to have an extended conversation with Him on the deepest subject of religion. And the point is they were Greeks, that is, men who had cultivated life from the viewpoint of pleasure and enjoyment, and now they were feeling their way to something deeper and more satisfying.

Already Jesus could hear the mutterings of wrath which were gathering for a tempest. The sky about Him was growing dark with the forecast of doom. He was like a ship which for some time has been moving out to sea amid a gathering storm, and now begins to feel the buffeting of the waves and the vicious blast of the gale which is very shortly going to take her to its breast. Wave after wave comes breaking in upon Him, bringing the grim foretaste of worse to come. "Now is my soul troubled," said Jesus. "Now is my soul disquieted."

That is the picture that John sets before us--the picture of a man facing the very worst that life can give. Let us realize that. He is facing the very worst that man can ever suffer. It is true that people have suffered crucifixion before and since. They have been burned at the stake. They have endured physical agonies. But the physical was only a fraction of what Jesus was facing. And no one ever loved as He, and love means capacity for pain. Loneliness, hatred, and treachery were all in the cup set for Jesus. Every form of suffering was threatening Jesus--the suffering of a patriot who sees his country destroying itself, of a leader whose men desert him, of a friend whose friends betray him, of a mother whose children deny her, of a Saviour who is slain by those whom He loves even unto death. That is John's picture of Jesus as He moves onward to the cross. Can we wonder that His soul is troubled?

Life itself is filled with struggle and difficulty and pain and tragedy. Suffering is inescapable. The problem of suffering is relentlessly urgent and practical. History forces it on us. Every thinking person has had to grapple with it. Life itself forces it upon us, as one well realizes when he walks through the wards of a great hospital. Also, experience forces it upon us, for suffering includes not only physical pain, but all the troubles, disappointments, bereavements, and frustrations to which the human spirit is heir, all the swift desolating calamities that crash their way through our hopes and dreams, all the subtle disillusionments that steal the heart out of life.

There are so many forms of trouble and suffering in this world--physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual; and the challenge which they severally and collectively present to faith is so radical that one craves to be able to let in some light upon the darkness. Certainly no one who takes life seriously can escape the necessity of confronting this problem and coming to terms with it in his own soul.

When our Lord was deeply troubled in soul, realizing that the hour of His ordeal was at hand, He said, "Father, save Me from this hour," and in the next breath continued, "But for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name." He had no morbid appetite for tragedy, and He had all the human shrinking from blood and agony that a young man eager for life would have. The sacrifice He was about

about to offer was a voluntary one, and He could even now ask His Father, and He would send Him more than twelve legions of angels to deliver Him. But our Lord renounced the cry of nature and triumphed over the shrinking of the flesh and cried, "Father, glorify Thy name." We should take His sayings and read and think about them until we get a glimpse of the state of thought in which our Lord was when He spoke them.

But the point to notice is that this suffering, as suffering so often does, awakens a question. Our question in regard to suffering is usually the question, Why? Why is it that we have had to go through so much? Why is it that we have been brought into this trouble? That is not the question of Jesus. He does not ask, Why do I suffer? His question is, What shall I say? Now is My soul disquieted, and what shall I say? In other words, what answer shall I make to life which so threatens and opposes Me? What reply shall I give to those fears and doubts and shadows that arise within My soul? What attitude shall I take to this tempest that swirls around My head and buffets My mind and spirit? That is the real question which life ought to awaken--the question that helps a man, in the face of life at its worst, to rally his soul and make the right stand. What reply shall I make to life? It is this question which determines whether he shall go up or down, whether he shall let himself drift, as it were, and become the plaything of life and circumstances; or whether he shall find in life a challenge to courage and faith, a challenge that releases unseen powers within him, and may turn a commonplace life into that of a saint or a hero.

Those who have thought deeply about life and the troubles and sufferings that come to all who take life seriously, think these troubles have a meaning, and that their meaning is to awaken a reply, and such a reply as shall make us the masters of circumstances and not their slave. Crave, as we may, for an easy life and an untroubled way, one clear fact rises from the story of man's progress and victory. It is by the sting of hardship and opposition and difficulty that his spirit has been awakened. Professor J. A. Thomson said, "The response of the organism to external stimulus is of the nature, not of a rebound, but of a reply." In other words, the progress of civilization has been won by struggle with circumstances, not by surrender to them. When we come to think of it, has not the finest character been developed by adverse circumstances? Is it not this fact which finds its witness in every heroic life, in every man who has been successful in business, in science, or in exploration? Life was hard, and it demanded from them a reply, and their reply was some stroke of courage, some step of faith, some energy of struggle which produced a victorious personality.

A man died whose life was summed up in this suggestive sentence: "He was one of those unique gifts to the world--a creative spirit whose response to life was so transforming that he vivified life for all who came within his range." His response to life was transforming. That was always his outlook, and it changed him and changed the world for other. So it was with Christ. "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say?" What reply shall I make to life.

There are various answers that a man may give to that question. Some, like Hamlet, never get beyond the hesitation point; they are content with asking:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing, end them?

But Hamlet's tragic end is a true picture of what happens when a man is content to let life slip through his hands without giving answer to the question. Half of the tragedies of life come from the fact that people either spend their time evading its challenge by taking what shelter they can from its troubles; or, when troubles come, stand helpless in the midst of them, refusing to make up their minds what reply to

make to life. We should make up our minds once and for all what reply we are going to make to life in the hour when the soul is troubled with pain or disquieted by temptation. Out there in the world the soul is going to be troubled and disquieted by some threatening. What shall we say to its fears, its doubts, its difficulties, its temptations, its low and selfish suggestions? What reply are we going to make to life?

What was the reply of Jesus? The first word He spoke gives us a clue to His attitude. He said, "Father." Out there in the gathering storm He saw many things. Blow upon blow of hatred cruelty, malice, treachery and deceit were preparing to strike Him. Many people have looked into that kind of tempest and seen nothing except a blinding mist. Others have looked into it and seen a glimmering purpose striving blindly through the storm to some great end which is beyond us -- but without heart, without tenderness, without any care for our individual lives. Jesus looked into it and He said, "Father." He recognized someone there who loved Him, whom He knew as His Father, whose love enfolded His life. That word, "Father", was His reply to the challenge of evil, to all the fears and threatenings--the reply of faith, of confidence in God's love and care and fatherly purpose. That sense of God's love was His most precious possession. It had been growing deeper and stronger all His life. To Him the consciousness of God the Father was the most real thing in His life. Even when things looked blackest, and when everything around Him shrieked against it, it held. It was rock beneath His feet. The first word He spoke in answer to His quest on was -- "Father".

His was no fair-weather faith. It was a faith that stood the test when life was at its worst. Here is one who probed suffering to its upmost depths. He went along the corridor of life right through to its darkest cranny, like an explorer in some cavern which has never been open to the light. And He has come back to tell us that there, where things are at their worst, this faith holds. His reply to life at its worst is His cry, "Father". That is His answer to all the doubts and the threatenings and the fears.

Somewhere, at the heart of all experience, there is a living, loving Will. One who knows us as His children, and Who out of it all has guidance and strength to give us, and the grip of a hand by which He can pull us through.

Beneath the Falls of Niagara there is a cave called the Cave of the Winds. And visitors are permitted with a guide to go down into it. We are told that when you are there, you feel at first nothing except the deafening roar of waters, while your eyes are filled with blinding spray. But there is one thing of which you are gladly conscious--the grip of the guide's hand, by which you are led through to safety and sunlight. That was the experience of Jesus here. It is this faith which He offers us. As we stand near Him there, amid the cloud and darkness that were around His Spirit, something shines into our hearts -- a confidence, a peace, a courage, a faith which sinks in deeper than all the fears and the doubts; and there awakens, in reply to life, the same answer -- "Father".

But this attitude to life took further form. It shaped itself into a prayer. And what did He pray? "Father, save Me from this hour?" That might have been His prayer, but it wasn't. He said, "For this cause came I unto this hour". In other words, He did not ask for escape from life as it threatened Him. Life does not bring us into trouble that we should use our faith merely to escape from it. Some bigger and stronger reply He must make, so He went on, "Father, glorify Thy name." He did not ask to be saved from the trouble, but to be saved in trouble -- to be saved from discouragement and fear and lovelessness and everything in Him which might defeat God's purpose of love and keep Him from mirroring God's glory. He asked that in the midst of the trouble His Spirit might be

an undimmed lamp for God's light -- "Father, glorify Thy name." Reveal Thy Spirit in Me at its best and fullest.

Is this not the way in which Jesus Christ calls on us too, and inspires us to make our reply to life? We are so apt to pray to be saved from the hour of our soul's disquietude and to look to God's Fatherhood for our deliverance out of the trouble, out of the danger, out of the threatening sorrow. There are times, of course, when that is His way of deliverance. But God's answer to our deepest need is not the external deliverance, and it is not this attitude which is the Christian reply to life. The true reply is that of our Lord Jesus. Make me fit for the strain, O God. Give me courage for the load. Let me not fail in the hour of temptation. "Father, glorify Thy name." That kind of prayer never fails of an answer because the real result of prayer is what He enables us to be.

That is the kind of prayer which Jesus bids us pray. It is the way in which all the external deliverances are really wrought -- not by the act of God without, digging us out of difficulty or breaking down the walls of opposition; but through His coming into our hearts so that we may dig our own way out, and His awaking the spirit in us which can conquer and rise above the trouble. The key to the transforming of life is the spirit which is one with Jesus, one with Him in His courage, His faith, His patience, and His love. Life meets us, challenges us, overshadows us -- to throw us on God, that in us He may rise to overcome it. The true victory of God in a world of evil is not that world made beautiful by some stroke of His power; it is in the hearts of men who are made strong and pure in Him a new creation through which all things become new.