

COMING TO GRIPS WITH LIFE

Philippians 4:10-13

When Paul dictated or wrote these words he was not residing in a luxurious suite in the palace of the emperor, nor was he being entertained in some unusual Christian household, the members of which were noted for their outstanding piety. Rather, Paul was a prisoner in Rome, where he had very few of the things that most of us consider the very minimum necessities of life.

When Paul's friends in the church at Philippi learned that he was a prisoner, they promptly sent to him a generous gift. The Apostle was delighted with the gift, which to him was a real token to their genuine love and devotion. Consequently, he wrote to them in terms of warm thankfulness for the gift and of high praise for the givers. He told them of the joy their thoughtfulness and generosity afforded him, but he went on to tell them that he wanted them to know that the Lord Jesus Christ was sufficient for him apart from them. He told them that he had learned to be content in all circumstances where the Lord had placed him. He was so superior to outward circumstances that abundance or abasement made little difference to him.

The words of our text are those of a man who knew what he was talking about. He had come to grips with life and knew its meaning. Life is not something to be petted and fondled and subjected to fleshly desires, but it is a grim reality with which man must grapple. Paul met this reality without flinching. He had found the source of strength for whatever condition of life became his lot. He had found a fortress, which, because of its own deep well and abundance of provisions, was plenty able to withstand the foe.

Paul was conscious of a living power flowing through him that made him independent of circumstances, whether they were favorable or unfavorable. We may be conscious of that same power if we will only seek it at the right source. Whether it be plenty or privation, joy or sorrow, abounding or suffering want, in Christ we are made masters of circumstance, and we are "strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man" (Ephesians 3:16), and therefore "can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth us." Paul proclaimed a proud independence of his surroundings and circumstances whether they were favorable or unfavorable. He was determined that he would never allow circumstances to be his master. He was not dependent upon circumstances for happiness. He did not cherish a grievance against life when he was short of money, or deprived of comfort, or exposed to unfair criticism. He had mastered the secret of being satisfied in any condition of life in which it pleased God to place him. His attitude was expressed in the words of the poet who wrote,

"Thy way, O Lord, is best for me,
So long as Thou art leading me,
I'll be content;
Why should conditions stagger me?
So long as Thou art still with me,
I am content."

Paul tried Christ under all conditions and circumstances of life, and found Him equal to every emergency. He readily acknowledged that his ability to live contentedly, victoriously and usefully came from a higher source than himself. He expressed his

gratitude for the living power which Christ was pouring into him in preparation for whatever he might be called upon to endure. Paul never attempted to explain all the vicissitudes of life. He simply declared that Christ had imparted to him the grace and strength to stand up and take anything that came his way in life. Strengthened by Christ, he was able to master every situation in which he was placed. Time after time he extracted victory from apparent defeat. Even when the odds were stacked against him, the Lord gave Paul sufficient grace and strength to emerge victorious. On one occasion, he was placed in the most unfavorable circumstances, and all his friends forsook him. In referring thereto he said, "Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me and strengthened me" (II Timothy 4:17). He was able to endure all things to which God called him, and to achieve all things that he was commanded to do, because Christ continued to pour His power into him just as he needed it. When Paul asserted that he could do "all things," he had in mind only those things that were in the will of God for his life.

The events that have come upon our world have brought disillusionment to many people, and left them baffled and bewildered. But it is not a time to lose composure and confidence. That is the course of the weak. It is a time, as rugged Paul admonished his Corinthian brethren, to "quit you like men," (I Corinthians 16:13), which is the course of the strong.

Archibald Rutledge, who writes so interestingly on nature, tells of birds that built their nest on a limb that was broken off by a furious storm, and next day the birds were back rebuilding their nest on the end of the broken limb. If the storms of wrath of evil men have brought wreck and chaos to our world, then let faith and courage go to work to rebuild it.

That which matters is not the hard situations we meet and the difficulties we encounter; it is the spirit in which we meet them and in which we emerge from grappling with them. Against this man Paul, life threw the worst of everything it could muster; but he met it at every turn in the conquering spirit that had victory for its reward.

Christ did not give unto His people "as the world giveth" (John 14:27). He did not have so much as a place in which to lay His head, but He could and did beset the far greater riches. He gives strength to meet whatever test may come to His follower. Whatever the struggle, however strong the foe, there comes the assuring promise, "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness" (Isaiah 41:10).

God's Word does not represent the true Christian life as a fair-weather picnic, but as a fight. In the Bible we find these, and kindred, statements, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12); "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain" (I Corinthians 9:24); and, "Fight the good fight of faith" (I Timothy 6:12); and, "Endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (II Timothy 2:3). The man who conquers is the one who comes to grips with life in the strength of Christ who makes him ready and able for anything.

"March on, my soul, nor like a laggard stay,
March swiftly on, and err not from the way
Where all the nobly wise of old have trod —
The path of victory and the path of God."

In our text Paul is not expressing merely a pretty sentiment. Rather, he is making a positive assertion. It is a declaration which was illustrated by one of the rarest and richest lives in Christian history. Witness Paul at Philippi, where he was unjustly condemned, imprisoned, and brutally beaten. Did it break his spirit? Not at all! At midnight we hear him praying unto God and singing His praises.

Witness Paul again during that fourteen days and nights of storm on the voyage to Rome as a prisoner. When all who sailed with him were in despair, he inspired them with hope: "And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me" (Acts 27:22-25).

Witness Paul again when he was a prisoner in a Roman jail, waiting execution. Listen to his shout of victory, "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (II Timothy 4:8). Does not this sound like a conqueror's trumpet blast after the battle?

Whoever the foe, and whatever the opposition or the fight, Paul's answer was, "None of these things move me" (Acts 20:24). Again and again he demonstrated that he had been initiated into the secret of all sorts and conditions of life, and that he was ready for anything in Him Who is the strength of all His people.

In making the will of Christ our will is found the secret of strength for all sorts and conditions of life, and strength and help for every need. We test the resources of God when we attempt the difficult and the impossible.

One thing that will help us to come to grips with life is a high resolve to live at our best. Living at one's best physically is the best preventive of disease. Living at one's best mentally is the best way to good mental health. Living at one's best spiritually is conducive to good spiritual health. There are three degrees of living in the will of God — the good, the acceptable, and the perfect. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:1-2). Nicodemus was saved, but he did not do his Christian duty. He was one of those secret disciples. Only two times do we find him out in the open; once in the Sanhedrin (John 7:50-51), and again at the crucifixion when, with Joseph of Arimathea, he removed the body of the Lord Jesus from the cross and carried it to the tomb (John 19:38-39). It is the good will of God that we shall be saved, but His will does not stop there.

In the fourth chapter of John, we find an illustration of one who did the acceptable will of God. The woman of Samaria at Jacob's well received salvation and then did something about it. She immediately went aback to Sychar and began witnessing for Christ, and came back bringing others to Him. The acceptable will of God is that we shall be saved and that we shall then serve Him. The service of the Lord's people is acceptable to Him.

In John 7 we find an illustration of the highest type of Christian living in the case of one doing the perfect will of God (John 7:37-39). The highest resolve a Christian can make is to give himself wholly in dedication to the Lord, and to be endued by the Holy Spirit for service. Such a one says in substance,

"I give Thee but Thine own, Lord,
Whate'er the gift may be;
All that I have is Thine, Lord,
To hold in trust for Thee."

A second thing that will help us to come to grips with life is a Christian confidence that rises above fear. One of the most frequent causes of dismay and defeat is the paralyzing fear of inadequate resources to meet exacting requirements. God's Word says, "Fear hath torment" (I John 4:18). There is the torment that comes from the fear of losing one's health, the fear of losing that which has been laid up for the rainy day, the fear of being dependent in old age, and the fear of changing times and the hardships they may bring.

Paul had come to grips with the fears of life and had come out the victor. So may we if we will only follow his example. No doubt there is need for a change in many of the conditions of life that confront us today, but there is a greater need for Christian confidence and courage that will come to grips with these conditions and master them; confidence that in Christ there is sufficient strength for all our needs.

Victor Hugo, on seeing and hearing a bird singing on a frail swinging vine above a great torrent of water pouring over a high precipice, undisturbed by the suction of wind pulling against the vine down toward the abyss below, caught the vision of Christian triumph over fear, and wrote:

"Let us learn like the bird for a moment to take,
Sweet rest on a branch that is ready to break;
She feels the branch tremble, yet gaily she sings;
What is it to her? She has wings! She has wings!"

"They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31). The soul that waits upon the Lord finds wings on which to soar.

A third thing that will help us to come to grips with life is a faith that lays firm hold upon God. We are saved by grace through faith. We are justified by faith.

We live by faith. We conquer by faith. "Faith is the victory that overcometh the world" (I John 5:4). God's heroes of faith came to grips with stern realities, laid hold upon God, and conquered.

"O for a faith that will not shrink,
Though pressed by many a foe;
That will not tremble on the brink
Of poverty or woe;

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A faith that shines more bright and clear
When tempests rage without;
That when in danger knows no fear,
In darkness feels no doubt;

.....

Lord, give us such a faith as this,
And then, whate'er may come,
We'll taste e'en here the hallowed bliss
Of our eternal home."

Faith is the initial step in the Christian life. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." This is the unfailing promise. If you have not taken this step, and claimed this promise, won't you do so now?