

SERENDIPITY

"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

Serendipity is a word with which many people are not acquainted. It is an uncommon word for a very common experience. It means "the gift of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for." It's a word used to describe that strange process of indirection, the unexpected that happens when one is pursuing something else.

Sir Horace Walpole coined the word in 1754, basing it on a Persian fairy tale, "Three Princes of Serendip." Serendip was the ancient or Arabic name for the island which is now called Ceylon. The legend was that every time the princes of Serendip went on a journey something unexpected happened; quite by coincidence they found valuable things for which they had not sought. In a letter to Horace Mann, on January 8, 1754, Walpole said he coined the word "because as their highnesses traveled they were always making discoveries by accident or sagacity of things they were not in quest of."

Life is full of that sort of thing. Christopher Columbus set out across the Atlantic to find Asia. He failed to find Asia, but in pursuit of it he found something else that made a difference — America. Edison, looking for an electric light, found a phonograph. A chemist was holding over the fire a test tube with a few grains of rice in it. He dropped the tube and when he picked it up the rice grains had exploded; he had puffed rice — serendipity — seeking one thing and finding another.

This process of indirection is written deeply into all of life with almost the force of a law.

The history of medicine is filled with serendipitous events. Medical history has recorded many fortunate surprises. Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind," and he himself was a splendid illustration of that fact. Looking for a way to keep wine from turning sour, by chance he found the process of pasteurization. And what a lifesaver that has been!

The discovery of anesthetics came, in part, by accident. Dr. Crawford Long of Jefferson, Georgia, heard an itinerant lecturer speak on laughing gas which, when inhaled, made people laugh-happy. Having had some experience with ether, Dr. Long tried it out; he put a man to sleep — even as the Lord did with Adam in the Eden story. Oliver Wendell Holmes named it "anesthesia." Wilhelm Roentgen, a professor in a Bavarian university, after class one day was working with the vacuum tube for improved photography, and leaning wearily on the table saw some unusual fluorescent action that started him down a two-year trail to the X-ray.

In the field of allergies and vaccines there are many fascinating stories. Smallpox was once the world's most terrifying minister of death. Edward Jenner developed a safe vaccine, not by long, arduous study in the laboratory, but by a fortunate flash of memory. At nineteen he had had a sweetheart who was a milkmaid, and she told him one day that she could not get smallpox because as a child she had had cowpox. This bit of country wisdom lay in his memory for years and was recalled to mind during a threatened epidemic of smallpox. It was said of Edward Jenner that he saved more lives than all the wars of Napoleon had destroyed.

Out of the study of blood cells have come many fortunate serendipities. Minot experimented with dogs, ran out of money, bought liver to feed them because it was the cheapest food, and found liver doing something to their blood. So he dropped

what he was after, followed a new trail, and now we take liver shots for anemia. Some veterinarians in the prairie states were baffled by a strange bleeding ailment that was killing off their cattle. A smart chemist in Canada discovered that it occurred only in animals feeding on a certain kind of inadequately-cured clover hay. The Mayo Clinic pricked up its ears. So, in the process of trying to keep cattle from bleeding to death, they stumbled onto what surgeons had been praying for to prevent blood clots.

The discovery of penicillin is another example. Perhaps you will remember the well-known story of how an open window and a gust of wind blowing through it resulted in the contamination of the plate cultures in Dr. Alexander Fleming's laboratory in St. Mary's Hospital. Through his microscope he saw how that wonderful blue mold delivered a knock-out blow to all kinds of little bugs. You can never tell when some luminous secret will leap out of its hiding place and shout "Surprise!"

When we move into the wider fields of scientific investigation, serendipity is perhaps more the rule than the exception — at least its history is marked by some very happy surprises. We are familiar with the many legends of the man who saw an apple fall and learned from its earthbound motion the great force that holds all things together; the man who saw the lid of a kettle rise, and came up with a steam engine; and the man who watched a lamp swinging in the Cathedral of Pisa and set a pendulum swinging in grandfather's clock. These are all serendipities, combinations of happy chance and prepared minds. The magic world of science is full of unforeseen, unpredictable surprises. Baekeland, searching for synthetic camphor, found Bakelite. Alexander Graham Bell, trying to improve the telegraph, got a telephone.

Glass is a serendipity. Some Phoenician sailors anchored their ship off the coast of North Africa. Unable to find stones on which to set their cooking pots, they took lumps of saltpeter from the cargo of their ship and set their kettles on them. In the heat of the fire the saltpeter melted, mingled with the sand, and when it cooled they had a hard, clear, transparent substance — glass.

Charles Goodyear spent many years trying to take the stickiness out of rubber. One night, by sheer accident, he left a piece of rubber which he had smeared with sulphur near a hot stove. Next morning it was vulcanized. Dr. William Pollard, director of the nuclear studies at Oak Ridge, declares that no one ever suspected that the atomic bomb was to come from the very different problems on which the scientists were all working separately. No one was looking for the bomb.

In many of the most exciting discoveries of human history, the processes of indirection can be traced clearly: something was discovered while the discoverers were pursuing something else. However, it would be a mistake to label these surprises as merely accidents, as though they were the products of casual strollers and lazy minds. To be sure, they are surprises, but they are also by-products of serious and often self-effacing search — something discovered while the discoverers were earnestly seeking something else. Joseph Henry, the American physicist, said, "the seeds of great discoveries are constantly floating around us, but they only take root in minds well prepared to receive them."

There is a parallel in the high realm of mind and spirit, because the physical world is but the shadow of the spiritual world. Since life itself, like the search for

truth, is a voyage into the unknown, we should not be surprised that it should hold happy surprises for the voyagers. Christ gave us the greatest of all serendipities when He said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." It was as if He were saying, "Make the kingdom of God your aim, your goal, your life pursuit, and you will find something unexpected and unlooked for lying there along the path of your search. Numerous valuable and agreeable things will be added as the incidental fruitage of your seeking.

In this text we find ourselves in something far-reaching and profound. It is possible that our text is the most comprehensive utterance ever made.

There are two ways of acquiring the necessities of life: one is the way of action, and the other is the way of reception. There are some things we can get by aggression, that is, by going after them. There are other things that we can get only by indirection, that is, by going after something else.

It is in the first area that we are most at home. We are the product of an aggressive culture, the descendants of immigrants who had to conquer the wilderness. We were brought up to believe that the way to get anything is to go after it; this direct method is the only one in which some people are skilled.

Americans want results, immediate results. They used to put the cash down and say, "Wrap up the package." In more recent years the practice has been to say first, "Wrap up the package," and secondly, "Charge it." People now turn on lights in hen-houses to fool the hens into laying before breakfast. On a Pennsylvania highway is this sign: "Antiques manufactured while you wait." This is the temper of our time. The way to get anything is to go after it, head-on, get it, put on the pressure until you do get it, get it now, and by any method that it takes to do it.

Think what you please about this method, and try it if that is your caliber, but remember that it has its limitations. It may work in some cases in the material realm, but it is not of any use and does not have any place in the spiritual. The very finest things in life do not come that way. You can get a Cadillac by putting down the cash, but you can't get character, or even culture by that method. You can get a house in that way, but you can't get a home. You can get money, but you can't get the real riches of life.

The majority of the most desirable things come by reception, by indirection, from something added and often unexpected in the earnest pursuit of something quite beyond us. Peace and happiness and greatness are not proper ends for any soul to set for itself. They are the by-product of a life that is held steady like a ship at sea to some true course worth sailing.

Here then is a wide area in life yet to be adequately explored. And it cannot be explored by the methods with which we get houses and property. Our Lord's great formula for life was: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." If we do this, we shall be able to perform a greater work than we could otherwise do.

"Seek ye first." God is to have first place in the life. Before all other interests, no matter how attractive or necessary, comes God. We are in danger of making the means of living the end of living: of being so much concerned about making a living that we forget to live. The primary things in life are often neglected because of our absorption in things which are merely secondary. Life's greatest blessings and joys are to be found, not in the putting of self first, by desiring things in the form of

wealth, pleasure, social prestige, fame, or achievements, but in the putting of God first. The dangerous tendency is to place self, friends, money, power, property, and all else first, allowing God to be last. If we will place first the Kingdom of God, then His church, His work, His will, and His power will be first and foremost all the time. Putting God first takes faith, surrender, yieldedness, and courage. It also involves our personalities, our possessions, and our plans. The care of the soul is to take precedence over all other things; and the affairs of this life are thus to be made secondary to those of the life to come.

The only way we can act wisely and obey Christ is to put first things first. We are to seek them first in point of time. We must neither put it off nor let anything else get in ahead of it. This is the prior engagement of life. This is to be the first thing. We are to seek them first as a matter of highest importance. Other things may be important, but not comparable with these. Seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness is the one thing that can make you happy both here and hereafter. We were made for God; to love Him, to praise Him, to live in fellowship with Him, to serve Him, and to do His holy will. The true order of our human pursuits should be God first, others second, and self last. Ask yourself some very plain questions. Does God come first in my life and does His business hold the supreme place or does my business hold supreme place. Is God first or pleasure? Is it God first or money? Does my family come first or does God?

"All these things shall be added unto you." Unless this command is obeyed, the promise will not be fulfilled. The promise is closely related to the pursuit and the precept. The Kingdom of God is not set in opposition to the things of the world for which men seek; it is set above them. It belongs to a realm that is higher than the physical and the material. It has to do with the essential life of man. A faithful pursuit of the Kingdom of God guarantees the supply of all needful things.

We need to realize that in all things our first duty and responsibility is to God Himself. The Old Testament prophets were constantly stressing the law of divine priorities. I wonder what the Shunamite woman thought when Elijah the prophet applied to her for room and board. She explained that her little store of food was almost gone; there was but a small quantity of meal in the bottom of the barrel and a little oil to mix with it. She was going to do a last baking for herself and her son, and then there would be nothing left, but Elijah, the man of God, said, "Make me a cake first." One could imagine her exclaiming, "What, make you a cake first! You, a stranger, when I and my son have so little left!" The answer might well have been, "Yes, it is a question of priorities; hereafter you are to run a boarding house for God. Put God first and He will look after you and your needs." So off she went and did as she was bidden and lo, she had more than enough as long as the famine lasted and the prophet remained as her guest. She gave God the first place and He in turn honored her faith and saw that she did not come to want. He will never be the debtor of any person. This is just a picture of what He will do for all of us when we give Him the first place in our lives. Our Lord Jesus insists on this again and again. Whatever you do, do not fail to put first things first, to recognize the importance of honoring God above everything else.